

A DOCTORAL STUDY OF THE USE OF THE INTERNET FOR GENEALOGY

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Resumen: Research evidence shows the Internet has had a revolutionary impact on our society and the way we live everyday. Consequently, as the Internet influences the many aspects of everyday lives, hobbyist interests in areas such as history have also been enhanced and changed by the Internet as a social technology. One hobby, genealogy, has risen above all to be one of the most popular online, providing an opportunity to understand the use of the Internet within a broader context. As a result, the author has commenced a PhD research program with Curtin University of Technology, Australia, to examine how genealogists use the Internet, and to investigate the consequences of the development of genealogy as a significant Internet-based activity. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to present the research notes of the study.

Palabras clave: genealogy, Internet, methodology, social technology

INTRODUCTION

Research evidence shows the Internet has had a revolutionary impact on our society and the way we live everyday. Consequently, as the Internet influences the many aspects of everyday lives, hobbyist interests in areas such as history have also been enhanced and changed by the Internet as a social technology. One hobby, genealogy, has risen above all to be one of the most popular online, providing an opportunity to understand the use of the Internet within a broader context. As a result, the author has commenced a PhD research program to examine how genealogists use the Internet, and to investigate the consequences of the development of genealogy as a significant Internet-based activity. These

research notes discuss Internet usage by hobbyists and how genealogy has risen to be one of the most popular hobbies online. It defines genealogy and discusses why genealogists might use the Internet for their hobby, in addition to exploring the available literature for genealogy, online genealogy, and the broader context of online hobbies. It concludes, given genealogy's popularity as an online hobby, and the lack of empirical evidence on the use of the Internet for online genealogy and hobbies, that online genealogy is an important and under-researched aspect of Internet use. Moreover, because of the tensions surrounding, for example, information veracity and quality, privacy, and commercialisation, this work can serve as a valuable case study for certain deeper issues relating to the use of the Internet in broader disciplines such as history.

RESEARCH NOTES

Neustadt, Robinson, and Kestnbaum¹ say "the Internet is many things to many people", though the popular press declare the Internet a "hobbyists' paradise"². In fact, the PEW Research Center, who actively explore the impact of the Internet on society and everyday life, find the hunt for hobby information the most popular feature on the Internet besides email³. PEW's surveys have found three out of four Internet users seek information about a hobby online⁴, increasing by 40 percent between March 2000 and January 2002 from 65 million to 91 million Internet users⁵. And the Internet is not only a way forward for users with existing hobbies; it also plays a crucial or important role in the adoption of a new hobby⁶.

Online, hobbies can take many forms. They "may encompass many of the more specific

Internet activities, such as checking sports scores, looking for information on leisure activities or researching religious and spiritual life"⁷. For example, About.com's most popular hobby sites include quilting, cross-stitching, bird-watching, radio-controlled vehicles, genealogy, knitting, woodworking and jewellery making⁸. Internet users can obtain information online about amateur astronomy, stamp collecting, and hobby steam boating. The Internet allows ham radio enthusiasts to make worldwide connections between their amateur radio stations⁹. And within the vast number of hobbyist websites now on the Internet, web rings link content¹⁰ within each hobbyist category, such as antiques, art glass and collectibles¹¹, meccano¹², and floaty pen trading¹³). Thought with the many hobbies online, one leisure pursuit has risen above all to be the most popular on the Internet. Interest in this hobby, genealogy, rose to 60 percent of the United States public in 2000¹⁴. Genealogy is a hobby where 54 million people belong to a family where someone used the Internet to research their family history. It has been found as a dominant hobby activity for online seniors¹⁵, and finally, one in which the Internet is said to have revolutionised the hobby. Genealogy, as described by Encyclopædia Britannica¹⁶, is 'the study of family origins and history, where genealogists compile lists of ancestors arranged in pedigree charts or other written forms'. It is a 'universal phenomenon and in forms varying from the rudimentary to the comparatively complex, is found in all nations and periods'.

It is "[...] a fascinating subject, whether it is tracing a family history to establish eligibility in a patriotic society, or to make a contribution to the preservation of local and family history, [or to uncover the origin of ones self]. It requires diligence, perseverance and imagination; [...] care, skill and labor. The genealogist must test every bit of information in relation to possibility, probability and from the various viewpoints of history, geography, physiology, logic, and the other sciences. Include any material that can pass these tests. Exclude any that cannot. If you make these tests and exercise this care, you can call yourself a genealogist"¹⁷.

