Bytes of Life: For Every Move, Mood and Bodily Function, There's a Web Site to Help You Keep Track
By Monica Hesse  Washington Post Staff Writer  Tuesday, September 9, 2008

When San Francisco couple Brynn Evans and Chris Messina heard of a new Web site called BedPost, they registered an account before the site was even out of beta. BedPost was created to map users' sex lives online -- everything from partner to duration of the encounter to descriptive words, which could later be viewed as a tag cloud.

Relationships and one-night stands alike, condensed to spare, inflexible data in a way that might make the average user uncomfortable. Or simply baffled.

But for Evans, a grad student studying cognitive science, and Messina, a Web entrepreneur, the site was just what they needed. After all, they already use project-management site Basecamp to chart the nonsexual parts of their relationship.

They use location tracker BrightKite.com to study where they've been.

They track their driving habits on MyMileMarker.com, their listening habits on Last.fm, and their Web-surfing habits, to the minute, on RescueTime.com.

"Brynn uses a service to track her menstruation," says Messina helpfully. (Two of them, in fact: MyMonthlyCycles.com and Mon.thly.info). Some of these trackings are visible to other people, but mostly the couple monitors the information just for themselves.

Before BedPost, they'd been using an Excel spreadsheet to track each interlude since the beginning of their six-month relationship, though they found the interface limiting. They saw BedPost and thought, "Oh, look, this guy's doing this, too, and he's actually making plots of it. Plotting was cool," says Evans.

Yes, plotting was cool.

The ability to visualize trends over time.

Now they could really start getting somewhere.

Is the careful tracking performed by Messina and Evans just a form of high-tech navel gazing? Or is it the opposite of narcissism -- an insecure belief that people cannot accurately evaluate what's best for them without the aid of a Web site?

Messina and Evans prefer the term "data junkies," spoken with the self-effacing self-awareness that comes from months of meticulous self-study.

Self-trackers like Messina and Evans could spend hours online, charting, analyzing, tracking. Life as a series of pure, distilled data points, up for interpretation.

It's not about tracking what you do, they say. It's about learning who you are.

Keeping Track
Self-disclosure has been redefined online. In Web 2.0, it's led to blogs and Tweets, Facebook and instant messenger, each developed to help users share the inane minutiae of their lives with others.

But another kind of site has evolved -- a type meant not to broadcast your life to others but to chart it for yourself, on password-protected sites accessible only to the user. A life examined to the point that Socrates himself might say, "Guys, that's enough."

Messina and Evans are at the tip of the information iceberg. The Internet brims with sites that track just about every task that you perform on a given day (eating, sleeping, exercising) as well as the things your body does without direction (pumping blood, producing glucose, gaining weight).
Some of the seemingly goofier sites have practical purposes: RescueTime was meant to increase time-management skills among business types, MyMonthlyCycles was developed for women trying to conceive, and Basecamp helps colleagues complete joint projects remotely. But dedicated trackers can repurpose these sites for their own self-study -- or use them as inspiration for their own, more intricate tools.

In San Diego, statistics student David Horn already belongs to BrightKite, Last.fm and Wakoopa.com, which tracks his Internet usage. He's also experimented with Fitday.com to map food intake and calorie expenditure. It was satisfying for a while, but now he wants something bigger -- something simultaneously broader and more nitpicky -- to fill in the gaps that individual sites don't currently track.

Horn is working with his engineer girlfriend, Lisa Brewster, to develop an all-encompassing life tracker, under the working title of "I Did Stuff."

"I'd like to track the people I talk to," says Brewster, "and how inspired I am six hours later. And definitely location history -- where I am, what time -- "

"Correlated with weather history," interjects Horn. "And allergy data, pollen and mold in the air."

Plus, "Web sites I read and their effect," says Brewster. "If I spend a long time reading a blog, like TechCrunch, but I don't get noticeable output from it."

These ideas are the types of heady possibilities that will be discussed by the members of a new group in San Francisco called Quantified Self. Members plan to meet monthly to share with one another the tools and sites they've found helpful on their individual paths to self-digitization. Topics include, according to the group invite: behavior monitoring, location tracking, digitizing body info and non-invasive probes.

"Don't you think it's kind of obvious that if you step on a scale, there should be something that sends the information to your computer?" asks Gary Wolf, a contributing editor at Wired magazine and one of Quantified Self's co-founders. "Isn't it ridiculous to think that blood pressure shouldn't be measured at least once a day, if not several times a day?"

Wolf is a tracker whose particular interest is the secret workings of his own body.

You listen to his questions -- posed energetically and frequently interrupted by excited laughter -- and you think No, Gary, no! Most of us would prefer our scale's number never saw light of day, much less light of database.

At some level, Wolf knows this. He theorizes that the impulse to self-track is one part available technology, one part geeky, data-driven personality. So far, only 10 people have RSVP'd affirmatively to Quantified Self's first meeting, which is scheduled to take place mid-September. "This is," Wolf says, "probably a very small subset of humanity."

There might be a broader audience than Wolf thinks. When Chicago Web designer Heather Rivers first launched menstruation tracker Mon.thly.info, she hadn't planned for the site to be anything more than a simple reminder application: Pack tampons tomorrow! e-mailed to each of the site's 4,000 subscribers the day before their periods were expected to start. She designed a clean, minimalist look for Mon.thly.info. User-friendly, she thought. No fuss.

"But I started getting so many e-mails," says Rivers. Things like, "I want to track exactly the minute my period started." Things about weight, and diet, and feelings. People seemed obsessed with tracking how they felt, Rivers says. "I'd get messages saying, 'I really want to be able to post a note saying I feel crappy right now.'"

