



**HAL**  
open science

# **ROBERT: ROBust and privacy-presERving proximity Tracing**

Claude Castelluccia, Nataliia Bielova, Antoine Boutet, Mathieu Cunche,  
Cédric Lauradoux, Daniel Le Métayer, Vincent Roca

► **To cite this version:**

Claude Castelluccia, Nataliia Bielova, Antoine Boutet, Mathieu Cunche, Cédric Lauradoux, et al..  
ROBERT: ROBust and privacy-presERving proximity Tracing. 2020. hal-02611265

**HAL Id: hal-02611265**

**<https://inria.hal.science/hal-02611265>**

Preprint submitted on 18 May 2020

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# ROBERT: ROBust and privacy-presERving proximity Tracing

PRIVATICS team, Inria, France  
Fraunhofer AISEC, Germany

May 18, 2020  
v1.1

The main goal of proximity tracing mobile applications is to notify people that they have been in close proximity of COVID-19 virus carriers in the last  $X$  days even though the carriers who did not have symptoms and were not even tested at the time of interaction. Ensuring the highest data protection and security standards will encourage a quick and broad adoption by citizens.

Any proposed solution should preserve user privacy, but should also be robust against attacks that aim at decreasing the performance or reliability of the system. A system that does not protect user privacy will not be accepted neither by the citizens nor by the Data Protection Authorities. A system that does not provide reliable results will just be useless. The challenge is to build a solution that is privacy-preserving and robust against malicious users and “honest-but-curious” authorities at the same time.

Although it might seem attractive in term of privacy to adopt a fully decentralized solution, such approaches face important challenges in term of security and robustness against malicious users [6]. This document proposes a ROBust and privacy-presERving proximity Tracing (*ROBERT*) scheme that relies on a federated server infrastructure and temporary anonymous identifiers with strong security and privacy guarantees.

The *ROBERT* scheme is the result of a collaborative work between Inria and Fraunhofer AISEC, and a candidate proposal for the Pan European Privacy-Preserving Proximity Tracing (PEPP-PT) initiative. This proposal is not final and is subject to discussions, modifications and improvements.

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 virus is hard to trace because many people can be carriers – and hence contagious – without knowing it and before experiencing any symptoms. Therefore, COVID-19 virus carriers may transmit it to many other people in their vicinity. Successfully containing the COVID-19 pandemic closely depends on the ability to quickly and reliably identify those who have been in close proximity to a contagious individual. In this context, a mobile application that uses a short-range communication in Bluetooth (that is available in all modern smartphones) is able to detect when two individuals are in close proximity. Such applications can later allow users to know that they have been exposed to COVID-19 virus carriers. Such an alerting system would be very beneficial to reduce the infection rate [3, 4]. Ensuring the highest data protection and security standards will encourage fast and a broad adoption from citizens. This work presents *ROBERT*, a robust and privacy preserving proximity tracing scheme.

### 1.1. Why is Proximity Tracing Useful?

The main goal of proximity tracing mobile applications is to notify people that they have been in close proximity to COVID-19 virus carriers.

We use the following terminology:

- A user is *infected* if she is a carrier of the COVID-19 virus.
- A user is *diagnosed* if she has been tested and diagnosed COVID-positive.

- An infected user can be contagious without knowing it and before experiencing any symptoms. We call the *contagious period* ( $CT$ ) an upper-bound on the number of days a user that has been diagnosed positive has been contagious<sup>1</sup>.
- A user is qualified as "at risk of exposure" if she has been in the vicinity of a certain number of infected user(s) during the past  $CT$  days. Further criteria such as proximity to the infected user or the duration of a contact can be set by the health authority and can be used to parameterize the risk scoring function.

Figure 1 illustrates an example where an infected user C transmits it to user A before being tested and isolated. User A infects in turn user B, who infects D.

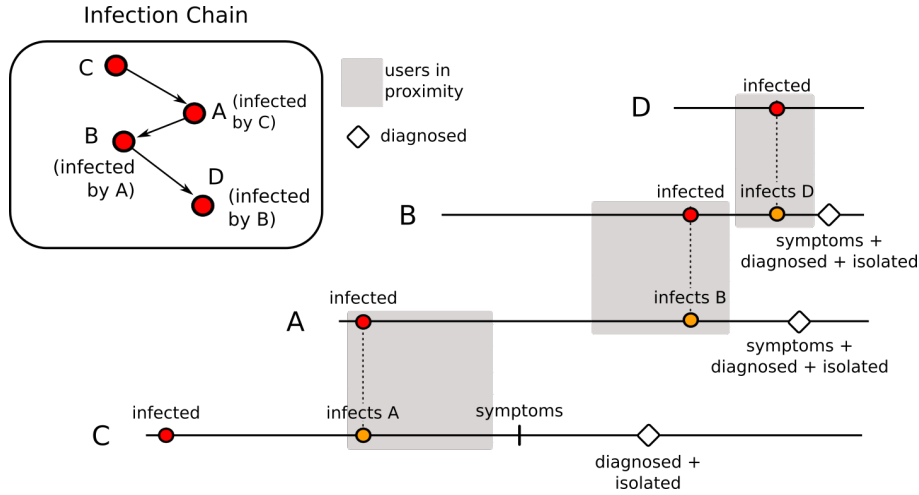


Figure 1: Example of the infection process without proximity tracing App.

Figure 2 illustrates the effect (and benefit) of proximity tracing. C is infected and diagnosed COVID-positive. User A gets notified and become "at risk" users. A gets tested and is diagnosed COVID-positive. B is in turn notified, becomes "at risk" and is confined before meeting D. Consequently, B and D do not get exposed, and therefore infected, anymore.

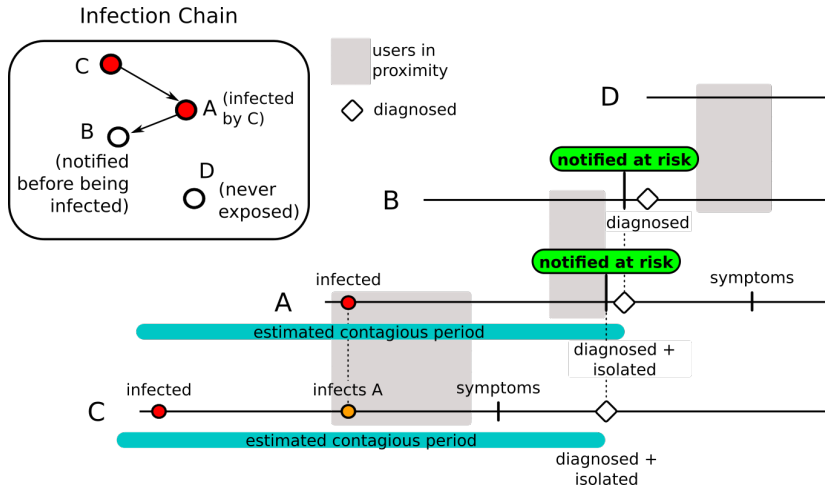


Figure 2: Example of the infection process with proximity tracing App that starts with person C being infected.

