

The surveillance firms 'made a profit' during the Covid-19 season

Surveillance technology companies say their experience can help the government monitor the silent spread of the Covid-19 epidemic.

Surveillance technology companies have flourished in recent years as law enforcement agencies around the world look for new solutions to combat cybercrime operating via encrypted mobile applications. .

When law enforcement agencies want to collect evidence locked inside iPhones, they often turn to hacking software developed by Israeli company Cellebrite. By manually plugging in software into a suspected phone, police can determine where the phone owner went and who they met. Now, as governments are working to combat the spread of the Covid-19 epidemic, Cellebrite offers the same ability to help identify who may have been infected. After someone is confirmed positive, authorities can get patient data and contact information, making it easier to 'isolate the right person,' Reuters reported. an email sent by Cellebrite to the Delhi police force (India) last week.

Usually this requires user consent, but in legal cases such as when a person violates a public ban, police can use tools to access a device. confiscated, Cellebrite advised in email. 'We don't need phone codes to collect data,' Cellebrite's salesperson wrote.

A spokesman for Cellebrite said the tool the sales staff mentioned was similar to the products the company had been selling on the market for a long time to help with law enforcement. The company also offers a version for healthcare professionals to monitor the spread of SARS-CoV-2 virus, but this tool is only used with the patient's consent.

According to a Reuters interview conducted with executives and from unpublished company documents, Cellebrite's marketing is part of a wave of efforts by at least eight supervisory companies. and cyber intelligence to sell spying tools for disease tracking purposes. Executives declined to name the countries that bought their monitoring products. However, executives from four of the companies surveyed revealed that they were piloting or in the process of installing products in more than ten countries in Latin America, Europe and Asia. A spokesman for the Delhi police force said they had used Cellebrite's product to deal with the Covid-19 epidemic. So far, Israel is the only country known to be testing a mass surveillance system provided by surveillance technology companies. The country has asked NSO Group, one of the biggest players in the industry, to help build its platform. However, the implementation of a monitoring project between NSO and Israel's Ministry of Defense is being delayed due to legal challenges related to privacy.

Privacy and health concerns

Advocates of democratic freedoms fear that tracking the SARS-CoV-2 virus infection could open up the ability to increase government surveillance of everything that they've been fighting for decades. year.

'This public health crisis needs a public health solution, not the intervention of monitoring companies seeking to exploit the crisis to make a profit', Edin Omanovic, chief campaign officer for liberal democracy organization UK-based Privacy International, said.

According to technology expert Claudio Guarnieri, who works with human rights organization Amnesty International, any new surveillance power that is accepted by countries to deal with the disease should be scrutinized.

On the government's side, they have sought to address the aforementioned concern by pointing out the unprecedented nature of the new strain that killed more than 220,000 people worldwide. 'We respect everyone's privacy, but in a situation like this, the country's right should not be set aside for individual rights,' said Stella Ndabeni-Abrahams, South African Communications Minister.

Monitoring surveillance of the Covid-19 epidemic based on personal information is currently a matter of privacy conflict. However, some countries are trying to find new directions by implementing disease monitoring applications not based on user location data. Instead, these applications adopt Bluetooth connectivity technology on the smartphone.

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