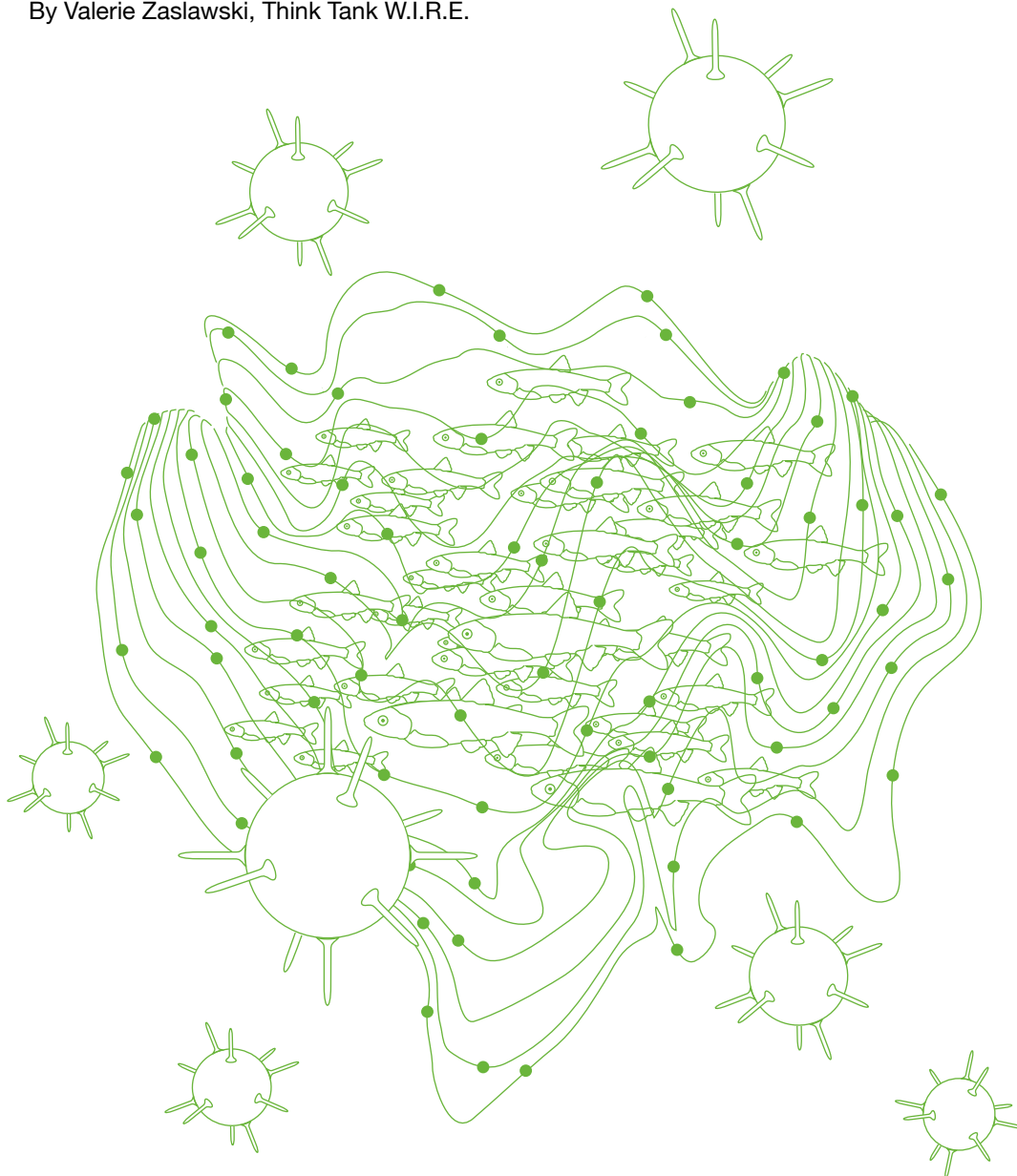


“Contact tracing is not Instagram. The individual is of no interest at all.”

Interview with **Dorothea Baur**

By Valerie Zaslawski, Think Tank W.I.R.E.



Switzerland is just one of the countries using digital contact tracing in an effort to manage Covid-19. Ethicist Dorothea Baur explains why sharing individual data in the pandemic is a way for people to put solidarity into practice. She also describes how we're getting more and more aware of the social, non-commercial value of data.

Dorothea Baur, is it an act of solidarity for people to share their individual data, for example via the federal government's SwissCovid app ?

Yes. The pandemic is also about solidarity. The coronavirus app is one of many measures that enable people to put solidarity into practice. It's part of the solidarity infrastructure. On the other hand, I have a problem with the notion of "sharing", which implies that other people have access to my data. Digital contact tracing doesn't involve sharing my data with fellow citizens. What I'm doing is entrusting my anonymised data to the state. It's about data being collected on my smartphone and passed on for the good of the public at large.

You don't like the term "self-monitoring" either. Why not?

The coronavirus app isn't about self-monitoring. I'm not gathering data for my own sake, as I am, for example, if I monitor my sleep or use a health and fitness tracker like Fitbit. With the app I'm gathering my data for the sake of other people. That's also why in this case it is misleading to talk of taking responsibility for yourself. That's not the point. It's not about taking responsibility for myself, but collective responsibility. It's about public health, not my own private health. You can only manage a pandemic if people consider the needs of others.

