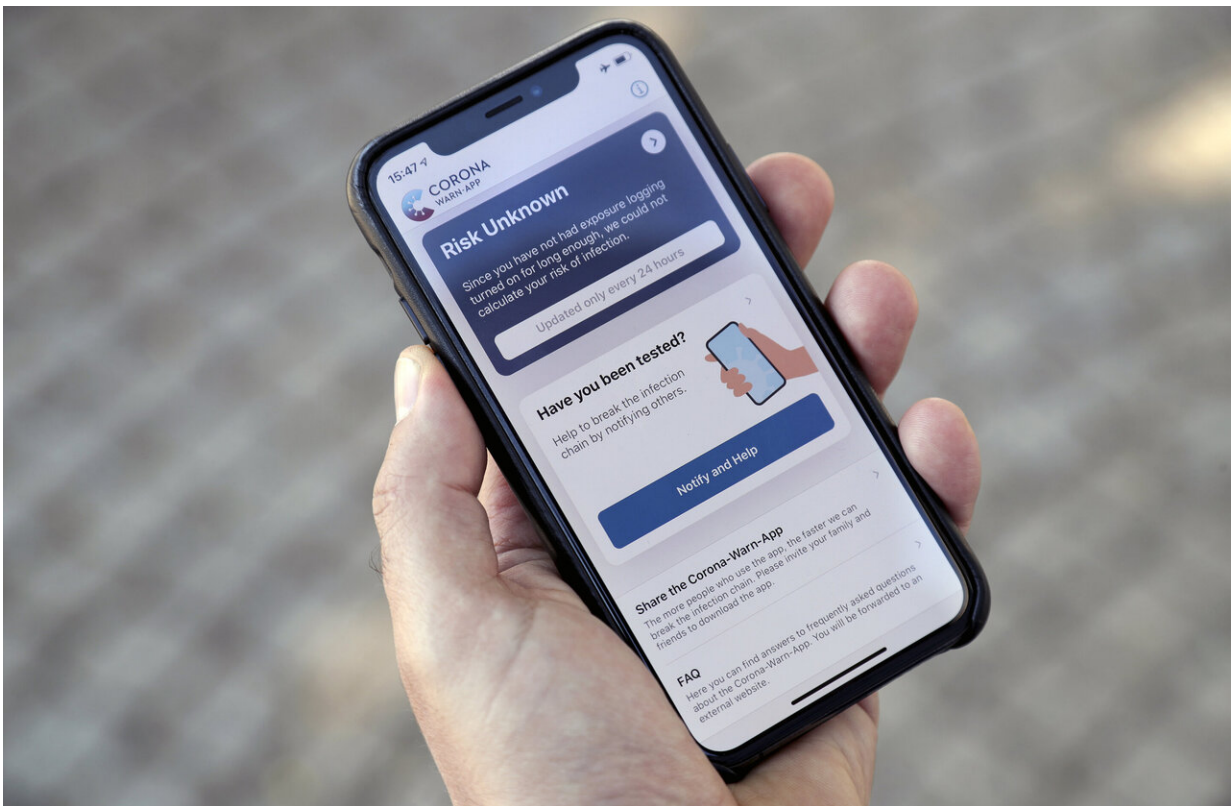


Coronavirus tracing app a test for privacy-minded Germany

June 16 2020, by Frank Jordans



A person holds a smartphone with the official 'Corona Warn-App' (Corona Warning Application) in Berlin, Germany, Monday, June 15, 2020. The app will be introduced on Tuesday, June 16 by the German authorities. (AP Photo/Michael Sohn)

Germany launched a the continent's strict data privacy standards.

Germany, where a person's right to their own data even after death is rooted in the constitution, has proved a particular challenge. Early government suggestions to use cell tower information and GPS coordinates for the app prompted a swift backlash.

