

“COVID-19 and the Politics of Locations”

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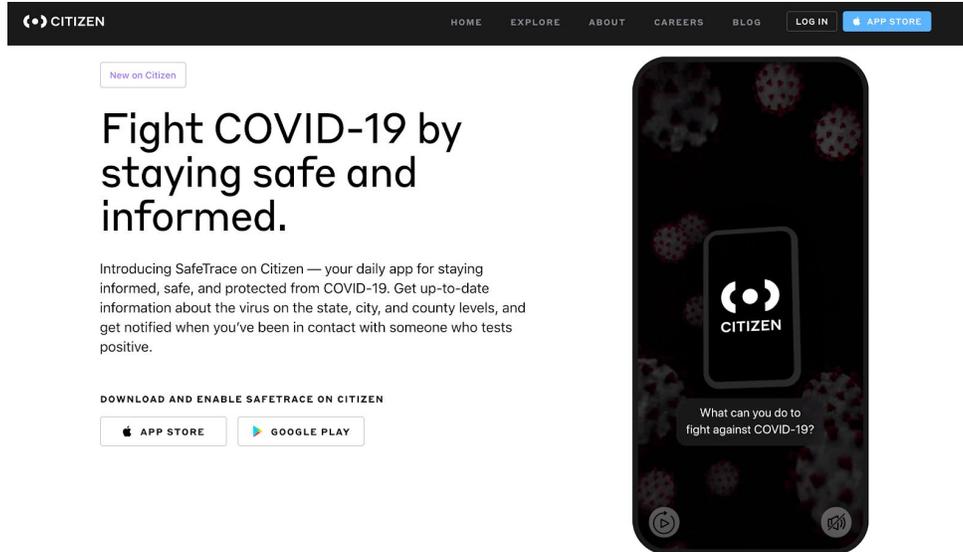


Interesting times for those interested in locative media,
location-based services, and location data [#COVID-19](#)

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Protective measures to fight COVID-19 are congruent with the push for greater investment in smart cities. While the controversial project to create a prototype for Sidewalk Labs in Toronto was cancelled shortly after the pandemic began due to financial concerns, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo quickly partnered with tech industry leaders to work on enhancing critical infrastructures to accelerate telework and personalized home entertainment. But the New York deal also has longer term projections in view (Klein, 2020).

Public-private deals like this one quickly align with solutions that extend from the home into the street. With the centrality of mobile media as a variable in our urban lives and the politics of location in general (cf. Morley, 2017), we can begin to see how these speculations of permanence inform technologically-driven responses to COVID-19, like the rapid development of mobile contact tracing apps. At present, this development operates at a planetary scale, with over 50 apps being used in roughly 30 countries.



While some designers struggle to incentivize their target population, authoritarian leaders push mobile technologies as a means of extending their power. The repurposed crime app, *Citizen*, falls somewhere in the middle, having accommodated its service to a policing narrative geared to ensuring safer communities against viral spread. Others tracing initiatives, like the much-publicized service from Apple and Google, emphasizes the value in creating a network that measures the proximity of mobile devices to safeguard an individual's privacy concerns.

