Finding Pleasure in Information Seeking: 
Leisure and Amateur Genealogists Exploring Their Irish Ancestry

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Abstract:

Genealogy may be characterized as serious leisure, that is an amateur or voluntary activity in which the hobby forms a central life interest, with participants actively acquiring and expressing special skills, knowledge and experience (Stebbins, 1996; 1997). Information skills development and information exchange are key features of genealogy. Amateur genealogists are very often older adults who have time to devote themselves to learning information and technical skills needed to navigate the complex maze of resources that support this activity.

This paper explores the information seeking behaviour of amateur genealogists in their leisure. Amateur genealogists from around the world participated in telephone interviews about their hunt for their Irish ancestors. Data were analyzed to identify patterns of communication and links between and among amateur genealogists, groups, and resources. Findings reveal that amateur genealogists are a unique group of information seekers, who devote their spare time to information seeking and sharing among like-minded researchers. Findings suggest that leisure time is an important information seeking context, in which people relate information seeking with pleasure, as opposed to a work-related or routine life information need.

Background:

Leisure time offers a unique context in which to consider information seeking behaviour. Information seeking is often treated as an activity leading to fulfilment of a work goal or a need or want that one encounters in daily life activities. It is possible, however, that information seeking may result from activities one chooses to participate in during time not devoted to work or routine life activities, that is, in leisure. Information seeking could take place for pure enjoyment. Leisure remains relatively unexplored in terms of information behaviour.

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The concept of leisure is an old one and reminds us of a variety of ways in which we spend this time, from sunny holidays in exotic places to watching television to visiting with friends. Leisure is a diverse area and can mean many things to one person. For instance, although some researchers connect leisure with a type of time, others have expanded on this concept to define leisure as more of a kind of experience (Roberts, 1997). Stebbins (1996, 1997) defines leisure as non-work time and activity, which may further be categorized as “casual” and “serious” leisure. Casual leisure is “immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it” (Stebbins, 1997). Serious leisure refers to amateur or voluntary activity in which the hobby forms a central life interest, with participants actively acquiring and expressing special skills, knowledge and experience (Stebbins 1996, 1997). As Gillespie et al. (2002) note, serious leisure may be conceptualized as “both fun and not-fun,” since participants in a given hobby may or may not derive satisfying identities from the experience and since the hobby may invoke clashes with the “real world” and generate politics within the world of the hobby.

Genealogy may be characterized as serious leisure. Information skills development and information exchange are key features of genealogy. Amateur genealogists are very often older adults, whose time is less constrained by childcare and the early years of career building. They are also commonly retired. Importantly, they have time to devote themselves to lifelong learning of information and technical skills needed to navigate the complex maze of resources that support genealogical inquiry.

Moreover, amateur genealogists may be seen as a community unto themselves. For example, amateur genealogists spend a great deal of time in archives and libraries which has provided many with comprehensive understanding of sources; yet they have in the past received a mixed reception in the historical community, particularly as hobbyists mixing with professionals. Chatman’s theory of Life in the Round, which proposes that one’s context shapes information behaviour, offers a useful basis for investigating the information behaviour of genealogists (Chatman, 1999, 2000; Fulton, 2005). By considering amateur genealogy as a small world, it may be possible to gain insight into patterns of information use and non-use in the pursuit of their hobby.
Purpose of study:

*Networking for Leisure* is an ongoing research initiative, which explores information seeking behaviour in everyday contexts, in particular, information seeking as part of leisure. This paper examines the information seeking of one particular group of leisure seekers: amateur genealogists researching their Irish ancestry and the resources and people they rely upon to build on a leisure pursuit. The information world of the amateur genealogist offers an opportunity to examine information seeking as an enjoyable activity, that is, the means by which people find pleasure in a hunt for information.

Method:

Approach:

*Networking for Leisure* employs a variety of methodological approaches and data collection techniques to exploring the question of information seeking in leisure. The part of the study discussed in this paper adopted a multi-case approach to obtain detailed data about the information world of the amateur genealogist. Semi-structured interviews permitted the construction of a picture of each participant’s experience with the information seeking process and the way in which they incorporate this activity into their leisure.

Participants:

A total of twenty-four amateur genealogists participated in semi-structured, telephone interviews. This number falls within the guidelines suggested by qualitative research experts, such as Miles and Huberman (1994). Participants were found through an advertisement placed in well-known genealogy forums and institutions, such as *Cyndi’s List of Genealogy Sites on the Internet* and The Family Records Centre (FRC), which is operated by the General Register Office in England. Telephone interviews facilitated access to participants who lived in areas distant from the study base in Dublin.

