

Google Baseline Study aims to define what a healthy human looks like

July 25 2014, by Bob Yirka



Google has announced that it has added a project it's calling Baseline Study, to Google X. The announcement came from project manager Andrew Conrad—he gave an interview to the Wall Street Journal. The aim of the project is simple, study a lot of people as vigorously as possible to see if it's possible to define what it means to be a healthy human being. If that can be accomplished, then logic suggests that any person with deviations from that standard should have cause for concern, because they might have a tendency to develop a particular type of ailment. Put another way, it's a large scale attempt at improving preventive medicine.

Conrad (he was once part of a team that developed cheap HIV tests for donated blood) has been working on the project for more than a year, and has already built a large team of researchers—the team has also already enlisted 175 volunteer into the program—each of which will be giving up blood, urine, saliva and tears for molecular and DNA analysis. Eventually the volunteers will wear monitoring devices to track blood pressure, heart rate, etc. and at some point the glucose monitoring contact lens that Google is developing. Over many years more and more volunteers will be recruited, each adding to the data that is collected. Google will then use its impressive data crunching facilities to create a composite of what a healthy human looks like, or conversely, what one looks like that is likely to develop an ailment. The idea is to create a baseline that will allow for identifying biomarkers for as many ailments as possible, as early as possible.

The project is likely to cause privacy concerns, of course—who will have access to all that data, and what about the privacy of the volunteers? Google is well aware of likely concerns and has taken steps to ensure data collected for the project is never used for any other purpose. Initial data will be handled in accordance with laws protecting patient privacy, by independent research facilities where personal information will be removed before it is handed over to Conrad and his team. Another potential area of concern is the final result—what if Google succeeds with the project? Could people be required to undergo extensive physicals prior to signing up for health insurance with the results compared against the Baseline Study results? If so, could certain biomarkers cause them to be excluded? Could biomarkers be used against people in other ways, such as a means of determining rights to procreate, or to run for public office? Such scenarios are impossible to predict, but the initiation of this new project just might begin the debate long before the project has created the baseline it's seeking.

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