Hobby Genealogist Information Community

Darlena Belushin

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Dr. Michael Stephens

San Jose State University

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Abstract

The hobby genealogist information community exhibits characteristics common to information communities in general, along with exhibiting several unique characteristics. Through analysis and synthesis of the scholarly literature, exploration of websites, many of which are community based, and knowledge gained from lectures and professional associations' guidelines, this research paper sheds light on the habits and needs of hobby genealogists. It examines genealogists' need to look beyond records to find meaning within their family histories; their need be approached with sensitivity and treated with ethical behavior; and their need to receive adequate, user-centric assistance during the various phases of the information search process. This paper proposes specific ways in which librarians can meet those needs. It advocates approaching genealogists with an attitude that respects their quest for meaning, suggests resources to better understand ethical issues within the field of genealogy, and provides examples of shaping information around user needs. It also identifies areas that could benefit from further research. The reader will gain an understanding of how librarians can best serve the hobby genealogist information community.

Introduction

A century ago, critics derided the practice of genealogy as little more than the search for illustrious ancestors. Genealogists were mocked as wanting to prove that royalty ran in one's bloodline, or that one's ancestors had boarded the Mayflower, braving the choppy seas of the Atlantic to claim their place in history as early inhabitants of the New World.

Over time, many factors caused changes in genealogy's reputation and popularity. One was the world wars. Soldiers deployed to far off lands were suddenly immersed in foreign cultures, sparking a longing for connection to their own heritage. (Bidlack, 1983). Another factor was the 1976 publication of Alex Haley's book *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* and the following year's broadcast of the television miniseries, which caused hobby genealogy to surge in popularity. Then, in the 1990s, as genealogists discovered the potential of the World Wide Web to advance their pursuits, genealogical databases began to proliferate online, and people commonly started using computer programs to build their family trees. Queries about one's ancestors, rather than being sent through the mail and being answered within about a month, were often answered within days (Smith, 2006). Genealogy rose so much in popularity that when the website of a service organization of the LDS Church called FamilySearch made its debut 1999, it received more than 40 million hits on its first day (Molto, 2009). The pastime continued to grow until by 2005, 73% of Americans said they had an interest in discovering their family history (Hershkovitz, 2012). Hobby genealogists are almost always motivated by the desire to trace their own family history. In contrast, professional genealogists are concerned with many families, and are more interested in learning the principles of genealogy research, since they plan to use them for wider study (Encyclopaedia Brittanica, 2017).

The hobby genealogist information community fits Fisher and Durrance's (2003) model by exploiting the information sharing qualities of technology, providing a multiplier effect. The community emphasizes collaboration among diverse groups, forms around the needs of its members, removes barriers to information and to trust, and connects people. It relies on retrieval of historic census returns, obituaries, cemetery records and ships' passenger logs available online for free or by paid subscription, news articles on websites that serve the population beyond genealogists, discussion forums, old photos and more.

This research paper explores the needs of the hobby genealogist information community with regard to its members' needs to look beyond records to find meaning in their family histories, to be approached with sensitivity and treated with ethical behavior; and to receive adequate assistance during all phases of the search process. This paper proposes ways for librarians to better meet those needs. It also suggests areas for further research.

Review of Literature

Stages of Activity

Darby and Clough (2013) interviewed 23 amateur genealogists and gathered 23 questionnaires from 23 amateur genealogists. They concluded that the genealogists routinely progress through eight phases: 1) trigger event; 2) collect family information; 3) learn the process; 4) break in; 5) tree-build - easy; 6) tree-build - medium; 7) tree build - hard; 8) push back selected lines.

Duff and Johnson (2003) found that the genealogists seek information in the order of names, places, and dates, then subjects and events.

Viewed together, Darby and Clough's and Duff and Johnson's contributions form a clear picture of the way in which hobby genealogists do their work: After events that motivate them to get started, hobby genealogists continue to develop their research skills for finding ancestors,

often enjoying a string of successes along the way, then they delve deeper into their research to find out about their more distant ancestors. As they move forward, the information search becomes less about finding names, and more about subjects and events, leading to a better understanding of the culture in which an ancestor lived.

