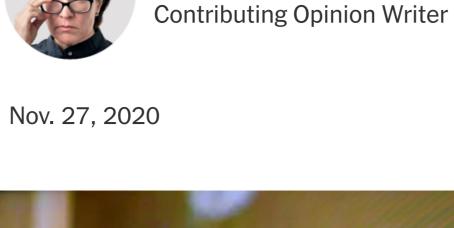
Amazon Wants to Get Even Closer. Skintight.

Account

In the pursuit of surveillance as a service, Jeff Bezos is intent on recording even our moods. How much personal data is too much to give to Amazon?



By Kara Swisher

your wrist.



"He's going to blackmail you," my wife joked.

"That's creepy," my nephew said. My younger teenage son was more clear, telling me to turn it off right away. He was the most perturbed — and

correctly so — by my testing of Amazon's new health and wellness tracker, called Halo.

into how people perceive the user's tone.

older son showed his wariness of the surveillance

My family's reaction was no surprise. A few years ago, my

house unplugging all of the Google Nest devices, even though his other mom had been a top Google executive. With Halo, I was working my family's nerves, especially because of its opt-in feature that uses a microphone and machine learning to analyze the user's voice, giving insight

capabilities of tech companies: He went around our new

In simple terms, along with my sleep and steps, the device can see my halo, as well as my horns, recording my amusement and anger and joy and irritation. Halo is Amazon's attempt to compete with the Apple Watch

and Google (which is awaiting approval of its acquisition of

Fitbit) in the health-tracking arena. I got on the wait list for

it as soon as it was introduced in the summer, and it arrived on Halloween. I strapped on the attractive band and turned on all the intrusive bells and whistles, which Amazon had trumpeted as good for me.

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That first day a vexed emoji told me I was "stern" or

"discouraged" for 16 percent of the day. "You had one

phrase that sounded restrained and sad" for 1.6 seconds at

12:30 p.m., it reported, although I have no idea what that

phrase could have been. But 8 percent of the day, including for 14.4 seconds at exactly 11:41:41 a.m., I was "satisfied," with "two phrases that sounded satisfied, delightful or appreciative." Later, for 1.2 seconds at 7:18:30 p.m., I was "afraid, panicked or overwhelmed." **ON TECH WITH SHIRA OVIDE:** Your guide to how technology is Sign Up transforming our lives — in the time of coronavirus and

wearable. The company has been on an endless quest for information

exactly what Amazon is capable of doing with this new

Still, I left it on, even though I keep my Alexa-powered Echo

devices unplugged until I might need them. I wanted to see

about me (and you, too). The device widens the reach of the

company's personal-data grab, adding a user's body tone

Yipes. Was I? Maybe so and Amazon knew it, which

beyond.

definitely scared me.

typically baggy ensemble.

and a body-fat analysis to the information it vacuums up, which required photos of me in as pared down a state of dress as possible. "You have to send Jeff Bezos nudes?" my wife asked, ever

more concerned by Halo. Not exactly, I replied, even though

She was not assuaged, even though she, too, had fallen into

the Amazon vortex during the pandemic, after the birth of

it works best with form-fitting clothing rather than my

our baby last year. Being a new mom pushed her from being a Never Amazoner to being a regular user of its home delivery services. "I hate myself for this," she said many times, like when the giant box of diapers arrived on our doorstep. Amazon has made bank during the Covid-19 crisis because

of this kind of widespread yet reluctant embrace of

convenience. Amazon's profits and stock have surged in

2020, along with the enormous wealth of its founder and

chief executive, Jeff Bezos, whose net worth has gone from

mind-blowing to decidedly obscene in only a few months.

Doubling down on owning the consumption grid, Amazon last week announced a major push into the prescription drug arena, since it needs to move into ever bigger markets like health and wellness in order to keep up its explosive growth. The announcement of Amazon Pharmacy to deliver prescription drugs to the home sent the stock prices of drugstore chains crashing. Innovation-free and customer-

service-resistant for far too long, the big drugstores have

which can offer discounts, great service and who-knows-

In the last few weeks of using Halo, it finally clicked with

left themselves vulnerable to a company like Amazon,

what-else-but-it-will-be-nifty to its members.

need or want at any moment.

me as to why Amazon needs a device that tracks sleep and movement and body fat and even body tone: An Echo is too far away from our bodies, and the consumer goods we order give the company much information about us but not enough. Amazon needs even more, and to be even closer skintight — to understand the state of me at all times. Then the company can begin to really determine what I might

This enormous idea has been at the heart of Mr. Bezos's

dream for a long time: to suck up the data from willing

participants and give them back exactly what they want,

for a price. This may be perhaps the most perfect signal-to-

noise ratio ever collected. Health info, entertainment likes

and dislikes, and purchase data offer a panoply of insights.

Am I upset? Send the ice cream and antidepressants! Happy? Send the champagne and music! Am I sleepless? Perhaps some warm milk and a weighted blanket — only \$39.99 on Amazon and delivered today. Helpful, for sure, but the underlying concept — surveillance as a service — gets exponentially more problematic and seems even more sinister when we consider recent reports

such as the one that Amazon is monitoring the labor

organizing activities of its own employees.

example of the data grab can be seen with the autonomous home security camera drone. Called the Always Home Cam, it was introduced in late September by Amazon's Ring division and is supposed to become available by the end of the year. Ring, which already got dinged for hacking violations last year, tried clumsily to assuage privacy concerns in a blog

post by its founder Jamie Siminoff: "The camera will only

start recording when the device leaves the base and starts

flying via one of the preset paths. We even designed Always

That should come as no surprise given the breadth of how

much personal data Amazon has been ingesting. Another

Home Cam to hum at a certain volume, so it's clear the camera is in motion and is recording. This is privacy you can hear." Actually, it's an intrusion of privacy that you can hear through a drone that can hear you, not unlike my Halo. Testing, one, two, three, indeed. The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd

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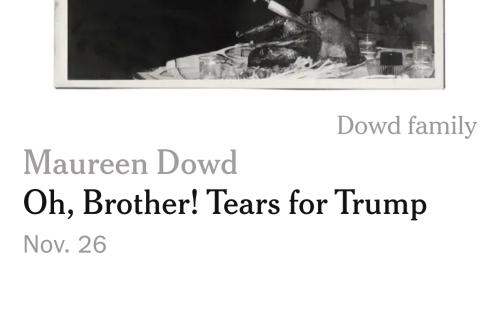
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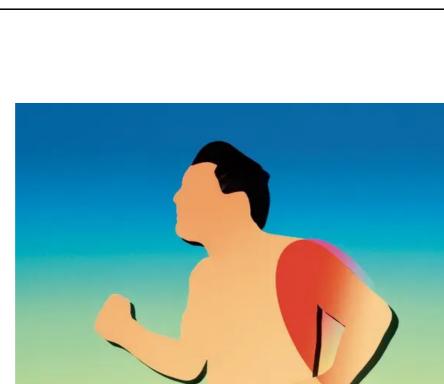


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