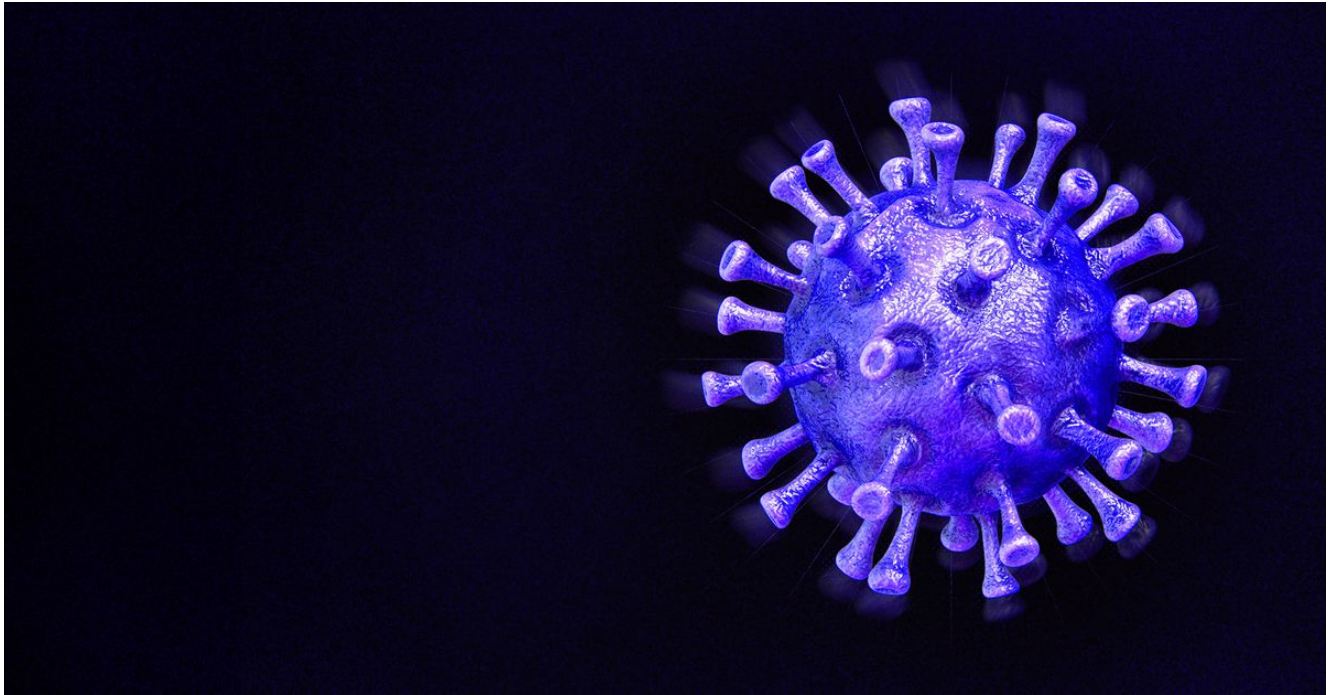


The federal government's inaction could hamper tech's response to the pandemic



Most days in this column I try to bring you one big story about the intersection of tech and democracy, but reading the news today I find I can't draw any real lessons for you. Instead I see a few clusters of stories that feel worth reading and thinking about. Let's take a look.

The big story of the week continues to be the (tentative, premature) plans to begin re-opening society as states manage to flatten the curve of COVID-19 infections. I've already linked Ed Yong's masterful piece in *The Atlantic* here once this week, but if you're new to the subject it's where I'd start. It's the frame around everything else you'll read about what big tech companies are doing in response to the pandemic, from sophisticated contact tracing solutions to old-fashioned philanthropy.

The most important thing to take away from that piece, as well as several others I have read this week, is that there is not

a coordinated federal plan to manage the next phase of the crisis. Instead we have a president who says he wants to end lockdowns as soon as possible, despite lacking the authority to do so, and groups of governors on both coasts pledging to work together to manage the process on a regional basis. This seems likely to cause not a small degree of chaos, working against efforts to contain new outbreaks and undermining the well intentioned tech initiatives that are now percolating.

And we can't blame all of this on politics: even epidemiologists disagree on what the best path forward is. Here's Kai Kupferschmidt in *Science*:

What is the exit strategy? "We've managed to get to the life raft," says epidemiologist Marc Lipsitch of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health (HSPH). "But I'm really unclear how we will get to the shore."

As they seek a path forward, governments around the world must triangulate the health of their citizens, the freedoms of their population, and economic constraints. Could schools be reopened? Restaurants? Bars? Can people go back to their offices? "How to relax the lockdown is not something around which there is a scientific consensus," says Caroline Buckee, an epidemiologist at HSPH. Most researchers agree that reopening society will be a long haul, marked by trial and error. "It's going to have to be something that we're going to have to take baby steps with," says Megan Coffee, an infectious disease researcher at New York University.

