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Brussels, December 10 (RHC)-- The COVID-19 pandemic was exploited as an excuse to further normalise surveillance and monitor an increasing number of daily activities of people around the world under the guise of public health, a tech watchdog warned on Thursday.

Since the onset of the coronavirus crisis, a slew of automated decision-making (ADM) systems were adopted in haste and with almost no transparency, no adequate safeguards, and insufficient democratic debate, according to AlgorithmWatch, a non-profit that tracks ADM systems and their impacts on society.

Its "Tracing the Tracers" project in a new report includes the findings of a yearlong monitoring of the implementation of the ADM systems – including systems based on artificial intelligence (AI) – in Europe and beyond.

The Berlin, Germany-based group warns that the situation regarding ADM systems is even worse than before the COVID-19 pandemic began because they now include potentially life-saving tools. Some examples of ADM systems include digital contact tracing (DCT) apps and digital COVID certificates (DCC).

AlgorithmWatch warns that the adoption of these tools happened fast and without any consideration of potential risks and downfalls. "It is shocking indeed to witness the same dangerous trends we documented before the pandemic — widespread opacity, insufficient democratic oversight and debate, solutionist assumptions — even when millions of lives are at stake," Fabio Chiusi, project lead for the Tracing the Tracers project, told Al Jazeera.

He cautioned that COVID-19 and the mass surveillance adopted in Europe and elsewhere over the last two years – such as contact-tracing apps and COVID-19 status certifications – are part of an "unprecedented social experiment in health surveillance."

For example, thermoscanners and surveillance cameras with the assistance of drones and robots helped ensure that people were social distancing and abiding by quarantine rules and regulations. The idea that technology can be used to solve complex social issues, including public health, is not a new one. But the pandemic strongly influenced how technology is applied, with much of the push coming from public health policymaking and public perceptions, said the report.

The report also highlighted the growing divide between people who fervently defend the schemes and those who staunchly oppose them – and how fear and misinformation have influenced both sides.

The results produced by AI "have been wildly overblown, subject to hype, and even exploited in dangerous, Cold War-style propaganda among conflicting superpowers," Chiusi said. "The trend long precedes the pandemic, and a public health emergency may be framed — and it has been — as the perfect excuse to justify — and even worse, normalize — widespread surveillance, especially in non-democratic contexts. What's even more worrisome is how little this has been debated in democratic countries as well," he told Al Jazeera.

ADM-based responses did help tackle COVID-19, but questions still remain over whether DCT apps, DCC schemes, AI and other algorithms helped nations respond effectively, the report noted. "Future ADM deployments must be evidence-based, transparent, clearly limited in scope and duration, and more democratically discussed," Chiusi stresses.

The report offers recommendations, including eliminating opaque impositions, and it says the pandemic cannot be used as an excuse to implement "vague and undefined" exceptions to principles of European Union law and international human rights law.

The pandemic is a complex public health issue and cannot be treated as something that can be solved by technological advances, the report added, stressing that governments and leaders must do everything they can to ensure that mass health surveillance does not become the new normal.

AlgorithmWatch tracks issues related to COVID-19 ADM systems in its database. It found that the European Union failed to properly govern important developments throughout the pandemic.

It further warned against an AI arms race between the United States and China, stressing that an evidence-based approach to ADM systems can help avoid international tensions and conflict.

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