Time to tag places

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June 2021. The pandemic has clearly reached a new stage. Unless an unexpected event happens, we are close to resuming the life we all long for. Nonetheless, it would be convenient to take into account that, even in the best scenario, namely zero transmission within the community, Covid outbreaks will still occur next autumn. These outbreaks will probably not be very significant from a healthcare point of view, but nevertheless, it would be highly recommendable to have the adequate means to control the problem before it increases. This is the role clearly played by the strategy of tracking cases. A good tracking, followed by the corresponding isolations and quarantines, will be decisive for the future of the pandemic. Here is where it makes sense to employ technological tools that ease the workload that trackers must face.

This is exactly what was attempted with tools such as Radar COVID. We have already explained why this strategy took us nowhere. Perhaps it was not so much a problem of the application, but more a case of our system of administrative organisation ruining a good idea. We understand now that an agile instrument is needed that does not involve the use of codes by users, or the transfer of personal data at any stage.

What we do need is a tool that helps us to tag places. What does this idea consist of? In reality, it is relatively easy to explain with an example. Let us consider a scenario where public health authorities spot an outbreak at a restaurant. In such a scenario, they usually examine the reservations book to identify who was present at the moment when the contagion took place and call the phone numbers that customers had made the bookings with. Obviously, this is a laborious process, that is, moreover, unfeasible if reservations had not been made. A correct tagging of places would be very helpful in such circumstances, since it would allow all of those that had shared an infectious environment to receive a warning without the need of any tracker to intervene.

Technically, it would work as follows: places would provide users with a code (a QR) that could be stored on their mobile phones via an application. The public health system would send on a daily basis the QRs of those venues where an outbreak had been spotted, so that users would receive the corresponding message. From that moment on, the user would have to proceed accordingly with responsibility.

The advantages of such system would be considerable. Firstly, it would allow users to gather more precise information about any possible risk with minimum effort (by simply reading the QR with their device). This would also allow the public health system to know how many people had been at an infected location (it would not know who they are, but how many, thanks to the intrinsic structure of the system, which would prioritise privacy over any other consideration). Human trackers would reduce their working-load, and, moreover, catering establishments could offer a service that provides customers with much greater peace of mind. Finally, in general, everybody would better understand where contagions happen, and all this at nearly zero cost. Overall, the question is very simple: if there are only advantages, why do we not make a start?