

Also by Andrew Hoskins

TELEVISION AND TERROR: Conflicting Times and the Crisis of News
Discourse (*with Ben O'Loughlin*)
TELEVISION WAR: From Vietnam to Iraq

Also by Anna Reading

THE SOCIAL INHERITANCE OF THE HOLOCAUST: Gender, Culture and
Memory
COMMUNISM, CAPITALISM AND THE MASS MEDIA (*with Colin Sparks*)

Save As... Digital Memories

Edited By

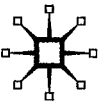
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Saving Lives: Digital Biography and Life Writing

Paul Longley Arthur

Introduction

In this first decade of the twenty-first century we are caught up in the midst of a technological shift of the kind that Walter Benjamin, in his 1936 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', attributed to the increasing popularity of photography in the early twentieth century. The essence of that change was the unprecedented capacity to create infinitely reproducible multiple copies. For the first time the idea of the primacy of the *singular* work of art was seriously open to question.¹ 'The history of every art form,' writes Benjamin, 'shows critical epochs in which a certain art form aspires to effects which could be fully obtained only with a changed technical standard, that is to say, a new art form' (Benjamin, 1973, p. 239). Photography initiated a change that Benjamin recognised as being as profound in its impact on people's lives as the introduction of the printing press. Each of these successive technological advances had the effect of putting within reach of the wider public products, information and knowledge that in the past could be enjoyed only by wealthy and elite groups and individuals, so much so that the concept of 'art' itself needed to be redefined to accommodate the many new forms that arose out of new technologies.² Over the past three decades, the advances in digital technologies that have occurred have repeated that pattern of rapidly increasing accessibility, far beyond the bounds of art and into every sphere of experience, in a manner and on a scale that Benjamin could not have foreseen.³ Most importantly, these technological changes have made it possible for 'ordinary' lives, that had formerly left no trace, to be recorded and 'saved' for the future.

'It is no accident,' Benjamin suggests, 'that the portrait was the focal point of early photography.' He explains this in terms of the 'cult of

remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead' (Benjamin, 1973, p. 228). Photography offered the kind of 'immortality' that had formerly been available only to very wealthy or historically important people through painted portraiture. Suddenly, a much wider group of people could enjoy this privilege – of having their name, their image, their *life* – preserved for posterity. As Benjamin points out, these tectonic shifts bring more than a change in art; they change perception – of the world and one's place in it.

In the sphere of writing, the genre of the biography is the equivalent of the portrait in painting. Both have traditionally recorded the lives of the rich and famous. While photography provided an alternative in the field of visual representation, biography has, until relatively recently, focused almost exclusively on historically 'significant' lives and major public figures. Now, very dramatically, the digital revolution has changed everything. In fact, the field of biography/autobiography is changing so fast that it is very difficult to comprehend what is happening and what it means.⁴

This chapter describes a selection of the new digital forms of biography and life-writing as a first step toward exploring the broad questions: What kinds of pressures and changes does the digital environment bring to biography and life writing? And what kind of future is there for biography beyond the book? The chapter considers established forms of biographical representation for purposes of comparison. One thing is certain: the biographical form is thriving in both its traditional forms and new digital forms.⁵ Biographies line the shelves of bookshops worldwide in greater numbers than ever before, biography on television has become so popular that it supports a dedicated Biography Channel, and filmmakers have flocked to see 'biopics' (biographical films and documentaries) over the past decade.

All of this is part of a spectacular new chapter in the 'democratic turn' in history-making that is dominating discussion in the history field. The process began in centuries past with the idea that historical knowledge should be available to anyone, not only to experts. Libraries and collecting institutions increasingly opened their collections to the wider public rather than exclusively to scholars. Then, in the twentieth century, there was a widening of the topics of history, based on increasing acceptance of the idea that all subjects are worthy of study and all kinds of lives and experiences should be recorded as accurately as possible. This would mean that histories could compete, that different versions would be possible, signalling a further democratisation through plurality. This has had particular significance for postcolonial history and was crucial in recognising marginalised or minority voices.⁶

In the last decades of the twentieth century the democratisation of history was also linked with the introduction of the term 'life writing'. The new terminology allowed the concept of biography to stretch its boundaries to include many forms of informal and unofficial personal records and stories about lives. It corresponded with history's broadening focus as it moved beyond national themes and leading public figures to include individual experiences that often contradicted the dominant stories of history that had been told.⁷ Interest in hidden histories grew out of a new intellectual environment that promoted the individual narration over the broad historical sweeping narrative.

