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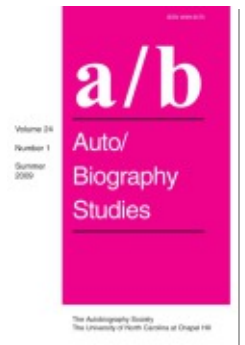
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Digital Biography: Capturing Lives Online

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Digital Biography: Capturing Lives Online

By Paul Longley Arthur

Every day, rivulets of information stream into electric brains to be sifted, sorted, rearranged, and combined in hundreds of different ways. Technology enables the preservation of the minutia of our everyday comings and goings, of our likes and dislikes, of who we are and what we own. . . . It is ever more possible to create an electronic collage that covers much of a person's life—a life captured in records, a digital biography composed in the collective computer networks of the world.

—Daniel J. Solove

THIS PAPER reflects on an emerging field that has no accepted name or boundaries but is described here as “digital biography.” The activities, formats, and genres associated with this field are rarely linked with life writing or traditional biographical studies. Rather, this field is seen as the domain of those concerned with digital privacy, copyright, data preservation, and identity management. Over the past decade or so, critics in various disciplines, mainly legal studies, information management, multimedia design, and IT development, as well as sociology, psychology, and marketing, have focused on the complexity of online identity. Though online identity has become such a significant focus of attention in these disciplines, few who study biography have discussed it. Indeed, as Nigel Hamilton points out, biography itself has had less attention than one might expect for a field that “has enjoyed an extraordinary renaissance in recent years” (1), a field that, according to Carl Rollyson, is widely recognized as “the dominant non-fiction of our age” (*User's Guide* 137). Suddenly, however, biography is demanding attention more visibly and more urgently than in the past, and from spheres of activity that are so alien to the traditional study of biography that their rapid infiltration of the field is being experienced as something of an ambush. These diverse life-recording developments, mostly outside the mainstream genre are the subject of this paper. Regardless of their immediate relevance to biography as we have known it, these digital incursions will undoubtedly transform, and are already transforming, public

awareness of and engagement with concepts of self and identity; truth and fiction; memory and imagination; reality and fabrication; public and private; and, entangled with all of these, autobiography and biography. This paper identifies current digital developments and trends that are influencing the production of lives and identities online in order to speculate on the digital future of biography.

“Biography,” the *Macquarie Dictionary* tells us, “is a written account of a person’s life” (“Biography”). While some critics and practitioners have called for this definition to be updated and expanded beyond the written text to include visual media such as film, television, video and photography (see Hamilton, 2, 83, 280, and 291), others, taking this as a given, have automatically gone ahead and incorporated these media in their understanding of the term.¹ However, with the extraordinarily rapid rise of online forms and opportunities over the past decade, the pressure to consider this issue of definition has been overtaken by much bigger questions and events. Biography has found itself caught up in a tide of transformational technologies and genres that are likely to change not only the character of biography, but also our understanding of fundamental concepts that help us to make sense of our lives, including “self,” “individuality,” “identity,” and “truth.” At the same time, these events also remind us that such terms have by no means had fixed or clear meanings in the past and that biography, especially in the latter part of the twentieth century, has had a *dynamic* existence—adapting to social and political change, “migrat[ing] across the genres”—and, in the process, insistently questioning such concepts and exposing their instability (251). In fact, as John Zuern reminds us, “the ‘I’ of autobiography and memoir, and even the ‘third person’ subject of biography, has never been anything but virtual” (xi). Nevertheless, critics who have entered the arena of digital biography generally agree that the intensity, speed, and scale of the digital revolution are such that fresh approaches are necessary. With a focus on autobiography and portraiture, Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith have argued for narratively-based theories to be re-considered to accommodate “presentations across multiple media, including virtual reality” (qtd. in Whitlock and Poletti viii).² In my recent article, “Digital Fabric, Narrative Threads: Patchwork Designs on History,” I propose an approach that foregrounds the “materiality” of web-based biography and history, through the metaphor of quilting. In their introduction to the issue of *Biography* entitled “Autographics,” Gillian Whitlock and Anna Poletti draw attention to “the rapidly changing visual and textual cultures of autobiography.” Shifting the emphasis from textual to “graphic life narrative,” they call for a fresh approach that casts

its net more widely and pays attention to “the sight, the sounds, the feel” of the new forms (v).

