

Forever—Or Not

Nearly anyone today can inscribe his name for eternity on the Web or have it chiseled in brick at his alma mater. Has the 21st century finally delivered immortality for all?

BY ANDREW STARK

WE HAVE A BETTER SHOT AT IMMORTALITY THESE days than we've ever had before—not literal immortality, of course, or the biological immortality that results from perpetuating our genes through procreation, but the lesser immortality that comes from leaving at least some mark for generations to come that says, “I was here, and this is who I was.” For much of human history, only eminent artists or thinkers or public figures could hope to have their names live on in this way. But a canvass of the culture reveals that, in at least two ways, the kind of immortality that once was the preserve of the greats is now being democratized. Or so it is said.

Thanks to the Internet, claims D. Raj Reddy, a professor of computer science and robotics at Carnegie Mellon University, the possibility of “virtual immortality” is now available to everyone. Anyone can post material on the World Wide Web, and because the Web is impervious to the degradation that time inflicts on printed records, whatever it contains has the capacity to exist indefinitely in some form. True, Web sites currently disappear with alarming frequency, and so Professor Reddy might be overstating matters when he says that “we can feel confident” that our Web

postings will become part of the “permanent record of the human race.” But if what he says isn't true of every single Web site at this early moment in the Web's history, it's certainly true that, in principle and for the first time, the Internet offers the technological means whereby anyone can keep his or her work universally accessible indefinitely. That's why bloggers—those who on a regular basis post their autobiographical narratives, political musings, photos, and poetry online—so often express the inchoate hope that the Internet will allow them, as blogger Radley Balko puts it, to leave “their mark on the world” and achieve a kind of immortality (Balko, a 30-year-old “writer, editor, and wonk living in Alexandria, Virginia,” currently gets a respectable 8,000 visits a day on his blogsite, theagitator.com). Blogger Joshua Claybourn, an Indiana University law student whose intheagora.com appears as a link on numerous other Web sites, makes no bones about the matter: “I admit to considering the blog's impact on my immortality.”

In addition to the incipient promise of virtual immortality through the Internet, there's a second phenomenon that promises to bring a formerly restricted type of immortality within reach of us all. In days gone by, individuals whose names lived on after them affixed to buildings—museums, schools, universities, hospitals, and the like—were usually fig-

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The blogosphere, where writers can post their thoughts and stories, is one of the new outlets for people with a yearning to see their names live on.

ures of some note. Now, with the burgeoning need for non-profit organizations to raise private funds, anyone can have his or her name placed on an institutional structure—for a price. This might seem more like the plutocratizing than the democratizing of immortality but for the fact that “naming opportunities” are available to people of all income levels. Those of more modest means can, for lesser sums, have their names placed on a classroom, a bench, or even an individual brick. And they often admit to seeking what Tasha Thomas, a fundraiser at Grant Medical Center in Columbus, Ohio calls “a little bit of the immortality that used to be available just to famous people.” “Call it an answer to the yearning for immor-

tality,” says *The San Francisco Chronicle*. “For a price, universities will carve the name of a generous benefactor in limestone or on an imposing building.” Or a brick.

Are we really living at the dawn of immortality’s democratization? Consider first the idea of immortality in cyberspace. We’re unlikely to confuse any of the other Louis Armstrongs on the Web with the jazz great. But things are different for us ordinary folks. A certain Michael Wood, one of many people to post comments on a site for people with the name “Michael Wood,” complained that “someone else’s [view will be] mistakenly attributed to me.” The Internet allowed Dave Gorman, who calls himself a “documentary comedian,” to discover 54

other people who share his name. “Before I did this,” he writes, “the words ‘Dave Gorman’ used to define me; now they don’t.” Of course, if you discover that your name is already being used by others in cyberspace, you can always, as innumerable bloggers now do, pick a singular pseudonym to distinguish yourself. But that merely makes the problem worse. If a person posts material online under a pseudonym, how will its everlasting preservation immortalize *him*?

We ordinary mortals, it seems, are not given enough unique names to differentiate all the distinct Web sites we will want to establish. The reverse difficulty confronts those who seek immortality by attaching their names to buildings, rooms, walls, and bricks: There are too many competing names for the suitable physical sites that institutions can or will establish. Even now, institutions increasingly face the need to tear down an old structure named for John Doe—a lab that’s obsolete, an auditorium that’s too small—to construct a new one, courtesy of a generous donation from

and faces drawn at random from a large database. Donors to institutions can always avoid these issues by giving anonymously, of course, but giving anonymously no more immortalizes the donor than posting pseudonymously does the blogger.

We ordinary would-be immortals face a further set of difficulties. Consider a donor to a university or a hospital, and let us assume that his name will remain embossed indefinitely on some kind of physical marker within the institution, even if transferred from pillar to post to plaque over time. In what sense would people 50, 100, or 1,000 years from now, noting Joe Blow’s name, think of Joe Blow and thereby contribute to his immortality? All that will pass through their consciousnesses is a name, with no accompanying narrative, no biographical information about the person attached to the name. In fact, after a time the name will cease to signify a person and identify simply the memorial itself. Last year, more than three decades after the closing of Emmett Scott High,

the town of Rock Hill, South Carolina, opened a brand-new secondary school. Many who had attended Emmett Scott decades ago wanted the new institution to bear the old one’s name. It’s clear that their aim was not to memorialize Emmett Scott the person. Rather, in the words of local resident Meredith E. Bynum, they wanted to

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Richard Roe. Institutions’ limited spaces dictate that, sooner or later, the name on an old structure will have to be folded into a differently named new one. That’s why, at Northwestern University, athletes play on Ryan Field at Dyche Stadium. Some libraries sell naming rights to bookcases and then, as well, to the individual shelves they contain.