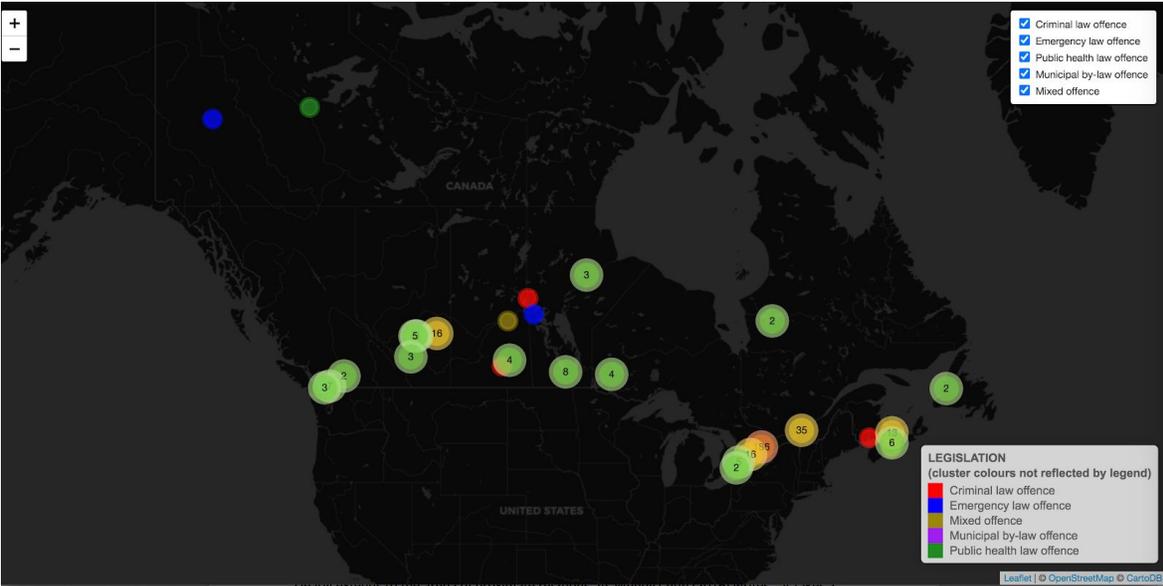
Unique among most others, the Apple/Google app promises to develop an expanded geography of exposure and personal risk by trafficking in anonymous data points as opposed to the traditional markers of mobile identification (GPS, IP address, cell tower triangulation).

However, despite the massive resources that are often committed to contact tracing app design, the tech community that is mobilized here tends to promote what Ali Alkhatib (2020) describes as "a dangerously incomplete picture of the world." He identifies three main assumptions as fallacies: 1) that those who are most vulnerable are not encumbered by barriers

of access. 2) that virtual and material spatial practices are not subject to any discrepancies, or situated cultural differences. 3) that privacy is a concern for the individual and not for the group.

Mobile apps are a treasure trove when it comes to forming critiques of surveillance societies. According to Btihaj Ajana (2013), digital biometrics inspire a system of pre-emptive response that remediates older techniques of identification, such as fingerprinting. The threat of “biological citizenship,” for example, is amplified by the process of automating biocentric data through mobile contact tracing and emergency response functions.

Simone Browne (2015) builds on these observations by identifying how surveillance technologies stem from the ongoing legacies of racist violence and discrimination. She writes that biometric technologies in particular tend to repurpose the technique of identifying through branding or “epidermalization.”



These perspectives help to illustrate the uneven geographies of COVID-19, including the massive differential experience among targeted groups for social distancing violations.

Responding to this, Alexander McClelland's *Policing the Pandemic* (policingthepandemic.ca) is a public initiative designed to counter policing initiatives, mainly by geolocating criminal charges related to social distancing violations. Ibram X. Kendi's *Racial Data Tracker* (covidtracking.com/race) does similar work in measuring the impact of the virus on specific populations.

Wendy Chun (2016) suggests that "it takes a network to solve a network." But she isn't suggesting that solutions are easy or even desirable, so much as to the reality that networked responses will be hampered by structural factors, inequities, and partial successes. Social distancing bylaws, and the spectre of interference posed by the muddling of boundaries between the tech industry and public institutions, is part of this hampering.

In the wake of the pandemic, Benjamin Bratton (2020) called for "an epidemiological view of society" that is based on "an image of our interconnected whole." But what is the value of wholeness and interconnection? While libertarian challenges to epidemiological wisdom ought to be rejected, perhaps in the meantime we can adopt a contextualist position that responds to the urbanist Jay Pitter's (2016) call for an ethos of planning that "[tackles] privilege, community accountability, and centering the most vulnerable."

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