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Day 47: life in Italy under lockdown. Italy's debate over traceability



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Gerd Altmann for Pixabay

A message arrived on my iPhone two days ago, April 21. It was from the Regione Lombardia and advised me to download a

free app called AllertaLOM, available on the Apple Store and on Google Play Store. The app offers a daily questionnaire about my state of health, which I am requested to fill out and send back. This information supposedly helps the region develop a map of contagion and is most effective if I fill it out every day. To reassure me, the phone message tells me that my data will be anonymous.

I was late in receiving the offer. SMS invitations began to circulate in early April so I figured maybe my province wasn't high on their priority list. To date, more than 9.5 percent of the population has downloaded the app –totaling more than 1.1 million users and 2.2 million questionnaires completed by April 22.

I am not (yet) one of them, given my mixed feelings about the program. On the one hand, traceability using the information gleaned from cellphones accounts for much of South Korea's success in containing COVID-19. (Maybe not all, since carpet testing was also a key element in their strategy).

And no question that the data gathered can be useful in pinpointing new areas of contagion *when they erupt* so that healthcare specialists can act quickly and decisively. The data can be used to help calculate the risk of contagion, something that still mystifies the experts, given how new and unique this particular corona virus is.

On the other hand, data that can be traced to my phone didn't sound "anonymous" to me, despite assurances from the region.

For starters, how did they get my phone coordinates? That question was addressed by a regional spokesperson, who explained that these messages were sent by the various cellphone companies operating in the region, and NOT by the regional government itself.

The spokesperson pointed out that AllertaLOM predates the current crisis. The system was developed by Protezione Civile Lombardia (the civil protection unit of Lombardia) for cases of “great emergency or necessity.” In such circumstances, the government has the legal right to request phone operators to send such messages. COVID-19 definitely qualifies and the phone companies readily complied. Compliance by us, the users, is voluntary.

Meanwhile, the national government is evaluating a new app called IMMUNI. This one was created in response to the corona crisis by a hot-shot software developer called Bending Spoons that is politically well connected and has its own marketing team at work. The application is more sophisticated than AllertaLom, but it is still in the discussion stage because promulgation requires parliamentary approval.

The debate is heated because privacy is held to a higher legal standard in Europe than in the US, and to date some techno-savvies have not been convinced about how IMMUNI would handle and protect the data it collects. Parties on both sides of the Italian political spectrum have voiced objections based on political positioning as well as technical details.

Italian Minister of the Interior Luciana Lamorgese, a lawyer by training, is sensitive to this debate. She points out, “Given the privacy of the health information involved, it’s important that IMMUNI be properly managed. It has to be done correctly and transparently.”

If approved by Parliament, the app could eventually be used for future pandemic situations, providing key information much faster than has been available for COVID-19, and thereby save lives. “IMMUNI represents an opportunity but it must be treated with the appropriate guarantees of security. Right now we are studying how to ensure the security of this kind of information,” Lamorgese says.

One glitch in terms of IMMUNI’s effectiveness is that it depends on 60 percent of the population using it. That could be a big stumbling block, given that 23 percent of Italians are over 65, a demographic segment not always comfortable with technology.

Another problem is that not everyone in Italy has a smart phone, regardless of age, and people hit hard by the economic whiplash of the crisis are going to be unable to afford one.

A third issue is that true traceability effectiveness needs to be Europe-wide, because viruses are oblivious to borders. But right now every European country is working on its own app in response to the pandemic. The European Commission has imposed a few rules that should be common to all: anonymity, Bluetooth, voluntary opt-in, and no geo-localization. But every national solution has its own emphasis and techno-specificity,

and every resident has his or her level of trust in the government to handle sensitive data appropriately. If Italy can't coordinate its traceability apps domestically, how can we expect Europe to do any better across the continent?

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