This kind of cramping and overlapping of spaces can go on for only so long. Institutions are already beginning to place plaques commemorating old donors on central walls of honor, such as Hackensack University’s Margery S. and Charles J. Rothschild Jr. Recognition Gallery (a wall of honor itself offers a nice additional naming opportunity). Even on walls of honor, though, space is finite. There are already so many candidates for the new wall of honor for Jefferson County, Missouri, that it will consist simply of four television screens displaying, over the course of the viewing day, names

retain the name because “Emmett Scott was an outstanding school.” The new school would be a memorial to a memorial.

The irony is that in order for a memorial to call up someone’s memory, that person needs to be memorable independently of the memorial. A disease named for a famous patient, such as Lou Gehrig, makes us think of that person; so does a law named after a famous victim—James Brady, for example. But if the person is not memorable apart from the memorial, then it will not remind us of him. A reference to Parkinson’s disease or the Glass-Steagall Act brings to mind neither Parkinson, nor Glass, nor Steagall.

And though institutions often inscribe a few biographical words on a plaque along with the name, there is no more room for a real biographical narrative on a plaque than there is for an epitaph on a grave. That leaves the immortality-seeking institutional donor caught in an unfortunate space-time

warp: The available spaces are too few for the names to be accommodated, and the span of time to be memorialized—the span occupied by the person's life—is too large to be commemorated adequately by any accompanying narrative.

Those who pursue immortality in cyberspace face a different challenge when it comes to biographical information. The Internet imposes no limits on the material bloggers can post, allowing them to record the most mundane or tangential details of their lives with a stream-of-consciousness flow. The blogger Craig Taylor says he faces a “challenge [in] refusing to let the promise of endless space act as an excuse to write about the size of my fingernail.” It is “the job of a blogger,” or so it seems to the commentator Andrew Ferguson, “to record his every neural discharge faithfully and minutely, leaving no thought unpublished.” Yet it's unclear that overly loquacious narratives, especially when they're consumed with the sorts of mundane activities we all share, memorialize a person any more effectively than overly curt ones. It would seem, then, that those who seek immortality online encounter their own kind of space-time warp: They share too few names to distinguish all the cyberspaces on the Web, and they post far too much narrative for the time periods being memorialized.

All of this provokes a question: Even if we assume that what's posted in cyberspace and inscribed in physical space will remain in perpetuity, is earthly immortality in fact available only to the extraordinary among us? Is the democratization of immortality an illusion?

Consider how immortality descends on the great. Great men of action get remembered, their lives become visible, *through* the media of various works—biographies that recount their acts, monuments that recall them—while great artists and thinkers get remembered *for* various works, for having created this painting or that novel or poem. Ordinary would-be immortals are forced to reverse these roles. Ordinary “men of action”—managers, lawyers, merchants—are not going to be immortalized by biographers or sculptors. Instead, the ordinary man of action has to create his own monument to himself—by donating to an institution, for instance, and having anything from a building to a brick bear his name. But this mechanism does not allow him to be remembered *through* the work—the building, the bench, the brick—the way great men of action get remembered through a work of biography or sculpture. Buildings, benches, and bricks hold no narrative. The Joe Blow whose name is on one of them may

have been anything from an adept fly-fisher to an arms salesman. At most, he'll be remembered simply *for* the work—for being the name responsible for the building, bench, or brick.

Now consider bloggers, the ordinary thinkers and “artists,” as blogger Eric S. Raymond describes them, who seek immortality online. The vast majority of blogs are not great works of art or thought *for* which their creators will be remembered. At best, individual bloggers can be remembered *through* the work, which is essentially autobiography and self-portrait, giving a sense, however choppy and unwieldy, of who they were and what they did.

In the final analysis, the kind of immortality bestowed on great artists and political actors will remain elusive to the rest of us. Perhaps nothing illustrates this quite so vividly as a particular caveat that institutional fundraisers frequently register: It's not quite true that nobody will remember Joe Blow years hence when they see his name on the Blow Building. His descendants will.

In fact, family members, viewing a named structure, are not just likely to be the only ones who'll recall the person named; they're also essential to ensuring that the name itself will remain, if not in its original location, at least *somewhere* in the institution. According to Jerry Rohrbach, director of planned giving at Temple University, when the time comes to raze a named building, institutions “contact family members still living and discuss with them other possible places” on which to put the old donor's name. But if there “is no longer any family,” says Ann Gleason, director of major gifts at Duke University, “after a few generations, the name will disappear.” When former Canadian prime minister Pierre Trudeau died in September 2000, a movement sprang up to rename the Yukon Territory's Mt. Logan after him. The descendants of William Logan vehemently objected, and the idea was dropped.

And so a last lesson for ordinary folks: To ensure that you'll perpetuate yourself by attaching your name to the physical world, you must also perpetuate yourself in the old-fashioned way. You must be fruitful and multiply. The same is true if you seek to memorialize yourself in cyberspace. Your works are most likely to survive on family Web sites—a growing number of sites are now devoted to family genealogies—for which those who carry your genes on into the future will be the primary audiences (and custodians). In the final analysis, the new democratization of immortality, imperfect as it is in so many ways, can be guaranteed only by the old. ■