SIDNEY FUSSELL BUSINESS 03.25.2021 07:00 AM

Groups Call for Ethical Guidelines on Location-Tracking Tech

The Locus Charter asks companies to commit to 10 principles, including minimizing data collection and actively seeking consent from users.

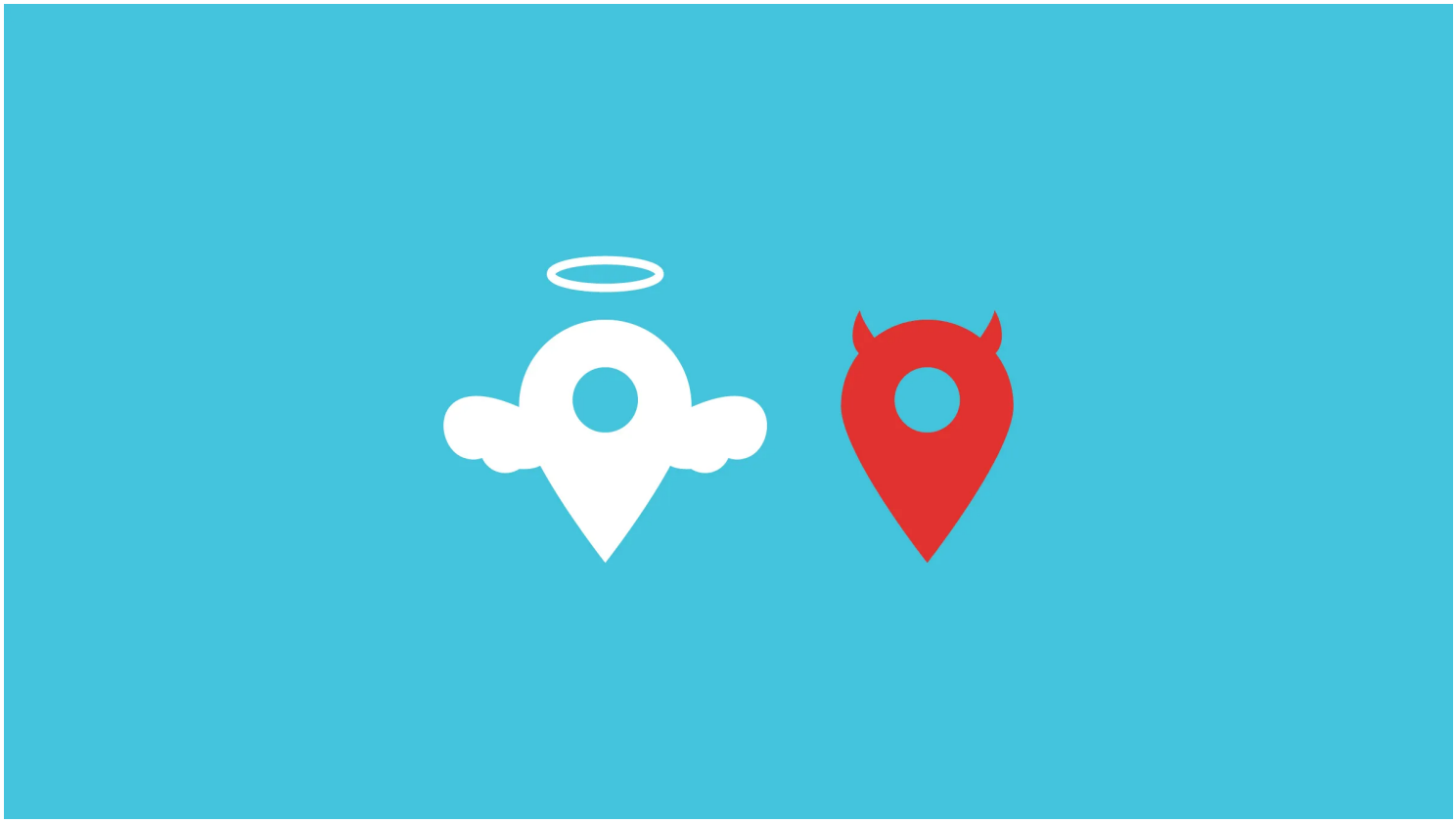

ILLUSTRATION: ELENA LACEY

AS SMARTPHONE APPS track our every move, a group of technologists in the US and UK this week offered guidelines for the ethical uses of location data. Leaders of the American Geographical Society and Britain's mapping agency, the Ordnance Survey, want companies to commit to 10 principles, including minimizing data collection and actively seeking consent from users.