## 1.2. Design Goals

Our scheme has been designed to reliably notify individuals of past collocation with an infected person while minimizing the impact on the individuals' privacy. Our scheme provides the following goals as detailed in [2]:

- **Open participation.** Participants are free to join or leave the system at any time.

<sup>1</sup>For simplicity, we consider that  $CT$  is fixed and the same for all users. In practice, this value could be adapted to each infected user by doctors.

- **Simple and transparent.** The system is simple to use and understand.
- **Easy deployment.** The scheme is easy to deploy and requires only minimal infrastructure.
- **Anonymity.** The smartphone App as well as the back-end server database do not collect or store any personal data.
- **Federated infrastructure.** The system must scale across countries, ideally worldwide. In order to preserve countries' sovereignty, a trusted federation of infrastructures is necessary.

### 1.3. Security and Privacy Requirements

Before describing our proximity tracing scheme, we highlight the main security and privacy considerations (these considerations are extracted from Section 3 of [2]).

- **Accuracy and reliability of proximity data.** Though users are free to join or leave the system, the scheme should not miss an exposure to an infected user. Moreover, the scheme should be robust against adversarial attacks from both the users or the database server.
- **Anonymity of users from other users.** The proposed scheme should guarantee that no user can learn any information that cannot be inferred just from knowing whether they collocated with another user (diagnosed as COVID-positive or not). Similarly, any colluding users should learn only what can be deduced from the individual information that each colluding member is entitled to know.
- **Anonymity of users from a central authority.** The central authority should not be able to learn information about the identities or locations of the participating users, whether diagnosed as COVID-positive or not.

### 1.4. Adversarial Model

We assume the following adversarial model:

- **Users** can be **malicious**. They can, for example, perform active and passive attacks, eavesdrop, inject bogus messages, modify messages, pollute users' contact lists and develop their own applications.
- The **authority** running the system, in turn, is **"honest-but-curious"**. Specifically, it will not deploy spying devices or will not modify the protocols and the messages. However, it might use collected information for other purposes such as to re-identify users or to infer their contact graphs. We assume the back-end system is secure, and regularly audited and controlled by external trusted and neutral authorities (such as Data Protection Authorities and National Cybersecurity Agencies).

### 1.5. Design constraints

To ensure compatibility between different mobile operating systems and due to restrictions in the Bluetooth advertisement, the application can only broadcast 16-byte messages (128 bits) over the device Bluetooth interface.

## 2. High-Level Description and Assumptions

### 2.1. Architecture considerations

Our proximity tracing scheme relies on an App installed on each mobile phone, supported by a back-end server. In a such distributed architecture, two considerations are important (1) where the data are stored and (2) where the status of the user (at risk or not) is verified. In our scheme, the data to be stored is shared between the App and back-end server. The data collection of proximity contacts is performed and stored locally on each App. This proximity contacts are never revealed to the server except when a user is diagnosed COVID-positive. In this specific case, upon agreement from the user and authorisation from the health authority, the App shares, anonymously, with the server the proximity contacts that it has collected during the estimated contagious period, typically the last 14 days. This data is used by the back-end server to compute an exposure risk score for each of the individuals, defined as anonymous identifiers, who have been in contact with this infected user. Users periodically probe the server to know whether their risk score indicates that they are at risk. As a result, users only learn one bit of information from the server ("at risk" or not "at risk"). They don't get any information about other users and, in particular, they don't learn who potentially exposed them. The back-end server only

Name	Description
<i>App</i>	Mobile application implementing our scheme
<i>App<sub>A</sub></i>	Mobile Application installed by user $U_A$
<i>BLE</i>	Bluetooth Low Energy
<i>CT</i>	An upper-bound on the number of days a user that has been diagnosed positive has been contagious. (for example 14 days)
<i>CC<sub>S</sub></i>	Country Code used for routing within the federation
<i>EBID</i>	Ephemeral Bluetooth IDentifier
<i>EBID<sub>A,i</sub></i>	Ephemeral Bluetooth IDentifier of user $U_A$ at epoch $i$
<i>ECC</i>	Encrypted Country Code
<i>ECC<sub>A,i</sub></i>	Encrypted Country Code used by $U_A$ at epoch $i$
<i>epoch.duration.sec</i>	Duration of an epoch in seconds
<i>ESR_REQUEST</i>	Request sent by the <i>App</i> to query the user status
<i>ESR_REPLY</i>	Answer sent by the server to users to notify their status
<i>HELLO</i>	Message broadcast by an <i>App</i> via its Bluetooth Low Energy interface
<i>ID</i>	Permanent and anonymous identifier associated to each registered user
<i>ID<sub>A</sub></i>	Permanent and anonymous identifier of user $U_A$ , stored by the server
<i>IDTable</i>	Database maintained by the back-end server
<i>K<sub>A</sub></i>	Shared key between the server and the <i>App<sub>A</sub></i>
<i>K<sub>G</sub></i>	Federation Key (shared between the servers of all countries with a federation agreement)
<i>K<sub>S</sub></i>	Server Key (used by a server to generate <i>EBIDs</i> ), stored by the server
<i>LEE<sub>A</sub></i>	List of exposed epochs of user $U_A$ , stored in <i>IDTable</i>
<i>LocalProximityList</i>	Local list on an <i>App</i> where the <i>HELLO</i> messages received by nearby devices are stored
<i>M</i>	Number of epochs between 2 consecutive requests by an <i>App</i> to the back-end server to obtain its list of ( <i>EBID</i> , <i>ECC</i> ) pairs for the following epochs
<i>Srv</i>	The back-end server
<i>SRE<sub>A</sub></i>	Variable that indicates the last epoch when $U_A$ has sent a "Status Request" to the server, stored in <i>IDTable</i>
<i>T</i>	The minimum number of epochs between 2 consecutive <i>ESR_REQUEST</i>
<i>Tpstart</i>	The time when the proximity tracing service has been started
<i>UN<sub>A</sub></i>	Flag indicating if $U_A$ has already been notified to be at risk of exposure. $UN_A$ is stored in the <i>IDTable</i>

Table 1: Glossary of terms and variables used in this paper

maintains the list of exposed users (through anonymous pseudonyms as no personal information are maintained on the server) with their risk scores. These risk scores can easily be adapted according the evolution of the pandemic or the evolving knowledge of the epidemiologists on the COVID-19 virus.