The global explosion of public participation in the digital media and the Internet has greatly accelerated these trends. When digital media began to influence the study of history significantly, not much more than a decade ago, the concept of democratisation was linked primarily with public access to digitised resources. Underlying the principle of public access is the idea that there is a social obligation to make materials available to all. But the greatest change, enabled by the internet in recent years, is undoubtedly the shift to personal expression. Individuals now have an unprecedented capacity to construct, display, share and store their stories, ideas, pictures and videos – their lives – online. Anyone with access to commonly available digital services and devices can self-publish online, reaching a potential audience of millions in an instant. It is astonishing how quickly the Internet is widening the reach of people's stories and allowing immediate connections and exchanges in ways that print never could.

These recent shifts are impacting on the field of biography by greatly expanding the range of forms that can be considered as genres of 'life writing'. As the new ways supplant the established written modes such as diary and letter writing, biographers will need to look for different kinds of information about our lives. Arguably, even the way we are remembering, as individuals and as societies, is now changing as a result of the new creative formats for articulating and recording life experience.⁸ The new modes of capturing, storing, presenting and sharing data in people's daily lives are influencing the way that lives are recalled, reconstructed and represented. However, the changes have been so rapid that the impact of the new environment on biography and life writing has, as yet, had little attention.

The expanding field of life writing

The term 'life writing' emerged in the 1980s when poststructuralist, feminist and postcolonial approaches were questioning familiar and

entrenched ways of producing knowledge. Extending the scope of biographical studies, 'life writing' sought to be more inclusive, bringing marginal or disempowered voices into the historical record. In the new intellectual environment that promoted life writing, there was also a stronger critical awareness of the power of the writer in selectively framing a life and the power of the reader in constructing that life in the act of reading.⁹ Moving beyond the confines of biography, life writing was also more inclusive of genre and style. In fact, at least 52 genres of life writing have recently been identified (see Smith and Watson, 2001a).

Biography can be considered as a genre of life writing. It has a long history and a set of conventions and expectations that determine how biographers approach their subjects. Like the writers of other long-established genres for recording history, biographers once aimed at an elusive 'objective' position, trying to present as accurate and truthful an account as possible. Although it has long been recognised that any biographical account is as full of the life of the writer as it is of the subject, this does not fundamentally alter the work of biographers. Their task continues to require that they identify, verify and consider the available evidence about a life (documents, testimony and memories of events), and then produce an account of that life. In the case of autobiography the writer is also the subject, but the process follows the same pattern.¹⁰ Some of the genres considered within the broader sphere of life writing are regularly drawn upon by biographers. However, the digital environment has introduced a new complication into this process. Much of the information that was formerly dealt with in hard copy, is now in digital form and is therefore either difficult to access (as in the case of email correspondence, for example) or is now so freely accessible and open to manipulation that it is almost impossible to know whether the evidence or information about a life is genuine or reliable. Obsolescence of early digital formats and proprietary software pose equally significant challenges.

The extreme example is that some people now have multiple identities, even living a 'second life' online. In the same way that life writing was conceived as an extension and expansion of conventional biographical studies, life writing itself is being stretched to accommodate the new possibilities for personal expression, representation and documentation that digital media are enabling.

While the term life writing implies *written* documentation, it is still has currency in the new world of digital communication, which includes mixtures of written, visual and audio material. John Eakin's description of life writing, for example, mentions web pages at the end of a list of 'the entire class of literature in which people tell life stories'. These are 'the protean forms of contemporary personal narrative, including

interviews, profiles, ethnographies, case studies, diaries' (Eakin, 2004, p. 1).¹¹ However, it is not surprising that both the terminology and the theories of life writing are also being challenged by the rapidly changing digital environment. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson conclude their 2001 essay, 'The Rumpiled Bed of Autobiography: Extravagant Lives, Extravagant Questions', by asking whether current theoretical perspectives are adequately attuned to the new forms in which lives are being recalled, the 'self-reflexive narratives that interweave presentations of self across multiple media, including virtual reality' (Smith and Watson, 2001b, p. 13).

