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Caribbean states to access Facebook data in wake of hurricanes

Ken Silva | 20 June 2019

With hurricane season under way, the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States has partnered with Facebook to access the company's "disaster maps" feature.

Disaster maps use Facebook data to determine where populations are located, how they are moving, and where they are checking in as safe during natural disasters.

When announcing the partnership earlier this month, OECS commission director Didacus Jules said having access to this information will allow Caribbean jurisdictions to efficiently deploy resources in the wake of a hurricane. Members of the OECS – an intergovernmental organisation of Eastern Caribbean states that work on common policy issues – include Grenada, Montserrat, St. Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and The Grenadines, the British Virgin Islands, Anguilla, Martinique, and Guadeloupe.

“As we continue to strengthen our resilience to the effects of climate change and natural disasters, we are cognisant of the advantages of a predictive approach,” Jules said. “Access to Facebook’s disaster maps will allow us to monitor the almost real-time movement of persons and therefore be better positioned to provide assistance.”

Claudia Giraldo, public policy manager for Facebook’s Caribbean region, said the tools will allow institutions to glean information such as what areas of islands have been evacuated, as what areas have access to power, internet, and cellular services.

In response to concerns about how the disaster maps data will be used by governments that partner with Facebook, the social media network has explained that the information is de-identified to protect individual privacy.

“Facebook disaster maps show where disaster-affected populations are located, how they are moving, and whether they have access to cellular networks and power,” Facebook stated. “All data is de-identified — that is, it doesn't connect to a person’s name or any other identifying information.”

Facebook explained that organisations accessing its information only get updated data in regular intervals – usually 24 hours – rather than being allowed to track new inputs in real time. The company says it also groups map areas into local administrative boundaries rather than producing insights about specific individuals.

Given the disaggregation measures being taken by Facebook, the new initiative indeed does not breach the privacy rights of people in the OECS member states, according to Bartlett Morgan, a data privacy attorney in Barbados.

“If, to the contrary, the information to be provided is as specific as ‘x user is checking in safe from Micoud in St Lucia’, then there may be more of an argument for a concern,” said Morgan.

Even then, the issue could be a grey area. While OECS states have constitutional privacy rights, a 2007 ruling by the Privy Council – which sits in London and acts as the area's supreme court – said that right is not enforceable per se, Bartlett said. Only four of the OECS member states – Saint Vincent, Saint Lucia, Antigua and Barbuda, and Saint Kitts and Nevis – have data protection legislation, he added.

Facebook's partnership with the Eastern Caribbean jurisdictions comes nearly two years after the region was ravaged by Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria in September 2017. In the wake of those disasters, some populations were left in isolation for weeks, and many areas were without power for months.

 Data privacy, Transactions

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