

Shaping the Internet - Article & Real time analysis on Privacy & Surveillance of Covid-19 app

In today's pandemic times INTERNET is rapidly emerging as a fourth essential need besides food, clothing and shelter. Everything is going Online be it work, education, shopping or even birthday parties for that matter!!! With zoom bombing reports coming to surface and governments across the world are deploying many online measures to control the numbers of Covid-19 cases from escalating, concerns are growing on **privacy and surveillance** issues faced by the common man in the Web world.

Health and law enforcement authorities are understandably eager to employ every tool at their disposal to try to hinder the virus - even as the surveillance efforts threaten to alter the precarious balance between public safety and personal privacy on a large scale. Take an example of what we are seeing in China, where they're using face-surveillance to identify people whether they are affected by covid-19 or not, follow them out on the street and assign them a social score. This score then enables government and private entities to discriminate and make decisions about these people based on their rankings. That's a really terrifying situation to have people be labeled and treated accordingly. Many experts are of opinion that ratcheting up surveillance to combat the pandemic now could permanently open the doors to more invasive forms of snooping later.

With a majority of 1.3 billion people confined to their homes and under lockdown, things don't look like they will change any time soon in my home land India. One way that the government of India aspires to keep a track of COVID-19 trends is through the ***Aarogya Setu app***. Launched on 2 April, 2020 mainly for "CONTACT TRACING", it was developed by National Informatics Centre (NIC). This App has over 114 million users as on 26th May, which is more than any other Contact Tracing App in the world. With Government of India making it mandatory for its public and private sector employees to download the app on one hand to control the swelling covid-19 affected numbers and on the other hand criticisms increasing for the app on failing to comply with data protection laws like consent, purpose limitation, data minimisation and transparency and accountability, many such factors like these drove me to conduct this survey. I hope to understand the views of the common man/woman regarding "Aarogya Setu" app and its privacy and surveillance concerns.

Demographics of the Respondents who took the survey as follows:

Gender - Male: 56% & Female: 44%.

Age – Below 30 Years: 44% & Greater than equal to 30 years: 56%.

Education – Graduation & below – 33% & Post Graduation/ Professional Degree – 67% and

Occupation – Employed: 77% and Student: 21%

Here are the results based on my survey. The results are divided and analysed in two parts based on sample population that 1) Installed the app and 2) Did not install the app

- 1) Despite the concerns over the privacy and surveillance, 67% of the respondents installed the app.
 - 87% of respondents in this category stated the major reason for installation was, "**It gives live updates and information about coronavirus**". They believed the Government's claim that the app is able to give live tracking of covid-19 patients in their immediate environment.
 - 73% of respondents are not at all or somewhat aware of the data protection principles.
 - In spite of being ignorant of the data protection principles, 70% of them advised their family members and friends to download the app.

- 52% of samples believe that the app is in compliance with “Data Protection Principle”.
 - While 52% of answerers are concerned with “**Sharing personal information**”, only 38% of them are concerned with “excessive data gathering by the app”
 - 48% of respondents here believe that the app is effective in tracing the end objective of "contact tracing"
 - 58% of samples here believe that it's correct to make apps mandatory to control the virus growth in numbers.
 - 44% of respondents believe in making apps mandatory in spite of being aware that "Privacy and Surveillance" of the end users are at stake.
- 2) The remaining 33% of the respondents didn't install the app.
- The major reason cited for this was, “**Asking for a lot of personal data**”. This comprised 31% of the respondents in this second category. The app was asking “GPS tracking, Bluetooth, Name, Phone Number, Profession, Gender & Age, etc.”
 - Out of these, 81% of answers are not at all or somewhat aware of the data protection principles.
 - In spite of unawareness of the data protection principles, 86% of them advised their family members and friends not to download the app.
 - 15% of respondents here believe that the app is in compliance with “Data Protection Principle”.
 - 42% participants here are concerned with “**Sharing personal information**” and 46% of them are concerned with “excessive data gathering by the app”
 - 31% of respondents here believe that the app is effective in tracing the end objective of "contact tracing"
 - 19% here believe that app should be made mandatory to contain viruses.
 - While only 8% of respondents belonging to this category believe app should be made mandatory and they are also aware that "Privacy and Surveillance" of the end user is at stake.

Based on this survey, we understand that citizens are unaware of many surveillance aspects of this digital app and factors related to data protection principles. They are downloading the app and recommending it to others without any knowledge w.r.t data protection principles. Also only 50% respondents who have downloaded have faith in the app achieving its objectives whereas, less than 30% of respondents who have not downloaded the app don't trust the app. Clearly there is no rationale behind the common man/woman for downloading the app or not downloading it. Survey link for reference <https://forms.gle/cezyKuD3LkK9nZM9>

Depending on the responses I got from my survey, I personally feel the Government must adhere to these principles before making these surveillance apps mandatory.

Basis the feedback from end users, petitions from activists, help from techies & other experts, Government had put efforts to improve data protection principles. One of the initiatives by the Government is “Bug Bounty Programme”. Find similar details on Government official website <https://www.mygov.in/aarogya-setu-app/>

If instances of misuse of this Aarogya Setu app will surface then people will not trust other digital initiatives meant for public welfare in future even if it respects all surveillance and data privacy laws. Aarogya setu app must rise to this challenge and be successful in conquering it.