Other, qualified as "decentralised", schemes broadcast to each *App* an aggregate information containing the pseudonyms of all the infected users [1]. This information allow each *App* to decode the identifiers of infected users and verify if any of them are part of its contact list. Our scheme does not follow this principle because we believe that sending information about all infected users reveals too much information. In fact, it has been shown that this information can be easily used by malicious users to re-identify infected users at scale [6]. We claim that infected user re-identification must absolutely be avoided since it could lead to stigmatisation. Instead, we chose to securely store this information on a central server.

Although *ROBERT* is proposed as a "proximity-tracing" protocol, *ROBERT* is actually a framework to assess the risk exposure of its users in order to fight pandemics. In our proposal, and as opposed to decentralized schemes, users do not get any information about the status of their contacts. In particular, they do not learn how many of their contacts are infected, nor which of them are. Instead, users get informed about their exposure level only upon the computation of a risk score by the server. The risk score may be based on proximity information, but also on other parameters that epidemiologists will define and adapt according to the evolution of the pandemic. Finally, the risk score algorithm will also depend on how the *App* will actually be used by the health authority. In fact, the algorithm will probably be different if the *App* is used to notify users that need to get tested in priority or if it is used to decide who should stay/go into confinement.

## 2.2. System Overview

All the notations used in this paper are summarized in Table 1. The proposed system is composed of users who install the Proximity Tracing Application, *App*, and a back-end server, *Srv*, under the control of the authority. We assume that *Srv* is configured with a well-known domain name, certificate and is highly secured.

Apps interact with the system through the four following procedures:

- **Initialization:** When a user wants to use the service, she installs the application, *App*, from an official App store (Apple or Google). *App* then registers to the server that generates a permanent identifier (ID) and several Ephemeral Bluetooth Identifiers (*EBIDs*). The back-end maintains a table, *IDTable*, that keeps an entry for each registered ID. The stored information are “anonymous” and, by no mean, associated to a particular user (no personal information is stored in *IDTable*).
- **Proximity Discovery:** After registering to the service, *App* broadcasts *HELLO* messages over its Bluetooth interface and collects *HELLO* messages from other devices, running the same application<sup>2</sup>, in the vicinity. These *HELLO* contain several fields, and in particular, an Ephemeral Bluetooth Identifier. The collected *HELLO* messages are stored, together with the time of reception (and possibly other information such as the strength of the Bluetooth signal or the user’s speed) into a local list of the application, the *LocalProximityList*.
- **Infected User Declaration:** When an individual is tested and *diagnosed* COVID-positive, and after an explicit user consent and authorisation (from the medical services), her smartphone’s application uploads its *LocalProximityList* to the authority server, *Srv*. *Srv* then flags as “exposed” all IDs of *IDTable* of which at least one *EBID* appears in the uploaded *LocalProximityList*. It is important to note that:
  1. The server does not learn the identifiers of the *infected* user’s *App* but only the *EBIDs* contained in its *LocalProximityList* (list of Ephemeral Bluetooth Identifiers she was in proximity with).
  2. Given any two random identifiers of *IDTable* that are flagged as “exposed”, the server *Srv* can not tell whether they appeared in the same or in different *LocalProximityList* lists (the proximity links between identifiers are not kept and, therefore, no proximity graph can be built).
- **Exposure Status Request:** *App* queries (pull mechanism) the “exposure status” of its user by probing regularly the server with its *EBIDs*. The server then checks how many times the *App*’s *EBIDs* were flagged as “exposed” and computes a risk score from this information (and possibly other parameters, such the exposure duration or the user’s speed/acceleration during the contact). If this score is larger than a given threshold, the bit “1” (“at risk of exposure”) is sent back to the *App* and her account is deactivated, otherwise the bit “0” is sent back. Upon reception of this message, a notification is displayed to the user that indicates the instructions to follow (e.g., go the hospital for a test, call a specific phone number, stay in quarantine, etc.).

**Time-related Assumptions:** This *ROBERT* protocol assumes that all the smartphones and the server *Srv* are loosely time-synchronized (thanks to NTP or any other time synchronisation mechanism like cellular mobile phone network information, or GPS time information, etc.). Time is expressed as the NTP “Seconds” value, which represents, for era 0, the number of seconds since 0h January 1st, 1900 UTC<sup>3</sup>.

Time is discretized into epochs (e.g., of 15 minutes)<sup>4</sup>. We define as *epoch\_duration\_sec* the duration of an epoch in seconds.

## 2.3. Risk Scoring Considerations

Specific and effective risk scoring is out of scope of this paper. We assume, in this proposal, that (1) the server returns a binary reply to its users if they are at risk or not and (2) the reply is only based on a calculated risk score value. These two assumptions need to be discussed. It might be useful, for several reasons, to return a probability value instead of a binary reply. Furthermore, adding some randomness in the query reply mechanism could improve privacy (see Section A).

We further assume that it is the responsibility of the health authorities and epidemiologists to provide input to such an algorithm. This algorithm should be public and may be adapted over time. Modifications and actionable advice based on the risk scoring must be done in accordance with epidemiology research.

---

<sup>2</sup>Federation is also considered for users who are traveling abroad. See Section 8.

<sup>3</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Network\\_Time\\_Protocol](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Network_Time_Protocol)

<sup>4</sup>This value of 15 minutes is the rotation period of random address recommended in the Bluetooth v5.1 specification [5, Vol 3, Part C, App. A]). We assume that these epochs and rotation periods are synchronized.