In 2003 the journal *Biography* published a special issue on the topic of 'Online Lives' which records how the boundaries of biography and of life writing were beginning to be pushed and challenged by the most recent digital technologies. In the introduction, the editor John Zuern, sketches a short history of biographical experiments online from the beginning of widespread public access to the Internet in the mid 1990s.¹² In the decade before the Internet was widely available, people began to use computers to write accounts of their lives using word-processing programs. Some even used email to correspond with friends and family. However, the Internet opened up many more possibilities, creating a 'fertile environment for the development of innovative forms of self-representation with potentially global audiences' (Zuern, 2003, p. vi). Online diaries began to appear, with the first dating back to 1994. As communities formed around them, these became known as online journals. Weblogs (a term first used in 1997) and blogs (dating from 1999) were extensions of online journaling.¹³ Blogs have created spaces for personal expression and discussion that have no earlier equivalent. In fact, personal blogs provide some of the most interesting historical records of unfettered contemporary opinion and insight and as such are valuable artefacts of our time. People not only wrote about their lives online, they began to record their lives visually and stream the material live to the world. Jennifer Ringley's JenniCam was one of the best known examples (she operated JenniCam from 1996 to 2003).

The theme that runs through all the papers in the Online Lives issue is of reciprocal generic influences. As Zuern explains:

When we put our lives online, we expand the capacities of the more traditional genres of life writing and the capacities of the new media we employ. While the network environment obviously reshapes life writing in many ways, it is also the case that life writing makes its

mark on the network, putting pressure on its technical conventions and questioning some of the commonplaces of the cultures that have grown up within it. (Zuern, 2003, p. viii)

Of the six articles in the issue, the first three are devoted largely to discussion of the differences between handwritten diaries and diary writing online. The next article is based on an assessment of more than 100 personal home pages and asks whether this can be considered as a new genre for self-presentation. The final two articles are wider ranging. One gestures toward the future by discussing the potential for collaborative authorship online, while in the final article, Helen Kennedy proposes the term 'technobiography', which she first put forward in the title of a co-edited book in 2001.

Regardless of the terminology chosen, it is clear that further discussion is needed of the influence of the digital environment on biography and life writing. The following section outlines the major digital innovations that are most deeply influencing the way that people are displaying, discussing and sharing lives online.

Web 2.0 and the public forms of personal expression

Even since 2003 the digital environment has changed in ways that the contributors to the special issue of *Biography* could not have predicted. Many of the new forms are yet to be recognised as life writing. The single greatest catalyst for the new forms has been the Web 2.0 environment – a set of technologies, standards and approaches that enable information sharing, collaborative authorship and a range of other kinds of user interactivity online. For the study of lives, some of the most important new forms include social networking, social bookmarking and digital storytelling – or 'videoblogging'.

Digital storytelling using a video camera (now commonly built into mobile phones) is now one of the most prominent genres for recording personal histories. Videos posted to YouTube (launched in 2005) can reach an audience of hundreds of millions in an instant. Building upon the digital storytelling tradition that grew up around personal digital media devices in the 1990s, YouTube stands out as the iconic video-sharing service of the early years of the Web 2.0 environment. In its first years it has had no equivalent and no rival. Very quickly it has become a major global channel – even a standard – for recording lives. Easy to use and remarkably flexible, it appeals to young and old and continues to engage huge numbers of new users daily.

The first experiments with social networking services such as MySpace led to a major new phenomenon, with competitors such as Bebo (launched 2005) and Facebook (launched 2004 but not open to all Internet users over the age of 13 until 2006) now thriving with, collectively, hundreds of millions of registered users. In fact, the community-building capacity of these services has been so quickly and eagerly embraced that in the very short time that they have been in existence, they have enabled communities to be formed that have populations far larger than many of the world's major countries.

Social bookmarking (a term first used in 2003) is a related phenomenon that is enabling people to store and tag information about websites they have visited and then share this information publicly. The pioneers of social bookmarking such as Del.icio.us (2003), were followed the next year by Simpy, Furl and StumbleUpon and there are now countless similar services. Like social networking, social bookmarking is a mechanism for exposing information about lives. By sharing information about patterns of searching and saving online, the interests of an individual are revealed. This technology is an unseen 'eye' that tracks and maps users' personal interests. Through web annotation, social bookmarking can also take the form of collaborative authoring, which helps to show larger patterns and preferences for information amongst groups as well as for individuals.

