

# SPEAK OUT

## Responsible Research and Innovation in the age of COVID-19: Challenges and Opportunities

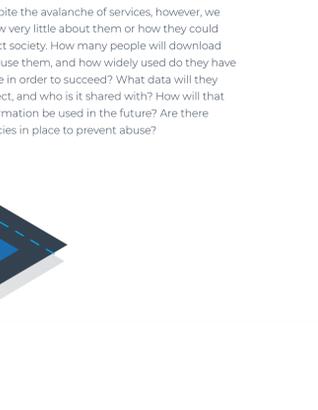
Moderated by **Startup Division**

This Factsheet summarizes the inputs and opinions shared through HubIT's forum platform [HERE](#) on July 17, 2020.



### Introduction to the topic

There are questions we need answers to, and tools we need developed as quickly as possible", says WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. Likewise, the European Commission has been at the forefront of supporting research and innovation and coordinating European and global research efforts, including preparedness or pandemics. The Commission and national ministries have also agreed on the first ERAs/Corona action plan which lays out 10 priority short-term coordinated actions to tackle coronavirus. But one of the points of contention lies with privacy. There is a deluge of apps that detect your COVID-19 exposure, often with little transparency.



As the COVID-19 pandemic rages, technologists everywhere have been rushing to build apps, services, and systems for contact tracing, identifying and notifying all those who come in contact with a carrier.

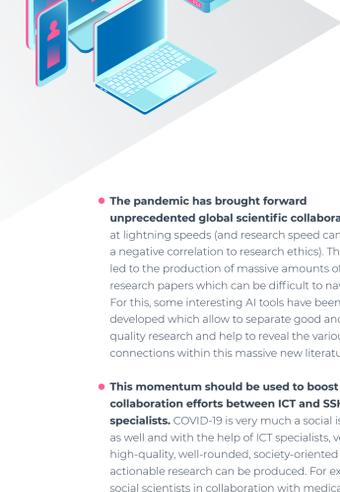
Despite the avalanche of services, however, we know very little about them or how they could affect society. How many people will download and use them, and how widely used do they have to be in order to succeed? What data will they collect, and who is it shared with? How will that information be used in the future? Are there policies in place to prevent abuse?



### Here's what was shared in our Forum regarding:

01. What are some challenges you see to privacy concerns online?
02. Do you think the current COVID-19 apps violate your rights and invade your privacy? In what ways?
03. Who do you think should step up and be the leading actor in ensuring that COVID-19 is properly addressed in terms of digital tools but at the same time ensuring privacy?
04. Do you think COVID-19 is and will continue to bring apart communities?
05. Before the outbreak, Americans strongly believed their personal data was more vulnerable than in the past.

## 01 What are some challenges you see to privacy concerns online?



- Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, it's needless to say how **internet usage has become a fundamental aspect of our everyday lives**. The issue is that internet providers (also in terms of hardware) are private entities which of course need to prioritize profit upon responsibility. It is of great importance, especially now, that governments adopt common countermeasures to ensure privacy security for citizens. **The EU shall be the first entity (with a position paper, etc.) triggering this process.**
- **This also should be reflected in the schools.** The teaching in the next couple of years will suffer big changes and there is a need not only for software (hardware but education to handle the related issues: security, privacy, fairness, etc.). This should be regulated on a governmental level.

- **The pandemic has brought forward unprecedented global scientific collaboration** at lightning speeds (and research speed can have a negative correlation to research ethics). This has led to the production of massive amounts of research papers which can be difficult to navigate. For this, some interesting AI tools have been developed which allow to separate good and bad quality research and help to reveal the various connections within this massive new literature.
- **This momentum should be used to boost the collaboration efforts between ICT and SSH specialists.** COVID-19 is very much a social issue as well and with the help of ICT specialists, very high-quality, well-rounded, society-oriented actionable research can be produced. For example, social scientists in collaboration with medical scientists and AI researchers can develop prediction algorithms for determining the high-risk social groups, work environments and neighbourhoods where some special attention is needed or where some specific methods of epidemic suppression may give better results (e.g mandating masks vs mandating strict social distance, determining specific thresholds for closing down specific types of businesses and transportation etc).



