

Study: UK public want NHS to be controlling body in COVID-19 contact-tracing app

May 20 2020, by Peter Dunn



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The public have massive trust in the NHS, who should have control and access to data in the COVID-19 contact-tracing app, according to new research by researchers in WMG at the University of Warwick, and at

the University of Birmingham.

Carsten Maple, Principal Investigator of the NCSC-EPSRC Academic Centre of Excellence in Cyber Security Research at the University of Warwick who led the research said:

"With all of the possible design choices for a contact-tracing app, many commentators and experts have argued which approach is in the best interests of the public. For example, some have argued that centralized apps create privacy invasions that are unacceptable; others have argued that to be effective the apps should be centralized. However, as yet, the opinions of the public have not been gathered and so we have undertaken a significant survey to elicit their thoughts. We have examined how important privacy is to them and how willing they are to engage and share information."

Dr. Rebecca McDonald, lecturer in experimental economics from the University of Birmingham said:

"The first encouraging results of our study are that only 9.6% of the public always chose to opt out of using the contact tracing apps we described to them. We asked people to express a direct preference between controlling the pandemic or preserving privacy, and we found that over half (57.4%) of participants favored prioritizing controlling the pandemic over privacy, contrasting with around a fifth (20.1%) favoring protecting privacy over controlling the pandemic."

However the most powerful and important result from the survey was the contrasting degrees to which participants trust different agencies or individuals with their data, even when anonymized. The group least trusted to be given access to this data was other app users but by far the most trusted group or organization was the NHS.

Professor Carsten Maple in WMG at the University of Warwick said:

"It is clear that the NHS enjoyed overwhelming trust in terms of access to personal data collected by such apps, even when anonymized. Surprisingly, respondents' choices suggest they would be most concerned about the decentralized approach that protects from Government access to information and instead shares information among other app users. The results indicate that users want a centralized approach, like the one currently being adopted by NHSX.

"Our research clearly shows that the public is broadly supportive of the use of a COVID-19 contact tracing app and would download it in significant numbers, providing the app providers listen to their wishes on who should have access to their data. The NHS is by far the most trusted gatekeeper for that data."

The table below shows in percentage terms how much more willing people are to use an app when their data is shared with different organizations (as in a centralized approach), compared to when it is shared with other app users (as in a decentralized approach).

The research highlights that people have a strong desire to understand the way a contact tracing app would work, and many respondents said they would need control over what data is shared about them, and who it is shared with, before they would be willing to download the app. Since widespread uptake is needed for the app to be effective, addressing these potential barriers has to be at the heart of any large-scale roll out of the contact tracing app. The appetite is there, but the public need transparency in order to trust, download, and use the app.

The research also found that public would also have concerns about linking proximity data to other data sources. (They were particularly concerned about the linkage of their shopping location from credit/debit

cards data. Some also had concerns about practical things like the impact on their phone's battery life, or the amount of data the app might need to use.

The researchers surveyed 2,171 members of the UK [general population](#) in a nationally representative sample and have published that research in a paper titled "Speak for Yourself! Attitudes to contact tracing applications in the context of COVID 19: results from a nationally representative survey of the UK population" at: github.com/carstenmaple/SpeakForYourself.

Provided by University of Warwick

Citation: Study: UK public want NHS to be controlling body in COVID-19 contact-tracing app (2020, May 20) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-05-uk-nhs-body-covid-contact-tracing.html>

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