Interviewees hailed from the regions generally considered part of the Irish Diaspora, including the major Diaspora destinations of Australia, North America and the United Kingdom. All participants were looking for one or more Irish ancestors, with eighty-eight percent searching for Irish ancestors in both their maternal and
paternal lines. Approximately eighty percent of interviewees were working alone, and the remainder worked in conjunction with a partner or other relative.

Three-quarters of participants in telephone interviews were married; the remaining twenty-five percent were single or divorced. While one quarter of participants reported an education level of secondary school or elementary school, the majority of participants had achieved a college or university education. About twenty-one percent of all interviewees had completed postgraduate degrees. The majority of participants were comfortable with genealogical research. Only a few (thirteen percent) participants considered themselves to have a beginner’s level of expertise with research. Approximately, seventy-one percent of participants evaluated their expertise as intermediate, and another seventeen percent reported their level of expertise as expert.

Participants were split evenly between employed and non-employed persons. While forty-two percent of participants were employed full-time and another eight percent were employed part-time, fifty percent of participants were retired as one might expect to find in amateur genealogy. Occupations varied, with participants holding positions in the private and public sector. All participants held or had retired from positions in fields, such as education, computer science, health services, and banking. Participants ranged in income. About twenty-one percent had an income of less than 20,000 euro per annum. Fifty percent earned between 20,000 and 39,000 euro per annum. Four percent earned 40,000 to 49,000 euro per annum. The remaining twenty-five percent of participants earned more than 50,000 euro per annum. All participants were aged above fifty: twenty-nine percent were in their fifties, forty-six percent in their sixties, twenty-one percent in their seventies, and four percent in their nineties.

The profile of participants in this study bears similarity to that of amateur genealogists in general. Participants were generally of an age when childcare responsibilities were no longer a pressing concern and when they might be retired or in the later stages of a career. In addition to having the necessary time to devote to a hobby, the majority of participants were well educated and often held an economic status that supported their chosen leisure pursuit.
Procedure:

Having seen the project advertisements, participants volunteered to take part in a short, online questionnaire, which provided background information about the participant’s genealogical interests. Participants indicated that they would like to take part in a semi-structured, telephone interview, lasting approximately thirty minutes on average. Interview data were tape-recorded to preserve the interview and then transcribed and analyzed using the Ethnograph to understand each person’s engagement in genealogical inquiry and the genealogical community.

Findings:

Devotion of Time to the Task of Information Seeking:

Participants devoted as much time as they could to their genealogical inquiry. Approximately fifty-eight percent of participants spent two to ten hours per week on genealogical research, and twenty-nine percent spent eleven to twenty hours per week on this research. The greatest amount of time spent on research, reported by eight percent of participants, was twenty-one to thirty hours per week. Whether participants spent concentrated periods of time on research or spread their research time across days, they remained dedicated to their information hunt. One participant, who noted that she spent “a couple of hours a day” on her genealogical research, further explained that she became so involved in her research that she had “to discipline myself to do my housework, etc.”

Sources of Information Regularly Used:

Internet:

The Internet was cited as an important source for amateur genealogists in this study. The Internet is renowned as a popular resource for genealogy, and this was reflected in the high usage of this resource by interviewees. Ninety-two percent of participants reported that they used the Internet regularly in their genealogical research.
The Internet served not only as a source of information for participants, but also as a medium for exchange of information. When asked about information sharing generally, one participant cited the Internet as her first choice among methods of disseminating information, noting that she spent a great deal of time online communicating with other amateur genealogists:

I spend a lot of time on the Internet as part of the -- you know, it's not actual research. It's just fun just contacting other people and helping them. So, they, they -- I'm continually communicating all sorts of information to them.

Another participant explained that she also relied upon the Internet for communicating with other researchers, as well as for learning about new information and resources that might be relevant to her search:

I know how to find people. And, I knew how to find people before we got the Internet [laughter], but, um, research has always been the fun part. So. Since the Internet has come along, it's been the people, sometimes people [who have] been fabulous at telling you and helping you find records at various places, because I might not know [town name] or I might not know in [city name] where some of these records are -- but people who are -- I belong to several mailing lists, email lists, etc.

The Internet, then, offered a means of connecting with others that extended beyond one's immediate circle of contacts.

Libraries:

Libraries held a central position as a source of information for participants. Nearly eighty percent reported that they often used public libraries. Thirty percent of the same group also frequented academic libraries to access sources.