In 2003, in response to the “remarkable expansion of online life writing” over the previous seven years, the pioneering “Online Lives” issue of the journal *Biography* was published. With an emphasis on both continuities and differences in relation to traditional texts, the essays were threaded through with key themes in the emerging field of digital biography, including “temporality, subjectivity, and the unstable polarity of private and public space” (Zuern vii).

A crucial difference between traditional biographies—including film and television—and people’s lives represented in the online “space” is that online identities are easily manipulated at any time by the individual subject or by others. There is no doubt that even this single feature, the ability to “manage” online content at will, is changing the way we see ourselves and each other. Along with the flood of other enabling tools that the digital world brings, this capacity to manage identity with increasing ease will certainly have an impact on the conventional practices of all forms of life “writing,” including biography. The fact that millions of complex social identities now flourish in online environments is a compelling reason for traditional biographical studies to study and assess the new developments. Some of them are considered merely games in the past, and some emerge from “locations” that are so familiar, so close to home, that their penetration into our worlds and their potential to have a direct impact on how we experience our everyday lives has, in many cases, taken us by surprise. Whether they are perceived as exciting or threatening, these innovations open up opportunities for new biographical forms and understandings to emerge. The fundamental driver of all biographical study has thus far remained relatively unchanged amidst an unprecedentedly volatile environment of proliferating genres and worlds available for the production of identity. Elizabeth Podnieks summarizes the contemporary situation well: “The technological innovations offered by the Internet stimulate, enhance and multiply the means for self-expression, but they do not inherently change the motivations for life writing, which has arguably always been to communicate and connect not only with our own disparate selves but also with those of others” (“Hit Sluts” 23).³

Will biography go through a more radical change as it gets further enmeshed in the online environment? Or will the “biographical project” remain fundamentally the same regardless of changes in medium or genre? I would argue that the new digital opportunities for representing lives online will change our conception of the biographical subject, of the biographer, and of biography in ways that we cannot yet understand. However, we can begin by observing how the

cyberworld, which is already teeming with life, operates. Many of the lives we can see there are actually second lives, fabricated identities.⁴ One could say, in fact, that the whole realm of “cyberbiography” is like a “second life” in relation to the traditional field of biography.

Even those people who do not live second or alternate lives online are finding that their lives gain new dimensions and take on a new complexity because of the growing interrelationship of humans with technologies that augment our abilities. Various kinds of memory enhancement are particularly relevant to the topic of this paper. Cyborg fantasies of implanted computer chips that give us extra memory seem not so distant and also perhaps not so frightening, when one considers how reliant most people already are on mobile devices, especially mobile phones. These are now much more than basic communication devices. Whereas once it seemed a miracle to be able to speak with one another wirelessly, smartphones now store personal information and synchronize this with computers silently and invisibly. They can also offer up information about a location—they “see” things that humans can never see.⁵ These phones may have become “our most trusted associates,” but they can also become our enemies: “The trust that we invest in our mobile phones,” writes one commentator, “makes them utterly convincing witnesses against us” (Yager). While the information stored is likely to be in the category of data rather than biography, the increasing capacity to store photos, videos, and reflective texts such as diaries is undoubtedly giving phones the potential to cross the line. Like our personal computers, phones are becoming so “smart” that they hold a great deal of sensitive, private information about our personalities and habits, information we would never have dreamed of carrying around in our pockets in the past. In a very real sense, these devices are biography machines. “It’s handy to carry a digital biography that could make you whole if you should ever suffer total amnesia,” the same observer points out, “but perhaps some things are best committed to wet memory, despite the risk” (Yager). Later in this paper I discuss the balance between personal exposure and privacy—a balance that younger “digital natives” keep shifting and which will become increasingly important for biography.⁶

