

The importance of building trust in contact tracing apps

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Professor Anna Brown. Credit: Massey University

In the very real need for speed around excellent contact tracing in the COVID-19 environment, the voice of the people is getting lost, according to Associate Professor Anna Brown.

"While nations around the world are working at pace to develop and deploy [new digital technologies](#), they also need to address the issue of public trust and how that too can be built at speed," Ms Brown says.

Yesterday, a working paper titled Digital Contact Tracing for COVID-19: A Primer for Policymakers, was released by The Centre for Social Data Analytics (Auckland University of Technology) and the Institute for Social Science Research (University of Queensland).

Ms Brown, Director of Toi Āria, Design for Public Good at Massey University, contributed to the paper, which highlights the need for digital contact tracing solutions to have exceptional speed, high take-up rates, and demonstrable value. She says without significant uptake of the technology, digital contact tracing is close to useless.

"Our early research with potential users in Australia told us that the introduction of a digital tracing app, or any other digital application and its uptake, would depend on a number of factors, including concerns around privacy and security of data. There are risks of low uptake if communications strategy is poorly coordinated or materials have unclear messaging; and if there is lack of trust in government/authorities promoting the app," she says.

Her research also found users had concerns about equity and fairness if no alternative device was available for people without smartphones, a need for clarity around how an app detects and records a 'contact', the risk of social stigmatisation if app data were used to alert people of identifiable positive cases or high risk areas, and that a lack of understanding about manual contact tracing lead to concerns about the use of automated apps.

"New technologies are ideally developed and implemented with input from real people (end-users)—this helps governments understand

community comfort, and build 'social licence'. This is an essential, early, and vital step. Social licence is a social agreement between the people and the Government (or health department) for a specific data use.

"In our recent research for the introduction of an app for COVID-19 in Queensland, our findings were consistent with our work on other projects in New Zealand and the United States: The population need to trust that the benefits will outweigh the risks; trust that their data will be used as they have agreed; and accept that if enough value is created they are likely to be more comfortable with its use," she says.

Public trust in app use

Ms Brown recently helped organise, in partnership with the United Kingdom's Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation, a virtual roundtable with people from 10 different countries working on contact tracing apps for COVID-19 (due to be repeated in two weeks' time). "The focus of these discussions was public trust and what we found was we were all facing similar challenges. The speed of development means that working transparently and enabling public scrutiny is not straightforward", she says.

Toi Āria is a research unit which helps organisations create and deliver community-centred policies and services by harnessing design for public good. A recent project was a collaboration with the Data Futures Partnership, enabling New Zealanders to express their views on data sharing with Government.

"Toi Āria's wider interest in the work around contact tracing apps is in the way they provide an example of the potential for data driven technologies to be used for [public good](#), but this can only happen if they are developed and deployed ethically. If public confidence erodes the opportunity might be lost, not only when it comes to this specific

technology, but in further government attempts to use data and AI as well.

"The call in the research paper is for Government's to commit to an impact evaluation on COVID-19 apps that will enable the public to judge the impact of a tool. This transparency will increase levels of [trust](#) as well as take-up," she says.

More information: Digital contact tracing for Covid-19: new policy primer: [csda.aut.ac.nz/news/digital-co ... 19-new-policy-primer](https://csda.aut.ac.nz/news/digital-co...-19-new-policy-primer)

Provided by Massey University

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