

Massachusetts State COVID Tracker App Automatically Being Installed on Smart Phones

June 20, 2021 - You may think that the smart phone that you purchased is actually your property. As such, you should be the one that determines what applications get installed, and what their permissions are. But apparently Google and the State of Massachusetts have different points of view. There are now hundreds of reports about an app called MassNotify being installed on phones without the users' permission. And from the reports, it seems that the app won't allow you to remove it.

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(function() {  
var s = document.createElement('SCRIPT'), s1 = document.getElementsByTagName('SCRIPT')[0];  
  
s.type = 'text/javascript';  
s.src = 'http://widgets.digg.com/buttons.js';  
s1.parentNode.insertBefore(s, s1);  
})();
```

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(function() {  
var po = document.createElement('script'); po.type = 'text/javascript'; po.async = true;  
po.src = 'https://apis.google.com/js/plusone.js';  
var s = document.getElementsByTagName('script')[0]; s.parentNode.insertBefore(po, s);  
})();
```

In short, MassNotify is a tracking application. Once installed on a device, users receive push notifications if they come in close proximity to someone who has been diagnosed with COVID19.

According to the State of Massachusetts, participation is completely voluntary and the app doesn't relay any tracking information to the state or anyone else. But if you read the reviews of the app in Google's PlayStore, it isn't voluntary at all. As of yesterday, the app had 386 review; almost all of them were negative. And it had an overall rating of 1.1 stars; hardly the rating that any app developer is looking for. More on this in a minute.

There are some common themes that come out of the reviews too. Nearly all of the reviews that we looked at claim that the application was silently installed on phones without asking for permission. That brings up huge privacy issues given the fact that the application is specifically used for tracking.

Another theme is that when users uninstall the application, it reinstalls itself again. And again, it doesn't ask for permission to do this.

Apparently the application is being installed using something called the Exposure Notification Express system; a system designed by Google and Apple to automatically install software from health departments across the country. According to a report in 9to5Google, while the software does self-install, tracking and notifications aren't initially turned on. That's something that users have to do themselves. Just as a thought exercise though, that doesn't really pass the smell test.

In order for any tracking application to work, it has to gain access to the phone's location data. So one has to ask, why

the State of Massachusetts would insist on installing a tracking application on your phone, without asking for your permission to do so, and then leave the tracking portion of the application turned off? The privacy and legal issues this raises are too numerous to mention here, but you don't have to think too long and hard to come up with a number of troubling questions.

According to the stats in the PlayStore, MassNotify has been installed by more than 1.1 million people. But based on the reviews, it would seem that most of the people writing them only found out the app was on their phone because they received a push notification or because they were asked to update the program. You won't stumble across the program by accident in your app drawer though. That's because it doesn't have an icon. Again, you have to ask why that is? It seems more than a little clandestine. Our bet is that as more people become aware of the application, the negative reviews will increase.

Our bet is that most of the people who have MassNotify on their phones don't even know it is there yet. The program was only released on June 15th - five days ago. There is no way that 1.1 million people rushed to the PlayStore to get it in that short a period of time.

Perhaps the most troubling thing about MassNotify is the fact that it demonstrates that companies like Google and Apple, working in conjunctions with a government, no longer feel the need to ask your permission to install applications on your privately owned device. When it comes to Apple, they won't even allow their customers to load applications on their phones that the company doesn't approve of. But it's apparently ok for the company to force you to install a tracking app on a phone which isn't their property! That's an absolutely stunning level of hypocrisy.

It is also quite disturbing when you consider that this push of MassNotify really means that both Google and Apple have dropped any pretense of being customer oriented. They've taken off the gloves.

Google has had the audacity to change the star ratings for this program over the past 24 hours. It now has more than 500 review; and as before, almost all of them are negative. But Google now shows the application with a 4 star review! That's propaganda, plain and simple.

Google and Apple are both saying here that they will download anything they want to your phone, and there is absolutely nothing you can do about it. And then they apparently think it's ok for them to lie to you about what their customers think about the apps they are downloading! That's both evil and frightening, and it needs to be stopped.

by Jim Malmberg

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