In the quickly changing, globalized society in which we live, we may take great comfort in knowing that an electronic device can open a communication channel to friends and relatives from practically anywhere in the world. But my instincts tell me that it is risky to defer increasingly to digital devices to run our lives. I was shocked to learn of the current “Companions” project. Led by the University of Sheffield with a consortium of fourteen partners from Europe and the US, and with thirteen-million Euro funding through the European

Commission, this interdisciplinary research program uses advanced technologies to create persistent “agents” (“Companions”). These are described as personal “Companions” that over a long period of time develop a relationship with their owners, mainly through speech, but also via touch screens and sensors. They are like cyber-pets but much more than that. They are “sensitive to the needs of, and relationship with, the single owner” (“Companions”). And yet, confusingly, “the embodiment of a Companion is relatively unimportant: it could be a screen head, a mobile phone, or some simple object, easy to carry about, like a handbag” (“Companions”). The envisaged relationship is ambitiously deep: “a Companion becomes, in a precise sense, part of the user’s memory on the web, essentially their memory of themselves and their life events” (“Companions”). This means that a key role for the Companion, and one that is highly innovative, is to produce a form of biography through non-human oral interviewing: “The originality here is the use of conversation as a tool of reminiscence for users who will already have much of their life’s data in digital form, such as images, texts and videos. The Companion is there to give that data a narrative form, a life story, for the benefit of the user and their successors” (“Companions”).

New media and new technologies may not yet threaten the role of the biographer or oral historian on a large scale, but this is one project that certainly demands attention and interpretation by those who are interested in the study of lives. Should these Companions be seen as a threat or a valuable new resource for biography? Underlying this question is, once again, the need to distinguish between the accumulation of data and the conscious act of organizing it and giving it shape that is at the heart of biography.

Of most concern is the potential impoverishment of biography. The Companions project is driven by the underlying assumption that a life narrative can be formed simply by collecting and storing information such as conversations, diary entries, photos, videos, maps, and physical movements in ways that can be performed, at command, by this rudimentary digital accomplice. What it does not account for is the complexity of the shaping process that crafts accumulated data into a life story. Nor does it account for the powerful effects on the selection process of memory, mood, and context that is at the heart of all narratives of self, whether we tell them to our biographers, our friends and families, or ourselves. Further, it does not acknowledge the ongoing reflective aspect of “self-fashioning” that, as Paul John Eakin puts it, “is oriented as much to the present and future as to the past” (xi). Because memory itself is “fashioned,” the Companion would not be much improved even if somehow it had direct access to memories. As Laurence J. Kirmayer explains, memory

is “anything but a photographic record of experience.” Rather, “it is a roadway full of potholes, badly in need of repair, worked on day and night by revisionist crews. . . . we readily engage in imaginative elaboration and confabulation and, once we have done this, the bare bones memory is lost forever within the animated story we have constructed” (176). Biographers work by animating through narrative; the narrative overlays a temporal structure and sequence (see Friedman). No digital companion, however sophisticated, can do this.

A theme that runs through this paper is that a future digital biography should not lose sight of the motive for and history of recording lives as biography—to preserve, memorialize, celebrate, and share life experiences. Nor should digital biography, as it develops, be mainly directed by technological innovation. However, in order to open up the field of biography to new influences and possibilities, it will be necessary to think beyond traditional forms. The future biographer will have unprecedented opportunities to craft lives in new ways, using technologies and genres that would seem very unfamiliar to today’s writers and readers.

This paper continues by considering further uses of the term “digital biography” that relate to online identity in a different way—through the provision of identity management services. It later turns to potential future genres as well as current examples that lead the way and provide a glimpse of what may lie ahead. Finally, it explores the larger issue of how in fundamental ways technology impacts our personal, virtual, and collective identities, all of which are centrally important to the study of lives as biography.

Digital Biography Services

Although the digital biography contains a host of details about a person, it captures a distorted persona, one who is constructed by a variety of external details.