Role of Librarians and Archivists

In the past, many librarians frowned upon genealogy. In his article from 1985, Null states that genealogy has long been seen as the purview of public libraries, or historical and genealogical societies, but not academic libraries. Over time, genealogy's reputation improved within academia. In 2012, Hershkovitz suggested a taxonomy for genealogy as an academic multidisciplinary research field. His six proposed categories for classification are people, families, communities, representations, data, and "bird's-eye view," which groups ethics, legalities, and methods for teaching genealogy research.

Null's 1985 article traces a history of public librarians not treating genealogists well. More recent research has found that relationships between librarians and genealogists are generally not close. In 2007, Yakel and Torres published an article based on interviews with 29 genealogists which demonstrated that genealogists did not place archivists centrally in the search process. Yet, a few years later, Skinner's 2010 study of 28 genealogists found that amateur genealogists enjoy their interactions with librarians.

Information Sharing

Genealogists often rely on each other for support and information. Yakel and Torres (2007) have witnessed genealogists solving problems in groups. They have seen genealogists recount their recent discoveries, then receive praise from a group. Ten of 29 genealogists Yakel and Torres interviewed mentioned that they help other researchers through volunteerism.

Fulton (2009b) discovered that certain social norms shape the way in which genealogists relate online. Her study looked at the intersection of leisure behavior and information behavior with regard to 24 amateur genealogists from six countries. Genealogy researchers would continue to nurture connections with others on the chance that one would discover something about another's lineage. Reciprocity is expected, requiring researchers to remember the searches of others.

Sustaining the Search for Information

Fulton (2009a) contends that amateur genealogists are a unique group of information seekers because they associate information seeking with pleasure. Their pleasure intensifies as they proceed deeper into the hobby. Bishop (2008) notes that genealogists feel a sense of responsibility to past and future generations. Fulton (2009a) agrees, saying genealogists see their information seeking as a way to build a historical legacy for future generations of relatives.

Weaknesses and Gaps in the Research

The scholarly literature provides a wealth of information about the hobby genealogist community's information seeking behavior, yet raises some questions. It's apparent that Bates' (1989) theory of berrypicking applies to hobby genealogists, who are motivated to find information by searching a variety of record types online and in person, consulting with their peers, and asking librarians for help. More studies about the specific technologies genealogists adopt would point the way for librarians and archivists to be of greater assistance. Lucy, a master's student whose 2015 article was published in San Jose State's *SLIS Student Research Journal*, gathered 425 responses to a survey she created to determine which research trends and emerging technologies genealogists had adopted. The majority of her respondents used Ancestry's Family Tree Maker software. *Ancestry.com* was the favored paid subscription

website, and *Find A Grave* and *FamilySearch* were the preferred free sites. Aside from the

specific information Lucy provides, her study is notable for its large sample size, which can be

attributed to the fact that Lucy distributed her survey through Facebook and other online

platforms. Similar large studies by more established scholars would further illuminate

genealogists' needs and preferences. In fact, Savolainen calls for such studies in his 2010 paper

on everyday life information seeking (ELIS), saying, "As the daily information environment

becomes more complex and information seeking is affected by an increasing number of

contextual factors, there is a need to elaborate the research settings of ELIS" (p. 1786).

Methodology

As I progressed through my research gathering, I noticed my relationship with some of

the models of information behavior we studied in INFO 200. At first, I modeled Zipf's principle

of least effort (Stephens, n.d.) when I clicked on the INFO 200 LibGuide and typed "genealogy"

into the first database I saw, Library & Information Science Source. I was unfamiliar with

academic writings on genealogy, so I interpreted my search results as a list of articles that all

carried nearly equal relevance to my studies. I embodied Kuhlthau's (1991) theory of feeling

states associated with information-seeking; I felt the uncertainty that can accompany the early

stages of the process. I tried searching for peer-reviewed articles using the keywords

"genealogy" and "hobby," which resulted in a useful find: "Quid Pro Quo: Information Sharing

in Leisure Activities," (2009b) by Crystal Fulton. A search for "genealogy" and "amateur" was

much more fruitful, yielding articles by Darby and Clough (2013), Skinner (2010), and another

article by Fulton (2009a). Over days and weeks, I refined my understanding of the information

community I had chosen, making it easier to spot promising resources as I used more keywords.

