

TECH

Adventures in Self-Surveillance: Fitbit, Tracking My Movement and Sleep

Kashmir Hill Former Staff*Welcome to The Not-So Private Parts where technology & privacy collide*

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In these privacy-challenged days, there's lots of ways for you to be tracked. Rather than worrying your pretty little, much-observed head about that, why not take advantage of it?

Self-tracking for self-improvement is certainly not a new idea. See founding father Ben Franklin's autobiography, via [Thinker's Journal](#):





Fitbit cofounder, James Park, with one of the devices in hand

I made a little book, in which I allotted a page for each of the virtues. I rul'd each page with red ink, so as to have seven columns, one for each day of the week, marking each column with a letter for the day. I cross'd these columns with thirteen red lines, marking the beginning of each line with the first letter of one of the virtues, on which line, and in its proper column, I might mark, by a little black spot, every fault I found upon examination to have been committed respecting that virtue upon that day.

Yikes, manual spreadsheet! Daily tracking is much easier to do these days. Thank you, modern technology.

One contemporary collection of folks obsessed with self-tracking call their group [The Quantified Self](#). Founded by Wired editors Kevin Kelly and Gary Wolf in 2008, the group offers a handy guide to tech tools for use in obsessive self-tracking [here](#).

I'm currently giving a few of these navel-gazing tools a peek at my own navel. First up: the Fitbit -- a 'lil thumb-sized device supplied by the company at my request that I've been wearing for over a month that tracks my daily activity -- footsteps, calories burned, and even the restlessness of my sleep. (Checking the results in the morning and being told that I woke up at 3 a.m., despite no memory of it, is very *Paranormal Activity*-esque.) One of its co-

creators, James Park, was inspired to create the device after playing the Nintendo Wii-fit, and wanting to take that experience out of his living room. Could the Fitbit make you a bit fitter?

You wear the device in a pocket, on a beltloop, or if you're a woman, hooked on the center of your bra. The online dashboard to which the device is linked allows users to enter the foods they eat to keep track of calories consumed each day, as well as enter in any special activities that up metabolism in a way that might not be reflected in the Fitbit's accelerometer -- along with duration and intensity. For example, I regularly trek up to the Forbes gym to do the elliptical at medium speed and medium resistance. Other activities include running, biking, swimming or "sexual activity" (ranging from "passive, light effort" to "active and vigorous" -- sorry nymphos, even at its most "difficult," it doesn't burn nearly as many calories as the elliptical).

It may strike you as Weight Watcher-y, and there is that aspect to it, but there's something fun about having an accurate measure of how active I am every day. I'm a carless New Yorker who walks to work and uses public transportation. Yet after wearing the device for a month, like creator James Park, I was surprised and disappointed to find out just how sedentary I am on a daily basis:





A day on Fitbit (Friday, February 4)

The company has been selling to customers directly for a little over a year online and at retail locations like Best Buy and 24-Hour Fitness, says Fitbit co-founder James Park, 34. This is Park's third company. He started a P2P software company in the late 90s, and then a photo-sharing site that he sold to CNet in 2005. This is his first company that involves a physical object. The company's initial round of \$2 million in angel funding came from True Ventures in 2008.





"Most software guys are afraid of hardware," says Park, whose background is in computer science. He describes the process of designing and locating the part needed for the tiny Fitbit as "fairly painful." The fitbit has a three-dimensional accelerometer (to track your movement), a low power radio (to upload its data wirelessly to your computer through a USB base station), and a light display (to check your steps traveled and calories burned in a day, as well as to let the Fitbit know when you're going to sleep). The device costs \$99. An online account for monitoring your daily activity and logging your food comes free, but you have to pay an ongoing subscription fee for premium analysis of your data.

He said that most folks using the Fitbit now are doing it for health and fitness reasons, as opposed to the Quantified Selfers who are obsessed with data collection in all possible ways. "It's good to have a set of hardcore users, though, (the Quantified Self folks). They become the evangelists -- the passionate people stretch the boundary of what's possible," says Park.

But the Fitbit tries to keep things simple for the average user. "If

you overload people with too much data, it's overwhelming," says Park. "We wanted to make this very accessible."

Even the non-hardcore users tend to become obsessive, though. Park says most users check their activity manager on the website seven times a day.

Fitbit has worked with a handful of companies to incorporate the device into their corporate wellness programs. Semiconductor computer chip company Tokyo Electron America, based in Austin, Texas, is one of them. The company has had a corporate wellness program since 2006. In October 2010, it supplied its 1100 employees with Fitbits.

The company has an annual voluntary 12-week challenge in the fall to encourage employees to be active and not pack on the holiday pounds, with prizes for those who stay trimmest. The goal is not to gain more than two pounds. This year, for the first time ever, participants collectively lost 214 pounds. Director Vickie Lee said most employees said it was due to monitoring their activity and calories on the Fitbit.

I asked whether the company has access to the employees' Fitbit data -- that would seem a bit invasive... though that line's already been crossed when any company invites its employees to get on a scale. (Forbes does this too, by the way, as part of its holiday-time Forbes Fitness Challenge.) Lee said the company doesn't have access to employees' Fitbit data and doesn't monitor their physical activities.

Could Fitbits help any company gets its employees into shape? Well, Lee does note that her company's employees are mainly engineers (and 87% male). "The Fitbit speaks to engineers' mindset," says Lee. "They're data-driven."



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