FAQs on COVID-19, telecoms and network data

By Alessandro Gropelli and Paolo Grassia

Brussels, 30 March 2020 – Europe is in the midst of an unprecedented health crisis. Epidemiologists, virologists and policymakers in the healthcare sector have called for the help of industry and civil society to slow the spread, fight the disease and save lives. The European telecoms sector, like many others, has given a strong and swift response. Here some Frequently Asked Questions on what telecom companies are doing and what it means for citizens.

What are European telcos doing to help fight COVID-19?

First things first: telecom companies are working round the clock so that **telecom networks stay up and running and service continuity is ensured**, including both private or business communications and emergency services. As of today, our members observe networks working well across Europe, with no significant disruption despite strong increases and changing patterns in data traffic.

Second, telecom companies are working to **empower individuals, workers, SMEs, schools and universities** to continue their activities from home. This includes providing extended, unlimited or free data, calls and/or entertainment packages to customers. In addition, we are also supporting small and big businesses with dedicated services such as cloud, smart working kits, teleconference and videoconference, including free trials. The same applies to students, with telcos using their existing e-learning platforms to support distance learning. Find a list of the initiatives here.

Is COVID19 going to break my internet?

No. Our engineers and technology experts are working around the clock, so you continue having a good internet experience. We are observing changes in the pattern of telecoms and internet traffic: peaks change in terms of location and time, as people move to work from home. However, this is currently being dealt with by providers thanks to sophisticated and upgraded network architectures. In addition, the European Commission and BEREC recalled the possibility, according to the Open Internet Access Regulation, to manage the network to avoid impending congestion, on top of asking some major video entertainment providers to slightly adapt streaming definition during the crisis.

Network data: how is it being used today?

Today, the main way in which several telecom companies are helping national public health authorities is by sharing with them **aggregated and anonymised** location data. This helps public authorities understand if, to which extent and when the peaks of mass movements are happening across territories. This means, for example, being able to know whether masses of people are still commuting every day from one area to another, and therefore better understand and calculate the healthcare risks associated to such movements. This can also help predict the patterns of spread of the virus.

Are my privacy and fundamental rights being safeguarded?

Yes. In Europe, your personal data is protected by the GDPR and, in the case of telecom operators, also by the ePrivacy Directive. Let us explain it in practical terms. First, telecom companies are currently sharing "aggregated and anonymised data". This means that data shared with public authorities in COVID19 actions, at present, do not include your individual phone number and/or

identity. All personally identifiable information is stripped from datasets, which are then combined with anonymous data from other users; this aggregate data 'mass' is called anonymous because it can no longer be used to re-identify individuals. Secondly, this is being closely monitored by the European Data Protection Board and by the national regulators that have been called to review and approve the data sharing solutions offered by telecom companies. Might public authorities decide to go further in analysing and using telecoms data that is personally identifiable, this should rely on new, special laws in accordance with Art. 15 of the ePrivacy Directive.

How can telco data help doctors and experts?

Knowing how many people move every day, where masses go and whether the movements are limited or not is an important insight for **epidemiologists and other experts** trying to track the coronavirus outbreak. Data is always aggregated and anonymised. This hugely helps scientific committees, for example, in advising governments on whether school closures, work-from-home or other measures are needed in the field of social distancing, which is currently the main public health strategy to fight the virus. In addition, insights gained about the likely spread of the virus help authorities make decisions about the necessary increase in the number of hospital and intensive care unit beds.

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