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Tackling COVID19 Is a Crucible for Privacy

Laws and norms around privacy take a significant amount of time to be established, but can often unravel at lightning speed. As a part of the global response to the COVID19 crisis in the United States and Western Europe, governments are relaxing carefully crafted privacy protections such as the US's Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). While the crisis is temporary, it is easy to foresee how privacy changes made in the crucible of COVID19 could have a long lasting impact on our civil liberties once we go back to shaking hands.

During the current crisis, we have seen a massive uptake in the use of digital tools to engage in all manner of contacts, typically made in person. Everything from doctors' visits, dance classes, secondary education classes as well as all the adult employment activities have rapidly moved online without considering the massive data extraction activities of these private for-profit companies. Tools such as Zoom, Google Hangouts, WhatsApp, WeChat and even TikTok are experiencing unprecedented implementations across a range of sectors that have never before considered using video as a facilitator. Uncomfortable questions around location data being shared with governmental agencies are now being asked, but the tech adoption is happening before society has had a chance to grapple with its answer. In other words, a significant portion of the general public is now reliant on digital tools that have not fully considered user privacy.

Because one's personal data is an abstract concept which exists outside of most individual's day-to-day purview, it is difficult for citizens to conceptualize the risks of relaxing individual data and privacy protections. How does one hold onto their data responsibility, under what conditions might it be useful for consumers to offer their data for use in unintended arenas? What are the digital protections one might expect in a pandemic?

Data extraction has finally been recognized as a source of capitalization that has, in only a decade, catapulted technology companies into the top ten corporations in the world. ZOOM, which we are now all using as lifelines is valued at [42 BILLION US](#) dollars, this is a major corporate body with little to now oversight. The manipulation of behavior and fact, some of which uses data extraction as an affordance, is a more

recent topic to have emerged as a serious threat to convivial humanitarian values. Perhaps persuasive and surveillant technology applications were tolerated for good reason. Early studies of network use indicated the enormous potential of human desire and expression, the relational qualities of visual enticement, the rising electronic tides of hegemony, racism, and objectification without consequence.

Even prior to the COVID19 pandemic, big tech firms such as Zoom have come under scrutiny for leaking personally identified user data, or flat out selling it. However, now as millions of families are forced to live their lives online while in quarantine, companies that facilitate remote working, learning and socializing have near unlimited access to individual's sensitive data. Most alarming are the lack of protections for vulnerable populations including children, those seeking mental health services and older adults. As [Joseph Cox, in Vice](#), and others have noted, users allow Zoom to transfer their data to Facebook and other third party vendors, whole cloth. Whereas, [Wire](#), an encrypted messaging service, has built into its design viewable open source code, and a delete for everyone function that users control.

The time for transparency has never been more urgent, before the Zoom boom is an irreparable bust for privacy.

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