I didn't need to rely on just a few academic journals because the literature that applied to my

subject was fairly abundant, and I had learned to check the citations from the articles I had

studied, which proved to be an effective technique. Two especially helpful articles in that regard were written by MLIS students. Skinner's and Lucy's student work contained long lists of frequently cited articles that suited my level of research. I also used Google Scholar, but mainly so I could familiarize myself with it. I used the King Library Catalog to find a few genealogy books. In the scholarly research, I did not find much specific information about genealogy websites, except in Molto's (2009) article. I already knew about *Ancestry.com*, and Molto introduced me to *FamilySearch*, *HeritageQuest* and *Cyndi's List,* among other sites. To find several community-based sites, such as *Genealogists' Forum – We Have Branches Everywhere!,* I searched Google. As I gained the materials I needed, I entered Kuhlthau's feeling states of relief and satisfaction.

Discussion

Seeking Meaning

Yakel and Torres (2007) assert that genealogists find records and place them into family trees in order to create coherent narratives that satisfy a quest for meaning. They state:

> Self-identification and self-discovery through the role of family historian are important dimensions of the genealogical research process. Family history is more than seeking names and dates through the location of birth, death, and marriage records. While this information is essential to complete the pedigree chart and research family lines, genealogists need to fill in the story between or within those lines. This aspect of the process also begins to address genealogists' underlying need for meaning, not just information. Genealogists are seekers of meaning as much as they are searchers for records. As seekers of meaning, they are less invested in proving the truth of stories and records, but more in uncovering coherent narratives. (p. 111)

An earlier study by Yakel (2004) concluded:

At its most abstract level, family history is a form of seeking meaning about one's

ancestor's lives, one's own life, and the potential connections among people--all essential

elements of finding meaning and coherence. As such genealogy is a means of working

towards a *mastery of life.* (Conclusions, para. 3)

Yakel's and Torres' studies suggest that librarians and archivists might benefit from an

awareness of genealogists' underlying quest for meaning and use it as a frame of reference

during their interactions.

Need for Sensitivity and Ethics

Genealogy can be a lot of fun. Fulton (2009a) found that, "Engaging personally with

research material was part of the fun and excitement for participants" (p. 255). Yet sometimes,

genealogists and those working with them must face unpleasant findings. Yakel and Torres

(2007) claim that some genealogists have difficulty letting go of family legends after the truth

proves them wrong. They describe a genealogist from their study who had to come to terms with

the fact that her ancestor was a military deserter. Partial truths can come to light, too, say Yakel

and Torres, creating a change in the allegorical meaning of a story. Another genealogist from

their study told of a family story in which a relative was killed by an explosion at the gunpowder

factory where he was employed. The researcher uncovered the truth: The man had died of a

stroke after his arm was amputated because it had been mangled by factory machinery.

Genealogy websites deal with potentially stressful issues at the practical level. The

community-based site *Genealogists' Forum – We Have Branches Everywhere!* contains a

"sensitive research" thread for discussions of topics such as adoption that might upset site

visitors or those randomly searching the web. The thread is blocked from Google and other

search engines.

Site administrators at *Genealogists' Forum* also ask that users not publish names of living people on their site. In making such a request of its users, *Genealogists' Forum* is trusting them to respect the privacy of others. Such trust is a characteristic of information communities as described by Fisher and Durrance (2003).

Ancestry.com has established stricter procedures to protect privacy. Members who post their family trees can include living people in them, knowing that Ancestry will go to lengths to hide their names from the public. When a tree is viewed by someone other than its creator, the name is replaced with "Private." To make a determination about who is considered living, Ancestry follows a protocol that includes checking to see if the person is listed as "dead" or has a date of death. Any person not marked as dead who is younger than 100 years old is considered alive by Ancestry. If there is no birth information, Ancestry estimates a birth date based on the person's relatives. If no safe estimate can be made, the person is considered living. Users can share their trees with other individuals and change the settings to allow viewing of living people's names, but Ancestry encourages users to share only things they have permission to share.

Librarians can find guidance relating to such ethical issues in the work of Garnar (2015). According to Garnar, the codes of ethics from four major professional associations—The American Library Association, Society of American Archivists, Association of Independent Information Professionals, and Federation of Library Associations and Institutions—contain passages that address privacy issues. Although not directed specifically at librarians working in the field of genealogy, the codes of ethics make clear the importance of protecting personal privacy.