## 02 Do you think the current COVID-19 apps violate your rights and invade your privacy? In what ways?

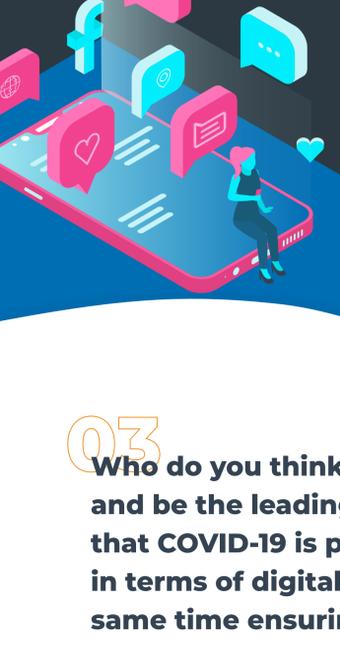
- Social media is not mandatory, and if you have Facebook or similar apps installed, it is your responsibility and decision, so **you are not in a position to complain.**
- **But, if applications are made mandatory (track and trace, for example), more care should be taken.** Indeed, COVID-19 tracking apps—many of them are made so that you can see if there are people within a 2-metre radius from you, this encompasses your and others' location information to be processed.

### An example of good practice in Taiwan

They made use of technology, integrating the national health insurance database with its immigration and customs database. By merging databases they could collect information on every citizen's 14-day travel history and ask those who visited high-risk areas to self-isolate. Mobile phones were tracked to ensure people stayed at home. Those who had not been to a high-risk area received an SMS to enable faster immigration clearance when travelling.

These measures were strict but combined with a high degree of transparency from the government.

- **If the data is kept anonymized, there should be no issues.**



## 03 Who do you think should step up and be the leading actor in ensuring that COVID-19 is properly addressed in terms of digital tools but at the same time ensuring privacy?

### What's the role of policy-makers as opposed to the private sector?

**It's the government's responsibility by large.** However, at least in Germany, the response in terms of digital tools was slow. The response to softening the impact on the economy was swift. This shows that the government can act quickly but was not able/willing to it with respect to digital schools, tracing apps, digital health records, and so on.



## 04 Do you think COVID-19 is and will continue to bring apart communities?

**Even though the EU has a digital strategy and strives towards the digital transformation of businesses and digital skills training for the society, it is a fact that much of the society especially the elderly do not have the necessary/basic digital skills to keep abreast of the developments. This could be especially worrying since the elderly population is one of the most vulnerable groups.**

As long as there are people with insufficient digital skills, **older forms of mass (crisis) communication have to be maintained at high quality.** In other words, while we should strive for digital innovation in containing the virus, we have to also provide all of the relevant information also via television and radio to make sure the most vulnerable groups are well informed.

In some ways, people may actually get more close to the elderly, **but the lack of face-to-face communication due to fear of virus can exacerbate their isolation and loneliness-induced depression.**

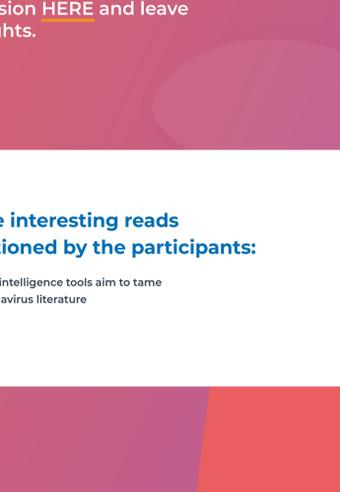


## 05 Before the outbreak, Americans strongly believed their personal data was more vulnerable than in the past.

In a June 2019 survey, 70% of Americans said their personal information was less secure than it was five years earlier. Just 6% of Americans said they felt their information was more secure than in the past, while 24% said their personal information was about as secure as it was five years earlier. Experts have suggested that data security could be threatened for companies shifting to remote work – as well as ordinary people who are spending more time online—during the coronavirus outbreak.

### Do you think society's sentiments would be different in Europe? How?

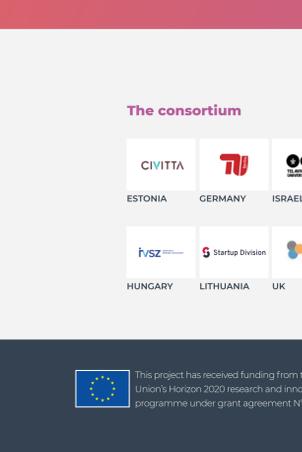
*"I think it would be a little different. We have come a long way regarding General Data Protection Regulation and I think people know this. However, the pandemic forces us to live more and more online and the study may have had very different outcomes in Europe if you would have asked before the pandemic compared to now."*



**The conversation isn't done** you can still join the discussion [HERE](#) and leave your thoughts.

### Some interesting reads mentioned by the participants:

Artificial-intelligence tools aim to tame the coronavirus literature  
*(Nature)*



### The consortium