This uncertainty has huge implications for public health and the eventual recovery of the economy. And in the shorter term, it raises questions about how effective the Apple/Google collaboration on contact tracing will be, as my colleague Nicole Wetsman explores in *The Verge* today:

The pandemic is moving at unprecedented speed, and public health experts are sprinting to build the tools they think

might help bring it under control. "It's a little bit of flying the plane while still building it," Dhillon says. Any automated contact tracing program would have to be carefully monitored to see how well it helps contain COVID-19, how people are interacting with it, and if it's flagging more people than actually would be at risk from an exposure.

Whatever the systems eventually end up looking like, they have to be introduced alongside public health infrastructure to ensure they have as big an impact as possible. "The tools can't be used in isolation," Liu says. "You have to make sure you have the policies in place to support them."

It seems likely that we will have those policies in place in California. But with President Trump framing the recovery as a partisan battle against Democratic governors, and people protesting stay-at-home orders already taking to the streets in Michigan, it's hard to imagine an environment in which a coherent national response emerges.

A good question for tech giants right now is: what would you build in response to the pandemic if you knew there would never be a coordinated federal response? Are your interventions resilient to partisan warfare? Can they be?

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A lesser concern: is Amazon getting stronger during the pandemic, or weaker?

On the stronger side, America is suddenly hugely dependent on the deliveries that Amazon provides. A huge number of local retail businesses may not survive the next several months, putting Amazon in an even stronger position to dominate e-commerce once the pandemic subsides. Jason Del Rey wrote about this possibility Friday at *Recode*:

And then there's Amazon, which already accounted for nearly

40 percent of all US online retail sales – that's around eight times more than its next competitor, Walmart. Before the pandemic, the US e-commerce industry only represented between 10 percent and 15 percent of overall retail. Now, that percentage seems likely to grow, setting up Amazon to have a bigger advantage over most other retailers, including Walmart.

With millions of Americans ordered to remain home, Amazon is now, more than ever, a lifeline for essentials for millions of people rather than just a convenient option for online shopping. Consumer spending on Amazon is up 35 percent from the same period last year, according to estimates from Facteus, a firm that analyzes more than 30 million daily payment card transactions to offer consumer spending insights to retailers and financial institutions. The labor numbers also reflect the company's growth; Amazon has hired 80,000 new workers in the past few weeks alone.

This seems to me to be a fairly airtight case that Amazon will come out of the pandemic stronger than before. At the same time, have you noticed how much of the company is in disarray? Each day brings a new story of COVID 19-related worker unrest, illness, or even death. Workers involved in organizing efforts have been fired in what they describe as retaliation. (Amazon denies they were fired for speaking out.) On Wednesday, France ordered the company to shutter its six warehouses in the country for several days to better assess the risk for contagion among its workforce there.

It's clear that these issues have had a significant effect on the quality of Amazon's services during this time, as you may have noticed from the multi-week delays in receiving shipments of "non-essential" items and the nearly impossible task of ordering grocery delivery. (The company is currently adding new customers seeking grocery deliveries to a waitlist.)

I expect all those issues to get resolved in time, particularly as the company brings on board the tens of thousands of new workers it plans to hire. But I do wonder how the company's reputation for exploiting its workforce will haunt it as America re-opens. There's already a significant swath of Americans who won't shop at Walmart over labor issues. I can imagine Amazon finding itself in a similar place among more wealthy and informed consumers – assuming those consumers have any good alternatives to shop at.

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Finally: Zoom is an amazing tool for the moment. But while it's equal to many tasks, it's not ideal for almost any of them.

Women in business meetings on Zoom find that it can be impossible to get a word in edgewise with the men.

People dating on Zoom find that etiquette makes it extremely difficult to know when to hang up.

Attendees of Zoom parties stare dead-eyed at the screen wondering if or when to speak.

I don't blame Zoom for not building software to address these and other shortcomings of video-chat based socializing. But it sure would be great if someone else did.

The Interface Live!

Yesterday we announced that the next edition of our *Interface Live* series will feature me in (live-streamed) conversation with Sarah Frier, author of *No Filter: The Inside Story of Instagram*. The event takes place April 21st at 5:30 p.m. PT, and you can register [here](#). It's free, but you do have to RSVP – and in less than a day, thanks to you, we hit more than 50 percent of our capacity. If you'd like to join, please RSVP today!

Pandemic

□ **Verily**, the **Google** sister company that launched a COVID-19 screening and testing program last month, told US lawmakers that its user data won't be used for commercial purposes or sold to third parties. But it also admitted its screening site is not in compliance with the HIPAA privacy rule. Here's Hugh Langley at *Business Insider*:

"Verily has focused on the protection of the security and privacy of personal health information since the inception of its Baseline COVID-19 Program," the company wrote. "With respect to its Baseline COVID-19 Program, Verily is not acting as a covered entity or a business associate as defined by HIPAA. As the Program expands, we will continue to prioritize the protection of individual health data. However, in the future if we engage in a program where we do become a covered entity or we are required to sign a BAA we will take all the appropriate steps to ensure compliance with HIPAA."

