

Pandemic, Data Collection, and Security An Emerging New Model

Tassos Symeonides
(RIEAS Academic Advisor)

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It was recently announced that Facebook has launched a Covid-19 symptoms data maps initiative in collaboration with the [Carnegie Mellon University Delphi epidemiological research center](#). Symptom tracking is a vital part of defeating the pandemic. The larger the data set at the disposal of experts the faster the finding of a cure can be. But aside from the purely scientific importance of Facebook's initiative, the move raises intriguing political and practical issues, namely:

1. For the first time ever, a *private* organization assumes a commanding role in a *global information collection* effort aimed at stopping a pandemic threatening the very fiber of societies and global economic stability.
2. Facebook's sheer computational clout dwarves what individual state organizations can do in data collection, collation, and, eventually, analysis.
3. Symptom tracking can be easily complemented with research results tracking. As we speak, hundreds, if not thousands, of research centers around the world are racing to develop vaccines and drugs capable of defeating Covid-19. A grand central database of these efforts can be a critical weapon in defeating the current and future pandemic threats—and producing a true windfall for those who win the race.

The “hidden” strategic significance of a Facebook-type free-access database should not be underestimated either. Right now, a plethora of government organizations, both open and classified, are repositories of important scientific data sets. Access to these sets is either prohibited or is controlled via prohibitively cumbersome procedures. Enter private entrepreneurship. Suddenly, a great part of this mass of controlled information

becomes free to access by the general public. This is an *unprecedented paradigm shift* and a keen blow to secretive government procedures and practices.

Open distribution of key information has been the target of private initiatives for the longest time. The rapid global growth of organizations like Facebook, Google, and other such giant private companies is constantly breaking barriers to the point that *governments* are now turning to these companies for carrying out specific tasks. The CIA cloud [computing agreement](#) with Amazon is only one of the many ongoing such projects. For the first time ever, private companies will be “handling” data once reserved for storage only on government computers—including confidential, secret, and top secret materials.

The implications of this paradigm shift are still poorly understood but certainly stand to cause a revolution in the relations between the private and the state controlled. When sensitive intelligence rests in private companies’ cloud, it is automatically exposed to multiple access points. This would undoubtedly send shivers down the spine of security experts.

Yet, the sheer volume of privately owned and controlled cloud space is already pushing government agencies, both military and civilian, to modernize and migrate to the cloud-based, service-oriented environment to save money, effort, and, above all, time. The almost certain corollary to this trend would be an increasingly expanding effort by private companies to imitate Facebook in creating open access cloud databases containing previously hard-to-find-and-access data.

Now that the Big Private Boys are about to enter the fray in earnest, questions about the undisputed ability of governments to maintain their hold on tight state secrecy come into question.

Many in the liberal camp will undoubtedly welcome diminishing state power. Others will surely mourn over “declining” security and allowing adversaries to exploit this unique Western entrepreneurial idea. In the end, those who are already celebrating the Facebook initiative will need to convince the public, beyond doubt, that such “from the heart” initiatives by this world’s gargantuan money makers are, indeed, to the true benefit of humanity—and not just another ploy to fatten the bottom line.