

Press release of 8 June 2018

Digital life tracking – a threat to solidarity and individual responsibility?

With digital life tracking gaining increasing traction in our everyday life, with more and more ways of recording, analysing and comparing personal data via apps on mobile devices, how are these new possibilities shaping our behaviour, and what do they mean for social cohesion? The first Digital self-tracking and solidarity survey conducted by the sotomo research institute sheds particular light on the social dimension of tracking and comparing. Participants indicated that they believe that both solidarity and individual responsibility are at risk in the future.

More and more people are actively tracking their life on digital devices. What do they think about how their personal data is collected and shared? What do they expect from a society in which personal data profiles are playing an increasingly central role in ever more areas of life? The representative study, Digital self-tracking and solidarity, which the sotomo research institute conducted on behalf of the Sanitas health insurance foundation, questioned Swiss residents on how they believe solidarity will change in the future. The plan is to continue tracking developments in the years ahead. The results of the first survey indicate that respondents fear for the values of solidarity and individual responsibility and would like to see counter-measures introduced. However, there was no consensus on who should initiate these measures.

Active use despite concerns

The results of the study show that around half of adults in Switzerland use their smartphone or similar portable devices to record activities and post status updates. And the trend towards digital self-tracking does not seem to have been exhausted yet. Two-thirds of survey participants would be interested in more automated recording of their data. At the same time, participants were wary about the collection of their data by third parties. Although over 70% of respondents use free email and instant messaging services, just 14% think it's OK for their data trails to be exploited in return for their use of these free services. Although some of those questioned make selective use of individual services due to concerns about security, many are fatalistic, with just 22% of respondents believing that they can control which of their personal data is collected.

Are data profiles replacing individuality?

Despite people's willingness to use digital self-tracking, they are ambivalent about the personal consequences of digitalisation. They do not welcome a world controlled by total life tracking. Participants were shown a list of ten keywords and asked to choose the three words that they most associate with a world shaped by total data recording and three words they associate least with the same topic. The vast majority of the words chosen in association with total data recording were negative. The term chosen most often was "control and monitoring", followed by "loss of individuality". And this was the case even though the key claims of digitalisation are targeted advertising, tailored information and personalised products. It seems that many people place greater value on standardisation. Participants fear that algorithms will replace people, with personalisation apparently seen by the majority as an empty promise.

Solidarity and individual responsibility under pressure

A majority of respondents (60%) assume that the progressive accumulation of personal digital data will have a negative or very negative influence on solidarity within society. A world like this is often associated with control, efficiency and pressure to perform. Almost the same number of respondents indicated that individual responsibility is also negatively impacted by the recording of personal data.

In the political sphere, individual responsibility and solidarity are often seen as diametric opposites. The clearly negative assessment of both aspects shows that the public's perception of less solidarity does not necessarily go hand in hand with more individual responsibility. After all, one characteristic of

digitalisation is that responsibility tends to be transferred from humans to machines. This creates a kind of digital nanny who helps people stick to the right lifestyle.

A majority of the respondents stated that both collective and individual responsibility within society are impaired by digitalisation. And most believe that counter-measures are necessary. However, the most striking finding is that the majority of participants see neither the government nor companies as primarily responsible for improving the situation. Instead, they believe that responsibility lies with the individual.

Digital self-tracking and solidarity

However, Professor Felix Gutzwiller, chairman of the foundation board of Sanitas Health Insurance, believes that the survey provides insights that give food for thought and could be seen in a positive light: "The results back up the theory that ever more readily accessible personalised data profiles could threaten the role of solidarity. But I'm nevertheless optimistic that individuals feel responsible for strengthening key values in society." Wide-ranging public debate is needed to establish the conditions under which responsibility can be assumed by civil society.

About the study

In January 2018 the sotomo research institute used a number of channels to question 4,269 people about their online digital life-tracking practices. The answers were then weighted representatively. The study results are based on the answers of 3,055 people and are representative for permanent Swiss residents over the age of 18.

Download the study

You can download the Digital life-tracking and solidarity study here: www.sanitas.com/foundation-survey

About the Sanitas health insurance foundation

The [Sanitas health insurance foundation](http://www.sanitas.com/foundation) was established in 1958. It is the sole shareholder holding the entire interests in the [Sanitas Group](http://www.sanitas.com). The foundation also focuses on socially relevant issues relating to insurance and health. The Sanitas health insurance foundation is planning to conduct the survey among the Swiss population on how they use digital life-tracking services once a year.

Further information

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