Getting buy-in for TraceTogether device and future Smart Nation initiatives

Set up an independent body to vet transparency and have a citizens’ panel to develop principles for privacy and use of personal data

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For The Straits Times

In the past week, the Government announced plans to roll out a wearable contact tracing device to help curb the spread of Covid-19.

Public backlash against the TraceTogether device initiative was swift. Within a span of three days, the device development of the device was downgraded from 100,000 down to 30,000 devices.

The Government has since clarified that key features of the device are to address people’s concerns – it will not track a person’s location, and will be small enough for people to put in their bags or pockets. Those who prefer to use the TraceTogether phone application can continue to do so.

While the Government can provide assurances and citizens can make compromises, the tension between the need to gather personal data for the collective interest and people’s desire to protect their privacy is perennial.

Although the TraceTogether app and wearable device are designed specifically to assuage fears of surveillance, too much people’s wariness and suspicion pertaining to their movements are unlikely to make a smooth transition.

Public willingness to receive COVID-19 vaccine has also increased over the years, amid the Cambridge Analytica case, racial profiling by the West, and local security breaches on data leaks.

Trust lies the dilemma. This hyper-sensitivity is ramped against the need for personal data to be shared for the public good, especially in national crises.

Without widespread voluntary adoption, the efficacy of contact tracing device will be low. And it is very likely that people will need to use their personal data in the future to be ready for the next pandemic or national emergency.

So what is the solution in a new post-Covid-19 normal? Transparency, trust and collaboration.

TRANSPARENCY: AN INDEPENDENT BODY

First, the Government must be transparent and communicate all measures as well as their attendant benefits clearly.

Most people have few qualms about submitting their personal information to a wide array of businesses, such as social media platforms, face-reading consumer goods businesses, e-commerce and peer-to-peer sharing platforms.

For many people, willingness to give up their personal data depends on whether they are getting value for their money.

A recent research Centre study in 2018 found that many Americans did not know how much personal information was being collected about them. The study found that 32 percent of respondents were “privacy activists” who take actions such as not signing up for services providers because of the companies’ data policies.

Interestingly, they are less comfortable with ads-off switches provided that the privacy purchased is exchange for personalised products and services, and sharing information from smart home operators in exchange for health and safety warnings for the entire family.

In Singapore too, people can benefit in trade-offs between privacy and convenience, as seen in the general acceptance of Smart Nation initiatives to benefit many Singaporeans’ living.

Trust is crucial, once the first Housing Board tower is “no-go”, sensors installed to measure energy consumption, water consumption and waste use in real-time.

Both parties benefit – the Government has access to data that will help improve the planning, design and maintenance of public housing estates, and residents receive feedback nudging them to adopt more environmentally friendly habits, which in turn reduces household costs.

The Elderly Monitoring System, another Smart Nation initiative, uses sensors on doors and inside rooms to monitor the movements of seniors. Such an erosion could be perceived as highly intrusive. But the line and benefits are clear – the system will help in alerting caregivers when necessary is detected.

The Government is committed to this transparency to ensure that individuals can choose the level and effectiveness of protection of any technology that is designed to protect them that will benefit the community.

The system is a model for the use of remote surveillance, which has enabled it to avoid severe lockdowns during the pandemic.

In times of emergency, its contact tracing tool is being deployed to deploy large-scale contact tracing involving multiple data points – phone calls and contact data, closing and collection of data, and the deployment of testing centers.

The Act, which applies to infectious diseases, permits authorities access to personal data, which is essential for the protection of the population.

Combined with the consent from the Personal Information Protection Act, which allows the authorities to identify and isolate potential COVID-19 cases quickly.

The Act, which authorizes data collection and analysis of personal data, is essential to the protection of the population from the spread of infectious diseases.

The task will be to strike the right balance between personal data and public good.

If, for example, some Smart Nation initiatives and intrusive devices are being planned.

Singapore needs to address these factors responsibly to achieve a working compromise between personal data and public good.

The citizens, not the Government, are the users of these data.

The solution is an independent body to vet transparency and have a citizens’ panel to develop principles for privacy and use of personal data.

COLLABORATION: A CITIZENS PANEL

This leads to the third crucial factor – collaboration. Given the efficacy of government efforts relies on citizens’ support and buy-in, the Government and citizens need to work together to come up with a sustainable approach to solving the consensus.

With the TraceTogether app, the IPS Institute termed it, then the app will be delivered to citizens, whereas Singaporeans decide on the guiding principles and key personal data, and how they should be used.

This can be done by convening a citizens’ panel, where people from different backgrounds come together and decide as a collective what goes on the chart.

Working with various government agencies on each panel, there fears first-hand the positive impact the process has had on policymaking and citizens’ lives.

When people are involved in the process, they are more likely to engage with those who are not engaged.

The deliberative process of a citizens’ panel is designed to elicit diverse views and gain informed collective decision making.

The Government can then take on board the people’s recommendations and develop a model that governs the use of personal data, one that would be uniquely Singaporean.

While the current wave is shoreline measures, a citizens’ panel is a good idea going forward, given the many Smart Nation initiatives and intrusive devices are being planned.

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