

# Amid COVID-19, Organizations Weigh Need- to-Know Data with Consumers' Right to Privacy

## ARTICLE |

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As COVID-19 spreads worldwide, many governments, health authorities and businesses are using technology and big data to combat the pandemic. But as these systems collect more sensitive personal information, they are also raising thorny privacy concerns.

Before the pandemic, location tracking—which is essential to many coronavirus-tracking solutions—had become a flashpoint in the consumer privacy debate. “Location data is personal information, and there are strict rules that everybody collecting it has to disclose what they use it for,” said Todd Wooten, founder of VRTCAL, a mobile supply-side platform.

## Apps that Protect Privacy

In response to concerns about “Big Brother” and centralized data gathering, many organizations are developing decentralized contact-tracing apps and tools that attempt to balance meaningful data collection, consumer privacy and system interoperability. For example, the Coalition app, spearheaded by the nonprofit Coalition Network—which includes IoT connectivity provider Nodle, the French

government, the COVID-19 Policy Alliance and the city of Berkeley, California—is a “free, global, open-source, privacy-by-design tracing app developed to complement and scale manual contact-tracing efforts.”

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**Would US Adults Use a Smartphone App that Alerts Them to Potential Exposure to Someone Who Was Diagnosed with Coronavirus?**

*% of respondents, April 2020*

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*Note: among smartphone users; numbers may not add up to 100% due to rounding*

*Source: The Washington Post and University of Maryland, April 29, 2020*

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According to Coalition Network’s co-founder and president Micha Benoliel, the Bluetooth- and cryptography-based design respects strict privacy rules, including compliance with the EU’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). “We wanted to protect people and those they come into contact with by helping their smartphones exchange information in a way that doesn’t reveal their identity or any of their private information,” Benoliel said.

Similarly, a consortium led by MIT developed the Private Kit app, which redacts and anonymizes a coronavirus patient’s personal health information while still enabling their phone to broadcast a location trail to nearby Bluetooth users.

In Europe, the Pan-European Privacy-Preserving Proximity Tracing (PEPP-PT) initiative is developing standards, technology and services that enable a scalable, interoperable software system for mobile-based contact tracing that prioritizes user privacy and works across borders. And in North America, Canada-based software studio Myplanet has created a fund to support independent developers in their efforts to

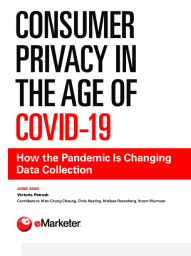
create better, more standardized open-source tools for digital contact tracing.

“Right now, there are a lot of solutions that are competing with each other and a lot of holes, and everybody is trying to recreate the wheel,” said Myplanet’s managing director of ventures Greg Fields, who also leads the firm’s new digital contact tracing lab. “We’re looking at ways to pull from what’s been solved already and share those practices to speed up development and help everything work more easily together.”

For more insights on consumer privacy in the age of COVID-19, eMarketer PRO subscribers can read our recent report:

**Report** by Victoria Petrock Jun 05, 2020

**Consumer Privacy in the Age of COVID-19**



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