THE INFORMATION-SEEKING BEHAVIOR OF GENEALOGISTS AND HISTORIANS

AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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**Abstract:** Longitudinal research conducted between 1992 and 1998 followed the technological progress of 94 academic historians at the four University Centers of the State University of New York at Albany, Binghamton, Buffalo, and Stony Brook, concentrating particularly on their use and non-use of electronic information access technologies. A combination of mailed surveys and on-site interviews uncovered lack of time, instruction and information as the primary barriers to the use of these technologies, while fear of lost productivity through time spent learning and using electronic technologies also surfaced as a barrier. Academic historians nonetheless felt almost universally by 1996 that electronic information access technologies such as word processing and electronic mail were critical to their missions, especially when these technologies allowed for verification of bibliographic citations or documents in particular archival collections. Furthermore, while use of World Wide Web resources for teaching was nonexistent in 1992, plans existed at all four sites in 1996 to create home pages not only for departments but for individual instruction, and sites were in place by 1997. Critical success factors that surfaced from the research included the need for departmental mandates and support, as well as the need to provide specialized instruction and information to historians in their academic, research and administrative roles.

**Database:** Google Web Search  
**Method of Searching:** Citation Search, Footnote Chasing  


**Abstract:** In recent years archives have spent increasing amounts of time and money developing on-line finding aids and other electronic retrieval tools. However, there have been relatively few studies of the effectiveness of such tools or of users' information-seeking behaviour on which to base these developments. This paper presents results from a survey of UK academic historians' information-seeking behaviour. It suggests that although historians have varied information retrieval methods, clear patterns and preferences are visible. Moreover, analysis suggests that the predominant factor to explain historians'
information-retrieval behaviour is the type, or genre, of source concerned. Lastly, the implications of these results for the development of archival information systems are considered.

**Database:** INFOSCI, File 2: INSPEC [Dialog]
**Method of Searching:** Keyword Search
**Search Strategy:** (seeking()behavior or information()seek?) AND historian?


**Abstract:** The popularity of genealogy has increased dramatically in the last decade, thanks in large measure to the internet, which has expedited access to a wide and still expanding range of information. Little research has been done on why individuals embark on genealogical research, or on the meaning they derive from their research. The author performed a narrative analysis of the responses to surveys and diaries completed by genealogical researchers to develop a clearer picture of how genealogical researchers assign meaning to the information and individuals they discover in their work. In short, the author attempted to piece together a "metanarrative" that describes how these genealogists endeavor to create engaging, accurate family narratives to be shared with future generations. Along the way, respondents ponder the place their families have in society's grander narrative.

**Database:** Citation searching
**Method of Searching:** Conducted manually


**Abstract:** Previous literature on the information needs and uses of historians has tended to focus on the use of libraries and specific types of materials, rather than on the motivations for, and results of, such use. Yet understanding this prior process of historical inquiry might help us to develop improved services and facilities for scholars. A study of twenty American historians was conducted in order to better understand the nature of research in history. Respondents were asked about their choice of research topics, specific projects in progress,
use of archives, categorization of materials collected, writing habits, and use of computers. Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using standard, quantitative techniques. The results were discussed in the light of previous investigations of historians and the published statements of classification experts regarding the organization of historical knowledge. Suggestions for future study of historians are offered, and implications for libraries are explored.

Database: ILL through Hagarty Library, Drexel University
Method of Searching: Citation Search, Footnote Chasing


Abstract: Although a number of investigations have been conducted on the information behavior of family historians, we know little about the degree to which they systematically collect information on the causes of death and major illnesses of ancestors. Such information, if reliable and accessible, could be useful to family physicians, the families themselves, and to epidemiologists. This article presents findings from a two-stage study of amateur genealogists in the USA. An initial state-wide telephone survey of 901 households was followed by in-depth interviews with a national sample of 23 family historians. Over half of the responding households in the general survey reported that someone in their family collects ancestral medical data; this practice appears to be more common among respondents who are women, older persons, and those with higher incomes. In-depth interviews revealed that this information is commonly collected by family historians, and typically comes from death certificates, secondarily from obituaries, and thirdly from word-of-mouth or family records; most of these respondents collected health information for reasons of surveillance of their own health risks. Social networking approaches to encourage gathering of family data could aid in increased awareness and surveillance of health risks. Implications for health information seeking and applicable theories are discussed.

