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South Korea COVID-19 Tracking Held Up as Model for U.S.

The U.S. “should have the debate” about whether the potential privacy concerns about disclosing anonymized information about the movements of people infected with the coronavirus are outweighed by the harm done by stay-at-home orders that lock down large swaths of the economy and have not necessarily resulted in reduced infection rates, University of Chicago economics professor Chang-Tai Hsieh said during a Technology Policy Institute online event today.

Mr. Hsieh co-authored a paper for the National Bureau of Economic Research that concluded the public posting of anonymized data in South Korea showing GPS tracking and credit card transaction information gathered from people who tested positive for COVID-19 helped limit the overall number of infections and adverse economic impacts in that country.

The availability of that information can help people decide to “target” how they social distance, such as by avoiding places, such as stores and restaurants, where data shows infected people have been, he said. The availability of that data also can help citizens weigh the risk of going to areas with fewer infections, Mr. Hsieh noted.

Because the U.S. does not have a “legal framework that allows local public health authorities to access phone records and credit card records,” he said conducting contact tracing of infected people is “going to be very, very hard and is likely to be hugely inaccurate. What you really need ... to do this in a cost-effective and accurate manner, is that you do need to access that data.”

If the U.S. had the same legal framework in place and could show the information was being appropriately handled, people could decide the tradeoff of giving up some personal information for a lower number of COVID-19 cases and deaths, as well as a smaller overall economic impact, is worthwhile, Mr. Hsieh said.

“We really haven’t had this debate,” he said.

In addition, he said, there is no technological reason the U.S. could not implement a similar system.

“If there was a legal framework to do it, if there was a public will to do it, we could do it easily [in the U.S.],” Mr. Hsieh said.

Thus far, discussions about instituting policies similar to those South Korea has have been “dominated by people who think about privacy and people in the medical profession, and they’re thinking about one side of the ledger, which is the cost of the privacy to the patients,” Mr. Hsieh said. “But there’s nobody

on the other side thinking about what the social benefits are for other people, for the disclosure of information.”

It is possible there will be a lobbying group that starts to push for more information disclosure, he said.

“We only have advocates for one side, that says, ‘Look, nobody wants to invade your privacy. That’s not the point. The point is to save our health and to save our economy,’” Mr. Hsieh said, adding: “We haven’t thought that much about what the potential benefits might be.”

Mr. Hsieh was critical of the way the U.S. government has responded to the coronavirus pandemic, arguing there is a cost to not doing “robust” testing and contact tracing.

“For the most part, [the U.S. has] gone about this without thinking in a clear way,” he said. “That’s not to say that every place in the world has thought about it in a clear way. But I think if we want to do better, we should try to learn from places that we think we can learn from and try to stop doing things that are disastrous.”

In addition to helping slow the spread of the virus by limiting social interactions in places with infections, implementing a South Korea-like system would mean the “economic losses are going to be lower” because not all businesses would have to be closed, Mr. Hsieh said.

“There are places where we know the probability is high and places where the probability of infection is low,” he said. “If people were to socially distance in places where the risk is high, the benefit of socially distancing is going to be large, where [as] the benefits of socially distancing in a place where the risk is low is going to be much lower. The thing is, we’ve got to know that. ... This is one key part of what disclosure of robust information allows you to do.”

Another benefit of making the information available is that different people can make different decisions about where they are willing to go based on their own circumstances, such as age and whether they have pre-existing conditions that make them more vulnerable, Mr. Hsieh said.

“Some social distancing brings about large benefits,” he said. “Some social distancing does not. And some social distancing comes with very large cost and some kinds of social distancing comes with very little cost. The optimal thing for a society to do in this COVID world, in the absence of a vaccine, is that you want to maximize the benefit and you want to minimize the cost.” —Jeff Williams

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