—Daniel J. Solove

To most people it is clear what biography is: a biography presents a substantive narrative of a life. But in the online environment the term “digital biography” has a range of usages, some closely related to, and others only loosely connected to, the conventional understanding of biography. A labyrinthine search on the Internet brought me into contact with all sorts of references to “digital biography.” A handful stood out as interesting and relevant to a broader discussion of scholarly biography. Some of these I have already referred to; however, I

discovered that for the most part the information I found led to paid services ranging from image consultants to genealogists.

In 1995, when Carolyn Burke launched diary.carolyn.org—regarded as the world’s first online diary—it was easy to describe the very limited extent of biography-related activities online. Eight years later, in 2003, when the topic was still very new, the journal *Biography* devoted a full issue to “Online Lives,”⁷ providing an important historical record of the new virtual space for biographical representation. Then, as Web 2.0 took hold in 2004, everything seemed to change quite suddenly. Web 2.0 ushered in the second incarnation of the web. Its effect can be summarized in these terms: while the Internet had been a channel primarily for communication of information, Web 2.0 introduced standards and technologies for information sharing that enabled it to shift towards facilitating dynamic interaction and exchange between individuals or communities, rather than simply providing for static information retrieval. Web 2.0 underpins social networking sites and a whole range of other dynamic blog and wiki services, and it generally facilitates user-generated content. In other words, instead of simply accessing the Internet, users could *enter* it, present themselves (however they wished), and engage directly with other users.

Online image is now everything—at least that is the case according to David Petherick, business consultant, who has a trademark on the Digital Biographer™ name. “Most people can not be objective when describing themselves—that’s why so many autobiographies are unreadable,” a heading insists (Petherick). The service offered is a virtual makeover of one’s online identity, with the goal of ensuring that this fashioned identity (“a combination of sales pitch, a personal presentation, a business card, a brochure, a personal statement, a list of recommendations, a mini web-site, and a wave from across the room”) conveys the desired image. In a recent BBC documentary that featured Petherick, the message was clear: with image management online, other forms of advertising may be wasted or even work against the online identity (Cellan-Jones). Petherick does not write *about* people—he does not produce the sort of biography we are familiar with. Rather, he crafts new and multiple identities for people, bringing out the aspects they want to offer online. There is great demand for this kind of service. While the products may seem shallow and contrived, they nevertheless remind us that there is a significant component of “spin” and manipulation in any representation of a life, regardless of how “authentic” or “authorized” or even “definitive” it may claim to be. Further, a person may potentially take on the qualities of the chosen image—the life may follow the fiction.

Many competing Internet-based businesses advertise services for capturing and preserving family memories for a fee. Such businesses typically specialize in the compilation of existing photographs (scanning, sometimes restoring, adding captions, and printing—giving shape to and celebrating the family archive rather than leaving it as a random or unordered collection). Some services include oral video interviews in the home, with questions generated in relation to a selection of photographs or other personal memorabilia. Services such as biowriters.NET have gone even further, engaging consultant biographers to write a biography of up to 25,000 words (biowriters.NET, “Premier”).⁸ “Each book contains a professionally written biography, complete with full-color photo montages and a CD of favorite songs, photos and other mementos. The entire process can take as little as two months.” Every project begins with a two-hundred word questionnaire relating to twelve “life chapters.” “Our service makes the biography process easy,” the founder, Suzanne Warden, claimed. (biowriters.NET, “Homepage,” 28 Sep. 2008). While “instant” biographies such as these are not necessarily in digital form, it is the ease of information exchange via digital technologies that has enabled this development. Most family records never make it to an archive; when they do they tend to be locked away and sometimes forgotten for a very long time, if not forever. In this context, all of these online services can play an important role because they are empowering ordinary people to celebrate their family histories and communicate them more widely. Other more popular services, such as Ancestry.com, put genealogical information and research tools in the hands of the user.

