Humankind is now facing a global crisis. Perhaps the biggest crisis of our generation. The decisions people and governments take in the next few weeks will probably shape the world for years to come. They will shape not just our healthcare systems but also our economy, politics and culture. We must act quickly and decisively. We should also take into account the long-term consequences of our actions. When choosing between alternatives, we should ask ourselves not only how to overcome the immediate threat, but also what kind of world we will inhabit once the storm passes. Yes, the storm will pass, humankind will survive, most of us will still be alive — but we will inhabit a different world. Many short-term emergency measures will become a fixture of life. That is the nature of emergencies. They fast-forward historical processes. Decisions that in normal times could take years of deliberation are passed in a matter of hours. Immature and even dangerous technologies are pressed into service, because the risks of doing nothing are bigger. Entire countries serve as guinea-pigs in large-scale social experiments. What happens when everybody works from home and communicates only at a distance? What happens when entire schools and universities go online? In normal times, governments, businesses and educational boards would never agree to conduct such experiments. But these aren't normal times. In this time of crisis, we face two particularly important choices. The first is between totalitarian surveillance and citizen empowerment. The second is between nationalist isolation and global solidarity.

Under-the-skin surveillance

In order to stop the epidemic, entire populations need to comply with certain guidelines. There are two main ways of achieving this. One method is for the government to monitor people, and punish those who break the rules. Today, for the first time in human history, technology makes it possible to monitor everyone all the time. Fifty years ago, the KGB couldn't follow 240m Soviet citizens 24 hours a day, nor could the KGB hope to effectively process all the information gathered. The KGB relied on human agents and analysts, and it just couldn't place a human agent to follow every citizen. But now governments can rely on ubiquitous sensors and powerful algorithms instead of flesh-and-blood spooks.

In their battle against the coronavirus epidemic several governments have already deployed the new surveillance tools. The most notable case is China. By closely monitoring people's smartphones, making use of hundreds of millions of face-recognising cameras, and obliging people to check and report their body temperature and medical condition, the Chinese authorities can not only quickly identify suspected coronavirus carriers, but also track their movements and identify anyone they came into contact with. A range of mobile apps warn citizens about their proximity to infected patients.

This kind of technology is not limited to east Asia. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel recently authorised the Israel Security Agency to deploy surveillance technology normally reserved for battling terrorists to track coronavirus patients. When the relevant parliamentary subcommittee refused to authorise the measure, Netanyahu rammed it through with an "emergency decree".

You might argue that there is nothing new about all this. In recent years both governments and corporations have been using ever more sophisticated technologies to track, monitor and manipulate people. Yet if we are not careful, the epidemic might nevertheless mark an important watershed in the history of surveillance. Not only because it might normalise the deployment of mass surveillance tools in countries that have so far rejected them, but even more so because it signifies a dramatic transition from "over the skin" to "under the skin" surveillance.

Hitherto, when your finger touched the screen of your smartphone and clicked on a link, the government wanted to know what exactly your finger was clicking on. But with coronavirus, the focus of interest shifts. Now the government wants to know the temperature of your finger and the blood-pressure under its skin.

The emergency pudding

One of the problems we face in working out where we stand on surveillance is that none of us know exactly how we are being surveilled, and what the coming years might bring. Surveillance technology is developing at breakneck speed, and what seemed science-fiction 10 years ago is today old news. As a thought experiment, consider a hypothetical government that demands that every citizen wears a biometric bracelet that monitors body temperature and heart-rate 24 hours a day. The resulting data is hoarded and analysed by government algorithms. The algorithms will know that you are sick even before you know it, and they will also know where you have been, and who you have met. The chains of infection could be drastically shortened, and even cut altogether. Such a system could arguably stop the epidemic in its tracks within days. Sounds wonderful, right?

The downside is, of course, that this would give legitimacy to a terrifying new surveillance system. If you know, for example, that I clicked on a Fox News link rather than a CNN link, that can teach you something about my political views and perhaps even my personality. But if you can monitor what happens to my body temperature, blood pressure and heart-rate as I watch the video clip, you can learn what makes me laugh, what makes me cry, and what makes me really, really angry. It is crucial to remember that anger, joy, boredom and love are biological phenomena just like fever and a cough. The same technology that identifies coughs could also identify laughs. If corporations and governments start harvesting our biometric data en masse, they can get to know us far better than we know ourselves, and they can then not just predict our feelings but also manipulate our feelings and sell us anything they want — be it a product or a politician. Biometric monitoring would make Cambridge Analytica's data hacking tactics look like something from the Stone Age. Imagine North Korea in 2030, when every citizen has to wear a biometric bracelet 24 hours a day. If you listen to a speech by the Great Leader and the bracelet picks up the tell-tale signs of anger, you are done for.

You could, of course, make the case for biometric surveillance as a temporary measure taken during a state of emergency. It would go away once the emergency is over. But temporary measures have a nasty habit of outlasting emergencies, especially as there is always a new emergency lurking on the horizon. My home country of Israel, for example, declared a state of emergency during its 1948 War of Independence, which justified a range of temporary measures from press censorship and land confiscation to special regulations for making pudding (I kid you not). The War of Independence has

long been won, but Israel never declared the emergency over, and has failed to abolish many of the "temporary" measures of 1948 (the emergency pudding decree was mercifully abolished in 2011). Even when infections from coronavirus are down to zero, some data-hungry governments could argue they needed to keep the biometric surveillance systems in place because they fear a second wave of coronavirus, or because there is a new Ebola strain evolving in central Africa, or because…you get the idea. A big battle has been raging in recent years over our privacy. The coronavirus crisis could be the battle's tipping point. For when people are given a choice between privacy and health, they will usually choose health.

We need a global plan

The second important choice we confront is between nationalist isolation and global solidarity. Both the epidemic itself and the resulting economic crisis are global problems. They can be solved effectively only by global co-operation. First and foremost, in order to defeat the virus we need to share information globally. That's the big advantage of humans over viruses. A coronavirus in China and a coronavirus in the US cannot swap tips about how to infect humans. But China can teach the US many valuable lessons about coronavirus and how to deal with it. What an Italian doctor discovers in Milan in the early morning might well save lives in Tehran by evening. When the UK government hesitates between several policies, it can get advice from the Koreans who have already faced a similar dilemma a month ago. But for this to happen, we need a spirit of global co-operation and trust.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, at present countries hardly do any of these things. A collective paralysis has gripped the international community. There seem to be no adults in the room. One would have expected to see already weeks ago an emergency meeting of global leaders to come up with a common plan of action. The G7 leaders managed to organise a videoconference only this week, and it did not result in any such plan. In previous global crises — such as the 2008 financial crisis and the 2014 Ebola epidemic — the US assumed the role of global leader. But the current US administration has abdicated the job of leader. It has made it very clear that it cares about the greatness of America far more than about the future of humanity. This administration has abandoned even its closest allies. When it banned all travel from the EU, it didn't bother to give the EU so much as an advance notice — let alone consult with the EU about that drastic measure. It has scandalised Germany by allegedly offering $1bn to a German pharmaceutical company to buy monopoly rights to a new Covid-19 vaccine. Even if the current administration eventually changes tack and comes up with a global plan of action, few would follow a leader who never takes responsibility, who never admits mistakes, and who routinely takes all the credit for himself while leaving all the blame to others.

References