The Complicated Danger Of Surveillance States

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Chin: Yeah, within the same year, the police were using that technology to track suspects, and they basically openly said: "Well, we changed our minds."

Lin: And there was a public pushback to that. And now they stopped doing it. It's just an example of how easily one use can lead to another.

The pushback led the Singaporean parliament to pass a bill in February 2021 to restrict police use of TraceTogether data. State forces are still able to access the data now, but they need to go through a stricter process to get permission.

It's easy to imagine that not all countries will respond the same way. Several Asian countries were at the forefront of adopting covid tracing apps, and it's not yet clear how the relevant authorities will deal with the data they collected along the way. So it was a pleasant surprise when I read that Thailand, which pushed for its own covid app, named MorChana, announced in June that it would close down the app and delete all relevant data.

Since our conversation, I keep thinking about what the pandemic has meant for surveillance tech. For one thing, I think it helped illustrate that surveillance is not an abstract "evil" that all "good" societies would naturally object to. Rather, there's a nuanced balance between privacy and social needs like public health. And it's precisely for this reason that we should expect to see governments around the world, including democracies, keep citing new reasons to justify using surveillance tech. There will always be some sort of crisis to respond to, right?

Instead of relying on governments to be responsible with data and self-correct when it makes mistakes, Chin and Lin argued, it's important to start recognizing the harm of surveillance tech early, and to craft regulations that safeguard against those dangers.

How do you think countries should approach surveillance tech? Let me know your thoughts at zeyi@technologyreview.com