Database: Library Lit & Inf Full Text
Method of Searching: Author Search
Search Strategy: Once I recognized Case as being an important scholar in this field, I used Web of Science to search by author for his other work. Case <in> Author, Personal

**Abstract:** This article reports a study of 45 Ph.D. history students and the effect of a technique of information seeking on their role as experts in training. It is assumed that the primary task of these students is to prove in their thesis that they have crossed over the line separating novice and expert, which they do by producing a thesis that makes both a substantial and original contribution to knowledge. Their information-seeking behavior, therefore, is a function of this primary task. It was observed that many of the Ph.D. students collected “names” of people, places, and things and assembled data about these names on 3 x 5 inch index cards. The “names” were used as access points to the primary and secondary source material they had to read for their thesis. Besides using name collection as an information accessing technique, the larger importance of collecting “names” is what it does for the Ph.D. student in terms of their primary task (to produce a thesis that proves they have become experts in their field). The article’s thesis is that by inducing certain characteristics of expert thinking, the name collection technique’s primary purpose is to push the student across the line into expert thinking.

**Database:** Library Lit & Inf Full Text  
**Method of Searching:** Citation Search, Footnote Chasing  


**Abstract:** This article reports on a survey of historians and a citation analysis undertaken to revisit the questions treated in Margaret F. Stieg’s 1981 article published in College & Research Libraries. It examines which materials historians consider to be the most important and how they discover them. Their attitudes toward and use of electronic materials were also studied. Many characteristics of historians information needs and use have not changed in a generation: informal means of discovery like book reviews and browsing remain important, as does the need for comprehensive searches. Print continues to be the principal format. What has changed is that the advent of electronic resources has increased historians use of catalogs and indexes in their efforts to identify appropriate primary and secondary sources of information.

 Abstract: Reports on a qualitative research study of the information-seeking behavior of historians. Investigates how they locate primary sources, carry out their research, and use archival materials; and identifies four different types of information-seeking activities, including orienting oneself to materials, seeking known materials, building contextual knowledge, and identifying relevant material.


 Abstract: This paper reports the results of a 2001 postal questionnaire (English and French) that gathered information about historians’ use of archival resources. The population for this report consisted of faculty members in history departments in degree-granting institutions in Canada whose area of interest is the history of Canada. The survey probed their current information-seeking practices in archives, invited assessment of their experience doing archival research, and sought their preferences for developments in the future. The conclusions indicate that finding and using sources in the early twenty-first century continues to invoke the knowledge and expertise of archivists.

**Abstract:** The paper reports on a mail questionnaire survey that gathered information about historians’ use of archival resources in the process of researching historical material. The survey population consisted of all faculty member (1185 prospective participants) in history departments of degree-granting institutions in Canada. Based on responses from 52 percent of the survey population, the findings indicated that historians rate finding aids, footnotes, and archivists very highly as sources for becoming aware of and locating information in their research. In addition, the overwhelming majority of historians want to see and use historical sources in their original format. However, the study also indicates that electronic access and digital reproductions have great, untapped potential.

**Database:** e-journal, Hagerty Library, Drexel University  
**Method of Searching:** Author/Title Search, Citation Search, Footnote Chasing  


**Abstract:** Until the 1990s, archivists gave very little attention to studying their user population. None of the user studies that have been conducted in the last decade have focused solely on genealogists, one of the most frequent users of archives. This paper gives the results of a study involving in-depth interviews with ten genealogists. The findings provide information on the stages of genealogical research, how genealogists search for information, the access tools they use, the knowledge required, and the barriers they face. The findings of this study can be used to improve the design of archival information systems that will facilitate access for this important group of users.

**Database:** INFOSCI, File 438: Library Lit. & Info. Science [Dialog]  
**Method of Searching:** Keyword Search  
**Search Strategy:** (seeking()behavior or information()seek?) AND genealog?