In our design, scores are computed on a trusted server and are used to notify users. While this offers more flexibility to adapt the scoring algorithms as needed and leads to more effective systems, it also increases the resilience of the systems against attackers that aim at identifying infected users: In order to be notified, an attacker must inject his own *HELLO* messages into a victim’s *App* in such a way that the risk scoring algorithm in the back-end selects him for notification. This makes such an attack more difficult as it requires an attacker to use invasive tools or put himself at risk, consequently reducing the scalability of such an attack. We consider especially the latter property to be a rather strong deterrent.

In contrast, processing the risk of a contact on the phone upon reception of a notification inherently reduces the system to tracing, even for very brief encounters, between users and infected. This has major implications on privacy as using contextual metadata makes it trivial to identify infected users [6]. The system’s design would be based on the fact that all users which at any point ever saw an infected user’s *HELLO* can now use contextual metadata (such as a meeting date and time) to identify the infected users.

### 3. Initialisation

This section describes the initialisation process on the server and the application (Figure 3).

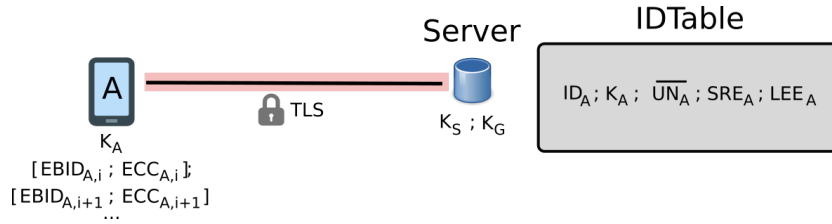


Figure 3: Initialisation of the system: server set up and application registration.

#### 3.1. Server Set Up

The back-end server is initialized at the beginning of the proximity tracing official period under the control of the Authority. In order to be able to determine in which period and epoch the system is, the server stores  $T_{ptsstart}$ , the time when the proximity tracing service has been started in the country. From this timestamp, the server maintains a counter  $i$ , initialized to 0, representing the current epoch number coded by 24 bits.

We also assume that the server is configured with:

- $K_S$  (“**Server Key**”): a  $L$ -bit long key, with  $L \geq 128$  to be defined, only known by the server<sup>5</sup>.
- $K_G$  (“**Federation Key**”): a  $L$ -bit long key, with  $L \geq 128$  to be defined, shared between all servers in Europe (used for federation, see Section 8).
- $CC_S$  (“**Country Code**”): a 8-bit long value that codes the country where the server provides service (used for federation, see Section 8). These country codes should be known to all international systems where federation is possible. For example, France could use the code “33”, Germany the code ”49”, ...

In addition, the server maintains a local database, *IDTable* (see Section 3.2 for details).

#### 3.2. Application Registration (Server Side)

##### 3.2.1. The *IDTable* database

For each registered application  $App_A$ , belonging to an anonymous user  $U_A$ , the server  $Srv$  keeps a record in a local database *IDTable* with the following information:

- $K_A$  (“**Shared Key for A**”): a  $L$ -bit long key, with  $L \geq 128$  to be defined, shared with  $App_A$ , that is used to authenticate  $App_A$  messages.
- $ID_A$  (“**Permanent Identifier for A**”): a 40-bit identifier that is unique for each registered App, and generated randomly (random draw process without replacement to avoid collision). This permanent ID is only known to the server.

<sup>5</sup>Note that this key can be renewed every few epochs for better security. In this case, the server needs to store all the keys that were generated during the last  $CTK$  epochs, where  $CTK = 86400 * CT/epoch\_duration\_sec$ .

- UN<sub>A</sub> (“User A Notified”)**: this flag indicates if the associated user has already been notified to be at risk of exposure (“true”) or not (“false”). It is initialized with value “false”. Once set to “true”, the user is not allowed to make any additional status request. The flag can be reset if the user can prove that she is not at risk anymore (for example by proving that she got a test and the result was negative).
- SRE<sub>A</sub> (“Status Request Epoch”)**: a 24-bit value that indicates the last epoch when  $U_A$  has sent a “Status Request”.
- LEE<sub>A</sub> (“List of Exposed Epoch(s)”)**: each time one of A’s EBID appears in the proximity list of an infected user, the epoch  $j$  when the encounter happened between the infected user and  $U_A$  is added to this list. This list of epochs reflects the exposure of the user (temporal and frequency information) and is used, together with other information (e.g. the duration and proximity of a contact to an infected person), to compute the risk score. Note that a given epoch  $i$  can appear several times in this list if  $App_A$  received several *HELLO* messages from infected users during that epoch.

### 3.3. Application Registration (Application Side)

A user  $U_A$  who wants to install the application on his device must download it from the official Apple or Android stores. After installing the application  $App_A$ ,  $U_A$  needs to register to the back-end server. During this registration phase:

- A proof-of-work (PoW) system (like a CAPCHA) is implemented in order to avoid automatic registrations by bots or denial of service attacks (the details of this PoW system are out of scope of this document).
- $App_A$ , the application installed on  $U_A$ ’s device, is configured (over a TLS channel) with:
  - The current epoch value,  $i$ .
  - The duration of an epoch,  $epoch\_duration\_sec$ .
  - The starting time of the following epoch,  $T_{ptsstart} + (i + 1) * epoch\_duration\_sec$  (This is required for synchronization with the server).
  - The  $K_A$  key, shared with the server.
  - An initial list of  $T$  ( $EBID_{A,i}, ECC_{A,i}$ ) pairs (see Section 4 for more details).

## 4. Generation of the Ephemeral Bluetooth Identifiers

During registration and then regularly, i.e. every  $M$  epochs (value to be defined), each registered user  $U_A$  connects to the server in order to obtain a list of the  $M$  ( $EBID_{A,i}, ECC_{A,i}$ ) pairs for the  $M$  following epochs. For efficiency, this request can be performed together with an *Exposure Status Request* (see Section 6.2).

Upon receiving such a request, the server generates and sends to  $App_A$  a list of  $T$  ( $EBID_{A,i}, ECC_{A,i}$ ) pairs for the upcoming  $T$  epochs<sup>6</sup>, where:

- EBID<sub>A,i</sub> (“Ephemeral Bluetooth Identifier for A”)**: a 64-bit identifier generated for the epoch  $i$  as:

$$EBID_{A,i} = ENC(K_S, i \mid ID_A)$$

where  $ENC$  is a block-cipher with 64-bit block size, for example 3-key TripleDES.