All of this provides a rich, living store of new raw material for history. People are telling their stories in their own ways and broadcasting/publishing them for the entire world to see. In fact, the theme that links most of the genres of personal expression online is that they tend to be very public, whereas personal expression used to be just that: personal and hidden. This is a major shift, with ramifications that are yet to be understood. One is the changing nature of personal expression in this exposed arena and another is the abandonment of the established forms – such as diary writing, memoirs and other print-based records – in favour of public, dynamic and immediate forms of communication in cyberspace.

It is tempting to look on all this activity and wonder whether it may signal the beginning of the end of the usefulness of traditional biographers. On the one hand, how can they manage this multiplicity with its constant movement and unreliability, and on the other, who needs them in an environment where 'publishing' is so easy and everyone can tell stories of their own lives and those of others and update them at will online? In this continual process, lives seem to tell themselves. But in this trend is also the best evidence of the need for biographers and

other experts in recording and interpreting lives. The field of online 'publishing' is expanding at an exponential rate. It offers unprecedented freedom and inclusiveness. However, the other side of this free and egalitarian digital world is that it is chaotic and uncontrolled – a free-for-all. The same technology that empowers and liberates also opens the way for self-indulgence, fraudulence and even violence. More than ever before there is a need for specialists to make sense of these new worlds of digital expression, find patterns in them, help to shape and manage them and to suggest what they mean for the way we see ourselves as individuals and in communities. And of course there will always be a role for biographers to write about significant public figures and to situate their lives and their influence in the context of the time in which they lived. The biggest difference for biographers is that there will be a great deal more material to discover, explore and sort, and much of it will be in new forms whose authenticity is much more difficult to assess than in the past – but perhaps the question of authenticity will also be less critical. After all, the lives of public figures have always been judged not only by verifiable facts, but also by opinion, speculation and hearsay – from multiple perspectives. The digital information explosion simply makes this more obvious than ever before.

The future of biography

So far this chapter has surveyed the expanding field of life writing and shown that the Web 2.0 environment is enabling new creative kinds of public/personal expression – all of which are contributing to a growing store of evidence for biographical research today. But what about the biographical account itself? The formal study of biography, in its traditional print format, has remained surprisingly stable even as the new forms of life writing have multiplied. Will the biographical genre take new forms in the digital environment?

There is no doubt that new ways of presenting biographical information will evolve and will provide alternatives to the printed book. In fact this is already happening, although mostly, at this stage, through either direct autobiographical entries or basic conversions of print-based texts to online formats. But in the future it seems very likely that online modes of expression and online genres will become increasingly popular and put pressure on traditional biography to adapt and change. This can be explained by the fact that the 'natural' fragmentation and dislocation that is part of digital textuality actually much more closely mirrors the chance, randomness and fluidity of memory than does

traditional narrative. The web environment also corresponds with the collective structure of lives – intertwining, meeting and diverging (a web can be defined as ‘an intricate network suggesting something that was formed by weaving or interweaving’).¹⁴

In spite of its power and popularity, digital textuality does not pose a fundamental threat to biographical narrative. Storytelling is central to our lives and is the means by which we ‘shape’ our identities and give meaning to our lives and our relationships.¹⁵ We need to be able to tell coherent stories about lives even though they may intertwine like a web or be available to us only in fragments and scraps of information. For this we still need books.¹⁶ It is not the linear form that is the drawback of books. Many experiments and discussions of non-linear, highly interactive forms have shown that most people long for the reassurance of the familiar sequential, chronological narratives. While the digital information may be increasingly messy and dispersed, it is the role of the biographer to give that information order and meaning in the context of a life. However, both the concept of narrative and the nature of the book as an object are likely to have to adapt to the new environment.

At this stage the first production versions of hand-held digital books are not so much a successor to the printed book as a copy in a different form. Nevertheless they provide a ‘handable’ object that may well develop into an important component for digital biography. Experimental multimedia documentaries, however, have progressed far enough to provide a glimpse into the future. Some occupy a middle ground between long text works and film documentaries while others offer models for newly flexible, distributed and decentralised formats.¹⁷ These experimental works that bring visual and written narration together, while not privileging either, may provide a model for a future kind of biography that is freer than the book but retains and communicates meaning through narrative – as stories of lives.