**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 behavior 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.

**Database:** ILL, Hagerty Library, Drexel University  
**Method of Searching:** Citation Search, Footnote Chasing  


**Abstract:** Local genealogical societies and libraries have a common interest in providing genealogical researchers with materials and expert assistance. Societies and libraries can cooperate to meet genealogists' needs through: (1) collection development, access, and creation, (2) indirect reference service (i.e., societies acting as a referral resource), (3) direct reference service to patrons (by mail and in person), and (4) programming, including facilities-sharing for meetings and programs. More than one hundred local genealogical societies in Ohio were surveyed to identify characteristics of local genealogical societies, to identify the extent of their own collections, to determine the degree to which they cooperate with libraries in their research area, and to assess the attitudes of societies toward libraries and their role in the genealogy network.

**Abstract:** To gain a full picture of research use, it is necessary to explore not only who uses archives and what they use archives from but also at what point researchers turn to archival materials, and where, how, and why such materials are used. To explore the potential of a broader-based analysis of information seeking and use, ten historians were interviewed about their views of research and their research practices, with special reference to their use of archival sources. Recommendations are offered concerning the training of both researchers and archivists.


**Abstract:** This is a study of the research communities in history and political science at Kent State University (Ohio). The purpose is to provide a profile of historians and political scientists and to discover the kinds of information they use for research. A survey/questionnaire was circulated to the history and political science departments. Information was solicited from faculty and graduate students in both departments. The findings show many areas of similar resource use. Despite some similarities, differences in access and method remain. Historians remain more traditional, using mostly older print sources, while the political science scholars use more current up to date resources like CD-ROM and online databases. Overall, many of the findings strongly support what has been found in previous studies. Tables illustrate demographic data, library use, typical information
sources, convenient and inconvenient information formats, and percentages borrowed research materials. Survey instruments are appended.

**Database:** INFOSCI, File 1: ERIC [Dialog]
**Method of Searching:** Keyword Search
**Search Strategy:** (seeking()behavior or information()seek?) AND historian?

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**Abstract:** The Primarily History project is the first international, comparative study to examine historians’ information seeking behaviors since the advent of the World Wide Web, electronic finding aids, digitized collections, and an increasingly pervasive networked scholarly environment. Funded by the Gladys Kriobel Delmas Foundation, Primarily History is a collaboration of the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) and the Humanities Advanced Technology and Information Institute (HATII) at the University of Glasgow, Scotland. This article reports on a survey that asked historians teaching American history at sixty-nine top ranked institutions how they located primary resources for their research. Information seeking behaviors identified range from traditional print approaches to use of online database, Web searching, and virtual repository visits. Implications are drawn for archives and special collection repositories.

**Database:** INFOSCI, File 2: INSPEC [Dialog]
**Method of Searching:** Keyword Search
**Search Strategy:** (seeking()behavior or information()seek?) AND historian?

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**Abstract:** The hobby of genealogy is today one of the most popular leisure pursuits for everyday people. Not since the mid-19th century’s period of fluctuating genealogical popularity (Taylor & Crandal, 1986) have we seen so many people in the western world tracing their family tree. In the United States alone, Maritz reports a rise in genealogical interest from 45% in 1996 to 60% in 2000 (genealogy.com, 2000), and since that date, the
figure has been steadily rising to 75% in 2003 (Pew Research Centre, 2004). Not only are people of all ages, from all over the world, adopting the hobby as their own, many (Hornblower, 1999; Tedeschi, 2001) report that millions of genealogists use the internet for their research. Although, as Wellman and Haythornthwaite (2003) declare, the internet has grown to be of common use in our everyday lives, it has also “revolutionised genealogy” (Willard & Willard, 2001); a catch phrase utilized no less that four thousand times on the internet. Genealogy is the science of studying family origins, generally utilizing pedigrees. A genealogist is, at the very minimum, one who collects vital statistics about birth, marriage, and death events and organizes these facts into pedigree charts and family trees. The hobby can be a personal endeavour and social phenomenon; though it is also extremely methods- and learningbased; a fact-finding and information-seeking pursuit requiring knowledge in family structures, life records, history, and methods.

