

# **Government, Technology, and Crisis: Balancing Surveillance Benefits and Privacy in Dealing with the COVID-19 Pandemic**

## **Abstract**

In the modern, digital society, governments, regulatory agencies, and citizens must often make difficult assessments about the benefits of surveillance against the preservation of privacy – a highly regarded value by many. This trade-off is exacerbated in times of crisis, as under these conditions uncertainty reigns, core values of society are threatened, and urgent decision-making is crucial. This is largely underexplored territory in the field of public administration and crisis management. To fill this gap, this thesis addresses the following overarching research question: *How do governments, regulatory agencies, and citizens balance surveillance benefits against privacy in times of crisis?*

The thesis answers this question by focusing on how governments use digital surveillance technology in crisis management, as well as how that technology is legitimized and regulated. Additionally, it investigates the effect of a major crisis on citizens' attitudes toward government surveillance and privacy. These issues are explored in the COVID-19 pandemic using qualitative and quantitative data. The data includes 51 interviews with political and administrative elites as well as regulatory actors and regulatees in Norway, a range of documents from Germany, Norway, and the United Kingdom, and survey experimental data with 23,912 individuals across 16 European countries.

The main findings of the thesis are that governments, regulatory agencies, and citizens make rather different assessments about surveillance benefits and privacy in times of crisis, for many reasons. Governments focus on the benefits of digital surveillance technology in the crisis management system and assess them against other crisis measures, as well as the potential of surveillance to increase governance capacity and governance legitimacy. In regulating the same technology, regulatory agencies devote their attention to the proportionality of surveillance intrusion towards protecting public health and privacy, and base their interventional approaches on intra-crisis experience, the response of regulatees, and levels of urgency and uncertainty. To better explain these regulatory interventions and the assessments made by regulatory agencies in crises, I developed an analytical framework that differentiates between rule-based, norm-based, and idea-based regulatory interventions. This framework expands our understanding of the regulation of emerging technology to crisis situations.

Empirically, the focus is on contact tracing technologies developed during the pandemic to support governments' crisis management. In Norway, as in many other countries, this technology was controversial. The government ended up with an ineffective technology, which weakened crisis management capabilities but retained privacy. The same type of technology is the basis for comparing legitimacy strategies in Germany, Norway, and the United Kingdom. The thesis finds that the countries differ in their emphasis on pragmatic, moral, and cognitive aspects in their legitimacy strategies. A key reason for this is that countries have different historical practices with regards to surveillance and privacy.

Moreover, analyzing survey experimental data in 16 countries, I find that a major crisis such as a pandemic makes citizens more accepting of government surveillance, compared with a non-pandemic setting. This effect is moderated by different types of trust: political trust, social trust, and trust in the government's capacity to handle the pandemic. For the two latter types, trust matters more for acceptance of surveillance in a pandemic than in a non-pandemic setting. Thus, the thesis contributes to the literature by providing causal explanations about influences on attitudes towards government surveillance and by advancing our knowledge of trust in connection with surveillance and major crises.

Overall, the findings of this thesis provide novel insight and contribute to our understanding of how different actors balance surveillance benefits and privacy in modern times infused with crisis, surveillance, and technology.