

Facebook-powered virus 'heat map' unveiled

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Facebook users were asked to take surveys on infection symptoms to gather data for a "heat map" to track the COVID-19 outbreak

Researchers Monday unveiled a coronavirus "heat map" powered by Facebook data which is aimed at helping track the spread of the disease and plan for reopening society.

The Carnegie Mellon University project offers "real-time indications of COVID-19 activity not previously available from any other source," according to a university statement.

The map was developed with millions of responses to surveys of Facebook and Google users as part of an effort to monitor the spread of the virus.

Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg said the heat map, currently available for the United States, was being expanded globally with help from University of Maryland research teams.

"As the world fights COVID-19 and countries develop plans to reopen their societies, it's critical to have a clear understanding of how the disease is spreading," Zuckerberg wrote on his Facebook page and in the Washington Post.

"With a community of billions of people globally, Facebook can uniquely help researchers and [health authorities](#) get the information they need to respond to the outbreak and start planning for the recovery."

Carnegie Mellon researchers said they are receiving about one million responses per week from Facebook users, and have also gotten some 600,000 from Google users.

"Using these and other unique data sources, the CMU researchers will monitor changes over time, enabling them to forecast COVID-19 activity several weeks into the future," the research team said.

The research uses responses to Facebook surveys about symptoms people are experiencing, with data controlled by university team and not shared with the social network.

The scientists also rely on anonymized data from Google and other partners on symptoms and search queries.

"The survey asked people if they have symptoms such as fevers, coughing, shortness of breath or loss of smell that are associated with COVID-19," Zuckerberg said.

"Since experiencing symptoms is a precursor to becoming more seriously ill, this survey can help forecast how many cases hospitals will see in the days ahead and provide an early indicator of where the outbreak is growing and where the curve is being successfully flattened."

More information: The information will be made publicly available at CMU's COVIDcast web site, covidcast.cmu.edu , and Facebook is making the aggregated survey information from its users available at dataforgood.fb.com/covid-symptoms-map/ .

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