Petherick’s title as Digital Biographer is intriguing for a number of reasons. One is that this potential for identity makeover, linked with the biographer, reminds us of how much power is vested in and responsibility is accorded to all biographers, whatever medium they choose. It reminds us that they *do* shape their subjects’ lives—often with controversial results. Another issue researching the term reveals is that the digital sphere is full of identities in various states of creation. But this, too, is nothing new. It is just another example of the fact that we naturally show different faces to the world, in accordance with the identity we want to project at any given time. Thus, digital makeovers amount to a different “packaging” of what biographers and historians have always known—that identities, like language itself, are infinitely changeable and plural. In the digital environment this has simply become glaringly obvious. As far back as 1970, Roland Barthes imagined the “ideal text” in terms that can be read as prophetic of the Internet and especially of digital identities: “In this ideal text,” he wrote in a well-known passage from the beginning of

S/Z, “the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend *as far as the eye can reach*, they are indeterminable (meaning here is never subject to a principle of determination, unless by throwing dice); the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text . . . based as it is on the infinity of language” (5–6).

New Genres for Biography Online

At this moment there are few models to look to for an indication of the digital future of the kind of biography that is currently published in book form. Genres, like brands, are successful only when they attract large numbers of followers. Not only are there no commonly identified genres for biography in the digital environment, but as Hamilton discusses, isolated examples tend to shed light on the restrictions of experimental genres as much as they offer glimpses of a promising future (242–50).

Most scholars would agree that there need to be commonalities between biography in old and new media. The purpose of biography will surely continue to provide an account of a person’s life, and biographers will still want their stories, whatever form they may take and through whatever lens they are filtered, to be based on reliable evidence and to provide a rich and rewarding experience for their audiences. And yet, the new biography also needs to be open to change, to make best use of the hypermedia online environment. In this environment, digital aesthetic with an emphasis on visual communication is already evolving (Arthur 113; Staley 3). This situation provides an opportunity to capture wide interest through its multi-layered visual and aural dimensions. Perhaps more importantly, users have developed sophisticated new media literacies. They are reading online with dexterity and have learned to expect highly interactive and engaging content. As the Internet matures and the “digital natives” start to dominate, content creators will be forced to adapt to user demands. Because biography is currently very popular and has appeal far beyond academic circles, in the online environment it is well positioned to attract even wider audiences. How will biography adapt?

One possible future for biography is exemplified by the innovative online exhibition *George Washington: A National Treasure*, which is framed around an interactive image of the president. The site brings together information and documentation about the famous portrait

painted by Gilbert Stuart in the last year of Washington's presidency in 1796 and biographical records of Washington himself and the broader social context of the time in which he lived.⁹ There are three lenses through which to view the work—"Symbolic," "Biographic," and "Artistic." The user selects a hotspot that is labeled with numbers 1–12 on a digitized version of the painting. Hotspots include "table leg," "clothing," "sword," "dark clouds," and "portico" among many others: these refer to elements in the composition of the painting. Once selected, that portion of the painting zooms in closer and the detail fills the right-hand frame. In the left frame is one of the interpretations (Symbolic, Biographic, or Artistic). The user can click to select the alternatives. The "next" button takes the user to the sequentially numbered hotspot and related item and interpretations, without needing to return to the full portrait view. These are carefully thought through navigation options that are effective from a usability and design perspective.

The portrait of Washington is accompanied by a history of related objects, practices, historical moments, painterly techniques, biographical details of Washington and the painter, together with carefully scanned or photographed records of miscellaneous related items that are highly evocative, such as a draft handwritten farewell speech or an image of the commemorative button worn at Washington's inauguration in 1789. There is educational interpretation for a general audience ("Some think that Washington is pointing towards the future, foreseeing bright prospects for his nation. Others believe that Washington is saying farewell" ["1. Gesture"]). For specialist audiences there are links to scanned documents such as the handwritten farewell speech.

In the context of the current discussion, this example is particularly illuminating. It demonstrates how the digital environment uses its flexibility to present multiple perspectives alongside relatively extensive documentation of a life at the same time as it privileges visual communication by framing the work around a major portrait. *George Washington: A National Treasure* also shows how this kind of digital biographical product can be highly accessible and appeal to diverse audiences who can choose their levels of involvement. Of the many experimental interactive texts I have investigated, this example is one of the simplest to use. However, the simplicity of use cleverly belies the rich resource of text, images, degree of detail, and angles of interpretation available.