Other Institutions:

Participants visited a variety of other institutions in the course of their information seeking. Three-quarters of participants regularly used government institutions, apart from public libraries. Thirty-eight percent also visited family records centres, which offered local, national and sometimes international access to particular resources of interest to genealogists. About fifty-five percent frequented historical societies. Eighty-three percent often used genealogical associations for assistance.
People Sources: Family

Although one might expect family members to figure prominently in a genealogist's information search, not all participants identified family as an information source used frequently. Sixty-seven percent identified family members as a regularly used information resource, but thirty-three percent did not. While this outcome might seem strange, it makes sense when one considers that a genealogist might not have relatives living to contribute to his or her search. In addition, family might function as an important information source at the beginning of a genealogical inquiry, and then the amateur genealogist, considering the task of consulting a family source completed, might turn to other resources.

In spite of this, when asked to identify their most important people source, participants most frequently cited their families (thirty-eight percent). Second most important was a librarian or archivist (twenty-five percent). Another seventeen percent cited other people, including people met through genealogy-related Internet sites, staff in churches, etc. Only one person cited a professional genealogist as their most important people source.

Information Seeking as Fun:

A major theme running through interviews was the pleasure participants associated with all aspects of their information hunts. For instance, participants equated meeting like-minded people with one of the most enjoyable parts of their information seeking. As one participant summed up, "I've met some wonderful people and I've just had a lot of fun doing it [genealogy]." Participants found meeting people interesting. Meeting like-minded people was central to the social aspect of information sharing. One participant explained the positive role that other people, in particular other amateur genealogists, played in her information seeking:

Participant: The excitement and the joy you get when you stumble upon something. A little bit, a little bit of, um, a little bit of information, now something picked up. On the whole, [people] are very willing to help, aren't they?

Interviewer: Do you mean people who are working there or people generally?

Participant: Generally. People who actually are interested in genealogy, like people I've spoken to down at the LDS [Latter Day Saints] centre.

Other people helped further one's information query with ideas, knowledge of resources, and useful nuggets of information that could be used to understand and piece together one's family history.
Participants found the entire process of research exciting and enjoyable. Participants enthusiastically referred to the twists and turns of their information hunts. As one participant noted, “Oh boy, I, I -- it’s just -- it’s a detective thing. You’ve just got to look everywhere you can for a clue!” The process of locating information about a particular ancestor was invigorating, in part because it gave participants a sense of accomplishment and discovery:

> The research, the finding, you know, saying “if this is so, then that must be, and this could be” and then I pursue that and find out yes, indeed, my hypothesis was right . . . And, and just the puzzle of it, you know. You know, that type of thing I find very exciting.

Participants liked doing research for many reasons. Participants who held or had retired from positions, which required understanding of searching for particular types of information, found the transition to genealogical research was natural. As one participant observed, “I’ve done research all my life, so that type of thing I just find very exciting and very fun.”

Since participants enjoyed their information searches, personally experiencing this challenge was also important. As one participant observed, hiring a professional genealogist had a place in the information process, but doing the research for one’s self was preferable when possible:

> And I, I think - I don't mind having somebody do research for me, because I obviously want to do it for other people. But when you're there, I think you want to try and do the research yourself, and if you don't have the time, fine, hire someone who is there to do it . . . We looked at newspapers in Dublin in the Archives and we just loved them. I loved them! [Laughter].

Engaging personally with research material was part of the fun for participants and they sought out opportunities to explore sources themselves.

Amateur Genealogy as Serious Leisure:

Participants considered genealogical research a leisure activity to which they were committed, and they frequently referred to the vacations they had organized around their research. For instance, participants considered time spent in institutions to do genealogical research and with different genealogical sources rewarding and enjoyable:
He [her spouse] likes getting the information, [but] he just doesn't like sitting for hours in a library. He thinks it's pretty boring! [But] I love it! [Laughter]. I spend whole vacations in libraries and cemeteries and courthouses.

Travelling to libraries, archives, and other institutions which held genealogical materials, whether nearby or in another country, represented part of the fun and excitement of the information hunt.

Participants saw genealogy as more than leisure; they considered genealogy a wonderful obsession. As one participant proclaimed, “It [genealogy]’s my obsession. I work as an accountant to support my habit.” Participants commented that they were “fanatics” when it came to genealogy, and even compared genealogy to “a drug addiction that keeps going on.” Finding time to spend on their hobby was no objective, as one participant reported:

And, of course, last night I immediately got on -- got the New York vital records site for deaths, births and marriages. You know. I mean, I do stuff like that. And, of course, last night I was up at three o'clock in the morning…

Another participant even noted that she took sick leave from work to travel to examine sources related to her genealogical research.

