

As of May 2018, the genealogically oriented DNA testing company Family Tree DNA imposed a set of crippling restrictions on the 10,000+ surname projects organized under its auspices, in response to the European Union's adoption of GDPR, a set of regulations imposed on all citizens of EU members states in the name of the will o'the wisp of internet privacy.

Over many years, I and many hundreds, if not thousands, of activist volunteer FTDNA project administrators have invested countless man-hours building up genealogically useful surname (and [patrilineage](#)) projects on the foundation of their members' ySTR DNA (yDNA) tests. Now all that has been swept away by FTDNA's typically ham-handed implementation of their misguided interpretation of these EU regulations, which at most apply to only a small fraction of their customers. Even if FTDNA's new rules were justified, it would have been better for them to cast adrift their European customers, who presumably find nothing wrong with bureaucratic intrusions into their lives, in violation of their inborn natural rights.

These regulations aren't just intrusive, they are also futile.

There is no privacy on the internet.

This is in part a consequence of the inherently insecure operating system and internet infrastructure software purveyed by tech behemoths like Microsoft, including especially the creators of browsers and email programs, and in part due to the general carelessness and incompetence of the large organizational custodians of internet data, including the credit bureaus, and such august and powerful government agencies as the Defense Department, the IRS, the Social Security Administration, etc.

The internet was never planned or designed: it just grew up as a hodge-podge full of exploitable security holes, and none of the corporate or governmental organizations who might have exercised their coercive and economic power at the right points to take things in hand and create security standards for everyone to embrace were up to the task, probably because the mediocrities running these organizations were too busy using their power to coin the easy money that derived from the rampant and chaotic burgeoning of the net.

Since the late 1990s, when the internet began to be used by powerful and deep pockets organizations, it has been subject to worldwide hacking and exploitation by malign individuals, commercial companies, and government agencies. As it stands, anyone who uses the internet needs to assume that whatever interactions they have with it, whatever they write in their emails, or publish in any form, no matter what guarantees of security or privacy are made, is all accessible to determined searchers, and in fact that it has pretty much all already been captured in many different data bases, where it can accessed by anyone for a price, or with the right government connections. There are almost daily stories of egregious incidents of hacking or exploitation, facilitated by the irresponsibility and carelessness even of our major financial institutions and otherwise powerful government agencies. For example, I write this just having read [this story](#) on the careless exposure of extensive personal, marketing type data, of virtually all Americans.

The EU's GDPR regulations cannot begin to plug the holes which are inherent in both the software and in the way everyone does their daily business on the net; all these regs do is make it easier for the bureaucrats to prosecute some of the more egregious exploiters after the fact, while perpetuating careless and irresponsible access to the net due to a false sense of security.

FTDNA's ill-thought out interpretation of the GDPR guidelines has done nothing but gummed up the works for its customers, in return for illusory, and for most, unwanted privacy protections.

According to FTDNA's new rules, administrators of FTDNA's surname project are now forbidden to publish members' raw DNA results in association with their identities and contact information even if these members have granted their permission to display such information—which defeats the whole purpose of such projects, and for that matter negates most of the potential genealogical value of DNA testing in the first place.

Of course, most of FTDNA's surname projects are moribund affairs anyway: people join them when they order their tests, and then what? Nothing much happens. The one thing that does come out of testing is the matches FTDNA reports to you once your haplotype has been processed. You then try to contact those matches using the email address that FTDNA feeds you, but as often as not there is no response, for a variety of reasons.

The main reason, I believe, is simply that most matches will have tested years ago and attempted to contact their own matches at that time, probably with lackluster results. They then languished inactive, typically for many years, even as members of surname projects, most of which do little or nothing for their members.

I also expect that for the many cases in yDNA testing where the genealogist customer (the person who actually orders and pays for the test) isn't the person tested, but the two initially share the same email address—or the address provided is that of the test surrogate, not the genealogist—but then if the genealogist moves away, dies, or just acquires a new email address or ceases serving the old joint one, the inquiries from newly tested FTDNA matches end up going to the uninterested test surrogate, not the genealogist who sponsored the test.

Given these circumstances, it should hardly be surprising if many people in the databases of FTDNA or other companies fail to respond to inquiries from their reported matches—or even bother to update their email addresses at FTDNA if these change or lapse.

In effect, the only genealogically meaningful service that FTDNA itself performs for its yDNA customers is its match reports, and if enough of these don't pan out due to non-responsiveness, the new customer in his turn becomes part of the non-responsive problem, not part of the ongoing genealogical solution.