The only small point of criticism I would make is that there are no dates given for this exhibition—neither at this interactive website exhibit nor through the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery's website, which refers to a touring version. The only indication is in an online

bookshop where there is a catalogue for sale that has a publication date of 2004 (*George Washington*). This is simply a slip-up, a mistake, nothing more. But this happens regularly in the online world. Web pages that one views are almost always the very latest versions—they have a life that is always up to the minute and practically timeless. It is difficult to see history through this fundamentally ahistorical, always newly framed, window.

While biography in book form has not migrated and evolved to adapt to the online environment, the most respected print-based reference works for the study of lives already have. The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (<http://www.oxforddnb.com>), the *American National Biography* (<http://www.anb.org>) and the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (<http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au>) have all moved to an online format and rendered the print version no longer authoritative. For the most up-to-date information, users now consult the constantly improved digital versions of these reference works. They are also experimenting with pooling their resources through direct hyperlinks so that users can follow a lead from one resource to another to access additional contextual information. This means that one biographical entry can link directly to related biographical entries in the partner database.

Within this relatively closed system (a selection of partner organizations working together) it is possible to direct users to appropriate information. However, biographical information in general is extremely difficult to “mark up” in such a way as to make it accessible and interpretable by computers. Biographical information poses such problems for simple technical reasons. The Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative’s (ECAI) special project “Bringing Lives to Light: Biography in Context” offers an explanation and is formulating a solution. In the project proposal, the authors explain that there are archival standards for digital referencing of people’s *names* but not the significant aspects of their *lives*. There are no widely embraced standards for encoding the things people *do* in their lives. Libraries routinely “mark up” records to characterize and identify lives—born here, married there, died then, for example—but these basic facts do not provide a strong foundation for a more complex and interconnected depiction of lives online. The ECAI project leaders foresee a time when clever software will trawl the web using specialist reference finding agents to produce the context for a life based on and extrapolating from what may be minimal existing evidence. In their view, it will rely on biographical records giving more information about context in the first place. As an example, the writers of the project narrative give us: “Born in 1881,” “Born in Moscow,” “Born in Moscow in 1881,” “Born to Grigorii and Olga Goldberg at 32 Miasnitzskaia, Moscow,

on August 19, 1881.” These are all completely different descriptions that relate to a structured series of more or less complete and complex events, each event represented “by a more or less complete four-facet ‘tuple’ composed of an *action* (WHAT) in *time* (WHEN) in a *place* (WHERE) in relation to *others* (WHO)” (University of California, Berkeley, and Partners). As the authors explain, “It is understanding the circumstances of people’s actions that illuminates their lives, but there is a significant gap in the infrastructure developed by libraries, museums, and publishers in this area.”¹⁰

How Technology is Changing Identity

As I spread myself around over the network, updating my Facebook profile, commenting on MySpace, flying through Second Life, blogging, twittering, updating my calendar and posting photos and videos and audio I am finding a new way to be Bill Thompson. I wonder what he’ll be like?

—Bill Thompson

Online expression and communication are becoming increasingly personal, and also very public. According to Nancy K. Miller, the rise of the “dot.com culture” is responsible for what she calls the “paroxysm of personal exposure,” whereby millions of people set up blogs, personal home pages, and online diaries of one sort or another, “making the private public” (421). Services such as Facebook and MySpace have had an extraordinarily powerful role to play in that they have opened up this facility for online self-exposure and self-construction to everyone with access to a computer connected to the Internet. There continues to be a shifting balance between personal exposure and privacy. For the skeptics, the Orwellian vision of suppressed identity in an environment of overarching control and surveillance has contemporary resonance. And yet, for others—especially younger people—the very same technology opens avenues for rich and meaningful interconnections that would not otherwise be possible. After all, from one perspective, power is in the hands of the individual—I can decide what I post on my blog, how I describe myself professionally; I can de-couple my day-to-day personality from my adopted persona in a game or a social network—in other words, it is up to me how I manage my identity. But from another, technology has a grip on an individual’s identity that can never be released. Identity management is sometimes out of the hands of the individual and may even be beyond the likes of David Petherick because a person’s online portrait can be built up from bits and pieces, remnants of others’ reports and impressions, together with other out-of-date

