



Confirmed: Surveillance State Uses Pretext of COVID-19 To Increase Surveillance of Citizens

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In a previous article dated March 18, this writer addressed early reports that the Surveillance State is seizing the “opportunity” afforded by the pandemic scare to expand the surveillance of ordinary citizens all over the world. Now, the *Wall Street Journal* is reporting on more details of that increased surveillance.

As this writer’s [previous article](#) stated, sources for the *Washington Post* had revealed that Facebook, Google, and a wide array of tech companies and health experts were in talks with the U.S. government to provide location data harvested from citizens via their devices and applications. The ostensible reason for that increased surveillance was to combat the spread of the coronavirus responsible for COVID-19. As that article reported:

The sources for the *Post* article are described as “three people familiar with the effort” “who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the project is in its early stages.” They said that public-health experts are interested in the possibility that private-sector companies could compile the data in anonymous, aggregated form, which they could then use to map the spread of the infection, according to the *Post*.

According to the article, analysis of trends in smartphone owners’ whereabouts could prove to be a powerful tool for health authorities looking to track coronavirus. But “it’s also an approach that could leave some Americans uncomfortable, depending on how it’s implemented, given the sensitivity when it comes to details of their daily whereabouts.” The sources are quick to point out that — if the plan moves forward — there is nothing to worry about, “they are not building a government database.” Now where has this writer heard that before?

It is difficult (read: impossible) to believe such a claim, coming from surveillance hawks who have been caught lying time and again. With the ease and relative lack of expense to store everything, why should anyone buy into the claim that this data will not become part of a permanent record?

That article also addressed the fact that Google and (to a lesser degree) Facebook had confirmed those talks with Uncle Sam.

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Now, the *Wall Street Journal* is [reporting](#).

Government officials across the U.S. are using location data from millions of cellphones in a bid to better understand the movements of Americans during [the coronavirus pandemic](#) and how they



Written by [C. Mitchell Shaw](#) on March 30, 2020

may be affecting the spread of the disease.

The federal government, through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and state and local governments have started to receive analyses about the presence and movement of people in certain areas of geographic interest drawn from cellphone data, people familiar with the matter said. The data comes from the mobile advertising industry rather than cellphone carriers.

Further, the plan could encompass “as many as 500 cities across the U.S., according to one source for the *Journal*.”

Of course, while the ostensible reason behind the 1984-themed surveillance is to “protect” us all from the virus, what it actually accomplishes is the expansion (and normalization) of mass surveillance of supposedly free people. As the *Journal* article states:

The data can also reveal general levels of compliance with stay-at-home or shelter-in-place orders, according to experts inside and outside government, and help measure the pandemic’s economic impact by revealing the drop-off in retail customers at stores, decreases in automobile miles driven and other economic metrics.

The CDC has started to get analyses based on location data through an ad hoc coalition of tech companies and data providers — all working in conjunction with the White House and others in government, people said.

And, not surprisingly, “The growing reliance on mobile phone location data continues to raise concerns about privacy protections, especially when programs are run by or commissioned by governments.” The *Journal* quotes Wolfie Christl, a privacy activist and researcher, as saying that the location-data industry was “covidwashing” what are generally privacy-invading products.

One important note is that while Uncle Sam’s surveillance hawks claim that the gathered location data will be “anonymized” to remove the identity of the subjects, such anonymization is extremely difficult (if not outright impossible). After all, if that location data shows that a person spent the hours between 9 p.m. and 8 a.m. at a certain residential address, it could reasonably be assumed that he lives there. If only four people live at that address — a man, a woman, and their two young children — and the data shows that the phone carried by one of them went into a store that specializes in women’s clothing or other products, the aggregation of that data could easily identify the phone as belonging to the only woman at that residential address. Of course it would also show everywhere else she went, who she was with (by the data collected from the devices carried by those people), and how long she spent with them.

And it is not just the federal government conducting this creepy surveillance; the states are jumping on the Big Brother bandwagon, as well. The *Journal* article includes a paragraph that is startling in its benignity:

Some companies in the U.S. location-data industry have made their data or analysis available for the public to see or made their raw data available for researchers or governments. San Francisco-based LotaData launched a public portal analyzing movement patterns within Italy that could help authorities plan for outbreaks and plans additional portals for Spain, California and New York. The company Unacast launched a public “social distancing scoreboard” that uses location data to evaluate localities on how well their population is doing at following stay-at-home orders.

Further, “Other state and local governments too have begun to commission their own studies and



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analyses from private companies. Foursquare Labs Inc., one of the largest location-data players, said it is in discussions with numerous state and local governments about use of its data.”

The list of companies that are playing along includes those — such as Foursquare — that focus on collecting location data as well as social media, mobile-phone carriers, and others. The data is “mostly drawn from applications that users have installed on their phones and allowed to track their location.”

In the more global picture, Uncle Sam and his accomplices at the state and local levels are not alone. The *Journal* reported that Big Tech is playing along with other nations, as well. And some of them have even used their own surveillance apparatus to gather greater amounts of location data:

Researchers and governments around the world have used a patchwork of authorities and tactics to collect mobile phone data — sometimes looking for voluntary compliance from either companies or individuals, and in other cases using laws meant for terrorism or other emergencies to collect vast amounts of data on citizens to combat the coronavirus threat.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology researchers have [launched a project](#) to track volunteer Covid-19 patients through a mobile phone app. Telecom carriers in Germany, Austria, Spain, Belgium, the U.K. and other countries have [given data over to authorities](#) to help combat the pandemic. Israel’s [intelligence agencies were tapped](#) to use antiterrorism phone-tracking technology to map infections.

In these uncertain times of pandemic panic, one thing can be certain: The surveillance hawks in both government and Big Tech are leveraging the pandemic panic to condition the world to accept greater and greater degrees of surveillance. And they will certainly ratchet things up moving forward. Whatever the next Big Scare, they will be ready to take all of this to a newer and higher level.

C. Mitchell Shaw is a freelance writer and content creator who focuses on matters related to the Constitution and liberty. A privacy nerd since before it was cool, he hosts and produces the [Enemy of the \[Surveillance\] State](#) podcast.



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