

# Information Sharing in On-line Genealogy Forums

Heather Willever-Farr  
Doctoral Student and Research Assistant  
College of Information Science and Technology  
Drexel University

## Background

Genealogists are avid users of historical collections. Yet, as Duff posited in her ethnographic study of genealogists, traditional archival reference tools have not served genealogists particularly well. Accordingly, genealogists have devised:

...a parallel system to help them retrieve records because the archival information system fails them. This parallel system includes finding aids organized according to the genealogist's point of view, along with a strong network of colleagues and courses. With this parallel system and personal expertise, genealogists are able to circumvent the archival retrieval system and find the information they need (Duff, 2003).

This paper explores how genealogists have created alternative methods of gathering and sharing historical materials in an on-line environment. Some of this information exchange involves genealogists directing others to physical archives and historical societies, and their on-line collections.

Given the limitations of traditional archival access tools for genealogical purposes, it is not surprising that genealogists have turned to other sources for needed information. One major source is other genealogists (Duff, 2003). Previous research on the information behaviors of genealogists suggests that genealogists are ardent information seekers, who prize informal information sharing to advance their research interests (Yakel, 2004; Fulton, 2009). Social norms of genealogists include expectations of reciprocal information sharing and building relationships based on information expertise (Fulton, 2009). Previous research studies have suggested that web technologies play a central role in information sharing among genealogists (Yakel, 2004; Fulton, 2009), but no quantitative study has been conducted on genealogists' on-line behavior in virtual forums. This study will look at the on-line information seeking and sharing activities of genealogists on the popular genealogical website, Ancestry.com. Ancestry.com hosts an extensive message board system for genealogists to collaborate on family history research.

## The Research Study

Ancestry.com is one of the most popular genealogical websites in the United States. Through its RootsWeb website, Ancestry.com offers many ways for genealogists to connect, including message boards, user-contributed family history databases, and user-contributed surname lists, all of which are open to public. Through the site's message boards, genealogists are able to post questions, offer advice, and provide instruction. The message boards contain over 17,000 posts and are organized into hundreds of different categories such as genealogist's

country of residence, immigrant groups, and historical resources (e.g. cemeteries, census records, etc.).

In this study, the researcher will extract text from 2,000 posts from Ancestry.com's United States "general" and "special" message boards. Employing a grounded theory approach, content analysis will be utilized to categorize the primary content theme of each post. This approach has been successfully employed to categorize social media messages in other studies (Honeycutt and Herring, 2009; Namaan, et al., 2010). Preliminary content analysis of a sample of 200 posts led to the following classifications:

- 1) **Data:** providing data or scanned documents in response to a query
- 2) **Opinion:** expression of subjective ideas, evaluations
- 3) **Reference information:** providing information about where data or documents might be found in response to a query (e.g. data can be found at a particular library or historical society)
- 4) **Soliciting Information:** queries, asking for information from others

Further refinements to this categorization scheme may be needed. Each of the 2,000 posts will be coded, utilizing these categories, and any additions to the scheme.

Quantitative data, such as the number of participants in the message board exchanges and the answer rate of inquiries posted to the message board, will also be collected. The exchange of messages among message board participants will be mapped to determine whether there are reciprocal information exchanges occurring, and whether there are information "experts" who frequently provide information or instruction to others.

### **Preliminary Findings**

Initial assessment of the messages provides evidence of reciprocal information exchange among genealogists and the presence of a small number of frequent information contributors. Preliminary findings also suggest that the majority of the posts are informational in nature, with soliciting information posts being the most common, posts offering specific genealogical data to inquirers being the second most common, and posts referring inquirers to particular archival repositories being the third most common. Thus, it appears that the message board is serving as a communal reference and data exchange service for genealogists.

### **Conclusion and Future Research**

Preliminary analysis suggests that on-line message boards and forums provide an important means to collect quantitative data about genealogists' information sharing activities and behaviors. Such data provides an additional dimension to the previous qualitative studies of genealogists. The success of the Ancestry.com message boards also suggests that archives and special collection libraries may want to facilitate information sharing among their patrons by offering message boards or forums via their own websites or regional consortium websites.

This research study is the tip of the iceberg in terms of studying genealogists' information collaboration via the website, Ancestry.com. Further analysis of message board content, user

profiles, and more extensive analysis of the social network underlying these information exchanges would contribute to our understanding of the on-line information world of genealogists. In addition, studying genealogists' participation in Ancestry.com sponsored user-contributed family history database projects would add a rich layer to our understanding of the collaborative work of this group.

## References

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