or misleading information. Daniel J. Solove puts it beautifully in his book *The Digital Person*, in which he writes about the “aggregation effect” in these terms: “The digital revolution has enabled information to be easily amassed and combined. Even information that is superficial or incomplete can be quite useful in obtaining more data about individuals. Information breeds information. . . . Similar to a Seurat painting, where a multitude of dots juxtaposed together form a picture, bits of information when aggregated paint a portrait of a person” (44).

The composite identity so formed, however, is likely to be out of the subject’s control. There is no point in even trying to dispute or remove an entry that pops up on Google or Yahoo, for example. In response to the threat of long-term personal over-exposure, there are now specialists working in a field called “de-identification.” Latanya Sweeney, who directs the Laboratory for International Data Privacy at Carnegie Mellon University, works to protect confidentiality by designing “anonymizing” software, “deidentifiers,” and other smart algorithms. These are all terms that allude to the worst of the dehumanizing tendencies of the Orwellian technological apparatus, those that work against individuality and, by extension, the possibility of biography. One “deidentifier” program melds images of real faces from surveillance footage to create composites that would only be unravelled to reveal the actual faces if legally authorized (Walter 74–75).

Our concept of social identity needs to expand to include a new, distributed kind of self given form in online environments. Thompson writes, “our modern conception of privacy and of the nature of the individual is a product of the industrial age that is now passing, so it should not surprise us that we are finding new ways of constructing an identity online.” In this changing environment it is becoming more difficult to describe social identity as singular because people are interacting increasingly in online and virtual relationships, and also more globally. For many people, the high-street shop has been replaced by an online merchant thousands of kilometers away. And yet, those same people may have also developed very close relationships with relative strangers who they might have not met in person but chat with every day online—in a spirit of “intimacy in anonymity” (McNeill 39).

In the online sphere, people thrive on multiple identities. How could a biographer profess to know these many facades of a character? How could she or he even hope to access them? What other new barriers are put up in the digital realm? The avatars of Second Life, the anonymous bloggers, the Facebookers with their code-riddled communication amongst often tenuously linked “friends” are all

part of this often inaccessible culture. Second Life alone creates a whole new world where the boundaries between fantasy and reality are all but dissolved. In fact in Paul Carr and Graham Pond's *The Unofficial Tourists' Guide to Second Life*, the reader is taken into a virtual world with the same pragmatic advice and support that one would expect from a Lonely Planet guidebook to another country. This other world is so real that Second Life players have met and married "in-world" and there have been cases of Second Life infidelities that have led to real-life divorce proceedings. As the *Weekend Australian* newspaper reported in November 2008, "a couple have divorced after the husband was caught having a 'virtual affair' with a female character" (Bruxelles 17). In this context, the old debates about fact and fiction, truth and imagination, come to life in new and startling ways. Perhaps the most perplexing and confusing situation facing future biographers will be that people are deliberately taking on radically different personas that sometimes bear no resemblance to their everyday counterpart, not even physically.

The fantasy of the online world of Second Life, which has millions of users, is also a very real success story in the mainstream commercial sense. "In-world" virtual events include serious university study and lifelike classrooms, simulcast music concerts by bands, and exclusive launches and premieres by the likes of 20th Century Fox (Schaer 198). Regular users see a blurry line between their original person and their avatar rather than a clear-cut distinction between the separate selves. "Imagine being given a licence [sic] to completely reinvent yourself with a new name, a new body and even a new personality. We all have days when that might seem like an appealing idea" (198). All the more confusing for a biographer. But can we seriously look to worlds such as Second Life to discover people's personalities? After all, in Second Life "your avatar can be gorgeous and clad in computerised couture while teleporting or flying around a sort of utopia, free from worldly constraints" (199).

