

# A Tale of COVID and Privacy

by Bob Siegel - November 30, 2020

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My wife and I have been very careful about “staying within our Bubble,” but it was bound to happen. Someone outside of our small group had encountered someone who tested positive and the “Bubble” began to burst. It made me consider privacy in this time of pandemic.

## How the bubble came in contact with COVID

I make no secret that I enjoy playing golf. One of the benefits of living in South Florida is that I can play golf all year. I have a weekly foursome with mostly retired guys who play frequently during the week. These men and their spouses are all “in our Bubble.” We are all equally concerned about COVID, take similar precautions (thank you CDC), and basically trust that we are all doing the right things.

Last Tuesday another group of men played golf and subsequently, a member of the group (Mr. A) received a positive test result on Friday. One of the other people who played in this Tuesday group (Mr. B) played golf with my three friends on Wednesday.

Thanksgiving dinner on Thursday was hosted by one of my three friends and his spouse. We ate outside and were socially distanced. On Friday I played golf with my three friends (it was a day off, so why not). That evening Mr. B notified all of us of Mr. A’s positive test.

## Initial reactions

Naturally, we were all upset. We worked so hard to stay safe and here we have a simple round of golf that could be our undoing. We all wanted information:

Is Mr. A someone who lives up north and just came down for the season?

What precautions did Mr. A take to protect himself?

What type of test did Mr. A take?

Have Mr. A’s spouse and child been tested? With what result?

What precautions did Mr. B take?

Has Mr. B been tested and with what result?

Has anyone in the Bubble been tested and with what result?

Is there anything we all should have done to protect the Bubble?

These are just some of the questions we had. All of them seem reasonable as we wanted to plan our next steps and how to protect ourselves. The privacy person in me then awoke asking “am I invading someone’s privacy?” by trying to get all this information.

## **Privacy and COVID**

As of this morning, I did not know the identity of Mr. A. To me, this was good as I really didn’t need to know his identity and the Bubble didn’t need to know who Mr. A is to make decisions. You could say the identity was anonymized.

However, we did know the identity of Mr. B. We could easily find out who they played with on Tuesday (it’s public information) to narrow down the identity of Mr. A, so Mr. A is not truly anonymous. We, as privacy professionals, need to think about public sources of information that may help to re-identify de-identified data.

The reason, in the COVID case, can be seen by how Mr. A and Mr. B are being treated by the Bubble and other community members. Since we know the identity of Mr. B, there was a lot of anger toward Mr. B. Discussions were rampant that since this is the third time this individual has been exposed, he must be acting in a risky manner. The question of “how do we protect ourselves from Mr. B?” was actively discussed.

Mr. A, being anonymous, was essentially given the benefit of the doubt. No one had information about him nor could identify him, so no anger or hostility presented itself. While Mr. B was being ostracized, Mr. A was unscathed.

## **How it turned out?**

After a few sleepless nights and the Bubble’s self-isolating, some members took tests. All came back negative, so life will go on.

Mr. A identified himself to the community in case someone he had contact with had not yet been notified. The golf community is requiring both Mr. A and Mr. B to quarantine for 14 days.

The Bubble is still trying to figure out if there is anything else we can do to keep healthy without intruding on individual privacy..