Genealogists generally commence their research with themselves, using the information to identify their parents, and in turn, their grandparents, great-grandparents, and so on, in a tree configuration. They record dates and places of

births, marriages, deaths, places of residence and other information, such as occupation, military service or church affiliation. Pedigree charts are used to record familial relations, and history sheets for supplementary information such as anecdotes, newspaper accounts, or other miscellaneous historical information. Every detail needs to be referred to the original source, invariably a primary or vital record, though sometimes secondary sources such as oral history, family bibles, published genealogies, and transcribed records. In this way, genealogy is a fact finding, information seeking, and sleuth requiring craft. Genealogical research is not always done alone, despite it often being a personal quest. On the contrary, genealogists throughout history have interacted with other interested parties for knowledge, the sharing of successes and brick walls, and the possibility of a family connection between common lines. As genealogists invariably become record specialists, due to the accessing of records of similar type, across differing time periods, and geographical regions, their knowledge is invaluable to other genealogists and indeed the wider genealogical community. In fact, when family connections are made, genealogists collaborate together to research toward a common goal—each individual working on a common link to progress the work much faster than one alone, or each perhaps progressing on different lines to fasten the more broad research objective—. Additionally, many genealogists have in the past collaborated to make available information to other genealogists—transcribing repositories of information that are disappearing due to physical degradation or to remove the barriers of geographic physicality—in part due to their own need for the information, or to offer something of gift economy proportions to the general genealogical community.

As a discipline that has been in existence since times of the Bible, and for western civilisation, since the beginnings of American society independently from England, why might genealogists embrace and utilise a technology such as the Internet for their hobby? We can first look to genealogy's past to uncover a history of access and technological revolutions embraced within the hobby, before finding secondly, the social and methodological practice of genealogy, as described in the preceding paragraphs, is suited to technological enhancement.

In the first instance, a brief history of genealogy over the last 150 years shows precedence in adopting improvements to the hobby, by means of access and technology revolutions. Sheppard¹⁸ tells us that the difficulties of early genealogical work, such as that conducted in the 1700's in America, was that source material was rarely available in material form. If it was available, the genealogist 'often had to travel considerable distances on foot or by horse to many different ill-kept offices, to dig out the necessary facts'¹⁹. Therefore, as Bocstruck²⁰ explains, the genealogical societies created in the United States in the mid nineteenth century, who began collating and making available records to the general public, were for the first time facilitating an access revolution for genealogy; bringing centrality and organised genealogy endeavour to the hobby. The continuing efforts of these societies in the mid 1930's brought "an ever widening body of [genealogical] study aids, research centres and organisations. within reach of more and more persons"²¹. In turn, by the early 1940's, organisations such as the Genealogical Society of Utah were microfilming their records to assist in even easier research for the public at no charge²². This work was a catalyst that Encyclopædia Britannica attributes to the increase of amateur genealogical work in the western world from 1945. By the 1970's, genealogical organisations, including libraries, offered a combination of paper-based and computerised records and indexes to their patrons, and the first genealogy program for a home computer appeared by 1979²³. Though in 1981, the merging of genealogy and technology got a major boost, as Richard Pence²⁴ explains:

"That year saw three significant events: A major article on personal computers in the staid National Genealogical Society Quarterly; the appearance of the first sales booth featuring personal computers and genealogical software at the Society's annual conference; and the launching. of a bimonthly journal called, naturally, 'Genealogical Computing.' [Before long], the 'genealogical computing' world [was] awash with a bewildering myriad of programs, dozens (if not hundreds) of computer interest groups fostered by genealogical societies or genealogy interest groups fostered by computer organizations, and [was] tied together by more than 200 electronic genealogical bulletin boards."

With computers, genealogists embraced the database, and enjoyed ease of recording and access to their own genealogical research. They could also trade GEDCOM files from their genealogy software in lieu of hand or typewritten reports from other genealogists, and share the outcomes of their research with family, friends and other interested researchers, using automatically formatted printed reports. By purchasing floppy disks (and then compact disks) of the indexes and records they could only previously view in libraries and genealogical societies, genealogists built personal libraries of information for increased accessibility, and to aid in helping others interests. The database allowed genealogists to go beyond what they had been able to discover about similar families when they had relied entirely upon traditional (particularly non-electronic) research approaches²⁵.

The Internet can be seen as a logical step in the chain reaction of access and technological revolution within genealogy. Indeed the Internet can be said to have revolutionised the hobby of genealogy, from its earliest days of public access. To summarise Isaacson²⁶ (1998), genealogists have been using the Internet for their hobby as early as 1983, when the first genealogy based newsgroup net.roots was launched to facilitate communication among the early online genealogists. Shortly after, in 1987, Alf Christophersen of Norway, and Marty Hoag of North Dakota State University, started the mailing list ROOTS-L to broaden the online communication options for genealogists, and as Isaacson says, 'with the creation of ROOTS-L, things began to happen'. An online database of the surnames people were searching for was proposed in late 1988, and around the same time, an online library of genealogy files was created. The ensuing volunteer efforts of hundreds, and then thousands, of genealogists embracing the Internet began creating the building blocks of the genealogists' Internet today. For example, the creators of large Internet- based genealogy databases such as USGenWeb saw the vast potential of the Internet for genealogy:

"if a modest-sized [computer-based] database enabled us to make significant breakthroughs in linking individuals and families, what might be possible in such potentially huge and worldwide inter- connected GenWeb files where hundreds, thousands, perhaps even millions of people

could contribute the results of their research [on the Internet]?"