- ECC<sub>A,i</sub> (“Encrypted Country Code”)**: an 8-bit code that indicates, in an encrypted form, the country code of  $EBID_{A,i}$ . This field is used for federation purposes and can only be decrypted by back-end servers that have federation agreements. More specifically,  $ECC_{A,i}$  is the country code  $CC_A$  encrypted using  $AES - OFB$  with key  $K_G$  and  $IV$   $EBID_{A,i}$ , i.e.,

$$ECC_{A,i} = MSB(AES(K_G, EBID_{A,i} \mid 0^{64})) \oplus CC_A$$

## 5. Proximity Discovery

In this phase,  $App_A$  performs two operations simultaneously:

- **HELLO Message Broadcasting** and,
- **HELLO Message Collection**.

---

<sup>6</sup>Note that the server does not store these pairs.



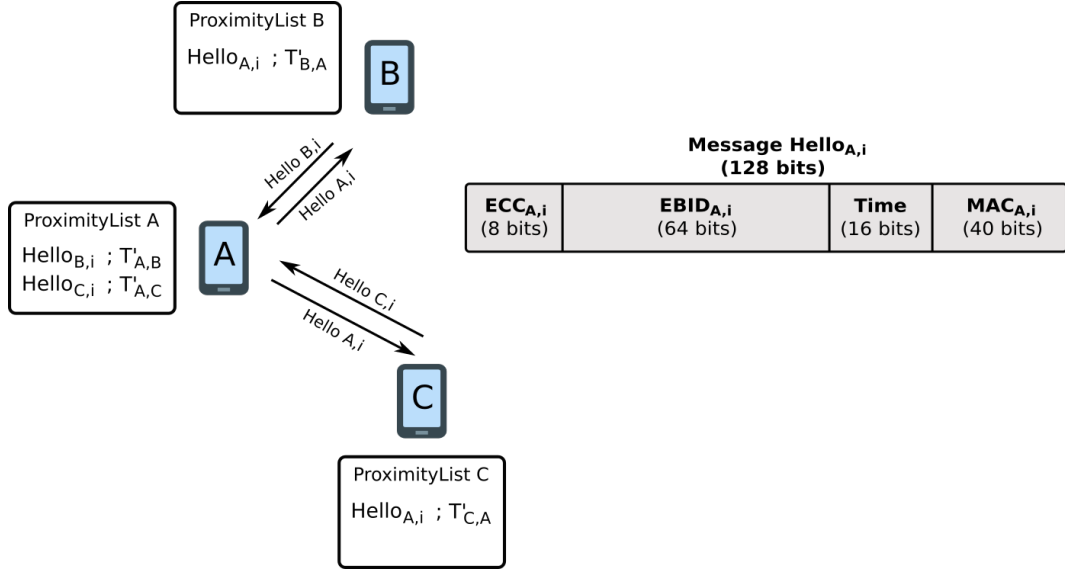


Figure 4: Proximity Discovery: the App continuously broadcasts *HELLO* messages and collects *HELLO* messages sent by nearby devices running the same application.

## 5.1. HELLO Message Broadcasting

$App_A$  continuously broadcasts *HELLO* messages on its Bluetooth Low Energy interface. These *HELLO* messages are composed of 4 different fields and have a total length of 128 bits (16 bytes) (see Figure 4). The *HELLO* messages broadcast at epoch  $i$ ,  $HELLO_{A,i}$ , are defined as:

$$M_{A,i} = [ECC_{A,i} \mid EBID_{A,i} \mid Time]$$

$$HELLO_{A,i} = [M_{A,i} \mid MAC_{A,i}]$$

where:

- ECC<sub>A,i</sub>**: the encrypted country code (8 bits).
- EBID<sub>A,i</sub>**: Ephemeral Bluetooth ID at epoch  $i$ , generated by the back-end (64 bits).
- Time**: 16-bit timestamp (to encode the fine-grain emission time). It contains the 16 less significant bits of the current NTP "Seconds" timestamp of  $App_A$  (which represents, for era 0, the number of seconds since 0h January 1st, 1900 UTC). Since it is truncated to 16 bits, it covers a bit more than 18 hours, what is much larger than the epoch duration. This field is used to mitigate replay attacks.
- MAC<sub>A,i</sub>**: a  $HMAC - SHA256(K_A, c_1 \mid M_{A,i})$  truncated to 40 bits ( $c_1$  is the 8-bit prefix "01"). This field is used to prevent integrity attacks on the *HELLO* messages.

**Note:** The *HELLO* contains a "country code" that is encrypted and is therefore not visible by other devices. It is used in case of federation by the foreign back-end servers (see Section 8 for more details).

## 5.2. HELLO Message Collection

$App_A$  continuously collects *HELLO* messages sent by nearby devices running the same application.

Upon receiving  $HELLO_{A,i}$ ,  $App_A$ :

1. parses<sup>7</sup>  $HELLO_{A,i}$  to retrieve  $ecc_A$  (8 bits),  $ebid_A$  (64 bits),  $time_A$  (16 bits) and  $mac_A$  (40 bits).
2. obtains a 32-bit NTP "Seconds" timestamp,  $time'_A$ .
3. checks that:

$$|time_A - TRUNC_{16}(time'_A)| < \delta$$

<sup>7</sup>In this paper, we use lowercase for variables that result from a parsing operation.

where  $\delta$  is a configurable time tolerance (typically a few seconds, value to be defined)<sup>8</sup>.

4. stores, in its *LocalProximityList* the following pair<sup>9</sup>:

$$(HELLO_{A,i}, time'_A)$$

**Note:** Entries in *LocalProximityList* are automatically deleted after *CT* Days (the value *CT* needs to be defined with the health authority).

## 6. Infected User Declaration

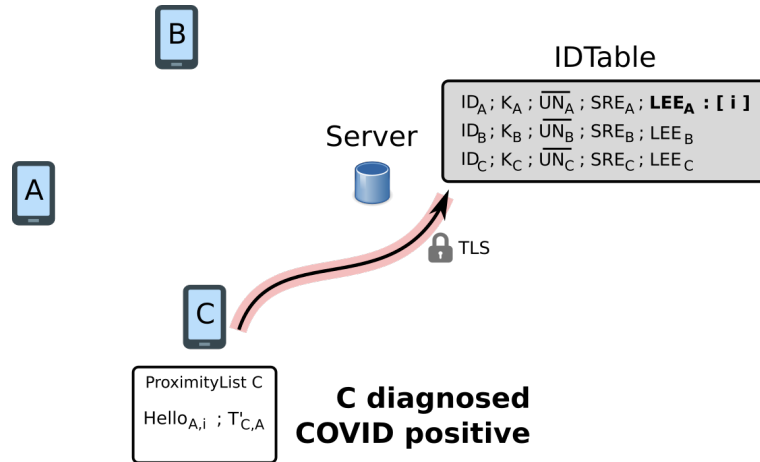


Figure 5: Infected Node Declaration: upon agreement, a user tested COVID-positive uploads her *LocalProximityList* to the server.

