STRAITS TIMES

History's future in our hands.

SIFTING through the relics of the past can be tedious; imagine, for instance, the painstaking slog through mud and dirt to get at a paleolithic bone. But it's by studying our own history that we can better understand the present, particularly within the context of how far we've come as a species. Through our ancestors' accomplishments, whether it's the enduring mystique of the Egyptian pyramids or the naive beauty of a prehistoric cave painting, we can construct a more burnished view of our own selves.

Given that, what chapter to the human story can we hope to contribute so that our descendants may understand and remember us?

We leave two basic kinds of documentary evidence behind: the things we make with deliberation and the detritus that we unthinkingly generate every day.

The first will present a mixed view of our abilities, for not everything we create can be considered the Mona Lisa or the Illiad of our age. For every architectural, technological or artistic triumph we notch up, we seem intent on countering with some monstrosity of human imagination, such as cutting-edge biological weapons, online paedophilia and reality TV.

We may wish to put more stock into the debris of our everyday lives. Just as we have mined knowledge of our ancestors from their bows and arrows, clothes and tools, so may future generations scavenge our leftovers for revealing information.

In this category, any number of things can qualify as symbols of our times. E-mail, Coca-Cola cans and fingernail clippers. Newspapers, voice messages and home movies. Credit card receipts, graffiti and diapers. The list is endless and intriguing.

But before we try and figure out what kind of historical snapshot can be constructed from our leftovers, we need to consider if they will even be around for the future to find.

Museums are stuffed with relics thousands of years old, but surely our records would outlast anything else we've made in the past. Surely with so much technology at our beck and call, our creations would still be around not just for a piffling number of centuries, but for millennia.

The truth is surprisingly uncertain. Our ancestors relied on clay and stone tablets, parchment and paper to record everything from the rise and fall of empires to weekly shopping lists. These records remain intact and legible to this day. But the mass-produced wood pulp paper that we started using some 150 years ago is already beginning to fall apart. Microfilm has been known to degrade after just 10 years while music CDs may go wonky after 15. On the Internet, certainly one of the most extensive repositories of human raw data that's ever existed, pages of information and whole websites can cease to exist.

Because computer technology evolves so quickly, storage formats, programming languages and operating systems fall by the wayside all the time, shoved aside by tools that are faster and more efficient. But as we stop using them, all the information that was recorded on or in them vanishes as well.

For example, when scientists tried in 1999 to retrieve data recorded by the two Viking spacecraft that NASA had launched to Mars in 1975, they found that the tapes had been recorded in an obsolete computer format. It was so old that the programmers who were familiar with it had already died, effectively locking the information on the tapes beyond reach.

NASA was later able to unearth other original records from the Voyager missions, allowing for about a third of the tapes to be deciphered. In other similar cases however, the losses have been irreversible.

In the meantime, the custodians of our printed records have long begun to destroy much of their archives. Libraries have been transferring books, newspapers and other print media to microfilm and microfiche since the 1930s, after which they toss out the originals to save space.

Author and preservationist Nicholson Baker, however, is adamant that keeping the original sources is a far more effective way of safeguarding our records as microfilm and microfiche are not as infallible as we think. His book Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper, published two years ago, is a damning account of how libraries are effectively erasing the very things they are supposed to protect.

Historians note that because of our belief in the empty promise of technology, the period starting from the 1950s can be considered a dark age of record-keeping. We still have the letters of such luminaries as Galileo, Einstein and the Bronte sisters, for example, but with e-mail overtaking letters as the most common form of written communication, there's little hope that such correspondence can survive in future. There is, in fact, the growing question of whether anything of meaning from our age will be left behind.

But efforts are underway to stop our slide into a historical abyss. Mindful of the Internet's evanescent nature, a non-profit group created an online archive in 1996, a digital library of Internet websites and historical collections that can be accessed for free at www.archive.org.

According to the website, this attempt to create "universal access to human knowledge" has already archived more text than can be found in the biggest libraries in the world. If all that information were to be saved onto floppy disks, which were then laid end to end, the disks would stretch from New York, past Los Angeles and halfway to Hawaii.

Then there are organisations such as the United States-based Long Now Foundation, an eclectic group of inventors, designers, engineers and musicians who work to promote long-term thinking. Civilisation, they argue, has such a "pathologically short attention span" that people rarely think beyond their own lifetimes. But if they could be persuaded to think in terms of tens of thousands of years, they may take more responsibility for their actions and stop indulging in destructive behaviour.

To this end the foundation has come up with a series of schemes, including the Digital Dark Age Project, which is a record of information that has disappeared into the digital gap, and the Rosetta Disk Project, which engraves in microscopic size as many languages as possible on nickel disks. The idea is create a modern-day Rosetta Stone - or translation code - which future generations can use to revive lost languages.

There's also the 10,000 Year Clock, named after the length of time it is supposed to last for. The building-sized clock would theoretically tick once year, and would have a century hand that advances every 100 years. The cuckoo would then emerge once every 1,000 years, for the next 10 millennia.

Debate continues to rage over whether such artifacts would last for as long as they're supposed to, or whether they would construct a telling enough picture of our age. What we ultimately, secretly wish for is to leave some lasting monument of ourselves. We are struggling against disappearing from this earthly place without a meaningful trace, but all we may be doing is crafting a futile swipe at immortality. * The writer can be contacted at samry@nstp.com.my.

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