To study ethical issues more specific to genealogy, librarians can peruse the Association of Professional Genealogists' Code of Ethics and Professional Practices, which promotes "(1) a

truthful approach to genealogy, family history, and local history; (2) the trust and security of genealogical consumers; and (3) careful and respectful treatment of records, repositories and their staffs, other professionals, and genealogical organizations and associations" (2003); and the National Genealogical Society's five sets of published guidelines having to do with sharing information, sound researching, library and technology use, and self-improvement (2016).

A User-Centered Approach

In 1991, Kuhlthau wrote about the need to shape information around users rather than to present users with available resources. She said that information systems and intermediaries were more successful at providing information in the latter stages of the information search process (ISP) because they were failing to recognize problem states that occurred earlier in the process. She wrote:

> Systems and intermediaries are presently directed to answering well-defined questions, not ill-defined ones reflecting uncertainty. These systems need to be made more proficient at accommodating a range of tasks in response to the users' articulation of the problem at all stages in the ISP, such as offering preliminary, exploratory, comprehensive, or summary searches according to the state of the user's problem. (p. 370)

Wilson (2000), notes that information professionals have made progress implementing the user-centric approach, saying, "Since the 1980s there has been a shift towards a 'person-centred' approach, rather than a 'system-centred' approach" (p. 51). As librarianship made these strides in general, members of the hobby genealogist information community made their own advancements. In Fulton's (2009b) study of 24 amateur genealogists, 92% reported they used the internet regularly in their research. Adopting this approach allowed researchers to scan and post to discussion lists, and helped them find other genealogists to whom they might be related who were searching for the same information. Fulton termed the most prolific of these genealogical

networkers "super-sharers," people who took such an intense interest in their hobby that they were motivated to take a lead role in terms of giving advice and passing on information. Fulton's findings may indicate that information encountering as described by Erdelez (1999) is a frequent occurrence: A genealogist may often look for information on one topic, but find useful information on a different topic. Then the genealogist shares the information with someone who can benefit from it, in adherence with the social norm of the information community.

Librarians can add value to the hobby genealogist information community by continuing to shape programs around community members' needs. The Sacramento Public Library's programs, for example, include online and physical records, and face-to-face instruction. Patrons can access the library edition of *HeritageQuest Online* remotely. *Ancestry.com's* library edition is available at all 28 branches in the library system. The New England Historic Genealogical Society's American Ancestors online collection is accessible at the Central Library branch. The Central Library offers patrons 45 minutes of free, one-on-one time with a genealogist. Family history experts lecture there once a month. Offerings continue to grow, as evidenced by the Genealogy Collection, which comprises more than 4,000 reference books, periodicals, and other materials, all housed at the Central Library. Most items in the collection were donated by the Genealogical Association of Sacramento in 2016.

Creating Better Records

Not all genealogical records can be taken at face value. In their 2007 article, Yakel and Torres say, "The interviewed genealogists knew of errors in census records, in immigration records written by officials with little understanding of accents or foreign spelling conventions, and birth dates midwives provided to clerks long after the event" (p. 109). Nothing can be done to change records from the past, but going forward, librarians and archivists should take great care to ensure materials they create and interpret are accurate and error free.

Skinner's (2010) findings showed that users would like more digitization of print and microform materials. One user said he would prefer searchable PDFs that are accessible online. Says Skinner, "The emphasis placed on digitization in participant responses suggests that this might be an area libraries may wish to focus on in their continued service to the public" (p. 35). A push by librarians toward increased digitization has potential to reduce barriers to information access.

Conclusion

During the past two decades, the hobby genealogist information community has been well studied. The literature paints a scene of a body of information seekers that grew as technological offerings increased, and whose members are motivated by their own curiosity and the positive emotions associated with discovering information. They feel a sense of responsibility to portray information accurately, and to hand it down to their younger family members. They often proceed through stages that immerse them ever deeper into their research and move from seeking names, dates and locations to seeking meaning, along the way relying on librarians and archivists, but most often turning to their peers online and in person to find information and support, and to offer help. Hobby genealogy is an act of "serious leisure" (Fulton 2009b). As such, this information community would benefit from more research being done through the lens of Hektor's information behavior model as revived by Hartel, Cox and Griffin (2016). Hobby genealogy fits within their category of a liberal arts hobby.

While more studies are being performed, librarians have an opportunity to better meet the needs of hobby genealogists by using genealogists' search for meaning as a framework for interactions; being sensitive to genealogist's desires and feelings; adhering to genealogical ethics; continuing to shape a user-centered approach; and taking care to reproduce and create records accurately.

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