So in the second instance, we find that the hobby of genealogy is suited to the Internet, as the Internet facilitates the social and methodological aspects of genealogy. To explain, the Internet 'removes the constraints of time and money involved in long and costly trips to remote' repositories of information²⁷ by enabling centralised repositories of information available on a global scale. Genealogists have unprecedented access to transcribed documents from all over the world, allowing them to obtain genealogical data from one place, such as: births, deaths and marriages²⁸; census records²⁹; and cemetery inscriptions³⁰. The Internet's interactive nature also facilitates a hobby that "is all about sharing"³¹. Mailing lists³², personal e-mail messages and chat replace most genealogical correspondence. The Internet is the publishing medium of choice for research output, due to the ease and creativeness of publishing, and the simplicity of continual updates. 'Genealogists collaborate around the world via the Internet, sharing their family history, research questions, and latest discoveries. They upload family photos, genealogies, and even digital movies for their relatives to enjoy'³³. They also work on record transcription projects together, contributing individually to online repositories of information, in global displays of volunteer, coordinated effort.

The emergence of the Internet as an integral medium for genealogical work was not all positive, however. Some of the negative perceptions include: concerns over information veracity and quality; fears about intrusions into privacy and even the chance for identities to be stolen; and the commercialisation of both amateur labour and previously free information. Briefly, in the first instance, the Internet enables many people from all over the world to pursue hobbies in ways that are easier and faster than the pre-Internet era. For genealogy, gone are the physical restrictions of access to records and other genealogists that made the hobby of old laborious and time consuming. Thus the many genealogies published on the Internet have given rise to the "quickie genealogist" –those who go online to pursue their ancestry, and by using the work of others, copy the information verbatim, disregarding basic genealogical methodology, to regurgitate the material, mistakes and all, as their own. This quick entry into genealogy

results in new hobbyists not being socialised into the basic and specific values, skills, and methods of genealogy, such as citing references, and confirming sources to primary records. Thus in response to the alarming proliferation of false, misleading, unsubstantiated, and otherwise unfounded genealogical information on the Internet, groups such as the Internet Genealogists for Quality have consequently been organised by concerned genealogists and family history enthusiasts. Secondly, as more consumers are lured on the Internet into providing personal information to enter contests, receive freebies, and for other purposes, the chance of that information finding its way on the Internet grows³⁴. And for the specific example of online genealogy, many authors have reported similar problems surrounding the ease of genealogical publishing, and the subsequent (generally inadvertent) publishing of personal information³⁵. A Wired News report proclaims online genealogy as the new threat to privacy³⁶, and Dick Eastman³⁷ cites a US News and World report by Margaret Mannix:

"Does your family have a home page on the Internet? If so, you might want to reconsider how much personal information you post online. With artists who steal others' identities, get credit in their names, then leave innocent people with a mountain of debt to fight and ruined credit to clean up are discovering the charms of the Net".

Although few documented examples of stolen identities arising from the private information published in the specific form of online genealogies could be located³⁸, family genealogy websites are among a growing list of possible providers of information supporting identity theft related fraud. As a result, many genealogical organisations now publish free guidelines for the safe publication of genealogies online, such as the Genealogy Privacy Organisation³⁹.

Genealogy has a tradition of volunteerism –one that encapsulates gift economy principles of reciprocity– as genealogists perform look-ups at local repositories for distant researchers, trade information, or dedicate time for transcription projects of common interest, in anticipated reciprocation from specific genealogists or the broader genealogical community. On the other hand, genealogy is not always an entirely free pursuit. There has always been a small commercial or 'for fee' component in the hobby

of genealogy, usually restricted to education materials, travelling or documentation costs, or paying genealogy society fees in return for organised networking, access to their libraries, or for their quarterly periodicals. Thus as a third issue, it's that the development of online genealogy has occurred in parallel to the commercialisation of the Internet, requires consideration.

