

Facebook draws on user data to help battle coronavirus

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Facebook is augmenting maps on "population movement" with tools to glean insights in ways that still protect people's privacy, in an effort to help researchers combat the coronavirus

Facebook on Monday said it is providing anonymous data about users' movements and relationships to help researchers better anticipate where the coronavirus might spread.

The leading online social network is augmenting maps on "population movement" with tools to glean insights in ways that still protect people's privacy, according to a post by Facebook head of health KX Jin and Laura McGorman of its Data for Good arm.

"Hospitals are working to get the right resources, and public health systems are looking to put the right guidelines in place," Jin and McGorman said.

"To do that, they need better information on whether [preventive measures](#) are working and how the virus may spread."

Google last week announced a similar move, saying it would provide a snapshot of users'

[location data](#) around the world to help governments gauge the effectiveness of social distancing measures, implemented to stem the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tools that Facebook is providing for researchers include "co-location maps" to show probabilities of people in one specific place coming into contact with those in another, perhaps signaling where new COVID-19 cases might appear.

Data about "movement range" trends will show whether people are staying close to home as advised or venturing to other parts of town, potentially exacerbating [coronavirus](#) spread.

Facebook is also providing an index of friendships crossing state or national borders to allow epidemiologists to forecast how the virus might spread given where people might seek support or sanctuary.

"Mobility data from Facebook's Data for Good program provides a near real-time view of important correlates of disease transmission," Institute for Disease Modeling senior research manager Daniel Klein said in the post.

"This data, in combination with other sources, allows us to make better models to inform public health decisions."

Facebook will also display links in news feeds on the platform inviting people to take part in a Carnegie Mellon University survey intended to help researchers monitor and forecast the spread of the virus.

Information about people's identities would not be disclosed to researchers, the social network promised.

Facebook has struggled in the past with assuaging concerns over how the internet titan handles private

user data, particularly after a massive 2018 data breach that exposed millions of users around the world.

If the survey proves to be helpful, Facebook will make similar efforts outside the US, according to Jin and McGorman.

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