Chris Tucker, chairman of the American Geographical Society, a private research and advocacy group, says the Locus Charter aims to capture the potential benefits and risks of a world of invisible real-time tracking: from your weather app to the GPS system in your car, or at an international level, state-supported contact-tracing apps that keep tabs on people worldwide.

“We all had to start grappling with Covid and the ethical implications of contact tracing, which is all about location apps and geospatial data,” Tucker says. “We realized there is no international set of guidelines or principles for implementing location tech. It's a big void.”

Tucker says the epidemic highlighted the dual nature of location data. Governments could use location data to prevent outbreaks by notifying people of potential exposures. But this risked creating a state-run ledger of everyone’s location, where they went, and with whom.

The Locus Charter is not a set of laws or rules, but 10 guidelines meant to steer an organization’s thinking on the ethical use of location data. The points include protecting vulnerable people and understanding how location data sets can be combined with other data to identify individuals.

The guidelines respond to concerns over some uses of location data. Vice reported on Muslim prayer apps, including Muslim Pro, designed to help Muslims keep to prayer schedules. But many users were unaware the apps kept this data, attached it to their IDs, and sent it on to data brokers contracting with the US government.

In the future, Tucker says concerned researchers or engineers could point to the Locus Charter guidelines to try to prevent such arrangements. Rather than simply saying, “This is bad,” they could point out that the apps collected more data than necessary, didn’t note that

their users were largely a vulnerable population, and didn't inform or seek consent for other uses.

"People need something to lean on when they're going up against the Man," Tucker says.

When the lockdowns began, Google, *The New York Times*, and other organizations charted how people moved in the early weeks of the pandemic. The data was illuminating, emphasizing how occupation and income influenced whether people sheltered in place. But many were shocked to see how easily these organizations could access our location data, tapping into the many databases keeping tabs on where we go.

Around the same time, Alphabet's Sidewalk Labs dropped plans for a so-called Smart City in Toronto's Quayside. Residents had raised numerous privacy concerns about plans to embed sensors for 24/7 data collection, including commuter data. Nadine Alameh, CEO of the Open Geospatial Consortium, which develops technical standards for geospatial data, says she is particularly concerned with smart cities, describing them as "Google Earth on steroids." In most proposals for smart cities, residents' location data is collected simply by virtue of where they live, with the trade-off being that the data informs the creation of a more sustainable city. She hopes the Locus Charter will get organizations to think of the benefits *and* the harms at the massive scale of entire cities.

For now, the Locus Charter guidelines are voluntary. But some backers see them as a stepping stone to regulations, like California's Consumer Privacy Act or the EU's General Data Protection Regulation.

"At some point we need to regulate these huge platforms that can grab all this data," says Alameh. "And the Locus Charter, as I see it, starts the conversation about how you can have regulation around that."

Tucker says the charter's drafters are talking with other groups about endorsing the principles. Eventually, the conversation will move to regulation, but for now, Tucker says, even this exploratory move is important.

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SENIOR WRITER

Featured Video

Engineer Explains Every Roller Coaster For Every Thrill

In this edition of "A World of Difference," Korey Kiepert, owner and engineer with The Gravity Group, goes through the 8 main types of roller coasters and breaks down how they work as well as the decisions behind why they get built in the first place. Korey explains the difference between a giga coaster and a strata coaster, as well as what separates a "wild mouse" from a "mine train." Korey Kiepert, courtesy of The Gravity Group Special thanks: Kings Island, Holiday World, Gröna Lund

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