

# Lifelogging: A digital diary

Interview  
with **Stefan Selke**

Equipped with smartphones and fitness trackers, nowadays people count their steps, record their sleep patterns and rate their performance – all in the name of self-improvement and better self-awareness. Sociologist Stefan Selke claims that the lifelogging trend is actually shifting challenges from society to the individual. In this interview he explains why this could be a problem, but how self-tracking could still be beneficial nevertheless.

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People nowadays are inseparable from their smartphones and tracking devices. We use them day and night to count calories, record activities and measure our well-being. You describe this phenomenon as “lifelogging”. What do you think about this trend?

Lifelogging is basically recording what happens in your life. In my work I differentiate between four types: health monitoring, where people or sensors record their vital signs in order to prevent illnesses or treat them more effectively; human tracking, which uses geodata to record the spatial presence or absence of people; digital memory which is when people delegate or digitally enhance their own memory by recording data so it's not lost; and surveillance/sousveillance, which is when citizens are monitored by official authorities or willingly hand over data they've generated themselves.

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Of course, people recording their lives is not a new phenomenon. In an analogue, pre-digital age, people kept diaries, for example, to record events and remember their experiences. How has digitalisation changed things?

The content of an analog diary remains the same twenty years later. It represents a snapshot of life and can't be incorporated into a new context on an automated basis. With digitalisation, the practice of recording information is more dynamic. In contrast to a traditional diary, digital logging gives users concrete feedback - for example in the form of data analysis, behavioural guidelines or a score. Thanks to new technology, the digital information generated by lifelogging can be linked in any number of ways. This mainly takes the form of linking health data or information on leisure activities within an employment context. As soon as data is linked with access to resources or opportunities, it starts having a selective or discriminatory function. In the United States, students at the private Oral Roberts University in Oklahoma have to collect data via fitness trackers and send it regularly to the rector's office. This data makes up 20 percent of their overall grade. This method of social disciplining is different from keeping a training diary, for example.

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It appears that self-tracking plays a much bigger role in our lives today. In most cases, writing a diary takes just a few minutes a day, while smartphones track our activities constantly. What do you think about that?

We enter into a relationship with these gadgets and they penetrate deep into our lives. At first glance, they seem to relieve the pressure on us by delivering insights and information on our behaviour. However, if you take a closer look, they also make us dependent and remove our ability to judge for ourselves. We measure our behaviour or how our bodies are functioning, and this data influences us in turn. For example, we take the

stairs instead of the lift because we haven't reached the number of steps specified by the device. Self-tracking devices have the character of media: it's not us doing something with them, but them doing something to us. It's tempting to see everything as a tool, but that's an illusion we shouldn't fall victim to. Lifelogging gadgets aren't tools that we use to transform the world around us. They're media that construct the world and change how we see people and the way we live together.

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In other words we're voluntarily submitting to a form of dependency.  
What do people hope to gain from constant self-tracking?

Life is complicated and often full of unpredictable twists and turns. As a result of economic competition and the ever-increasing demands being placed on us as individuals, more and more people are suffering from exhaustion. People strive to alleviate these feelings of exhaustion by using self-tracking as a means of quantifying the complexity and unpredictability of the world and reducing it to their own body. The data they receive on their behaviour gives them a feeling of security and control. People use self-tracking to alleviate their anxiety and in an attempt to avoid making mistakes.

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On the face of it, living a life freer of anxiety sounds like a positive development, but what are the possible long-term risks of using self-tracking devices?

First, universal ethical values such as human dignity, privacy, solidarity and autonomy are coming under increasing pressure in the digital age. There are two possible scenarios: Either values will be negotiated on a case-by-case basis in the relevant market, or an "ethics free zone" will be established in which basic ethical values will be sacrificed in return for greater efficiency.

Second, quantifying people makes it possible to reduce them to a single number, which is a very dangerous thing to do. In specific areas such as performance appraisal at work or health monitoring, if people are reduced to a number or a score (for example a health score) it's easier to treat them as objects instead of individuals. On a societal level that amounts to an "efficient colony" where people are rewarded or punished on the basis of a single figure. Take for example the citation index in science, the loss of spark relationship index you can work out using an app, or the social credit score China plans to introduce, the ultimate dystopian example of rating people in terms of an index.