To be precise, while the Internet has the capacity to both enhance collaborative and voluntary information sharing, at the same time, it enables the commercialisation of those activities in ways that produce conflict and concern, when matched with the aforementioned traditions of volunteerism in genealogy and in fact the Internet itself. For instance, leading online commercial genealogy provider Ancestry.com exceeded 1.5 million paid subscriptions in 2004 (MyFamily.com Inc), amid complaints of freely uploaded family trees being sold on commercial CD's; of continuing memberships after cancellation; and of 'countless emails and postings to forums of people denouncing Ancestry. as the "big bad wolf" which are "only out to make money"⁴⁰. The success of genealogy on the Internet has also attracted those external to the genealogical community; from the broader e-commerce world. After two years of maintaining the infamous genealogy portal Cyndi's List on her own volunteer time, as her genealogy journalist husband Mark Howells⁴¹ reports, Cyndi Howells found herself fielding three separate unsolicited offers of business relationships in late 1997 and early 1998, ranging from outright purchase, to commercial sponsorship, and to advertising deals. "Not at all comfortable with the perceived changes that commercialization of her web site would bring. . [and] in considering the commercial offers, she insisted that her web site always remain a free resource open to all". Similarly, online projects such as GenExchange are working hard to lead the way toward the non-commercialisation of online genealogy, via free access to the output of data transcription projects, public outreach, and education.

Taking into account the aforementioned popularity, benefits and issues surrounding genealogy on the Internet, it is surprising to find a lack of scholarly or empirical research for the intersection of the two fields. We do find however many empirical accounts of genealogy as a general topic published in the last twenty-five years. An in depth history or 'genealogy of

genealogy' can be found in the works of Bockstruck⁴² and Taylor & Crandal⁴³. Green⁴⁴ writes about genealogy as an occupation; Drake⁴⁵ explores genealogical motivation from a psychological perspective; and Bishop⁴⁶ creates narratives on the meaning of genealogical research to the individual practitioner. In the field of librarianship and archivists, Duff and Johnson⁴⁷ interviewed ten genealogists regarding their information seeking behaviour in public archives, and the co-operative provision of materials by genealogical societies and libraries is explored by Litzer⁴⁸. And many researchers continue the battle to promote genealogy as a legitimate field of historical enquiry and social study⁴⁹.

For online genealogy however –outside of the popular and trade press– the largest body of knowledge is a growing number of 'how-to' guides. This material advises hobbyists what they can do on the Internet, and is largely based on the personal experiences of the author, rather than a wider empirical standpoint to explain the phenomenon of genealogy on the Internet. Conversely, some parties have performed mini-survey's on online genealogical activity, though they provide little insight into the broader phenomenon. That is, some were created for commercial or internal purposes, of which the full results are not available. Others utilise restricted samples for specific goals⁵⁰; publish their survey's without notification of result release⁵¹; or are restricted in scope⁵² or by region⁵³. Other researchers have utilised the Internet to gain online access to genealogists, for the purposes of surveying general genealogical motivation⁵⁴ or travel as a part of the genealogical quest⁵⁵, though they are unrelated in scope to the proposed research. Stepping back to a broader perspective of the online hobbyist domain, again very few empirical studies can be found. Hielema's 2003 study found photographers use the Internet for email, to research supplies, and publish their website, though less than 25 percent of the respondents were hobbyist in nature. While Isomursu, Tasajärvi, Perälä, and Isomursu⁵⁶ discuss categories of hobbyists, and the characteristics needed from a good Internet-based delivery platform to satisfy different categories of amateur video producers, no empirical investigation was performed to uncover how amateurs currently use the Internet for their hobby. In turn, no empirical research on the use of the Internet for genealogy could be located.

RESEARCH INTENT

Given genealogy's popularity as an online hobby, and the lack of empirical evidence on the use of the Internet for online genealogy and hobbies, online genealogy acts as a case study for certain deeper issues relating to the use of the Internet. The ensuing research program has therefore intends to trace a history of access and technology revolutions within gene, leading to the use of the Internet as a major part of genealogy. Using both quantitative and qualitative data, the research will investigate the phenomena of genealogy online as conducted by, and for, the online genealogical community, in terms of publishing, interacting, transacting, and collaborating activities. Finally, the research will draw broader conclusions from specific examples of online genealogy issues. Topics such as information veracity and quality, on account of new entrants not being socialised into the values, skills, and methods of genealogy; the ease of publication and sharing of information facilitating problems with privacy and stolen identities; and the capacity to both enhance collaborative and voluntary information sharing,

while at the same time enabling the commercialisation of those activities in ways that produce conflict and concern, when matched with the traditions of volunteerism in genealogy, and in fact the Internet itself.

Moreover, the research will explicate what a broad range of online actions reveal about the perceptions, needs, concerns and expectations of genealogists, where no other study to date has done, providing an area of research from which to draw broader conclusions. Additionally, the results will be of benefit and interest to a broad range of parties, including but not limited to: those pursuing the hobby of genealogy on the Internet, as a way to understand how the online genealogical community operates, and as an effective guide in the use of the technology in the craft; those in the practice of, and provision of commercial services to, genealogists by parties such as professional genealogists, societies, government departments, and historical ad commercial entities; and those in the decision-making role concerning the availability of genealogical and historical records to the general public.

NOTAS

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