

Smartphones and contact-tracing: Balancing care and surveillance

22 June 2021, by Daniel Miller



Credit: Shutterstock/Rawpixel.com

The astonishing [rise](#) of smartphones in everyday life has created many solutions (GPS maps, internet browsing and messaging, to name just a few). But they have also brought new moral dilemmas. One issue in particular stands out in the wake of the pandemic—the fine line between care and surveillance.

We highlighted this tension in an [extensive project](#) which examined the use and consequences of smartphones around the world. The study was made up of 11 researchers who each spent 16 months in nine countries. Our research revealed how smartphones have demonstrably increased the human capacity for care. For example, in helping people look after frail and elderly parents.

Smartphones become [especially prominent](#) when those parents live at a distance—or, indeed, in lockdown. [We found](#) the ability to send frequent messages (what in Japan are called "little bits of nothing") was perhaps more important than their content.

The project also found that the way [social media](#) allows the visual to complement oral and textual forms of conversation has become a significant element in the expression of care. For example, [we](#)

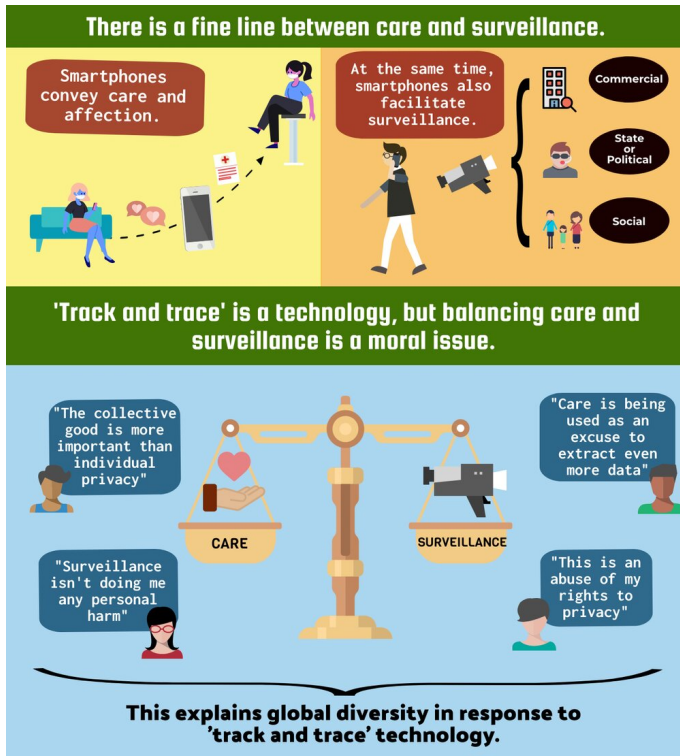
[discovered](#) that the use of "stickers" (stickers, like emojis, are illustrations that represent emotions or actions) within LINE in Japan and WeChat in China helped to convey both concern and humor more effectively.

The Big Brother dilemma

But at the same time, there has been increasing concern over the way smartphones facilitate surveillance, both by governments and by corporations—what American social psychologist [Shoshana Zuboff](#) calls "[surveillance capitalism](#)".

In Ireland, [our study](#) focused on surveillance as part of family relations, particularly when the children of frail parents were monitoring their actions. The parents had concerns about their autonomy, dignity and privacy.

Similarly, many parents consider monitoring their children's smartphones as an integral and responsible part of their care. But the children mostly experience this as surveillance. We concluded that at every level, from intimate family relations, right up to the relationship with the state, the ability of smartphones to simultaneously increase both care and surveillance was leading to new moral dilemmas.



How moral issues arise from smartphone use. Credit: Daniel Miller, Author provided

The eruption of a global pandemic in 2020 underlined the importance of smartphones as an instrument of care due to the conditions imposed by lockdowns and sheilding. The impossibility of physical contact increased the significance of digital communication, especially for low-income populations.

For example, in Kampala, where [we found](#) that mobile and smartphones were the only means of contact, if people possessed neither landlines nor computers. As one village elder commented "life's easier now with phones," noting how he could inform his family about problems and request their assistance.

The NHS App and the NHS COVID-19 app are two different apps.

The NHS App lets you share your COVID-19 status, order repeat prescriptions and a range of NHS services.

The NHS COVID-19 app is a contact tracing app, which also lets you check in to places like bars and restaurants.

pic.twitter.com/KFRQJ4503k

— NHS (@NHSuk) [June 3, 2021](#)

The parallel increase in the capacity for surveillance became equally apparent when it was realised that smartphones could play a crucial role in curbing the spread of the virus through the development of contact-tracing apps. These apps allowed authorities to know about—and then constrain—the movement of people who had been in contact with anyone who tested positive for COVID-19.

Smartphone apps developed for this purpose have been deployed in many countries across the world. But the response to their development has been mixed. At one end of the spectrum are countries such as South Korea. Here, the technology was primarily perceived as an [instrument of care](#). The intrusion of the state into people's private lives was generally accepted as far less important than the potential for saving lives. The government's adoption of a robust approach involving multiple digital technologies is considered to have been a significant factor in its [success](#) in the subsequent election.

By contrast, in many other countries, the deployment of these technologies has led to considerable concern about the way they [extend surveillance](#) and intrusion into personal privacy. There is, for example, evidence that Republican-leaning states in the US were less willing to download such an app as compared to others, because of a [political ideology](#) which centered on individual privacy rights in opposition to what was viewed as an intrusive state.

This has had implications for the technology itself. Some of these countries have tended to favor the Apple/Google version, that has more inbuilt privacy protection than, for example, the app originally [favoured by the UK](#) government, which provided

more data to the epidemiologists. Each country chose its own path in this balance between [privacy and effectiveness](#).

The evidence shows that the development of a [smartphone](#) technology aimed at curbing the spread of a pandemic across the globe by no means ensures a homogeneous response. This is because the technology has exposed this fine line between care and [surveillance](#).

Where one population may prioritize individual privacy, another will be far more concerned with collective welfare. So an understanding of wider cultural values will be crucial to the ongoing deployment of this technology across the world.

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