### 6.1. Upload by the Application

**Upload Authorization Procedure:** If user  $U_C$  is tested and diagnosed COVID-positive at a hospital or medical office and it is estimated that she was contagious from  $ContStart_C$  to  $ContEnd_C$  (expressed in seconds using the standard NTP "Seconds" system), she is proposed to upload to the server each  $(HELLO, Time)$  pair of her *LocalProximityList* that satisfies:

$$ContStart_C < Time < ContEnd_C$$

In this document, we do not detail the interactions between  $App_C$  and the health authority. In particular, we do not present the security/authorization procedure that verifies that only authorized and positively-tested users are allowed to upload their *LocalProximityList*<sup>10</sup> (note that during this upload,  $App_C$  does not reveal any of its *EBIDs* to the server).

**Upload Mechanism:** A *LocalProximityList* contains the *EBIDs* of the devices that the infected user has encountered in the last *CT* days. This information together with the timing information associated with each *HELLO* message could be used to build the de-identified social/proximity graph of the infected user. The aggregation of many such social/proximity graphs may lead, under some conditions, to the de-anonymization of its nodes, which results in the social graphs of the users.

Would that be a concern, it is necessary to "break" the link between any two *EBIDs* contained in the *LocalProximityList* to prevent the server from getting get this information. Therefore, instead of uploading the *LocalProximityList* our scheme uploads each of its elements independently.

Different solutions can be envisioned to achieve this goal:

<sup>8</sup>Note that since  $time_A$  is only 16-bit long, this check is not enough to detect replay attacks of *HELLO* messages that were generated more than  $2^{16}$  seconds (i.e., a bit more than 18 hours) before  $time'_A$ . In case  $U_A$  is diagnosed positive on COVID-19, an additional test is performed by the server (Section 7) to further detect these attacks.

<sup>9</sup>Other information that could be useful to compute the risk score, such as the message's reception power or the user's speed/acceleration during the contact, could be added.

<sup>10</sup>One solution under study is to consider that the user obtains an authorization token from the hospital or the medical office when it is diagnosed COVID-positive. The User can then use this authorization token to validate its *LocalProximityList* upload.

- The  $(HELLO, Time)$  pairs of the *LocalProximityList* are sent to the server one by one using a *Mixnet*<sup>11</sup>. Upon reception of these messages, the server won't be able to associate them with a *LocalProximityList* if the upload is spread over a long period of time.
- The *LocalProximityList* is uploaded on a trusted server (for example at a hospital or health organization) that mixes all the  $(HELLO, Time)$  pairs of all infected users' *LocalProximityList*. The back-end server has only access to the exposed entries via a specific API provided by the trusted server.
- The back-end server is equipped with some secure hardware component that processes the uploads of the *LocalProximityList*. The back-end server has only access to the exposed entries via a specific API provided by the secure hardware module.

## 6.2. Server Operations

Upon reception of a  $h_A = (HELLO_A, Time_A)$ , the server:

1. parses  $h_A$  to retrieve  $ecc_A$  (8 bits),  $ebid_A$  (64 bits),  $t_A$  (16 bits),  $mac_A$  (40 bits) and  $time'_A$  (32 bits).
2. decrypts  $ecc_A$ , using  $K_G$ , to recover the message country code,  $cc_A$ . If  $cc_A$  is different from the server's country code,  $CC_S$ , and corresponds to a valid country code,  $h_A$  is forwarded to the back-end server managing this country using the federation procedure in place (See Section 8). Otherwise it continues.
3. computes  $ENC^{-1}(K_S, ebid_A)$  to retrieve  $i_A \mid id_A$ , where  $i_A$  is the epoch number corresponding to  $ebid_A$  and  $id_A$  is the permanent identifier.
4. verifies that  $id_A$  corresponds to the ID of a registered user, otherwise  $h_A$  is rejected silently.
5. checks that:

$$|t_A - TRUNC_{16}(time'_A)| < \delta$$

where  $\delta$  is a configurable time tolerance (typically a few seconds, value to be defined).  $h_A$  is rejected if this test is not satisfied.

6. checks that  $time'_A$  corresponds to epoch  $i_A$ :

$$|(Time_A - T_{tpsstart})/epoch\_duration\_sec - i_A| \leq 1$$

(note that a difference of 1 may happen if the *HELLO* message is sent at the very end of the epoch due to transmission and processing times).  $h_A$  is rejected if this test is not satisfied.

7. retrieves from *IDTable*,  $K_A$ , the key associated with  $id_A$ .
8. verifies if the MAC,  $mac_A$ , is valid as follows:

$$mac_A == HMAC - SHA256(K_A, c_1 \mid ecc_A \mid ebid_A \mid t_A)$$

If  $mac_A$  is invalid,  $h_A$  is rejected silently.

9. adds  $i_A$  in  $LEE_A$ <sup>12</sup>.
10. securely erases  $(HELLO_A, Time_A)$ .

## 7. Exposure Status Request (ESR)

In order to check whether user  $U_A$  is "at risk", i.e. if she has encountered infected and contagious users in the last  $CT$  days, application  $App_A$  regularly<sup>13</sup> sends "Exposure Status" Requests (*ESR\_REQUEST*) to the server  $Srv$  for  $ID_A$ . The server then computes a "risk score" value, derived in part from the list  $LEE_A$  corresponding to  $ID_A$ . The server replies with a *ESR\_REPLY* message that is set to "1" when the user is "at risk" (i.e. if the "risk score" is larger than a threshold value) or to "0" otherwise.

<sup>11</sup>Since all mobile telecom operators are using NAT, it should be studied whether the use of a Mixnet or proxy is really needed.

<sup>12</sup>Note that at each epoch  $i$ , the server cleans up the  $LEE_A$  list of each registered  $ID_A$  by removing the "expired" entries. More precisely, all epochs  $j$  of  $LEE_A$  such that  $(i - j) \geq (ct * 24 * 3600/epoch\_duration\_sec)$  are deleted.

