



# Feds Look To Phone Location Data To Track Coronavirus

Silicon Valley Technocrats are negotiating with the government to give up location tracking data in smart phones to track coronavirus infections. Once this door is opened, the government will never voluntarily close it. □ TN Editor

The U.S. government is in active talks with Facebook, Google and a wide array of tech companies and health experts about how they can use data gleaned from Americans' phones to combat the novel coronavirus, including tracking whether people are keeping one another at safe distances to stem the outbreak.

Public-health experts are interested in the possibility that private-sector companies could compile the data in anonymous, aggregated form, which they could then use to map the spread of the infection, according to three people familiar with the effort, who requested anonymity because the project is in its early stages.

Analyzing trends in smartphone owners' whereabouts could prove to be a powerful tool for health authorities looking to track coronavirus, which has infected more than 180,000 people globally. But it's also an

approach that could leave some Americans uncomfortable, depending on how it's implemented, given the sensitivity when it comes to details about their daily whereabouts.

In recent interviews, Facebook executives said the U.S. government is particularly interested in understanding patterns of people's movements, which can be derived through data the company collects from users who allow it. The tech giant in the past has provided this information to researchers in the form of statistics, which in the case of coronavirus, could help officials predict the next hotspot or decide where to allocate overstretched health resources.

"We're encouraged by American technology companies looking to leverage aggregate, anonymized data to glean key insights for covid-19 modeling efforts," said an official with the White House's Office of Science and Technology Policy, who spoke only on condition of anonymity.

The official said those insights might "help public health officials, researchers, and scientists improve their understanding of the spread of COVID19 and transmission of the disease." Multiple sources stressed that — if they proceed — they are not building a government database.

A task force created by tech executives, entrepreneurs and investors presented a range of ideas around disease mapping and telehealth to the White House during a private meeting Sunday. The discussions included representatives from tech giants; investors led by the New York-based firm Hangar and well-known Silicon Valley venture capitalist Ron Conway; public-health leaders from Harvard University; and smaller telehealth startups like Ro, two sources said.

"We are still in the process of collecting ideas, recommendations, and proposed actions from task-force members, which we intend to present to the White House in the coming days," said Josh Mendelsohn, the managing partner at Hangar, who helped organize the effort.

Many of those involved either did not respond or declined comment. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention did not respond to a request for comment.

The early, unprecedented collaboration between Washington and Silicon Valley reflects the urgent, nationwide scramble to stop a deadly malady that has shuttered businesses, skewered the stock market, sent students home from school and now threatens to overwhelm the U.S. medical system with patients in need of critical care.

Over the past week, White House officials led by Michael Kratsios, the country's chief technology officer, have convened a series of meetings to leverage the tech expertise of Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google, IBM and other technology leaders. The government has encouraged social-media sites to take a more aggressive approach to thwart coronavirus misinformation, The Post has reported, responding to concerns that foreign misinformation might be stoking panic about the outbreak. And the Trump administration has explored partnering with the tech industry to improve telework and telehealth offerings for millions of Americans.

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