Blogs of our lives
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Every breath you take: improved storage capacity means you don't have to ration what you record.

Christian Lindholm's heavy accent greets me over a clear telephone line from Helsinki, Finland. As one of Nokia's key creative minds he has spent the past 10 years designing mobile phones and building user-friendly interfaces.

The 38-year-old inventor's latest project is the Nokia Lifeblog <http://www.nokia.com/lifeblog>, software that is loaded on a camera phone and PC to create a multimedia diary.

The program, which costs €30 ($50), collects text messages, picture messages and video clips you send and receive on your handset and organises them into a chronological form that's easy to view.

"It is automatic," Lindholm says. "If you have the application on the phone you don't need to do anything to create a Lifeblog or a multimedia diary. It just does it for you."

With Lifeblog, when you connect your handset to a PC your day's (or week's) information is transferred across to make room for more information on your phone. And, once it's on the desktop, you can edit and search through your life record.

While the program can be used to create an online weblog (or blog), Lindholm says it is mainly designed to help people manage a personal diary they can share with friends and family.

"I have a three-year-old and a two-month-old - they totally define my life and totally dominate my life. But if you look at my [professional] blog called Moving Experiences <http://www.christianlindholm.com/> there are only about five photos of my children there. If I would count them in my Lifeblog there would be close to 2000. Because I just don't feel comfortable [sharing them online]."

Nokia is one of the first companies to market a product that is tapping into an emerging trend that could potentially change the way we record, and ultimately remember, our lives. The new buzzword is life caching, a term that describes the information we capture about our lives using the various digital devices we are increasingly attached to.

Once organised, our life cache can be shared with friends or kept as a personal diary. From the snaps we take with digital cameras, to the calendar dates we set on our PDAs, to the video we shoot on camcorders, to the email we store in Outlook on our computer - the digital information we collect about our lives each week is growing exponentially and the capacity for technology to store it is keeping up. For Lindholm, it's just a matter of deciding whether to share the highlights.
"What makes Lifeblog, in my mind, so interesting is that now you have this diary of your life and some of that material is very worthwhile to share. And you can either share it so that you send individual pictures by email or I can have a separate blog, which is a private blog under a password."

The camera phone is the perfect device to record your life since you carry it everywhere with you, it's always on and it is designed to take snaps easily, Lindholm says. "Another absolutely fundamental shift in photography is that - going from the Kodak era - from being event-based, it became ubiquitous so that you always have a camera at hand. And since it is one-hand operated it is very quick - the time that it takes between seeing something and taking the shot is significantly shorter.

"Really, the social transformation is in the subject of what you record. Because you always have the camera with you and you can quickly get to it, you start to record the little things in life or the real moments. You will be able to really start recording your life [with a lot more detail] and, since you are recording it primarily for yourself rather than to share, then you have the fundamental ingredients for a multimedia diary."

So far Lifeblog can only work on Nokia 6630, 7610 and 6670 imaging handsets.

Since identifying the phenomenon, Trendwatch.com <http://www.trendwatching.com/trends/life_caching.htm> has picked out a string of other examples of how life caching is being embraced. The website points to Samsung's "Show Your World" ad campaign in the United States, which encourages camera phone users to record their daily lives and turn them into movies.

People in Asia, it says, are wearing fashionable MP3 players that carry their entire "digital life files" around their neck, from music to movies to documents to photos to presentations. Another example is Apple's new iPod Photo, which can carry up to 60GB of pictures and songs.

As the storage capacity of gadgets continues to grow, there is less pressure to erase files that belong to our life cache. Even web-based email sites such as Hotmail <http://www.hotmail.com/> and Gmail <http://www.gmail.com/> have increased their storage limits to the point where there is no urgency to delete old messages.

While the multimedia diary will continue to be stored across a number of devices, the real challenge, says the CSIRO's Science Industry manager, Dr Ross Wilkinson, will be how we organise and access it.