Database: Google Scholar
Method of Searching: Keyword Search
Search Strategy: “information seeking behavior of genealogists”
http://www.springerlink.com/content/rvv068055x6075t4/


Abstract: Research evidence shows the Internet has had a revolutionary impact on our society and the way we live everyday. Consequently, as the Internet influences the many aspects of everyday lives, hobbyist interests in areas such as history have also been enhanced and changed by the Internet as a social technology. One hobby, genealogy, has risen above all to be one of the most popular online, providing an opportunity to understand the use of the Internet within a broader context. As a result, the author has commenced a PhD research program with Curtin University of Technology, Australia, to examine how genealogists use the Internet, and to investigate the consequences of the development of genealogy as a significant Internet-based activity. The purposed of this article, therefore, is to present the research notes of the study.

Database: Google Scholar
Method of Searching: Keyword Search, Browsing
Search Strategy: “information seeking behavior of genealogists”

**Abstract:** *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History* presents the concept of a "community of records" as it applies to native Virgin Islanders. A "community of records" refers both to how records are (re-)created or reused within a community as well as its contextualization of records (through memory and narrative construction). This paper examines whether this intellectual construct and lens can be applied to other social groups and their relationships to records. Specifically, this article explores the connections between genealogists and records—how genealogists reuse, combine, interpret, and disseminate records to create a coherent narrative of their families' lives that gives added meaning to their own lives.

**Database:** Google Scholar, ILL Hagerty Library, Drexel University  
**Method of Searching:** Keyword Search, Browsing  
**Search Strategy:** “information seeking behavior of genealogists”

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**Abstract:** Genealogy and family history are examples of everyday life information seeking and provide a unique example of intensive and extensive use of libraries and archives over time. In spite of the ongoing nature of this activity, genealogists and family historians have rarely been the subject of study in the information seeking literature and therefore the nature of their information problems have not been explored. This article discusses findings from a qualitative study based on twenty-nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews with genealogists and family historians and observations of their personal information management practices. Results indicated that the search for factual information often led to one for orienting information. Finding ancestors in the past was also a means of finding one's own identity in the present. Family history is also an activity without a clear end goal; after the ancestry chart is filled out the search continues for more information about the lives of one's forebears. Thus, family history should be viewed as an ongoing process of seeking meaning. The ultimate need is not a fact or date, but to create a larger narrative, connect with others in the past and in the present, and to find coherence in one's own life.

**Database:** INFOSCI, File 7: Social SciSearch [Dialog]  
**Method of Searching:** Keyword Search  
**Search Strategy:** (seeking()behavior or information()seek?) AND genealog?
BACKGROUND ARTICLES:

The articles are in this section because they are either older than 1995 or they touch on seeking behavior that is slightly to the edge of the topic at hand. They are all interesting, nonetheless, and in the case of Case’s 1991 article, seminal.


**Abstract:** This Canadian study of historians specializing in women’s history combines the questionnaire survey method with citation analysis, to explore both the use and usefulness of various archival materials. Findings suggest that some of the most useful primary materials are less utilized, as archives have not focused on gathering materials related to women’s history, or have not catalogued them in a way that facilitates the study of women’s history. Suggestions are made for improving archival services to this specialized user group.

**Database:** Google Web Search  
**Method of Searching:** Citation Search, Footnote Chasing  
Beattie “Archival User Study”


“This article looks at selected archives in the UK and surveys the attitudes of archivists towards family historians. Noting that there has been no discussion in print on archival attitudes and policies towards family historians, the author links positive change - a greater willingness to work with genealogists - to archivists of the 1990s. She ends with a plea for use and preservation to have dual roles in archival management.” From Tucker, S. (nd) Archivist and Genealogical Researchers: A Bibliography. Retrieved March 1, 2009 from http://www.tulane.edu/~welib/archivists/archivists.html.

