

## Accurate Online Genealogy and the Digital Afterlife

Michael E. Byczek, an Illinois attorney, proposed a direct blood descendant administered framework in September 2024 to promote accurate genealogy after discovering widespread inaccurate information about his ancestors on various online platforms. He began genealogical research in the early 1990s and over the years applied professional software engineering experience combined with legal insight to advocate ethical and moral-based genealogy on the Internet. The new frontier in genealogy at the intersection of law and technology is called the “Digital Afterlife”. The dead are brought back to life on the Internet through a form of online immortality. However, this virtual world is driven by the antiquated view that the dead don’t have rights.

If web-based companies can create a virtual world where the Digital Afterlife exists, then Michael E. Byczek, as an attorney, has the conceptual right to appoint himself the legal representative (“administrator”) of each direct blood ancestor. The objective is to protect how direct ancestors are portrayed on the Internet. This is the virtual equivalent of Michael E. Byczek, as an heir, initiating probate proceedings for a direct blood ancestor who passed away without a Will to administer his/her Digital Afterlife. In the absence of other genetic cousins who step forward to do the same, Michael E. Byczek is the sole administrator. If other blood relatives do come forward, they collectively serve as co-administrators (i.e. supervised probate administration). Third parties, especially anonymous users, should not have an unrestricted and unlimited right to dictate how the dead are portrayed in the Digital Afterlife. Direct blood descendants must always take precedence over third parties without exception when it comes to how their ancestors are portrayed online. It is unacceptable for those who died decades or centuries before the Internet existed to be the subject of third party cyber-squatters who block access and refuse to cooperate with descendants.

All genealogy and social media platforms pose a risk of fraud, cyber-bullying, intimidation, identity theft, scams, “bait”, fake images/documents (i.e. AI-generated), social engineering, trolling, slander/libel, and other inappropriate conduct against living descendants. As a result of significant efforts to stop such online conduct, Michael E. Byczek proposed a direct descendant administration framework for shared responsibility that is specific to community-based platforms (i.e. familysearch.org) that allows any anonymous user to unilaterally delete or rewrite entire profiles:

1. Direct blood descendants of a common ancestor serve as co-administrators of a profile. Each descendant fully identifies him/herself showing his/her relationship to the deceased. Only those who identify themselves, within privacy rules and concerns, may edit a profile. Otherwise, nobody knows if that user is real or fake.
2. The requirement of direct blood includes those whom a direct descendant authorizes to act on his/her behalf. This could include adopted children, step-children, or spouse (i.e. immediate family of a direct blood descendant).
3. There are realistic scenarios where a relative, but not direct descendant, may briefly comment on a profile. For example, a direct ancestor had other children and marriages that are part of the overall biography (i.e. crossover).
4. Each co-administrator has equal access to the profile and may promote their own research. The only expectation is for each contribution to be respectful in “agree to disagree” style.
5. This framework has too many special scenarios for enumeration, such as dead babies without living descendants.
6. Gratitude is expressed for volunteers who digitize, transcribe, and index records. They should not interpret the data.
7. Co-administrators need never directly communicate, provided all are respectful towards each other in common cause.
8. Third-parties on multi-profile platforms (i.e. ancestry.com) should link to one or more direct descendants instead of creating or uploading their own interpretation of historical records.

Genetic cousins may defer to Michael E. Byczek’s legal judgment for how best to stop third party interference and promote accurate genealogy on the Internet. All blood relatives are encouraged to participate, contribute, and collaborate in a respectful and dignified manner.

The objective is to deter interference. Third parties should not upload, create, edit, or manipulate official genealogy profiles on the Internet without discussing the content with Michael E. Byczek and other descendants named as co-administrators. All comments in this document and proposed framework are subject to the Terms of Service of the respective platforms. Michael E. Byczek’s role as a virtual legal representative is a proposed framework and private claim of stewardship limited to genealogy rather than a court-sanctioned designation.

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