

Is Google's project to monitor healthy people just a bit creepy?

July 31 2014, by Blaine Price



Google knows if you're pulling a sickie. Credit: Sergio Alvarez, CC BY-NC-SA

You donate gigabytes of valuable data to Google every day. Your browsing history, search results, and gmail behaviour as well as the countless smartphone apps which monitor your movements and personal relationships all tell the company about you. Now Google X's "moonshot" division is using wearable technology to have [healthy volunteers monitored](#). The idea is to monitor their physiology and

sequence their DNA in order to produce a baseline for human health. Is this going a bit too far given how much Google already knows?

Most of us already have an implicit contract with Google. We barter our [data](#) for services, giving the company access to our online behaviour, which it aggregates and can sell and we agree to be exposed to adverts. In return Google provides us with a variety of services and apps. Which side is getting the better deal is debatable, but as [Edward Snowden has taught us](#), there can be unintended consequences from sharing your data with someone even if they appear to be trustworthy. And while your browsing history might reveal predilections you would prefer not to share with the world, your DNA and physiological responses could embarrass you even more, or cost you dearly.

As little as seven years ago, [DNA sequencing cost \\$10 million per genome](#) but after 2008 the cost fell off a cliff and [consumer-level testing kits now cost less than \\$100](#). You can learn a lot about yourself and your heritage from a few millilitres of your saliva, including the drugs that will work for you and which might kill you or how likely you are to contract a disease. [Some people have used this knowledge](#) to take steps to live longer but it is also knowledge that could be used against you.

We are no longer very far from the kind of dystopian world depicted the film [Gattaca](#), where those with "inferior" genes become second class citizens and are denied insurance or certain jobs. [Some insurers already use activity trackers](#) to encourage customers to maintain a healthy lifestyle, but it's not such a giant leap to imagine them requiring customers to monitor themselves with [wearable technology](#) as a condition of insurance.

Although the cost of examining your DNA is now pretty cheap, self-monitoring or "[quantified self](#)" technologies are even cheaper, with many working as free [smartphone apps](#). By switching on an app on your

phone or putting on one of the many gadgets and wristbands on offer, you could have your activity level tracked so you can get warnings when you start becoming less active and start to put on weight. But with almost all of these gadgets and apps, someone else owns your data (usually in their proprietary data silo) and could potentially use it against you.

So, whether Google tracks you or you track yourself, the privacy deck seems to be stacked against you. Should you still play? [My studies](#) have shown that many people get significant insights from things as simple as their activity and sleep data. Having an objective view of yourself and being able to compare it with objective views of others lets you find out how "normal" you are and can help you correct bad habits you didn't know you had. So, yes, I think the game is worth playing but you should know the rules and, like poker, you need to know when to walk away.

Whatever system you use, read the fine print and make sure you can walk away with your own data. If you can only view it in the manufacturer's app or web portal and there is no export feature then try something else. Try to imagine the worst thing that could happen if your data was accidentally made public. If that makes you uncomfortable then consider finding a way to keep your data local to you. You never know when Facebook might buy up your self-tracking provider and find a way to monetise your data for its own gain.

Google's plan to track healthy people certainly has the potential to add a great deal to our medical knowledge and to customise health treatments, so it is worthy of support. We just need to watch the data-collection-creep to make sure that potentially damaging data about us cannot easily fall into the wrong hands.

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Citation: Is Google's project to monitor healthy people just a bit creepy? (2014, July 31)
retrieved 18 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2014-07-google-healthy-people-bit-creepy.html>

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