Independent, well-developed surname and patrilineage projects are crucial to the realization of value from yDNA testing

Up until now, a small minority of FTDNA's 10,000+ surname projects are fortunate enough to have had activist administrators who have picked up the slack left by FTDNA and performed valuable unpaid services for the members that have benefitted them genealogically.

Open (public) surname projects that are organized as a set of [genealogical patrilineage](#) projects are essential to reaping the benefits of yDNA testing. Such projects seek to bring together active genealogists whose yDNA test results show that they belong to the same patrilineage, for the purpose of collaboration and sharing of both their test results, and more importantly their genealogical work.

Most administrators, I believe, at least attempt to group their members' haplotypes in patrilineage sets on the haplotype chart—essentially collecting together all the cross-matched pairs of haplotypes that FTDNA consider's at least "possibly related" to each other. But this patrilineage grouping can't be adequately done without at least considering the genealogical specifics as well as the specific yDNA results of each project member (atDNA matches, where available, may also be of some adjunct use in patrilineage grouping).

FTDNA's matching algorithm has always been too restrictive, because it factors in only the [genetic distance](#) between pairs of haplotypes and fails to consider how the odds of a distant patrilineal match greatly improve if an outlier whom FTDNA has rejected as "unrelated" (and thus not reported as a match) has the same surname and/or converging genealogical narratives with other yDNA customers whose haplotypes his still closely resembles.

However, even if the administrators of the typical surname project have grouped the members of their projects correctly by patrilineage on the FTDNA haplotype charts, many yDNA customers don't even bother to fill in the minimalist 50-character field that FTDNA displays next to the haplotype on these charts that identifies the testee's "earliest ...direct paternal" ancestor. Yet this field

is the sum total of the facilities FTDNA provides for characterizing a yDNA tester's patrilineal ancestry in a useful, because grouped and public context.

Only a minority of yDNA testing customers fill out this earliest patrilineal ancestor field meaningfully, or even at all—mostly because FTDNA provides no guidance as to what the field's purpose is—where it's displayed or what, exactly, it should contain. With severe and judicious abbreviation this field, if filled in by all the members of a grouped patrilineage, could at least provide some idea of collective origins and ramifications of the patrilineage. For example, my own personal earliest patrilineal ancestor field reads: “Joseph Robb(say1735 AberdeenSCO-1812 WashngtnCoPA)”. As it is, without such text, the FTDNA haplotype chart comprises nothing but rows of meaningless marker values.

FTDNA surname project administrators can thus at least impute a bit of genealogical meaning to the default FTDNA surname project haplotype chart by accurate and judicious patrilineage grouping, and by ensuring that every project member at least fills in the FTDNA 50-character “earliest... direct paternal [patrilineal] ancestor” field in an informative way, but the new FTDNA project rules and the new customer participation defaults complicate even this modest encouragement of sharing among the members, and since administrators are now forbidden by those rules from associating member identities with either their email addresses or their yDNA results, filling out the haplotype chart with 50-characters of genealogical information for each project member is also the most that they are now allowed to do.

If this were all that could be achieved by yDNA testing, I would never have tested myself, let alone become a project administrator, nor would I recommend that anyone else bother testing either.

Under the new rules, haplotype matching has become even more problematic because now whether a match is reported depends upon the way new customers have set an array of new complicated, poorly named, and generally unexplained privacy options. Nor can surname project administrators any longer help out these new members, without going through a big rigamarole with them first, explaining to them how to log it to their personal pages and negate the useless privacy parameters that are crippling the matching and sharing facilities which are the only reason for testing in the first place. The new defaults also block many administrators from being able to engage in actions to help existing surname project members pursue their genealogical objectives.

The irony is that despite these Draconian restrictions that FTDNA has imposed unilaterally and without notice on all of their existing project administrators (wiping out at a stroke all of the project content of thousands of surname project pages set up and hosted at the third party website World Families Network), the DNA haplotypes that derive from ySTR DNA testing are completely innocuous and virtually meaningless outside of the genealogical contexts created by these projects.

In the first place, the ySTR areas of the runty Y-chromosome that are tested to create the 37-, 67-, or 111-marker haplotypes have no known genetic function, and consequently no meaning except for their utility in identifying the [\(genealogical\) patrilineage](#) of each tested male.

Beyond this, over the dozen or so years that I've been actively administering yDNA projects, the only other supposed privacy issue I've heard raised in connection with yDNA testing is a couple of reports of overzealous but incompetent law enforcement officials supposedly mining yDNA databases for matches to the DNA of criminal suspects or fugitives, and the subsequent harassment of innocent members of the same extended family.

