Scientists call for a contact tracing app regulator

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Rolling out contact-tracing apps for COVID-19 without considering their wide ethical and social implications can be "dangerous, costly and useless," argue four digital-ethics experts in a Comment piece in *Nature*.

COVID-19 contact-tracing apps alert people who have come into contact with someone carrying the virus SARS-CoV-2 and advise them how to

respond. They are already in use, for example, in Australia and Singapore, and are being developed by France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, the United States and others. However, Jessica Morley, Josh Cowls, Mariarosaria Taddeo and Luciano Floridi argue that collecting sensitive personal data potentially threatens privacy, equality and fairness.

The authors set out 16 questions that governments and app developers should answer to assess whether an app is ethically justifiable. Most attention so far has focused on data privacy, but the authors outline other concerns. For instance, if not everyone can access the app—such as people who do not have a smartphone—then take-up might be too low to slow the pandemic's spread, and would amplify inequalities in society. If the app fails, it becomes unnecessary and thus unethical. An independent body needs to be in place to oversee its development and use. Different countries have various levels of digital literacy, and therefore have different impacts to weigh.

Even if COVID-19 apps are temporary, rapidly rolling out tracing technologies runs the risk of creating permanent, vulnerable records of people's health statuses, movements and social interactions, over which they have little control. Deploying these apps without assessing their effects on society "is not acceptable," they write. A 'try-everything' approach, even in a crisis, is "dangerous when it ignores the real costs, including serious and long-lasting harms to fundamental rights and freedoms."

More information: Jessica Morley et al. Ethical guidelines for COVID-19 tracing apps, *Nature* (2020). DOI: 10.1038/d41586-020-01578-0

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