Future forms of biography will need to support easy reading of large amounts of text but also allow for visual, audio and other multimedia to be interwoven as part of a richer multilayered narrative. Biography can profit from freeing up its form. What is required are new online forms of storytelling that allow the fragments to be referred to through hyperlinks and that enable the written, visual and audio fragments to be collated and narrated as a richer composite text that better reflects the information available in digital form about a life. This future digital biography would allow the discussion of lives to be brought

back to its most basic mental and material components: memory, testimony, scribbles, bits and pieces and objects of significance. This is likely to blur the biography/life writing distinction even further because multimedia texts will be able to bring together that raw store of evidence about a life as a compilation, allowing that compilation to ‘stand for’ the life or using it as the reference point as part of an account of that life. In turn, new by-products would be created. These new combinations of primary and secondary sources would produce archives of material that would otherwise have existed as scattered fragments.

The challenge then will be to develop familiarity. The new formats for organising and ‘containing’ biography/life writing will not thrive overnight. Until there is an established history of using the new genres, they will remain marginal. This has always been the case with experimental genres. For example, the rotary press, developed following World War One, allowed photographs and text to be combined on the one page cost effectively. This resulted in a rapid growth in the popularity of photographic magazines. However, widespread popularity of photographic history did not come until after World War Two. This was not because of any new technical advances but rather because newspaper and magazine publishers by then held half a century and more’s worth of archives of photographs.

In the case of digital biography, the barriers to wide acceptance of the new formats are likely to be multiple and complex. One barrier is undoubtedly the computer screen itself. The challenge is for the digital book, which mimics the printed book in shape and size, to develop in such a way and provide such enhancement of the traditional reading experience, that it will begin to overcome that barrier. But there are many other potential barriers, some of which are suggested below. In some cases these point to a fundamental shift in the way we communicate, the way we see our world, the way we remember and the way we tell the stories of our lives.

Traces of Lives

Increasingly there will be new challenges facing biographers, whether or not they wish to experiment with digital forms. A major challenge will be in how to find information. How would a future historian or biographer look back on our lives today and what they would find? Historians and biographers in the future will have their work complicated by having access to an overload of information about our moment

in time, at the anarchic beginnings of the Internet era. However, much of it is likely to be more difficult to access and to interpret than traditional hard-copy documents. As younger people in particular continue to embrace social networking and other online and mobile forums for personal expression, there is a high risk that much of the important information about everyday lives will be lost.

At the same time future historians will notice that people are abandoning the long popular modes for personal expression, such as the written diary or letter, that were once some of the most important sources of information about personal lives and memory. The old practice of a family finding the personal records of a deceased family member and choosing to deposit them in an institutional archive for posterity or making them available to a biographer, is also becoming less common. While some blogs, especially institutionally hosted blogs, may be archived and preserved for the future, personal blogs are particularly vulnerable and the majority will not survive to provide a lasting record for the future. Posting to these blogs is the equivalent of writing extensive diaries and exposing them in the public domain, but all the while accepting that these will almost certainly be lost.

There are also other concerns and dangers. YouTube, in only four years, has created a valuable and liberating mass channel for personal expression. But because they are uncontrolled such tools for mass communication can easily be misused: 'Today the pond - YouTube - laps at every door, letting egos of the shakiest foundation reflect imagined beauty or genius to the entire world', wrote a reporter, prompted by the case of a young Finnish man who advertised on YouTube his intent to kill innocent fellow students, and who subsequently murdered eight students and the head mistress at his school. How could this have been viewed by millions, the reporter asked, without anyone taking action?

With the new digital forms come new challenges that print records did not pose. Letters tended to be more personal (they were usually only meant to be read by one person), more 'complete' and more extended than email. Other examples of everyday electronic communication are even further abbreviated and fleeting. The record of correspondence can disappear immediately, as in the case of instant messaging or SMS text messages. Today the love letters once exchanged in the early stages of a romance may equally take the form of highly abbreviated and code-laden SMS text messages which must be deleted in order to receive more.

Moreover, the correspondence between people is increasingly distributed, impermanent and complexly interlinked. One person's social

networking web page on a networking service is likely to be characterised by short, code-laden communications from 'friends', and the idea of 'correspondence' - with the to and fro of information between people - has been lost and replaced by an unpredictable kind of multiple commentary. Even if there is an intention for such exchanges to be stored for the future, personal privacy settings routinely block access in user-defined ways, and even major data storing services do not normally archive these Internet domains - for privacy and other reasons. A significant volume of communication may also be non-textual but rather expressed in the form of exchanges of visual images or videos, which inherently communicate a message about/to the sender/receiver, but one that is not decipherable to others.