Where else are data shared with the aim of improving or protecting the common good?

One example is data donation for medical purposes: I share my data so that other people can benefit from it. Ultimately, the research is good for me, too. The same applies to the coronavirus: if the number of cases falls, every single one of us benefits because we regain freedoms. Beyond health there are data reporting schemes such as züriwien.ch, a website where information is gathered on damage to infrastructure such as illegal dumping or broken manhole covers. Taking part in political surveys also benefits the common good.

Does the community at large have a right to our anonymised digital data – more, for example, than it is entitled to expect us to donate our organs?

If it's a question of what's reasonable to expect, then a right to data is much more reasonable than a right to donated organs. It's much less intimate and involves less interference in your personal rights. Sharing data doesn't violate your physical integrity. Donating organs, on the other hand, is a very personal matter. People often object because of their religious beliefs, for example because they see it as a desecration of a dead body. We're only too glad to give away our data if it makes our lives easier, for example for good reading tips or online shopping. But when there's no direct benefit we have a problem. We should have just as much interest in public health and controlling the pandemic.

So more than anything, people are lazy?

Yes. I think it's a matter of laziness and ignorance. We don't like thinking about the traces we leave in the web. We're too lazy to change the settings.

So the debate around privacy is a smokescreen?

Yes. The technology we're using in Switzerland is really friendly in terms of data privacy – at the expense of quality in epidemiological terms. I think more than anything, people don't want to be confronted with the moral dilemma they'll find themselves in if the app sends them a warning. If that happens, you have to voluntarily go into quarantine, take a test and

forego leisure activities. We don't have the moral maturity to deal with the problem. Not only that, but people often overestimate their own importance.

How do you mean?

Many people think others are interested, for example, in who they were in a club with. They don't get that in digital contact tracing they're of no interest at all as an individual. They're of interest merely as a potential carrier of the virus. This self-importance is typical of the Instagram generation: for them it's all about controlling their own content. Influencers pose on a beach because they think their followers are interested in who they're on holiday with on what island. But contact tracing isn't Instagram! The location doesn't have to fit your image. Individuals become data points. Their personality is irrelevant.

Is pandemic tracking producing a shift in terms of societal norms of individual tracing?

Pandemic tracing might create an awareness that data can also be used for the common good. Suddenly, it's about the non-commercial value of data. "Data is the new oil" was yesterday. The debate around data is becoming more political. That's also reflected in the government's calls to the public to participate. This means that in future the debate might focus less on privacy.

Will we get used to sharing data?

No, I don't think so. It's an extraordinary situation that at best will increase people's awareness of the different significance and value of data.

But don't you think that the need for state tracking for security reasons could grow, also after the crisis?

No, I don't believe that either. But if it turns out that contact tracing was an important part of managing the pandemic, hopefully there will be greater acceptance for measures of this sort in the future. The problem is, for reasons of data privacy, the effectiveness of the app isn't even being measured. For example, there's no systematic analysis of whether people who report to the health authorities with symptoms use the app or not.

Would it be okay for tracing apps of this sort to be mandatory?

I could live with it if the state imposed the requirement equally on all citizens. But under no circumstances should the SwissCovid app be made into a requirement in situations of dependence, for example for a job. If it's mandatory, it has to be the same for everyone.

Is there really room for mandatory solidarity measures in a free society?

A free society needs a modicum of cooperation and solidarity. If you try and force people to show solidarity, it loses its core. Solidarity is something that should happen horizontally, between you and me. But if the state tries to indoctrinate people with solidarity it becomes vertical, and there's no benefit. There has to be an interplay between a free society, solidarity and cooperation. State coercion is only needed if this state of affairs can't be achieved by other means. But then it's no longer solidarity. It becomes a law. If something has to be made compulsory, it always means that there's no longer trust in members of society.

People are much more sensitive about being forced to do something when it comes to vaccinations and organ donations than they are when it comes to having to show solidarity by paying taxes. What's the difference when it's about health and people's own body?

A physical intervention is more immediate, and physical integrity is a precious commodity. At least I can control my own body. It's kind of the last bastion.



Dorothea Baur is an independent consultant who advises organisations on matters of ethics, responsibility and sustainability. She has made the financial and technology sectors her particular focus. Alongside her work as a consultant she also lectures at universities. Dorothea Baur studied governance and public policy and received a PhD in business ethics from the University of St. Gallen (HSG).

The SwissCovid app

Launched in June 2020, the federal government's SwissCovid app is designed to make it easier to trace chains of infection. Smartphones with the app installed exchange anonymous identification codes with other phones within range with the Bluetooth function activated. These codes are stored on the phone for two weeks and then automatically erased. Users who have been in close proximity for at least 15 minutes to someone proven to be infected receive a notification to warn them.

Downloading and using the app is voluntary. There is a legal basis designed to ensure that no one is discriminated against for downloading or not downloading the app. Bruno Baeriswyl, for many years the Zurich data protection officer, questions the need for the app to be voluntary. In April 2020 he told the NZZ that if the app is appropriate and necessary to control the pandemic, it is legally compliant and does not have to be voluntary.

The app's success depends on its adoption by as many members of the public as possible. By mid-July 2020 the SwissCovid app had been downloaded 1.85 million times from the App Store and Google Play Store. A survey by Comparis at the beginning of July showed that those sceptical about the app mainly have doubts about using the app and fears that their data will be misused.