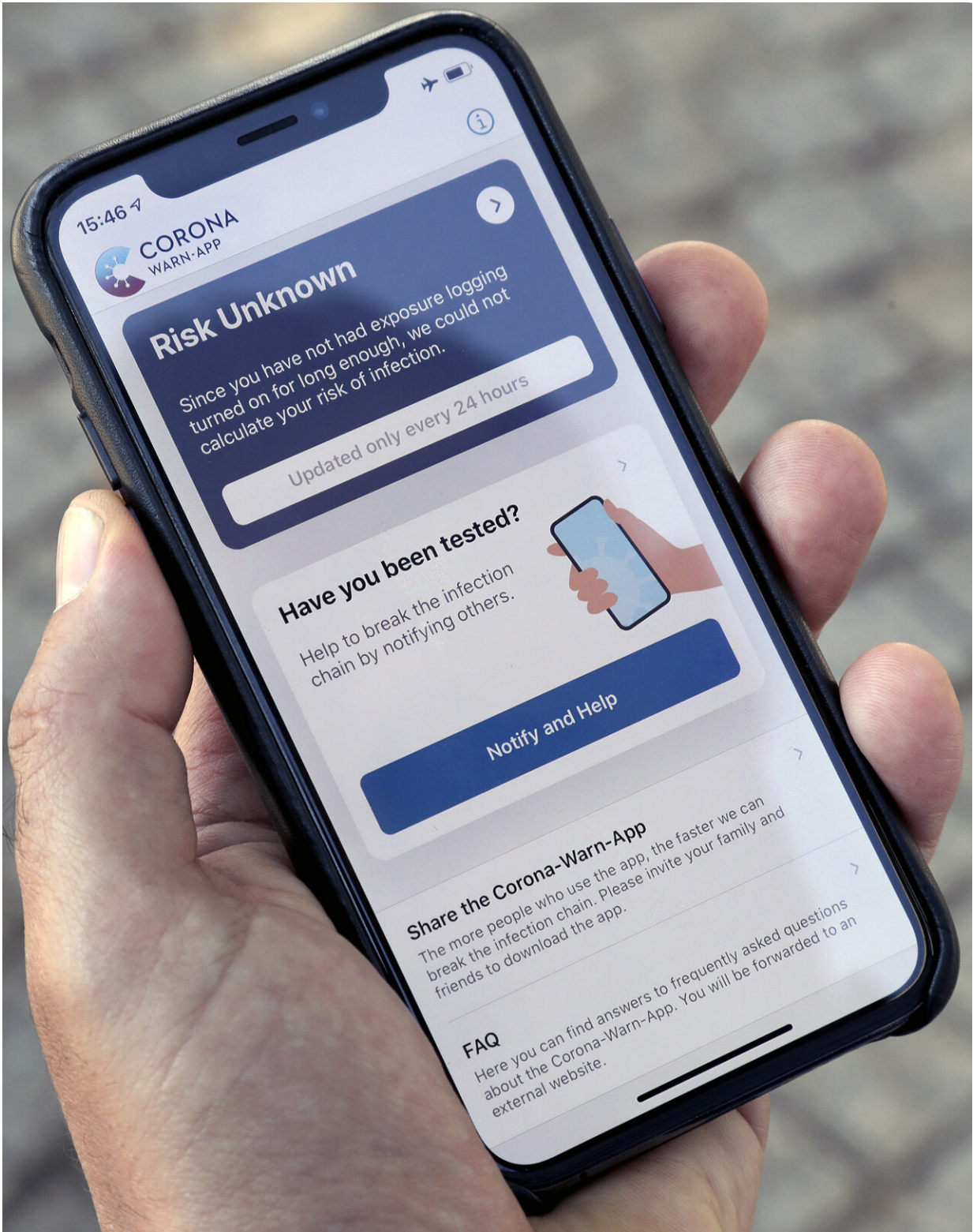
"Tracking where a person is in real time, that does remind us of China and its surveillance system," said Frederick Richter, who heads the independent Foundation for Data Protection.

It also recalls Germany's own history of dictatorships. Both the Nazis and East Germany's communist regime amassed vast amounts of information to persecute dissidents and undesirables.

"That's why we have always been very sensitive in Germany when it comes to the state collecting information on its citizens," Richter said.

Like many other European tracing apps, Germany's system now relies on low-energy Bluetooth technology that's standard in modern smartphones. The app scans the user's surroundings and records which other smartphones with the app are nearby and for how long.

If someone using the "Corona-Warn-App" tests positive for COVID-19, they can inform others who were in [close proximity](#) for at least 15 minutes that they, too, might be infected.



A person holds a smartphone with the official 'Corona Warn-App' (Corona Warning Application) in Berlin, Germany, Monday, June 15, 2020. The app will

be introduced on Tuesday, June 16 by the German authorities. (AP Photo/Michael Sohn)

Developers say their most recent tests correctly identified 80% of people's contacts. That still leaves 20% who were either not recognised as having been close to an infected person or deemed exposed even though they were more than 2 meters (6.6 feet) away.

"This app is no cure-all, it doesn't give you a free ride," said Germany's health minister, Jens Spahn, noting that face masks and manual tracing will still be required. "But it's an important tool to contain the pandemic."

He acknowledged that there would likely be an increase in people seeking to get tested because of the app. "I'd rather a test too many than a test too few," said Spahn.

Concerns have also been raised about the hotline some users will need to call in order to get their positive test result recorded in the app. This opens the door to trolls who could try to trick hotline staff, setting off a cascade of consequences for everyone they were close to in restaurants, supermarkets or [public transport](#).



