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Security Nexus Perspectives

MASS SURVEILLANCE AND INDIVIDUAL PRIVACY

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During a crisis, governments will seek to implement technological solutions in an effort to be responsive. The COVID-19 pandemic is no exception—in order to contain the spread of an outbreak and to assist with contact tracing, governments are using technologies, such as facial recognition, surveillance cameras with artificial intelligence, and mobile phone apps. The use of technological solutions, however, comes at a cost to individual privacy.

For example, on 17 March 2020, Israel approved an emergency measure to use digital technology to locate and quarantine COVID-19 infected individuals for 14 days. The emergency measure allows Israel's General Security Service (Shin Bet) to obtain mobile data without a court order for 30 days.¹ In South Korea, the government is using data from its smart city infrastructure (i.e., credit cards, mobile phones, and CCTV cameras) to track infected individuals and is making the aggregated tracking data available to the public via websites and apps.² And, China is using drones for disease detection and quarantine enforcement, along with facial recognition and mobile phone tracking.³ Quarantined individuals in Hong Kong receive a wrist band that communicates with a mobile phone app to monitor a change in their location.⁴

There are alternatives to mass surveillance. For example, the British Government is working with Oxford University to develop a mobile app for voluntary contact tracing.⁵ Similar mobile apps are also being developed in the USA by the private sector. However, without widespread adoption of the apps, voluntary solutions may not be effective for containing the spread of an outbreak.

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In summary, instituting mass surveillance technological solutions during a crisis may demonstrate a government's responsiveness, but it comes at a cost to individual privacy. The discussion on balancing public safety and individual privacy is important because future technological advancements will make even more invasive surveillance tools available to governments.

References

¹ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/16/israel-coronavirus-mass-surveillance-pandemic/>

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³ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/zakdoffman/2020/03/05/meet-the-coronavirus-spy-drones-that-make-sure-you-stay-home/#3db58fa41669>

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⁵ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2020/03/17/could-dystopian-technology-tackle-coronavirus-saves-mankind/>

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