

Uber monitoring drivers in US in attempt to flag dangerous driving***The Guardian* Danny Yadron and Nelly Bowles Jan 26 2016**

Uber quietly began monitoring the movements of some of its drivers in an experimental Texas-based pilot that is attempting to flag up dangerous driving.

Abrupt movements in a smartphone's accelerometer, a movement sensor built into most smartphones, can show when a driver accelerates and brakes too quickly consistent with driving too close to the car in front, or "tailgating".

Uber did not explicitly tell drivers that their movements are being tracked, but the company says it is informing users only when it needs to access the data after a company complaint. Selected drivers in Houston have been monitored for the trial since it started in late 2015.

Uber told the Guardian it is running or is planning several experiments designed to gain more influence over the behaviour of drivers and passengers in its vehicles, which are owned and operated by freelance contractors. Taken together, these efforts could amount to a subtle form of quality control. The company says it is considering sending dashboard phone mounts to drivers accused of texting while driving, and installed passenger-facing mirrors in the backseats of operators in Seattle based on evidence it causes riders to "selfmoderate" their behavior. It has also put a children's sound toy called a Bop It in the back of cars across Charlotte, North Carolina, to dissuade intoxicated passengers from distracting drivers.

The Uber app offers rides on demand using a network of unregulated drivers. It has spread to 300 cities globally and is one of Silicon Valley's most powerful firms, with backers including investment firms Google Ventures, Greylock and Benchmark. Uber's app has been downloaded millions of times and it claims to have served up more than 1bn rides.

Founded in 2009, the company has become the platonic ideal of a successful tech startup and has replaced the taxi cab for many consumers. its last-known private valuation of \$62.5bn is more than the market capitalization of both Ford and General Motors.

But for all its success, one major stress point for the company has been its reliance on human drivers because, unlike computers, they are unpredictable and hard to monitor.

The company seeks to get around this problem with its autonomous vehicle lab in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, staffed by former roboticists for Carnegie Mellon University. At an industry conference in October, Uber's chief executive, Travis Kalanick, said it could be "five, 10, even 15 years" before there are autonomous vehicles that are completely safe.

While monitoring drivers more closely could boost safety for riders, interviews with current and former Uber drivers suggested the program could be a mixed blessing for the operators of Uber's fleet.

If a consumer unfairly complains that a driver was speeding when he wasn't, data from the tracking programme could exonerate the driver. On the flip side, there's nothing to stop Uber from proactively looking at the data to identify speeders and tailgaters. The company says people who consistently drive unsafely shouldn't be driving.

Uber faces another balancing act if it wishes to monitor driver behavior proactively. Many drivers have joined a class-action lawsuit filed in San Francisco in an effort to be recognized as full employees entitled to benefits, rather than independent contractors. The case, which goes to trial in June, revolves around the question of how much control Uber has over drivers' work.