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A corona app: yes or no?

Originally published in Dutch on Sociale Vraagstukken

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Early on in the COVID-19 crisis, a worldwide discussion started about the possibility of an app to slow down the spread of the virus. The Centre for BOLD Cities examined the - fluctuating - concern of citizens, their expectations and their potential willingness to install such an app in collaboration with research agency Motivaction.

The first news about a new coronavirus in China was followed quickly by reports about digital tools used by the country and its neighbours to get the diffusion of the resulting disease, COVID-19, under control. Stories reached us from Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong about different ways of detecting and guarding patients through their mobile phones. Based on the Asian experiences with the SARS virus, these authorities assumed that *testing*, *tracing* and *isolating* would offer the most effective approach to contain the outbreak of COVID-19. President Obama said something similar already in 2014, while various Dutch experts now also argue that such three-stage strategy provides the most effective way to contain the virus.

Since the Netherlands did not have enough testing facilities for a long time, the options left were tracing and isolating. Soon after the Dutch lockdown, on March 16, the Onze Lieve Vrouwe Hospital (OLVG) in Amsterdam launched an app that enables people to report their personal health data to the hospital. Depending on one's individual score, the OLVG team provides digital feedback about what one should do. A month later the app had been deployed nationwide by more than 100,000 people. Reportedly, through the app more than 4500 people found out they have probably become infected with the virus.[1]

Exploring citizens' concern about digital surveillance

In a joint study, research agency Motivaction and the Leiden-Delft-Erasmus Centre for BOLD Cities have asked Dutch citizens their concerns or hopes for a tracing app and whether they would be willing to install it on their phones. We asked it immediately after the first lockdown, on March 18, and found that over 40% of the Dutch people would agree if the government were to inform everyone via their mobile phone whether they had been in contact with infected people and, in addition, would check on the location of infected people through their mobile phone. This was then still a hypothetical opportunity but three weeks later the Dutch Minister of Health, Hugo de Jonge, announced that the government intended to develop such an app (by means of a so-called *appathon*). The percentage of citizens willing to adopt the then rose to more than 45%. Only 17% firmly answered they would not use the app.

The appathon, however, did not turn out to be the expected success and was heavily criticized. It caused a slight uproar in Dutch media. Our survey, two days later, reflected the national unease and that support dwindled to under 30%. The number of people who worried about their privacy had increased, while the number of people who were confident about the way the government would handle their personal data had dropped.

It is hard to resist the temptation to say that Minister De Jonge and his teams thoroughly mismanafed this. It was said they were in too much of a hurry, no experienced app developers were involved, and it was unclear which criteria the app had to meet. Nevertheless, Minister De Jonge has not abandoned his wish for an app. Moreover, it would benefit both public health and the economy if we were able to

deploy the trio of testing, tracking and isolating in a responsible way, for the present as well as for all the future viruses we may still expect to encounter. In that case, apart from a better and safer technique, we must know more precisely which collective opinions and feelings the development of such an app evokes, and whether these are the same for different parts of the population.

Types of arguments

When we examine the results of the two subsequent surveys a little more closely, we detect several patterns. The willingness to install an app, as it turns out, is lowest among people with a lower education. Besides, we hear different counterarguments in the qualitative parts of the survey. Evidently, the focus is above all on privacy issues, but there is also considerable doubt about the effectiveness of the tracing app. According to one part of our respondents, the app offers false certainty and security. Another part does not believe that enough people will participate to make the app work. Still others have argued that there is no need for an app as long as everybody adheres to the rules of social distancing.

Then there are those who are distrustful of the government to begin with. There is also group that does believe in the sincere intentions of the government but strongly values its own freedom and privacy. Lastly, there is a group that finds it difficult to deal with technology and opposes such an app out of fear for innovations. The failure of the appathon feeds such skepticism, suspicion and fear.

Apple and Google already line up

So how should one proceed? Apple and Google have already automatically updated all mobile phones running on their operating systems with contact-tracing software, that can be mobilised by the authorities in case of a virus outbreak.[2] In view of the ease with which Apple and Android users make use of other smart health apps on their phone, it is conceivable that the necessary app-coverage of the general public will be automatically realised.

In addition, in our monitor we see a shift in priorities: while for much of the Dutch population, the priority in March was guarding public health, a month later it had strongly shifted to restarting the economy and facilitating freedom of movement. We also see this in the everyday behaviour of people and in the fact that everything that allows this freedom of movement can count on support.

From a pragmatic point of view, one would advise the Minister to join forces with Google and Apple, yet on principle, one should warn against the data-grabbing tech giants. This places us, as a society, before a devil's bargain: do we leave our data with the platform capitalists, who are capable of making something quickly and efficiently but exclude us from its control, or do we choose the app of our own, democratic but slow government?

We will include this question, formulated in more neutral terms, of course, in our next survey. We can already predict that the answers will not univocally prescribe a simple choice. Yet, they will give the politicians and members of government whose task it is to decide on this for us in a democratic process, a detailed idea about the groups they will either satisfy or repel with their choice.

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