Google is slowing hiring for the rest of the year. It's the most drastic action the company has taken since the COVID-19 pandemic began battering its advertising business several weeks ago. (Mark Bergen / Bloomberg)

The fear and anxiety around coronavirus is prompting people to judge and shame others on social media, even when they're doing their best to keep themselves and those around them safe. (Anne Helen Petersen / BuzzFeed)

Conspiracy theories about the origins of the novel coronavirus are prompting attacks on Muslims in India. The Muslim community is being falsely accused of conducting a malevolent campaign to spread Covid-19 to the Hindu majority. (Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Shaikh Azizur Rahman / *The Guardian*)

A long-running Iranian influence operation has returned to

social media to blame the United States for COVID-19 and praise China's response to the virus. (Graphika)

TikTok has become a family affair, as kids stay home due to the COVID-19 quarantine. Those who used to collaborate with other creators are now roping their parents into making videos. (Taylor Lorenz / *The New York Times*)

People are paying to get into **Zoom** nightclubs, where DJs livestream virtual sets and participants dance in their living rooms. (Michelle Lhoq / Bloomberg)

Houseparty has seen 50 million signups in the past month, as people stay in their homes due to COVID-19. The app, which was previously most popular with teens, allows people to video chat and play games. (Kurt Wagner / Bloomberg)

The pandemic is showing us that teens aren't addicting to social media – they're addicted to socializing with friends. And most are going crazy trying to live entirely online. (danah boyd / *OneZero*)

Virus tracker

Total cases in the US: At least 606,800

Total deaths in the US: More than 25,000

Reported cases in California: 25,703

Reported cases in New York: 202,208

Reported cases in New Jersey: 68,824

Reported cases in Massachusetts: 28,163

Reported cases in Michigan: 26,844

Data from *The New York Times*.

Governing

□ The Pentagon's inspector general could not definitively determine whether the White House interfered with the procurement process for the JEDI contract because senior Defense Department officials were barred from answering verbal questions on the subject. **Amazon** sued the Defense Department last year, alleging that the Pentagon made several mistakes in its evaluation of bids. Here's *Politico's* Jacqueline Feldscher:

Trump repeatedly inserted himself into the JEDI review process in ways that presidents traditionally don't. In July, Trump said he would be asking the Pentagon "to look at it very closely to see what's going on" because he heard complaints about the review process from companies and lawmakers. Shortly after, the Pentagon put a contract award on hold so Defense Secretary Mark Esper, who had recently taken the job, could review allegations that Amazon had been unfairly given an advantage for the contract.

Mashable successfully convinced a New York judge that it legitimately used an image found on **Instagram**. The photographer sued for copyright infringement after her photo was used without her consent. The judge ruled that she gave up exclusive rights to the photo when she created her account and made it public. (Eriq Gardner / *The Hollywood Reporter*)

Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson filed a new lawsuit against **Facebook** for allegedly continuing to violate state laws governing political ad disclosures. It's the second time Ferguson has sued Facebook over its handling of political ads.

Industry

Hackers are selling two **Zoom** vulnerabilities that would allow someone to hack users and spy on their calls. The flaws are

currently present in Zoom's Windows and MacOS clients. (Lorenzo Franceschi-Bicchierai / Vice)

A new app called **Pragli** wants to make video conferencing more inclusive by using avatars to signal whether co-workers are at their desk, away, in a meeting, in the zone while listening to Spotify, or just done for the day. (Josh Constine / TechCrunch)

YouTube launched a free tool for small businesses that need a low-cost way to create video ads, but don't have the technical skills. The company rushed to launch the YouTube Video Builder in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, when in-person video shoots are no longer an option. (Sarah Perez / TechCrunch)

Things to do

Stuff to occupy you online during the quarantine.

Go on a virtual date while continuing to respect stay-at-home orders. **Match** launched a feature called Vibe Check, which allows people to video chat online and in the Match app.

Learn how to cook something new on these **YouTube** cooking channels.

XOXO, the internet's best festival, has made its entire catalog of keynote speeches available to watch. I love so many of these, but Jennifer 8. Lee's talk on the grassroots effort to make emoji inclusive is particularly sweet and inspirational.

Those Quibi tweets

BREAKING – Quibi tumbled out of US iPhone Top 60 and is trails an app that simulates cutting colored cakes of sand so you can hear the rustling sound which eases the sheer pain of existing. pic.twitter.com/TRcmpDKjtz

– Tero Kuittinen (@teroterotero) April 15, 2020

Talk to us

Send us tips, comments, questions, and coordinated federal responses to the pandemic: casey@theverge.com and zoe@theverge.com.

<https://www.theverge.com/interface/2020/4/16/21222335/pandemic-response-federal-government-big-tech-apple-google-amazon-zoom>