"In some sense where it is stored and how it is stored is going to be less important than 'Can we find the stuff'?. It is hard finding things on a messy desk just as it is hard finding things on a messy computer. How do we get support for that?"

Wilkinson points to the likelihood of an artificially intelligent electronic helper that will learn from our digital habits and favourites, decide what to record in our digital cache and then organise the information into our life story.

"Try to imagine, and this is interesting, my personal avatar [a virtual representation of oneself] is going to be some sort of device that is kept on my network that has a fair idea about me and what I like and think is important. It could help me select parts of my life that I would wish to keep in my sort of more active memory, as opposed to just the soup that is everything that I collect."
"And then this device could start stringing things together so that there are some stories. And every time I'd say, 'Oh! I didn't like that bit much', or 'What about this?' it learns from that - so you can imagine a solution, if you like, [where] your avatar is telling you your story and you're sort of conserving or denying it."

The growth of life caching owes a lot to the continued popularity of blogging, where individuals share their thoughts and daily lives in open, web-based journals. It is the blogging mindset of collecting information and being able to present it in an easily consumable format that will help digital diaries mature more quickly.

Blog hubs such as Moblogs <http://moblogs.com.au>, which enables camera-phone users to email their snaps wirelessly to the website where they are displayed for everyone to see, have the ability to turn on a level of security that would enable private digital diaries. Peter Williams, managing director of Red Planet Software, the company behind Moblogs, says it would be easy to switch on password protection so users could simply email and build their own photo blog.

Access could then be given to family and friends. At present, the web service is free and provides an easy way to start creating a digital diary and getting around the current memory limitations of camera phones, Williams says.

"One of the problems with the camera phone is that people snap a lot of photos but they don't do much with them and they find that their memory is full and they delete them," he says.

"So the aim with Moblogs is to get a way where they can take photos, straight away transmit them to somewhere that is safe and secure and get it backed up and maintain a digital diary without having to go back and do other work, like download them and organise them."

As the website is an open, searchable library of images, Williams is aware that privacy may become an issue for those people who are in the photos. "On Moblog if anyone has any issues we take the photos straight down."

People can go online and add comments to the pictures and "it will stay there forever", he says. "For example, I do that with my daughter at the moment. She's just turned one and there's probably 100 photos of her on there at the moment and by the time she has her 21st [birthday] there's going to be many thousands and so we'll just have a nice slide show to show everybody her life."

The CSIRO's Wilkinson thinks that, as with most new technology, enthusiasts will embrace it vigorously at first, but he also says we will all soon be faced with an unusual decision. "It will be really just a question of, 'Well, is this how I wish to remember my life?' or will I prefer to use my internal memory."

**Personal black box**

Microsoft is planning to take life diaries to a new, more detailed level with SenseCam <http://research.microsoft.com/research/hwsystems>. This wearable device is designed to capture up to 2000 images a day on its 128MB memory.

It will also record temperature, light level and movement and will take a picture every time the environment changes or it detects people nearby.
The company likens it to a personal black box that will be able to tell what happened in case of an accident. "All the interesting trivial details of life can be recorded and shared with family and friends," says Lyndsay Williams, who is part of the Microsoft Research team developing SenseCam.

The images can be transferred to a PC using a USB connection but you will also be able to quickly review your life, Williams says.

"On the SenseCam, the images are normally viewed as a 'SenseMovie', that is, the still images are displayed as a movie 100 times faster than recorded. You can review your entire day (or someone else's) in about three minutes."

Williams is convinced people will put aside any privacy fears for the potential life-saving advantages it offers. "For example, recently I had a cycling accident and hit my head. Luckily, I was OK but if I had been found unconscious by the side of the road, any paramedics could have looked at my SenseCam black box recorder, seen what led up to the accident and also noted how hard my head had hit the ground, as the SenseCam records acceleration.

"Also, the SenseCam can be switched off. All the people I know are respectful with taking photos in private environments."