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But doesn't my smartphone help me live more healthily?

My phone tells me to get more exercise and eat more fruit and vegetables, so I do.

Ultimately, doesn't society as a whole benefit from this?

No, it only seems that way. It's an illusion. Lifelogging shifts societal problems to the individual. We act as if improving ourselves is the answer to many of the challenges facing society today. As a result, we lose sight of the actual causes of the problems. While companies provide yoga rooms for their employees and equip staff with tracking devices to keep them fit and healthy, employment conditions remain poor, with shift work and low pay still the order of the day for many people. It's important to remember that people get sick because of the conditions they have to operate in, not just because they're not acting rationally. We first have to agree on the goal of social progress before we demand that individuals improve themselves.

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You say that the social value of solidarity is coming under increasing pressure.

What's the connection between a pedometer and social cohesion?

Solidarity assumes that individuals are in control of their own lives. Devices that make decisions for us or suggest how to act rationally or sensibly cause us to lose part of the freedom of making our own judgements. This undermines the foundation of solidarity.

However, for solidarity to flourish we also need to live without fear. People in today's society are exhausted and driven by fear. In this environment a system based on solidarity is perceived as prohibitive and expensive. In a society in which fear and competition become a means of controlling individual action (the way people live their lives) and collective action (political activity), there is increasing intolerance of anyone who is different. As costs rise and resources dwindle, the likelihood that responsibility will be shifted to individuals increases. For healthcare this means that self-tracking data will become the barometer for an individualised future, e.g. with new pay as you live tariff models for the health insurance industry. Inclusive social solidarity will evolve into nano-collectives in which solidarity is reduced to a transaction involving doing something and getting something in return. There are exceptions where autonomy and empowerment increase, for example when people with rare diseases use data to join together to form new communities and collective bodies allowing them to assert their interests vis-à-vis established elites such as doctors or the pharmaceutical industry.

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Which areas will be hardest hit as solidarity weakens?

The health industry provides one specific example of how collective solidarity could be put under pressure by digital self-tracking: you don't smoke, you eat healthily, you do sport and you have the data to prove it. And you're rewarded with lower health insurance premiums. As a result, however, you're less willing to bear the cost of the unhealthy lifestyle of others and the rising healthcare costs this results in. In this case, although lifelogging leads to solidarity within nano-collectives with a similar lifestyle, the cross-societal, solidarity-based risk community is lost.

What's more, this model ignores the unpredictability of life and the fundamental irrationality of human beings. Sooner or later, we all make irrational decisions that can lead to a whole range of unforeseen developments. Collective systems based on solidarity are able to absorb the unintended consequences of such decisions. However, if this cross-societal system of solidarity is destroyed, individuals will be left to face the consequences alone.

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What are the implications of your observations in terms of the way we use digital self-tracking applications in our everyday lives? What do we still have to learn about how we use these devices?

We need a better understanding of how these technologies work and an awareness of the processes that run in the background. Information can be stored unused in a database for a long time and suddenly be used against a person ten years later. Once we've developed an understanding of these kinds of situations, we will need to draw up new regulations. We need clear rules regarding the use of personal data in industry. A voluntary commitment by individual organisations isn't enough. It's not about condemning the technologies themselves, but about preventing uncontrolled misuse of data. For example, we need to make programmers aware that there are always people behind the data.

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How could we be collecting and using data so that society benefits?

One approach is to establish data trustee systems organised on a cooperative basis in research. These are transparent and socially-oriented and could help remodel the concept of solidarity. For example, individuals divulge some personal data and could benefit ten or 20 years later from the research results.

If we focus more closely on the societal implications of using digital applications, we can minimise specific risks early on and leverage the opportunities for society.

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This interview was conducted by Barbara Schnyder and Stefan Pabst from the W.I.R.E. think tank. The article was written in 2018 on behalf of the Sanitas health insurance foundation.



Professor Stefan Selke is professor of sociology and social change and research professor of transformative and public science at Furtwangen University.

He gained a degree in aerospace technology before completing a PhD in sociology.

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