

Information Seeking Behaviors of Family History Researchers

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Abstract

The author analyzes and discusses the information seeking behaviors of family history researchers. Key literature and group discussion are used to help summarize and highlight key aspects of the information seeking behaviors of family history researchers. The information seeking behavior of family history researchers are discussed in terms of this user group's social and cultural settings, the content type FHRs seek, and their purpose in searching their genealogy. This user group is of particular interest to libraries and archives where historical records are kept for researching family histories.

Analysis and Discussion

Genealogy research (also referred to as family history research) is the study of families by identifying family lineage and history. Darby and Clough (2013) define genealogists and family historians as family history researchers or FHRs (p. 73). For consistency this report will use this term when referring to genealogy or family history researchers. By using key literature and group discussions, insights are discovered about the information seeking behaviors of FHRs.

Past research examined the information seeking behavior of FHRs in non-work (Darby & Clough, 2013, p. 74; Yakel, 2004, p. 38) and professional settings (Duff & Johnson, 2003, p. 82). FHRs tend to develop social networks and rely on other FHRs for help and knowledge sharing (Darby & Clough, 2013, p. 74-75; Duff & Johnson, 2003, p. 90; Yakel, 2004). Information sharing among peer FHRs strengthened their personal understanding of information seeking tools and techniques, advanced their own family history research, and aided peers in finding more information about their ancestors (Fulton, 2009a, p. 766-767). Amateur FHRs, individuals who seek information about their personal family lineage as a hobby rather than professional activity, are commonly retired adults who have increased free time to pursue family history research (Fulton, 2009a, 758).

Information seeking for FHRs is iterative in nature and commonly follows a trial-and-error approach (Darby & Clough, 2013, p. 79). Darby and Clough (2013) propose an information seeking behavior model describing discrete phases that FHRs take in their searching (p. 77-78). This model starts with a trigger event that leads FHRs to gathering information about their family. If FHRs don't know how to research their family heritage the next step in the model is to learn the way to approach their research. In cases where FHRs are already familiar with the

process of family history research they may jump to the “break-in” step (Darby & Clough, 2013, p. 77) where they break into historical records looking for names, dates, or locations that are part of their ancestry. Phases 5-7 involve FHRs adding individuals to their family tree using progressively more challenging activities for discovering family history information. In the final phase FHRs seek to go back over a well built family tree and look for more challenging sources to push the family lines back even further if possible. It was noted by Darby and Clough (2013) that at any of the phases 4-8 FHRs could go back and begin again with new or different sources either on the same family line or in a new family line needing to be researched (p. 78). The model also accommodates for continuous learning FHRs experienced while researching their families during phases 3-8. The information seeking behavior of FHRs is a long term, lifelong approach "carried out sporadically yet intensively" (Darby & Clough, 2013, p. 75).

FHRs seek information from census records, church records, newspapers, and maps as they search for names, birth and death locations and dates, marriage dates, journals, and photographs about their ancestors. Computers and the internet increasingly play a large part of their research to help find these content types (Darby & Clough, 2013, p. 80). Some online services used by FHRs include MyHeritage, Ancestry.com®, and FamilySearch. Online services, like Ancestry.com®, use offer subscription-based access while others (e.g., FamilySearch), provide open access to their historical record collections.

There is a high level of motivation among amateur FHRs (Darby & Clough, 2013, p. 74). The purpose of their information seeking is spurred by their desire to seek meaning in their life, in the life of ancestors, and connect the present to the past (Yakel, 2004). They may also have an information gap in their own personal family history that motivates their search (Darby &

Clough, 2013, p. 78). Although some research has discussed the motivations of FHRs, this is an open area with potential for further study (Darby & Clough, 2013, p. 75).

FHRs are a unique user group to study in terms of their information seeking behaviors. Many are amateur or hobbyist researchers with high motivation for searching their ancestors. Their research can span long-periods of time iterating over each family line they research. The information seeking behavior of FHRs is unique and seems insufficiently researched particularly in the motivations behind both professional and amateur FHRs. As more historical records are made available and as computer technologies continue to evolve, there will be an increased need for libraries and archives to consider the information seeking behaviors of this unique user group.

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