Participants also noted that a search for one piece of information often led to another search and then continuous searching and scanning for information. One participant described satisfaction with information seeking as finding more and more information, declaring “No piece of information is too minute!” The urge to build a comprehensive and complete picture of an ancestor drove the information search. For instance, one participant complained that using equipment to examine documents caused physical discomfort, but considered the pain worth the effort:

Interviewer: So what, what keeps you going if it gives you a stiff neck?

Participant: Uh, I hate having loose ends. And I want to have it. I want to have it [picture of ancestor] as complete as I can possibly get it. If the information's there, I want to find it.

Participants were determined to find every piece of information available to them. As one participant summed up the situation:

If we can find that first, find one bit of information for them. And then, once they find that, they're just hooked. We start them on, you know, the long, slow slide into addiction.
Ultimately, participants wanted information, but they also wanted information at their fingertips. The Internet further provided instant information, as one participant described:

Participant: Yes. So this, this wedding license is Norman J.B. Hanlon, and I think, how many men by the name of Norman have a middle initial J? So, I sent for it. The problem is I can't wait! [Laughter]. That's always the problem. So I have to find something else to do to occupy my time for another three weeks.

Researcher: And it's coming? It's going to be sent to you, is it?

Participant: Yes, oh yes, it'll be sent to me. I went online and I charged it. I wasn't going to do it. I was going to write a cheque, but I thought, you know, I want it. Instant gratification once again. So, I charged it.

Having information immediately available or quickly obtainable affected future information seeking, since amateur genealogists used the information they found to build on what they already knew and to develop information seeking strategies to gather even more information about a particular ancestor.

Participants also saw their information seeking as more than simply gathering facts; they viewed their information seeking as one means of building a legacy for relatives in the present and future. One participant noted:

Well, I love it. I mean, I get a great deal of pleasure, and, um you know? And, yeah. It's lovely to leave something behind, isn't it? If only our relatives had written down this information about themselves, you know?

Participants in this study not only saw their information seeking as a pleasurable activity, but also as a means of promising an enriched past to future generations.

Discussion and Conclusion:

Amateur genealogists in this study engaged in information seeking for the pleasure they found in the process of looking for and finding relevant information about their Irish ancestors. Genealogy held a place of importance in participants’ leisure, and the more they searched for information, the more involved they became in the process of finding even the smallest tidbits of information about their ancestors. As with Gillespie et al.’s dog walkers (2002), amateur genealogists’ devotion of time and resources to their leisure hobby created a culture of commitment, which shaped self-identity and functioning in an alternative world. Genealogy in this study meant
more to participants than a means of passing spare time; instead, their engagement with their hobby suggests that their information seeking played a significant role in their lives generally. They took pride in their information seeking and it gave them a sense of accomplishment. In this context, their leisure was more than free time; it was a life experience.

The information seeking process was significant for amateur genealogists for a number of reasons. The thrill of the chase for information was a primary motivation for continued information seeking. Interaction with other genealogists increased the pleasure of the pursuit for participants. In keeping with Chatman's small world theory, the context of genealogy shaped their information behaviour in that world. Participants acknowledged particular sources of information as key sources, which they then often shared with like-minded researchers who understood the value of that source to genealogical inquiry. Their small world existed for them because they shared goals in their hobby not necessarily understood in the “real” world.

The Internet proved to be an extremely important resource for amateur genealogists in this study and enabled them to network with other genealogists who shared similar experiences. The age range of interviewees and the high percentage of participants who used the Internet to research their genealogy reflect the findings of *Older Americans and the Internet* (2004), which found that older American adults dominate in the field of genealogy with thirty-six percent of wired adults over age sixty-five researching their genealogy compared to twenty-four percent of all users of the Internet. Indeed, the same study suggests that while only twenty-two percent of older Americans use the Internet, “their enthusiasm for email and search[ing] may inspire their peers to take the leap.” The enthusiasm shown by participants in this study generally for information seeking in support of their genealogical inquiry led them to share their knowledge and experiences with other amateur genealogists both online and in person. Their leisure was fun as well as serious, and participants in this study found great pleasure in their information seeking.

The current paper addresses some of the initial findings emerging from the larger *Networking for Leisure* project. Research in this area is ongoing, and it is hoped that we will learn more about the interpersonal networking of amateur genealogists as this work continues.
References:


