Life in a time of the quantified self: How apps both empower and suppress us

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A healthier life and better relations with others. These are the promises made by many social media and apps. However, these ideals are in stark contrast with the way the companies behind these apps behave. The

companies are primarily driven by their commercial interest in exploiting the data they collect and not by improving the life of the user. Doing so, they harm our most intimate domains and relationships. This is one of the conclusions put forward by Marjolein Lanzing in her Ph.D. dissertation, which she defended today at the TU Eindhoven.

According to Lanzing there's a moral tension between what the apps promise (better control of ourselves and our relationships, by permanently collecting and analyzing data about us) and what the companies behind the apps actually do (using data to earn money at the expense of the user). The companies have hidden motives that can be harmful to the user.

She explores various examples by linking [empirical data](#) to existing philosophical principles (such as privacy, self-understanding and autonomy) and reviving these principles by making them applicable in a 21st century context.

Promise versus exploitation

Lanzing gives a number of examples of this contradiction:

- Instagram offers young girls autonomy and a large audience, but at the same time forces them to conform to stereotypes.
- Tinder places some users in a separate category with few matches, from which they can only escape by paying the [company](#).
- Google sees such value in health data that they bought Fitbit for over $2 billion.
- Menstrual app Maya not only helped women keep track of their monthly cycle, but also sold their data to Facebook (which makes money from advertising), because there is a correlation between ovulation and buying behavior.

"Much of the [ethical issues](#) surrounding self-tracking technologies are related to the commercial parties that use these technologies to penetrate our most intimate domains and thus shape these spheres and relationships," says Lanzing.

"This has bearings on the way in which we enter into relationships with ourselves, with others and with one another." Lanzing therefore believes that the responsibility for protecting these relationships lies with policymakers, large technology companies and legislators. "Instead of placing the responsibility with the individual, by saying things like: 'then you're going to get rid of Facebook, right?'."

More information: The transparent self: a normative investigation of changing selves and relationships in the age of the quantified self: [research.tue.nl/en/publication … n-of-changing-selves](#)

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