

Snowden: Governments Using Pandemic to Build “Architecture of Oppression”



China, Taiwan, and South Korea have been using a surveillance strategy called “contact tracing” that uses cell phones to track the user’s health records and those of everyone they contact. If a cell phone comes in close contact with someone who might have a virus, the user receives a text message with instructions to self-quarantine for 14 days. US whistleblower Edward Snowden says: “Do you truly believe that when the first wave, this second wave, the 16th wave of the coronavirus is a long-forgotten memory that these capabilities will not be kept?” He also says such emergencies never end, and authoritarian policies become normalized.

Apple and Google announced they were teaming up to develop compatible contact tracing apps, which they say will be offered on an “opt-in” basis. However, *Bloomberg* reported that the companies are planning eventually to build the feature into all updates. Ranking on these apps could be used to allow entry into grocery stores or larger businesses and events. Snowden says the apps will be used to automate decisions about who gets a job, a loan, who can go to school, who gets a home, and who does not get those things. -GEG

In addition to quarantines and lockdowns, some governments like those in China, Taiwan, and South Korea have been using a surveillance strategy called “contact tracing” to reduce the spread of the novel coronavirus.

While each country's contact tracing program has slight variations, all of them are essentially cell phone apps that keep a running record of the user's health and the health records of all the people they come into contact with.

If a cell phone comes in close contact with someone who might have the virus, the user receives a text message informing them and then instructing them to self-quarantine for 14 days.

However, the quarantine is not necessarily voluntary, depending on where you live. In some countries, phones have been used as a sort of house arrest ankle-bracelet that will notify authorities if the person being monitored leaves the house for any reason.

These apps are being touted as the way to end the shut down in both Italy and the UK and it appears that officials are going to be taking things in that direction.

At face value, it may appear that this could be a useful strategy in preventing the spread of disease, but privacy advocates and tech experts are concerned that this information could be misused and that the unprecedented surveillance capabilities could be kept and held by corrupt governments long after the pandemic is over.

In a recent interview with *Vice*, NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden expressed his concerns about the coming surveillance program, calling it the "*architecture of oppression.*"

"Do you truly believe that when the first wave, this second wave, the 16th wave of the coronavirus is a long-forgotten memory, that these capabilities will not be kept? That these datasets will not be kept? No matter how it is being used, what' is being built is the architecture of oppression," Snowden said.

Snowden recognized that the virus was a serious threat and

said that the intelligence community was well aware that it was only a matter of time before a massive pandemic crippled the country, even back when he was working in the NSA.

“There is nothing more foreseeable as a public health crisis in a world where we are just living on top of each other in crowded and polluted cities, than a pandemic. And every academic, every researcher who’s looked at this knew this was coming. And in fact, even intelligence agencies, I can tell you firsthand, because they used to read the reports had been planning for pandemics,” he said.

Snowden questioned the positive numbers that have come out of China in recent weeks and pointed out that the Chinese government has been credited with reducing the spread of the illness because they took such draconian measures during the lockdown.

Perhaps their extreme strategy is not working as well as they say it is, but since the government maintained tight control of any information coming out of the country, it is impossible to say for sure.

“If you’re looking at countries like China, where cases seem to have leveled off, how much can we trust that those numbers are actually true? I don’t think we can. Particularly, we see the Chinese government recently working to expel Western journalists at precisely this moment where we need credible independent warnings in this region,” Snowden said.

In a statement published on Friday, Apple and Google announced that they were teaming up in a rare partnership to develop compatible contact tracing apps, which they claim will work on an “opt-in” basis.

However, according to *Bloomberg*, the companies are planning to eventually build the contact tracing into the device’s

updates.

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