In this April 27, 2020, file photo, passengers wearing face masks arrive in the main train station in Frankfurt, Germany. Germany launched a coronavirus tracing app Tuesday, June 16, 2020, that officials say is so secure even government ministers can use it. Smartphone apps have been touted as a high-tech tool in the effort to track down potential COVID-19 infections. But governments in privacy-conscious Europe have run into legal and cultural hurdles trying to reconcile the need for effective tracing with the continent's strict data privacy standards. (AP Photo/Michael Probst, File)

Opposition parties, meanwhile, have called for a law to ensure that private businesses don't try to push customers or employees into using the app, either through incentives or sanctions.

The German government insisted Monday that "voluntary means voluntary" and the app would be continually improved.

Asked whether the app meets security standards for top-tier officials, a spokesman for the German Interior Ministry said the country's IT security agency has been involved from the start.

"I presume that from their side there can be an unreserved recommendation to members of the federal government to use this app," said the spokesman, Bjoern Gruenewaelder.

German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and his wife Elke Buedenbender, a judge, announced they were using the app.

Die-hard skeptics are more likely to be reassured by Germany's Chaos Computer Club, which bills itself as Europe's largest hackers association. The group has a history of punching holes in government and corporate IT systems and of campaigning against surveillance technology.



Linus Neuman, a spokesman of the 'Chaos Computer Club' (CCC) hacker group speaks during an interview with The Associated Press in Berlin, Germany, Monday, June 15, 2020. The official 'Corona Warn-App' (Corona Warning Application) for mobile devices will be introduced on Tuesday, June 16 by the German authorities. (AP Photo/Michael Sohn)

Linus Neuman, a club spokesman, praised the German app developers' transparency for using France has done, would help minimize privacy risks.

"We can't guarantee that someone won't find a weak spot in (the code) tomorrow," said Neumann. "But we can say that these weak spots will have a lower overall risk than if the German government had pursued a centralized approach."

Still, the group won't officially endorse the app.

"What we want is for every user to make an [informed decision](#)," said Neumann. "And this decision might be different for an investigative journalist than for a teenager who spends most of the day on WhatsApp, Facebook, Google or YouTube."

The German government says its app cost 20 million euros (\$22.7 million) to develop and will require 2.5 million to 3.5 million euros per month to operate. It's available in German and English, with Turkish and other languages to follow.



A face mask was left behind on the Roemerberg square in Frankfurt, Germany, Sunday, June 14, 2020. Due to the coronavirus masks must be worn in shops and

public transport. (AP Photo/Michael Probst)

So far, Chancellor Angela Merkel's government has been praised for its handling of the pandemic, which has resulted in a death toll about one-fifth of Britain's and one-fourth of Italy's. Germany has recorded almost 190,000 cases of COVID-19 and just over 8,800 deaths to date, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University.

A poll this month published by public broadcaster ARD found that slightly more Germans—42%—said they would use the tracing app than the 39% who wouldn't. The rest either said they didn't have a smartphone or hadn't made up their mind.

The telephone poll of 1,005 had a margin of error of up to 3 percentage points.

A major glitch could hurt uptake. On Monday, Norway suspended use of its track and trace app after a public spat between health authorities and the information watchdog.



Timotheus Hoettges, Chief Executive Officer of Germany's telecommunications giant Deutsche Telekom AG, holds a mobile phone as he attends the presentation of the new contact-tracing smartphone app that will use Bluetooth short-range radio and technology standards from Apple and Google to alert people of the risk of infection from coronavirus, in Berlin, Tuesday, June 16, 2020. Germany has launched a coronavirus tracing app that officials say is so secure even government ministers can use it. Smartphone apps have been touted as a high-tech tool in the effort to track down potential COVID-19 infections. (Hannibal Hanschke/Pool Photo via AP)



Federal Health Minister Jens Spahn, center, speaks at the presentation of the official Corona Warning App in Berlin, Tuesday, June 16, 2020. Germany has launched a coronavirus tracing app that officials say is so secure even government ministers can use it. Smartphone apps have been touted as a high-tech tool in the effort to track down potential COVID-19 infections. But governments in privacy-conscious Europe have run into legal and cultural hurdles trying to reconcile the need for effective tracing with the continent's strict data privacy standards. (Hannibal Hanschke/Pool Photo via AP)

At Berlin's Friedrichstrasse train station, commuters appeared cautious when asked whether they would download the German app.

Klaudia Kruczkiewicz said using a smartphone to scan her surroundings felt "a bit creepy," but wouldn't rule out signing up.

"First I'd need to see how it works," she said. "But otherwise, at the moment, I'm keeping my distance. I always wear a mask. I don't need this app."

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