The future historian may be confronted with an apparent void of information on lives that were in fact richly documented, but only through fleeting digital entries on security encrypted online services. A further issue is that people's digital identities can be plural: for better or worse, many people have multiple online personas to which they devote as much time as the physical self. But much of the information about these alternative identities is hidden and inaccessible to an outsider.

All of this is compounded by the fact that generally people do not have adequate strategies for long term personal data management. Most people have a story to tell about one or more occasions when they lost vast stores of important information on their personal computers due to hard disc failure, file corruption, viruses or irrevocably 'misaid' data through inconsistent filing or other aspects of poor data management. Computers may be routinely backed up at workplaces when employees are working on networked computers, but this information is unlikely to include personal data such as private diaries, photographs or other life records that would be of interest to historians in the future. And personal computers are precisely that: information stored is largely beyond the access of more than one user. Computers are usually password protected at the login stage, and even when they are not, individual files may be password protected. Because email servers require password login they actually a much more secure store of personal correspondence than the traditional box of received letters - but if the password is not known the store may as well not exist.

In addition, the way we *remember* trivial everyday things - such as telephone numbers, addresses, names, birthdays, tasks and diary commitments - is undoubtedly being changed by new technologies. Where once we kept such things in handy notebooks - or in our heads - they are now stored and accessed digitally, with none of the former aids to

memory such as the place on the page, the colour of the script or the many other material triggers to memory that are suddenly becoming a thing of the past. We are increasingly dependent on memory banks that are external and separate to do the memory work for us.

It is a great paradox that, at a time when there is an unprecedented amount of textual interaction and information about our lives, if the current pattern persist we are in danger of leaving fewer personal textual traces than ever before and those we do leave may well be either inaccessible to indecipherable by others. Only the 'lifecasters' or 'lifeloggers' are taking control of digital technology to create long-lasting records of their lives.¹⁸

Conclusion

The digital revolution has had a more profound effect on biography and life writing than on any other branch of literature, perhaps of any branch of the arts. Playing a crucially important role in the explosion of interest and activity is the Internet. Nothing from the past can rival the scale and speed of the Internet's unleashing of enabling technologies for researching and documenting lives – all kinds of lives, past and present, everywhere. Thousands of family history websites are fuelling an insatiable appetite for genealogical research and now even the most respected print-based reference works for the study of biography are available online, some without charge. Whereas once the historian or biographer had privileged access to information, now many base their research on web-based resources that, by and large, are available to all.

The Internet has also provided the opportunity for 'ordinary' people everywhere to tell their story to a circle of online friends – or to the world. This development represents a massive advance in the process of democratisation that has been occurring in the field of biography over recent decades. It has given people the opportunity to record their lives in far richer, more varied and more creative ways than were previously possible. In order for the academic field of biography to keep pace with the changing technologies and media that most people are now using to communicate and record information on daily basis, new ways of presenting and theorising biography in digital environments are required, and the study of lives needs to be consciously open to this plethora of new forms.

With Web 2.0 technologies and services the democratisation of history has taken another huge step forward. Entirely new forms are being developed with the growth of social networking and the possibility of sharing

personal information and opinions with a global audience on blogs.¹⁹ Never has it been so easy for people to record their lives for others to see. This is allowing for new kinds of personal expression that are far more public than earlier written records could be, and this is fundamentally altering the old patterns of human communication. Never have so many vehicles for self-expression emerged so quickly and confusingly, requiring a language not known as little as five years ago. Perhaps 'democratisation', with its inbuilt sense of communal and consultative order, is no longer an appropriate term for this phenomenon which is characterised as much by its chaotic and unruly nature as by its inclusiveness.

The other side of the coin is that this exciting development has occurred in association with an increasing dependence on online modes of communication and information storage that are temporary, vulnerable and in many cases, inaccessible to others. While they may be more prolific and more accessible they are volatile and fleeting. Could it be that this enormously exciting and apparently emancipatory trend will actually work against the saving of 'ordinary' lives for posterity? The challenge for biographers and historians is to make sure that this is not the case. An important aspect of their role is to work with others across the disciplines to influence the development not only the genres of digital biography and life writing, but also the modes of storage and of access to the digital documents that increasingly represent the most abundant and significant traces that we leave – of our lives.