<sup>13</sup>The queries are sent regularly and at most every  $T$  epochs. If a user is allowed to perform  $N$  queries per day,  $T$  is defined as  $T = 86400/(N * epoch\_duration\_sec)$ .

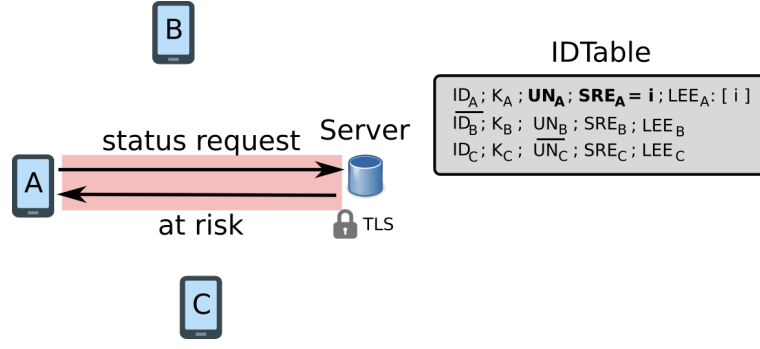


Figure 6: Exposure Status Request: the App regularly requests the server to know if any of its EBID appeared in any *HELLO* messages collected by an infected users.

**Application processing:**  $App_A$  queries the server by sending the following request over an TLS channel:

$$ESR\_REQUEST_{A,i} = [EBID_{A,i} \mid Time \mid MAC_{A,i}]$$

with

$$MAC_{A,i} = HMAC - SHA256(K_A, c_2 \mid EBID_{A,i} \mid Time)]$$

where:

- $c_2$ : Fixed prefix "02" (8 bits).
- $EBID_{A,i}$ : Ephemeral Bluetooth ID of the current epoch  $i$  (64 bits).
- $Time$ : 32-bit timestamp in seconds, corresponding to the transmission time.

**Server processing:** Upon the reception of a request,  $ESR\_REQUEST_{A,i}$ , at epoch  $i$ , the server:

1. parses  $ESR\_REQUEST_{A,i}$  to retrieve  $ebid_A$ ,  $time_A$  and  $mac_A$ .
2. verifies that  $time_A$  is close to its current time.
3. retrieves the permanent identifier  $id_A$  and epoch  $i_A$  by decrypting  $ebid_A$ , as

$$i_A \mid id_A = ENC^{-1}(K_S, ebid_A)$$

4. uses  $id_A$  to retrieve from *IDTable* the associated entries:  $K_A, UN_A, SRE_A, LEE_A$ .
5. verifies that

$$mac_A == HMAC - SHA256(K_A, c_2 \mid ebid_A \mid t_A)$$

If  $mac_A$  is incorrect, the message is silently rejected;

6. verifies that  $UN_A$  is "false" (User Notified) in order to check that the user has not already received a "At Risk" notification. If the user has already been notified, the message is silently rejected.
7. verifies that  $(i - SRE_A) \geq T$ , where  $T$  is minimum number of epochs between two consecutive *ESR\_REQUEST*. Otherwise, the message is silently rejected.

If the  $ESR\_REQUEST_{A,i}$  is valid, the server:

1. updates  $SRE_A$  with the current epoch number,  $i$ , in *IDTable*.
2. computes a "risk score" value, derived in part from the list  $LEE_A$ .
3. Two situations are then possible:
  - If the computed score indicates that the user is at risk of exposure, the server sets  $UN_A$  at "true". It means that App  $App_A$  cannot perform any new request until user  $U_A$  is tested and her status updated. An  $ESR\_REPLY_{A,i}$  message set to "1" (at risk of exposure) is then returned to the user.
  - If the computed score does not indicate any significant risk, an  $ESR\_REPLY_{A,i}$  message set to "0" is returned to the user.

**Application processing:** Upon receiving the  $ESR\_REPLY_{A,i}$  message:

1.  $App_A$  replies with an  $ACK$  message.
2. If  $ESR\_REPLY_{A,i}$  is set to "1":
  - $App_A$  keeps broadcasting  $HELLO$  messages but stops sending  $ESR\_REQUEST$  requests to the server.
  - User,  $U_A$ , receives a notification from  $App_A$  with some instructions (for example to go to the hospital to get tested, to call a specific number or go on quarantine).

## 8. Federation

In order for our system to be an effective tool, it must operate across neighboring states. This is especially true in the case of Europe, where freedom of movement is a core value.

We therefore propose the use of a distributed, federated architecture where countries may operate their own back-ends and develop their own Apps. This is also practical as we can expect each instance to require country-specific options with respect to health system integration and localization.

A detailed specification of a federation protocol remains to be defined in agreement with all other partners of the PEPP-PT initiative<sup>14</sup>. However, the proposed structure of the  $HELLO$  message allows some elegant solutions. We propose a standard format for all  $HELLO$  messages as follows<sup>15</sup>:

$$ECC_{Country}(8bits) \mid EBID(64bits) \mid t(16bits) \mid MAC(40bits)$$

Given this simple definition, a User *Bernard* from a given country, let's say France, could visit another country, let's say Germany, and still be able to use his national application. The protocol works as follows:

- When *Bernard* goes to Germany, his App broadcasts, at each epoch  $j$ ,  $HELLO_{FR,j}$  messages as defined in Section 4.
- When *Bernard* meets a German User, let's say *Uta*, at epoch  $i$ :
  - *Uta* stores the  $(HELLO_{FR,i}, time)$  pair in her *LocalProximityList*.
  - *Bernard* stores the  $(HELLO_{DE,i}, time')$  pair in his *LocalProximityList* (where  $HELLO_{DE,i}$  is the  $HELLO$  message broadcast by *Uta* at epoch  $i$ ).
- If *Uta* is later tested and diagnosed COVID-positive:
  - *Uta* uploads her *LocalProximityList* on the German back-end server.
  - The German back-end server obtains the  $(HELLO_{FR,i}, time)$  pair and processes it as follows:
    - \* It parses  $HELLO_{FR,i}$  to retrieve  $ecc_{FR}$  (8 bits),  $ebid_X$  (64 bits),  $time'_X$  (16 bits) and  $mac_X$  (40 bits).
    - \* decrypts  $ecc_{FR}$ , using  $K_G$ , to recover the message country code,  $CC_{FR}$ . Since  $CC_{FR}$  is the country code for *France*, the  $(HELLO_{FR,i}, time)$  pair is forwarded to the French back-end server.
    - \* The French server processes it as described in Section 6.
- Similarly, if *Bernard* is later tested and diagnosed COVID-positive in France:
  - *Bernard* uploads his *LocalProximityList* on the French back-end server.
  - The French back-end server obtains the  $(HELLO_{GE,i}, time')$  pair and processes it as follows:
    - \* It parses  $HELLO_{GE,i}$  to retrieve  $ecc_{GE}$  (8 bits),  $ebid_X$  (64 bits),  $time_X$  (16 bits) and  $mac_X$  (40 bits).
    - \* decrypts  $ecc_{GE}$ , using  $K_G$ , to recover the message country code,  $CC_{GE}$ . Since  $CC_{GE}$  is the country code for *Germany*, the  $(HELLO_{GE,i}, time')$  pair is forwarded to the German back-end server.
    - \* The German server processes it as local pair.