Ultimately autobiography online may be much more straightforward than biography. The "lifeloggers" have already begun to pursue a dream of personal documentation to its extreme. Lifelogging is "the practice of recording and storing, as far as possible, all the information of your life—every conversation, every phone call, every email, every web page visited, everything you did for every minute of every day" (Dent). An average hard drive will store a whole life, claims George Bell, a seventy-three-year-old, pioneering lifelogger and Microsoft Research computer analyst. In his vision of lifelogging, the data his equipment collects will help us with our own imperfect memories and measure heart rate and other bodily functions to create extensive medical records over time (Dent). This effectively takes responsibility

for collecting the materials for our own auto/biographies. But there are obvious risks. Formats change over time and some information may one day become unreadable and obsolete. This is a risk with any sort of digital data. Perhaps more importantly, the lifeloggers themselves will certainly miss out on some of the potential of their lives and, in an effort to document minutiae, may entirely miss great opportunities. In considering lifelogging in the context of autobiography, we are reminded sharply again that accumulated data does not in itself amount to a representation of a life. For that we need the crafting role of the traditional literary biographer/autobiographer, turning life into art, creating something whole and beautiful out of the “rag and bone shop” of life (Yeats 40).

Conclusion

At this stage, beyond the sphere of online reference works such as dictionaries of biography and encyclopedias, biography continues to be grounded in the familiar printed book form. This paper shows that while the focus of academic study has remained firmly on print-based biographical genres, the dynamic online world of the Internet is starting to spawn new conceptions of biography at the same time as complicating familiar notions of personal and social identity (Arthur). These complex factors will impact on the digital future of biography.

I write from the perspective of someone who is trained in and respects traditional historical research techniques. I also enjoy using computers and have a passion for screen culture, interactive media, and new technology. It does not matter where one looks—to novel writing, business strategy, sustainable resource allocation, or any other field of activity—the technology now within most people’s reach is providing a toolkit to think and do things differently. In universities the latest teaching rooms now resemble collaborative creative media studios. Industries and government are aiming at flexible working environments supported by mobile communications technology, freeing employees to think differently, more independently and creatively. The result is that the new conditions enabled by communications technologies are flowing through all aspects of our lives, changing the environments in which people live as well as the skills they need to communicate, interpret, and work.

This will be a fascinating time for future biographers and historians to document when they look back and wonder when social identity online became a focus of serious academic study—the “tipping point” or “seminal moment,” as Cathrin Schaer writes (199). Technology will no doubt take us in entirely new and unexpected directions. As Camille Dodero ponders, “Humans might someday be able to

up-load their memories, their personalities, their entire lives, into their avatars. They might be able to program them to live and breathe and interact for all eternity inside Second Life. Humanity's great quest for immortality might finally be solved" (qtd. in Schaer 200).

Even if this is the case, ultimately we still need biographers—and perhaps we will need them more than ever.

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Notes

1. The Biography television channel is an example of the "automatic" expansion of the term "biography" beyond writing. New terms signaling biography's multi-media nature include "psychobiography," "pathography," "biopic," "technobiography," "autoble," and "autographics."

2. Eakin promotes a narrative-based approach.

3. Eakin makes a related point (74).

4. "Second Lifers" inhabit a parallel "geographical" universe that "can be mapped, like the real world" (Carr and Pond 30).

5. In Perth, Australia, mobile devices now "tune in" to invisible interactive trails—prompting the user to download free historical information (Offen).

6. "Digital natives" is the term commonly used for the generation that has been born into and is entirely at home with digital technologies.

7. For related discussion, see Podnieks "Hit Sluts" and "Web Diaries," and Serfaty.

8. I was surprised to read in the very fine print that biwriters.NET paid writers only \$1700 and that they expected the biography to be written in sixty hours. See biwriters.NET, "Independent."

9. This example follows the model of Shelley Jackson's acclaimed hypertext novel, *My Body: A Wunderkammer*.

10. The protocols are being tested on the Emma Goldman Papers, Berkeley, and the collections of the Shoah Foundation for Visual History and Education.

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