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# A challenge to think in multimillennial terms

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*SAN FRANCISCO*— You've no doubt heard about the Y2K problem. Well, as it turns out, that's not the half of it.

Some of technology's leading lights have identified a Y10K problem, though this one has nothing to do with improperly programmed computer systems.

The culprit in this case is technology itself, the entire Information Age, and the way it is foreshortening everyone's sense of time.

Identifying the problem is a group of technology inventors, futurists, and loyal advocates who have founded something here called the Long Now Foundation. Its mission: to "explore whatever may be helpful for thinking, understanding and acting responsibly over long periods of time." Long as in, say, 10,000-year increments.

Specifically, the Long Now Foundation is planning, among other projects, to build an eight-story-high mechanical clock that will run for 10,000 years, ticking once a year, bonging every century, and sending out a cuckoo each millennium.

It's a monument to remind us we're in this for the long haul.

The foundation has been around since 1996 but is about to go public in a big way. Its work will be unveiled internationally this week at the prestigious World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

In some respects, the clock's originators see it as the perfect antidote to the millennium madness now sweeping the land. "The 2000 thing is about the moment. The clock is about everything but the moment," says Stewart Brand, inventor of the Whole Earth Catalog, co-founder of the futurist Global Business Network, and a prime mover of the Long Now Foundation.

Mr. Brand's band of conspirators includes Danny Hillis, a pioneer in the massive processing used in supercomputers and now a Walt Disney Imagineering vice president; Paul Saffo, director of the Institute for the Future in Menlo Park, Calif.; author Esther Dyson; and Brian Eno, British musician and acclaimed installation artist.

These are all, as Brand calls them, techno-optimists. Not a Luddite among them. Yet they're convinced the world's accelerating technology obsession has encouraged us all to think and act short term, worshipping concepts like "faster and cheaper" instead of "slower and better."

There is some whimsy in the venture, to be sure. But that's only because the group understands the need to capture people's imagination. Behind what Brand calls the mythic qualities of the clock are many hoped-for practical achievements.

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A key component of the foundation's work is a long-term library, which will preserve for centuries records on research, science, and public policy.

"Take the controversy over the Headwaters forest, for example," says Brand, referring to the ancient grove of redwoods in northern California that has been the subject of a protracted battle between loggers and environmentalists. "Each side would register ... their side of the debate with us, for a fee," says Brand. Sometime in the future, the assumptions and arguments that couched the debate could be studied, perhaps guiding future decisionmaking. At a minimum, it would provide a fascinating glimpse into late-20th-century cultural values and ways of reasoning.

The library is needed because of the shrinking share of resources for long-term research in the academic and corporate worlds, Brand says. But another reason concerns one of the great paradoxes of the digital age. While computers and the Internet have increased the availability and transferability of information, they've also created a world where information doesn't last long.

A year ago, a group of scholars, futurists, and others concerned about the durability of digital information met at the Getty Center in Los Angeles to talk about the problem. They concluded that "the end of the most materially obsessed century in history is characterized by a ubiquitous technology that produces ephemera." Egyptian stone tablets lasted thousands of years; modern acid-free paper lasts hundreds; and mediums for digital information (like magnetic tape) can start degrading after five.

Compounding that is the problem of constantly changing computer platforms, software, and operating systems: Even preserved digital information can be virtually impossible to see just a few years after it is created. As Brand puts it, "it's never been so easy in history to copy things, and it's never been so hard in history to preserve things."

Mr. Hillis, the originator of the clock idea, is convinced we're in the middle of what will be a "digital gap," a historical blank screen in which much of the current electronic record will simply vanish. He's optimistic, though, that society will recognize and solve the preservation problem eventually.

But progress on preservation requires some new values that have not been part of the frenzied pace of the technology age. That's where the clock comes in. The foundation plans to have a prototype working before the end of the year. Though smaller than the 10,000-year version, it has already led to several preliminary design patents.

There is much discussion of where the clock will reside. Perhaps it will sit on a high desert, where weather conditions would be most benign to its mechanics. The location has to be remote, but not inaccessible. Alexander Rose, executive director of Long Now, says "We want people to ... have to go through something of a journey to get there."

While working as fast as it can, the foundation views deadlines for the clock unconventionally: "The hope is to set in motion something that takes a long time," says Brand with a smile.

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