Notes

1. Walter Benjamin refers to the long tradition of creating replicas through casting (for example, coins) or woodcuts, engraving and etching, but sees photography as starting a new era of mass reproducibility in art.
2. It was long debated whether photography was an art form. As Benjamin points out, 'much futile thought had been devoted to the question of whether photography is an art. The primary question – of whether the very invention of photography had not transformed the entire nature of art – was not raised. Soon the film theoreticians asked the same ill-considered question about film' (1973, p. 229).
3. See Jose van Dijk's (2005) discussion of the evolution of media formats.
4. The same point applies to autobiography as well a biography. Until very recently, publishers were interested in the autobiographies of significant publicly known figures. In Australia, Albert Facey's *A Fortunate Life* and Sally Morgan's *My Place*, both first published in the 1980s, marked the beginning of a broadening of interest to include 'ordinary' lives.
5. Mary Besmeres and Mary Perkins, in the first issue of the *Journal Life Writing*, write 'Autobiography and biography seem to have become the most popular forms of storytelling of our time.' (2004, p. vii).

6. The rising interest in Commonwealth literature in the 1970s and the emergence of postcolonial literary theory in the latter decades of the twentieth century provide ample evidence of these inclusive trends. The stories of indigenous people, immigrants and displaced people received increasing attention, as did the stories of women. As Joy Hooton (1990, p. 1) notes: 'It has become a truism of recent cultural studies that women did not appear in Australian historiography in any important way until 1970. Publicly relegated to a lesser ahistorical sphere by their male contemporaries, and usually by themselves, women were doubly penalized by the prejudices of twentieth century historians in favour of history as the arena of public events.'
7. In the words of Janet Hoskins (1998, p. 5) 'Perhaps because many of the "grand" narratives of science, progress and politics have lost their credibility, "little" narratives situated in the particular experience of individuals have resurfaced. Third World authors are publishing their own personal accounts of the rise to nationhood.... Within the academy, interest in people's own stories has been spurred by a new hermeneutic self-consciousness in criticism and history, and the struggles of feminists and minorities to be heard on a personal as well as political level.'
8. Lev Manovich has argued that the database, as the most fundamental aesthetic element of today's electronic media, is radically changing patterns of creative cultural production. See Manovich and Kratky (2005).
9. As Roy Miki (1998, p. 39) puts it, 'the reader is no longer a stable point of reference, but becomes an active producer of significances and values'.
10. As Joy Hooton (1990, p. xi) notes, 'Autobiography moreover, is now accepted as a highly artful mode, incurably problematic, vulnerable to all the devices of fictional narration.'
11. Paul John Eakin (2004, p. 3) also traces an increased personalisation in life writing to the early 1990s, 'a new frankness which seemed to be the hallmark of contemporary memoir' (including sex lives, alcoholism, mental illness and even adult incest – the topics that may have once been repressed, hidden, or otherwise overlooked in historical accounts, however personal).
12. Zuern makes repeated reference to *The Pain Journal*, an autobiographical account by writer and performance artist Bob Flanagan tracing his last year of life living with cystic fibrosis leading up to his death in 1996 (published posthumously in 2000). For Flanagan the shift from handwriting to typing on a laptop was a revelation. The computer also became an electronic extension of his body. In that early era of personal computing, the unreliability of the computer seemed to mirror his frailty. When the computer breaks down he relates it to his own health. A modem is installed and he refers to it as an 'implant'.
13. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>.
14. See <http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn>.
15. On storytelling, see Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989, pp. 148–9).
16. Perhaps the main reason that biography continues to be published in book form by publishers is that the quality of traditional book publishing is closely monitored and maintained. The same cannot yet be said of the majority of digital publication formats, although scholarly publishing in the form of e-books and online journals has quickly gained respect in the academic community over a very short time.

17. Some of the most innovative and visually interactive examples have been produced over the past decade by the Labyrinth Project at the Annenberg Center for Communication, University of Southern California.
18. On the motivations for lifecasting, see the Wikipedia entry at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lifecasting_%28video_stream%29#Pioneers.
19. To the computer-literate (and those with access to a computer), then, creating and online diary has become as easy as 'putting pen to paper'. On blogs and online diaries, see McNeill (2003).

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