But not only would even a perfect 111-marker match between a criminal and a yDNA tested member of a genealogical project not be admissible in court as proof of any sort of particular relationship, the fact is that two males with identical 111-marker haplotypes might just as well be 8th cousins as brothers, or father and son, or linked by any other sort of close relationship. Thus, for example, anyone with pre-1800 New England ancestry, typically has many hundreds of New England

ancestors who came over in the 1600s, and a typical 17th century NE immigrant who founded a family, typically has many hundreds, if not thousands, of living descendants who if tested might come up as matches to any particular individual whose yDNA one had in hand.

If it were otherwise, if the FTDNA 37-marker yDNA test could determine the exact relationship between two members of a genealogical patrilineage, we could just run tests of living descendants of each lineage and all our genealogical problems and conundrums would be resolved.

The one way that yDNA testing might prove disturbing or embarrassing to those tested would be in cases where they indicate that an NPE (Non-Paternity Event) occurred somewhere up the ancestral chain, but this is just as much a hazard of genealogical research in general, and I don't suppose the EU bureaucrats, and their counterparts in the US, are yet prepared to propose regulating or banning genealogically research in general. However, at the rate freedom is dissolving under increasingly regressive progressive governments, that may be a project for next year.

FTDNA's autosomal (Family Finder) and other DNA tests

The most popular DNA tests these days are the autosomal DNA (atDNA) tests, like FTDNA's Family Finder test—probably because they are the cheapest and therefore have the greatest appeal to potential customers who are quite willing to copy their friends and spend some money on DNA testing without having much idea of the severe limitations of any benefits they might derive from doing so.

Up to this point all of my remarks have concerned FTDNA's ySTR DNA test and the surname (or better patrilineage) projects that are based on these yDNA tests, because in my opinion none of these other tests are of much benefit to serious genealogists. Yes, atDNA tests are great for turning up long-lost cousins, or filling out the recent leaves of the family tree, but most serious genealogists have long since pushed their lineage back to the 3rd cousin level and beyond, at which point the potential and significance for atDNA matching rapidly become problematic.

While my remarks above about the illusory nature of internet privacy apply as well to these other tests and the identities of the testers, both atDNA and mtDNA (mitochondrial DNA) haplotypes do have some potential to reveal personal genetic information that while scarcely meaningful now, might become so at some point in the future. Also, atDNA databases, unlike yDNA databases, can be practically useful in tracking down people who are hard to find (perhaps because they don't want to be found), and if this ability was abused by public authorities could conceivably become a nuisance for innocent atDNA-tested close relatives of criminal suspects or fugitives from justice.

These atDNA tests extensively sample the whole of the genome, covering many hundreds of thousands of marker sites (compared to the few dozen ySTR sites sampled by yDNA tests), and what atDNA tests (but not yDNA) tests are good at, is categorizing the near exact relationship between two closely related people—say a criminal suspect and his innocent brother, father, or first cousin.

In fact, there have recently been a couple of well-publicized cases of law enforcement types mining atDNA databases (preferably the third party GEDMATCH, which doesn't do any testing itself), one of which resulted in the finding of the "Golden State" killer. I would point out, though, that even in such cases there need be no undue or additional harassment of innocent relatives, whether close or not so close, because the final steps in the search require access to the some of the same internet-based databases that are now used for finding ordinary people, as well as to special purpose, theoretically closed (but still hackable) criminal databases. While many (including myself) are extremely wary of ceding any more authority or capability to government agents, others might consider this additional tool for tracking down malefactors on balance a good thing, and in any case certainly not a reason to be deterred from testing one's own atDNA.

In sum, the horse of internet privacy is already out of the barn and long gone, never to return, and these pointless EU regulations, which mislead gullible citizens by pretending that their personal information can be protected, benefit only bureaucrats, would-be regulators, and predatory lawyers with greedy clients who will be encouraged by these new rules to sue when their clients' spurious privacy is violated.

Family Tree DNA's gratuitous adoption of these EU regulations, and more particularly their extravagant interpretation of them and typically ham-handed rollout of the supposed "electronic contracts" that they have forced existing project administrators to "sign" in order to carry on the volunteer activities that many feel at least a moral (if not a contractual) obligation to continue, has crippled the one facet of FTDNA's business that promises more than casual and transient entertainment value: the possibility of organizing activist genealogists whose ySTR DNA test results fall into the same patrilineage classification, for the purposes of collaborative public research and sharing of their genealogical knowledge and expertise to further knowledge of their shared ancestry.

At least such projects can no longer be affiliated with FTDNA, or therefore encouraged by them, and I expect that many of the hundreds, if not thousands, of FTDNA's existing surname projects that have, under the tutelage of activist administrators been made into more than crypts for sloughed-off yDNA haplotypes, will now fold up and die, and this major feeder of FTDNA's testing business will wither along with them.