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Air aces show fame is not fair

With the newspapers filled with stories about minor celebrities, you might think it is easy to become famous. But a theory of fame developed by statisticians suggests people are far more likely to languish unrecognised while a few become more famous than they deserve.

Mikhail Simkin and Vwani Roychowdhury from the University of California, Los Angeles, analysed the fame of “ace” pilots who fought for Germany during the World War I by comparing the number of web pages that now mention each pilot with the number of planes that the pilot shot down.

They discovered that rather than being directly proportional, the fame of the pilots actually increases exponentially with the number of planes they shot down. This means that fame is not distributed fairly among the 393 pilots in the sample.

“The exponential will blow up small differences in merit,” explains Roychowdhury. For example, the “Red Baron” – Manfred von Richthofen – is the most famous of all the German aces, with 4720 Google hits. He also shot down the most planes, 80 in total, before he died in battle. This represents only 1.6 per cent of the total number of planes shot down, yet he gained 27 per cent of the fame.

Meanwhile, the 60 lowest-scoring pilots receive less recognition than they deserve. Having shot down five planes each – 5.9 per cent of the total aircraft destroyed they appear on only 2.6 per cent – of the web pages.

Although other factors come into play – Max Immelman was a pilot renowned for his acrobatic skill rather than his deadliness, for example – Simkin and Roychowdhury found that about half the variation in the pilots’ fame is due to achievement.

They now plan to test the fame of modern celebrities such as tennis players and musicians, to see whether the same relationship still holds between achievement and fame.

By Jenny Hogan

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