

Is Technology the Solution?

Transparency and disinformation in times of COVID-19

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: In responding to the pandemic, many states have taken a number of measures to legalize access to citizens' personal data. How effective have technological solutions proven in the fight against corona?

BERGMAN: In Israel, we have an app called The Shield, which is supposed to alert you in case you or anyone near you has been in danger of contracting the virus. The app relies on a database of people who have been diagnosed with the coronavirus, which mostly does not include asymptomatic cases. Consequently, such apps may provide a false sense of confidence, encouraging people to mingle when they should be keeping a distance.

Moreover, many of the technological solutions rely on data from cell phone towers, which are far less accurate than a given device's GPS signal. In Israel, we are yet to see any professional, objective reports on how effective these efforts have been.

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: States and private companies are developing different apps to track the spread of the coronavirus. Would you rather trust states or the private sector with such apps?

BERGMAN: It depends on the individual company or government, but I would be cautious in either case. If I had to make a call, I would choose a governmental provider rather than a private company as governments remain more accountable. In addition, compared to the private sector with its financial



© Dor Malka

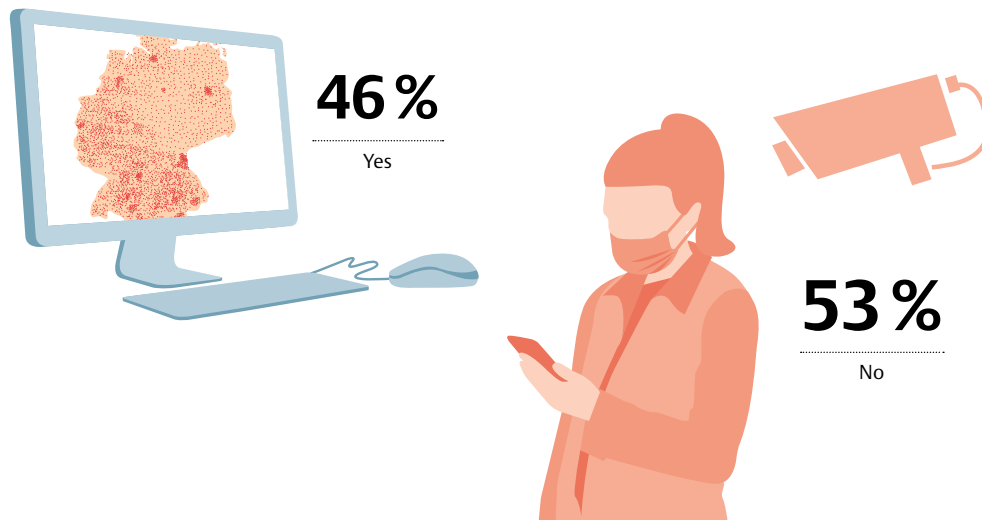
RONEN BERGMAN
Staff writer to the New York Times,
author of "[Rise and Kill First](#)", Tel Aviv

interests, civil servants have fewer incentives to abuse such data.

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: Many people distrust their respective government's handling of such data. How can states win their citizens' trust?

BERGMAN: Transparency is the key. Rather than explaining to citizens why downloading and using an app would be to their benefit, the Israeli Prime Minister merely announced that the government would be deploying a technology that had

To fight the pandemic, should the government be allowed temporarily to access personal data?



proven extremely effective in the fight against terrorism. Israel's domestic intelligence service, the Shin Bet, has been gathering non-targeted mass surveillance data on all Israeli citizens since about 2003, collecting and storing the metadata of all Israeli cell phones, being able to identify who we call and when, how long our calls last and where we were at the time. The Israeli public was completely unaware that the government had established this database.

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: Do you see an inevitable tension between the use of such data and democratic governance?

BERGMAN: The fact that a clandestine database existed for so long in Israel with very little oversight and scrutiny provides ample proof of the fragility of Israeli democracy. Moreover, the government's decision to repurpose the database, from a counter-terrorism to a counter-corona tool, was taken with inconceivable ease. When Parliament refused to approve this step, the government simply pushed ahead. Changing the target of such a sensitive database may well lower the inhibition threshold towards doing so again, this time perhaps against leftists or human rights activists. This is an extremely worrying trend, and contacts from the

2020: don't know 1%

Israeli intelligence community have been urging me to address it in my reporting. When you reach a point at which the military apparatus, the security establishment, and the intelligence community are fighting for democracy, something has gone very wrong indeed.

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: How can we mitigate such tensions in the future?

BERGMAN: One alternative may be to establish an emergency backup system. Cell phone providers could be required to log all geolocation data going back 30 days. In a case of emergency, such as the current pandemic, they could then supply these data to an emergency authority under strong and public supervision. Such a solution could present a compromise, providing us with the capability to track people in the case of another pandemic, but placing strong limits on its use and time-scale and thus posing a smaller challenge to the right of privacy.

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: Amidst growing geopolitical competition, disinformation has become a

central topic. What role has disinformation played in the context of the pandemic?

BERGMAN: The pandemic has been the basis for a number of massive attempts to manipulate public opinion via social media. Such campaigns make it seem as if independent people are tweeting their views. While it is extremely difficult to measure the effects of such operations, they are clearly being conducted by capable and sophisticated entities.

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: How would you assess the threat such campaigns pose to democratic countries?

BERGMAN: In George Orwell's famous dystopian novel, 1984, "Big Brother" broadcasts to each and every screen, controlling all information. So prior to the advent of social media, we all thought that, in order to prevent a monopoly of information, you require a multitude of platforms through which everybody can say whatever they like. In a way, this turned out to be true. However, it is also false, in the sense that today's hundreds of thousands of channels are vulnerable to abuse by entities with the capacity to dominate them. These entities are much, much harder to fight than the classical

media belonging to dictatorships. When authoritarian rulers published what they claimed to be Pravda, the truth, we knew how to interpret such propaganda. With Twitter accounts, seemingly authentic but spreading false information or carrying hidden commercial messages, we do not. Moreover, for those who do know, it is very hard to explain to those who do not. Freedom of information and expression can be weaponized to achieve the exact opposite of democratic discourse. This is a challenge on par to the fight against the dictatorships of old.

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: Germans are famously protective of their privacy. Looking ahead, is this attitude more likely to save us from the adverse effects of technology or to leave the country hopelessly behind?

BERGMAN: Every nation's attitudes reflect its past traumas. Israelis amplify any kind of threat to be existential and the Germans are amplifying any kind of challenge to the human rights and rights of privacy to be the basis of a tyrannical regime. This is the way it is and perhaps also the way it should be.