"I wonder if it's the same people who take a picture of everything they eat and post it online," she muses. She finds the impulse perplexing. But to please her subscribers, she's begun an overhaul of Mon.thly.info. The new version will have bells and whistles and notes and mirrors, all the better to see yourself with.

**Don't Dismiss the Data**

Why?
For what possible reason would otherwise sane people dedicate brainpower and man-hours to charting experiences at which they themselves were already present?

And not meaningful things, either. Not things like, "Proposed to future wife at 7:02 p.m., Aug. 15, 2006," but things like, "Ate three green beans at 7:02 p.m., Aug. 15, 2006." And not just occasionally, but lots of times every single day, gobs and gobs of binary data representing everything from the last time you slept past 10 a.m. to the song you were listening to at noon last Oct. 12.

It's similar to a fashionable new trend called lifeblogging, an art form/obsession wherein bloggers go to extreme means to record infinitesimal events throughout the course of a day. Microsoft engineer Gordon Bell famously (at least in very small circles) wears a SenseCam around his neck, which automatically snaps a photograph every 60 seconds of wherever Bell happens to be and whatever he happens to be doing.

But lifeblogging seems mostly like a byproduct of an always-on society. If you do something but fail to record it online, did it really happen?

Self-tracking, on the other hand, is partly about the recording, but also as much about the analysis that goes on after the recording.

The apparent meaninglessness of data recorded over time is actually what makes it profound.

The problem with diaries and blogs, trackers say, is that people use them to record the events they think are meaningful. What they forget is that meaningful events are often a result of months of insignificance, a cause and effect not readily visible to the human eye but easily detected with the help of a computer program.

"Things that happen over time can lead up to bigger events," says Horn. "They may seem small by themselves, but looking at them as a whole I can see how they lead to a bigger theme or idea."

"I was always a terrible self-journaler," says Messina. "Every once in a while I'd write in a journal, but it was always a major, momentous event. 'Got to college.' 'Broke up with girlfriend.' You lose a lot of the nuance that caused that situation to come about."

Tracking can "zoom out over my entire life," he says. It could, for example, help him better understand the aforementioned breakup. "When you've self-documented the course of an entire relationship, trivia that doesn't seem like much could, over time," help him understand exactly what went wrong, and when.

Maybe, to extrapolate on Messina's idea, your weekly date night had been Friday. And maybe you were always in a tetchy mood on Fridays because you'd just come from chem lab, which you hated. Maybe the whole relationship could have been saved by switching date night to Sunday, after your endorphin-boosting yoga class. Maybe you just didn't realize the pattern, because you weren't tracking it. All the answers could be right there, in your life data.

When talking about tracking, Messina speaks thoughtfully and precisely, choosing words carefully and revising his ideas when his original sentence doesn't seem clear enough.

He met Evans when he participated in a research study she was conducting as part of her course work. She was immediately drawn to the insight he showed into his own behavior.

But insight doesn't necessarily translate to emotional intelligence, and people who graph their lives online don't put much weight in intuition and fuzzy feelings.

"For a certain type of person," says Wolf, the Quantified Self founder, "data is the most important thing you can trust. Certain people think a feeling of inner certainty is misleading."

Wolf says he's one of them; Messina can identify with the sentiment.
"I want to understand the changes that are actually happening [in my life], not just my perceptions of them."

Has it really been a month since you last had sex, or does it just feel like that? Did you really floss five times last week, or was it more like twice? Now that you realize that, are you a little less angry at your dentist for that painful last appointment?

Computers don't lie.

People lie.

This part's actually good science:

"We all have the tendency to see our behaviors in a little bit of a halo," says Jayne Gackenbach, who researches the psychology of the Internet at Grant MacEwan College in Alberta, Canada. It's why dieters underestimate their food intake, why smokers say they go through fewer cigarettes than they do. "If people can get at some objective criteria, it would be wonderfully informative." That's the brilliance, she says, of new technology.

But it's one thing to use a computer as a tool for behavioral therapy, and another to treat a computer as a life-guiding oracle, ego to our id, telling us how we feel and what we need. Or perhaps, treating the computer as a person -- while we become the machines, subject to our tracking Web sites' every direction.

Michelle McGillivray, a mom in Oregon, signed up for MyMonthlyCycles.com when she was trying to conceive her first child. She has a toddler now, but McGillivray still uses the site, relying on how it says she should be feeling (based on her previous data input) to inform her behavior. If one month she was particularly irritable at a certain point in her cycle, she'll make sure to keep to herself at that point during the next month. She'll even wear the clothes she noticed made her feel best the last time around.

Most of the trackers interviewed for this article haven't been tracking long enough, in their opinions, to adequately gauge how it's affecting their behaviors. (Messina has only been on some sites for a few months). But the possibilities are endless.

For example: Analysis of your stress levels, cross-referenced with other things, could tell you not only that you needed a vacation, but also when and where to go, says Messina.

Brewster and Horn see untapped potential for optimizing productivity and life experiences. If you could learn which foods, people, activities, sleep patterns, driving routes and television shows left you the most content, think of how much better your life would be.

Complicated decisions, diluted to data.

It's a happy thought.

Still, a reporter has one niggling question about this improved world, in which there is no wasted time or effort, in which daily activities like reading TechCrunch would be chopped from the schedule if they did not produce enough "noticeable output."

Is a smile a noticeable output? the reporter wants to know. What if productivity decreased in the hours following, but the time spent on the Web site produced 3.2 chuckles and 2.4 interesting pieces of information learned?

Brewster pauses for a few seconds before looking to her boyfriend, Horn, for assistance.

"David," she says finally, "this is a bigger algorithm."