This concept allows us to successively on-board other back-ends with potentially different EBID schemes. It further allows us to improve upon the format without requiring changes to the federation protocols.

<sup>14</sup><https://www.pepp-pt.org>

<sup>15</sup>Actually the adopting countries should only agree to use the 8 first bits of the  $HELLO$  message as the "Encrypted Country Code" that is encrypted using the following 64 bits as an IV of a stream cipher, as detailed in Section 4.

## A. Towards Probabilistic Notifications

As described in previous work [2, 6], all proximity-tracking schemes are vulnerable to the "one entry" attack. In this attack, the adversary has only one entry, corresponding to  $User_T$ , in her *LocalProximityList*<sup>16</sup>. When the adversary is notified "at risk", she learns that  $User_T$  was diagnosed COVID-positive. The *ROBERT* scheme, however, mitigates this attack by:

- (1) Requiring to all users to register (anonymously) to the server.
- (2) Not allowing a user that receives an *ESR\_REPLY* message set to 1 to query the server anymore.

As a result, a registered user can only perform the attack once and then will be blocked by the system. She is therefore limited to one victim.

We argue that the only way to prevent this attack is to use *probabilistic* notifications in order to introduce some "deniability". In such a scheme, the server that receives a *ESR\_REQUEST* message would reply:

- "0" (i.e. not at risk) if the User's ID is not in the list of exposed IDs.
- "1" if the User's ID is in the list of exposed IDs **or** if it is **randomly selected** by the server (the server selects additional users to receive a "1" reply with probability  $p$ ).

As a result, if the user receives a "1" back, she does not know whether it is because she has been exposed or whether she has been randomly selected by the server. Since the user cannot query the server anymore (as it already received a reply "1" back), she cannot send additional requests to refine his attack. We acknowledge that this attacks remains possible by  $n$  colluding nodes that target one user. In this case, the  $n$  colluding nodes will all get a "1" back and will find out the exposure status of their victim. The scalability of the attack is however reduced since it now requires  $n$  adversaries to target one victim.

The side effect of this proposal is that it introduces some false positives, i.e. some people will be notified whereas they are not really "at risk" (at least according to the proximity risk score). Is this acceptable or not? There are several elements of answer to this question. First, we need to acknowledge that proximity tracing is not perfect, and that there will be anyway false positives or false negatives. In this context, is it really problematic to add 5% or 10% more false positives? Second, the answer to this question may also depend on what the application is used for. If the App is used to target users that should get tested, we believe that testing 5 or 10% more users randomly should be quite acceptable. If the App is used to notify users to go in quarantine, false positives could be more problematic...

## B. A Note on Current PEPP-PT Deployment

The protocols of the PEPP-PT App and service currently scheduled for release in Germany diverge from the protocols proposed in this paper. This is due to the fact the the PEPP-PT initiative originated from a national project which was the driving force behind the current German App release. However, efficient and successful containment through proximity tracing can only happen internationally. As such, the scheduled release is only a first step and plans to migrate towards this protocol that supports federation between countries are already in place.

The major differences between the protocols proposed in this paper and the current state in Germany, as of today, are:

- **EBID format:** The current *EBIDs* issued by the back-end do not contain the *ECC*. They also do not contain a *MAC* or timestamp.
- **Upload authorization:** The current App and back-end already include methods and protocols for upload authorization after infection; protocols which are specifically tailored to the German health system. Those methods will likely change from country to country.

The migration path is clear and the systems and protocols will be harmonized soon.

---

<sup>16</sup>This attack can easily be achieved by keeping the Bluetooth interface off, switching it on when the adversary is next her victim and then switching it off again.

## C. Server Security Considerations

This proposal assumes that the back-end server is correctly secured, implementing the best state-of the art counter-measures and deploying the required security measures to prevent intrusions <sup>17</sup>.

Its security will be audited, tested and validated by the competent national bodies. Different measures are already considered like:

- A secured logging systems (in order to allow regular audits of the operations for secured or privacy checks).
- The use of hardware or at least software security modules for secure cryptographic processing, key generation and protection.

Furthermore, an extension of *ROBERT* that uses a secret sharing scheme to split the secret keys between the server and the applications is under consideration for a future version of this document.

## References

- [1] Decentralized privacy-preserving proximity tracing.
- [2] Ran Canetti, Ari Trachtenberg, and Mayank Varia. Anonymous collocation discovery: Harnessing privacy to tame the coronavirus, 2020.
- [3] Joel Hellewell et a. Feasibility of controlling covid-19 outbreaks by isolation of cases and contacts. *The Lancet*, 2020. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X\(20\)30074-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(20)30074-7/fulltext).
- [4] Luca Ferretti, Chris Wymant, Michelle Kendall, Lele Zhao, Anel Nurtay, Lucie Abeler-Dörner, Michael Parker, David Bonsall, and Christophe Fraser. Quantifying sars-cov-2 transmission suggests epidemic control with digital contact tracing. *Science*, 2020.
- [5] Bluetooth SIG. *Bluetooth Core Specification v5.1*. 2019. Accessed: 2019-08-30.
- [6] Serge Vaudenay. Analysis of DP3T. *Cryptology ePrint Archive*, Report 2020/399, 2020. <https://eprint.iacr.org/2020/399>.

---

<sup>17</sup>See for example: <https://www.ssi.gouv.fr/entreprise/bonnes-pratiques/poste-de-travail-et-serveurs/>