Literature Review

Hobby Genealogist Information Community

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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. 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).

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.

There is no lack of scholarly articles that examine the characteristics of genealogists. Several of them rise to prominence because of their overt contributions to the understanding of genealogy as a leisure pursuit. This paper examines the major themes these articles present: genealogists' stages of activity, the role of librarians and archivists, the prevalence of genealogists sharing information with their peers, and motivations for continuing the hobby.

Review of Literature

Stages of Activity

Darby and Clough (2013) modeled the stages of activity through which amateur genealogists advance using data from in-depth, unstructured interviews with 23 family history researchers from the United Kingdom. They also analyzed questionnaires from a second set of 21 researchers, many of whom were in the initial interview group. They concluded that genealogists routinely progress through eight phases. Phase one is a "trigger event," which could be as simple as the would-be genealogist finally having more time after retirement, or something more specific to the individual, such as a need to find the truth behind a family story. Phase two, "collecting family information," might involve gathering photos and birth certificates from one's own home. In phase three, "learn the process," new genealogists may discover the limitations of sources. Phase four, "breaking in," may involve taking steps toward census returns and other important sources of information, and a key discovery may propel the genealogist forward. Phases five, six and seven are "tree-build" (adding to the family tree), easy, medium and hard, respectively. Although the borders between phases five through seven are not clear cut, as the

amateur genealogist works through them, online sources decrease in importance, and travel and physical material increase in importance. Phase eight, “push back selected lines,” is reached after the family tree is well populated, and involves accessing information that’s difficult to find and interpret.

Duff and Johnson (2003), who conducted in-depth interviews with 10 genealogists, found that the genealogists seek information in the order of names, places, and dates, then subjects and events. The genealogists determine the type of information they are seeking, then they figure out what form that information might take. For example, births, marriages and deaths might be found in church records. Deaths might also appear in obituaries and cemetery records.

When viewed together, Darby and Clough’s and Duff and Johnson’s contributions form a clear picture of the way in which hobby genealogist information community members 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. This picture dovetails with Yakel and Torres’s (2007) assertion that genealogists find records and place them into family trees in order to create coherent narratives that satisfy a quest for meaning.

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. He traces a history that includes even public librarians not treating genealogists well. He closes his article by saying, “Perhaps academic librarians, by looking more closely at a subject they have so long ignored, can help to remind everyone once again that all fields of study have their worth and in turn are worthy of respect” (p. 32).

Over time, genealogy’s reputation improved within academia. In 2012, Hershkovitz suggested a taxonomy for genealogy as an academic multidisciplinary research field. His scheme of classification “demonstrates the relationships between genealogy and other fields on one hand, but describes its uniqueness on the other hand” (p. 15). His six proposed categories are people, families, communities, representations, data, and “bird’s-eye view,” which groups ethics, legalities, and methods for teaching genealogy research.

Aside from purely academic concerns, some researchers have 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 although archivists and librarians are enablers of the genealogy community, genealogists did not place them centrally in the search process. They elaborate, saying, “Genealogists are supportive of archival activities; they do not, however, rely heavily on archivists for education, either about searching for records or about preserving family records” (p. 111). Yet, a few years later, Skinner’s 2010 study of 28 genealogists who answered surveys placed in State Historical Society of Iowa libraries found that amateur genealogists enjoy their interactions with librarians. In Skinner’s study, most researchers, no matter what their experience level, approached librarians with questions and appreciated the face-to-face interactions.

Information Sharing

Genealogists frequently rely on each other rather than on librarians for support and finding information. Yakel and Torres (2007) state that at genealogical meetings they have attended, members have solved problems in groups. For example, both panel and audience members might contribute ideas on how to identify the location of an ancestral homestead. The authors attended genealogical society meetings where members recounted their recent discoveries, then were praised by the group. Ten of the 29 genealogists Yakel and Torres interviewed mentioned that they engage in volunteer activities to help other researchers such as transcribing, posting information, presenting at meetings or working at a genealogical library.

The internet offers many opportunities for connection beyond one's immediate circle, and genealogists take advantage of them. 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 different countries who were researching their Irish ancestry. Genealogy researchers would continue to nurture connections with others on the chance that one would discover something about another's lineage. A key finding was that reciprocity is expected, requiring researchers to remember the searches of others. Fulton termed the most prolific of the 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.

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, and the hobby is a healthy one, contributing to lifelong learning and the adoption of technology by older people, fostering successful aging.

Bishop (2008) notes that genealogists feel a sense of responsibility to past and future generations. This quality spurs them to continue and drives them to strive for accuracy. Says Bishop, “Diligent researchers (our narrators), motivated by curiosity and a desire to create and pass along a compelling family history, travel to libraries, genealogical society meetings, to visit relatives, and to important family sites--all to collect information (p. 408).” Fulton (2009a) agrees, saying genealogists see their information seeking as a way to build a historical legacy for future generations of relatives.

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. How do academic libraries currently rate with regard to offering genealogists the type of help they desire? There’s a need for scholars to build on the work of Null and Hershkovitz.

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)."

A related area that could benefit from the insight of a scholarly study is that of the paid subscription model for genealogy websites. Lucy showed that Ancestry.com enjoys overwhelming popularity; does the hobby genealogist information community endorse its subscription model as necessary for gaining access to records, or is it looked upon as gatekeeping that impedes the flow of information?

Another topic that further research could shed light on is the effect of the availability of DNA testing on genealogical information seeking. Does DNA testing for ancestry further motivate genealogists to find records, or perhaps dampen their enthusiasm?

Conclusion

The literature about the hobby genealogist information community 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 Lonline and in person to find information and support, and to offer help. Judged by its characteristics, the hobby genealogist information community is a consummate example of an information community as described by Fisher and Durrance (2003).

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