**Database:** e-journal, Hagarty Library, EBSCO  
**Method of Searching:** Citation Search, Footnote Chasing


**Abstract:** As electronic text files increase in number and diversity, the problem of devising a more effective information retrieval interface grows more important. Future designs may draw upon cognitive theories of categorization and metaphor to understand how users interact with text—both paper and electronic. Relevant literature in cognitive psychology and information science suggests the importance of the user’s physical environment in thinking about abstract entities, such as categories of documents. Empirical studies have established a basis for understanding how we think about, file, remember, and locate text. Results from a study of 20 historians—an exemplary group in terms of their close studies of texts and the broad scope of their inquiries—simply the importance of metaphors for storage and retrieval of documents. The study found that metaphors and subjective categories were frequently applied to documents collected and created by these scholars. Two physical factors—spatial configuration and document form—were often considered before topic in determining document storage locations in the office. Developers of information systems should consider qualitative aspects of cognition in their designs. System developers might also consider segmenting the audience for computer interfaces, as well as designing generic tools that apply to all users.

**Database:** Web of Science  
**Method of Searching:** Citation Search, Footnote Chasing  


**Abstract:** The author reports the results of a study of forty-five Ph.D. history students who were asked questions about cognitive activity related to information events. Using Barney
Glaser and Anselm Strauss' grounded theory approach, two overall categories of cognitive activity were observed: categories about knowledge structure and categories about information process. Teun van Dijk and Waiter Kintsch's "situation model" theory of reading comprehension and Leo Noordman and Wietske Vonk's research into elaborative inferencing form the theoretical framework for the study. In light of the results, three tentative conclusions are made about the characteristics of Ph.D. history students' knowledge structure and information process: (1) they become informed in a four-part information process; (2) they have a two-part knowledge structure, which allows for data storage; and (3) as a result of these two characteristics, elaborative inferencing for history Ph.D. students is hybrid, occurring both "on-line" and "off-line." The hybrid nature of their elaborative inferencing may be one of the features that distinguish the domain expert from the domain novice.

Database: File 7: Social SciSearch [Dialog]
Method of Searching: Author Search
Search Strategy: e au=cole c, se3-e16, s s1 and history?


Abstract: A study investigated the way in which history graduate students seek information and use the university library to gather information. A total of 15 full-time graduate students of history at UCLA participated and were divided into three groups based on their years spent in the graduate history program. Results showed that the participants regarded themselves as emerging scholars in a field of inquiry that is easier to write about than to define, that the participants were all regular library users, that the use of primary and secondary source materials was consistent among the three student groups, and that all participants were generally positive about computers and electronic technology even though interest and applications were limited. Discussion of the results is provided.

Database: INFOSCI, File 437: Education Abstracts [Dialog]
Method of Searching: Keyword Search
Search Strategy: (seeking()behavior or information()seek?) AND historian?

**Abstract:** This paper addresses the information needs and gathering behavior of historians and other members of the academic social science community. In addition, it looks at the competitive information environment and views libraries as one of many providers. The existing research is fragmentary and, by far, too incomplete to be useful to librarians in developing collections and services to meet the information needs of historians and to accommodate their preferences for information gathering.

**Database:** INFOSCI, File 1: ERIC [Dialog]
**Method of Searching:** Keyword Search
**Search Strategy:** (seeking()behavior or information()seek?) AND historian?

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**Abstract:** Historians are expert researchers who use a variety of methods to locate primary research material in archives, including consulting the archivist. This article suggests that historical researchers deliberately establish relationships with archivists to tap into their in-depth knowledge about archival resources. The relationship with the archivist is the social capital of historical researchers because through it they are able to gain access to this specialized knowledge. This article examines the strategies undertaken by historical researchers to establish these relationships and their evaluation of the relationships in terms of finding resources. It also examines the difference in access to the archivist between established historical researchers and PhD students and speculates on how the availability of archival resources and finding aids on the World Wide Web might affect the relationships between researchers and archivists.

**Database:** Library Lit & Inf Full Text
**Method of Searching:** Author Search
**Search Strategy:** duff <in> Author, Personal

**Abstract:** This article reports research findings related to converging formats, media, practices, and ideas in the process of academics’ interaction with electronic texts during a research project. The findings are part of the results of a study that explored interactions of scholars in literary and historical studies with electronic texts as primary materials. Electronic texts were perceived by the study participants as fluid entities because the electronic environment promotes seamless interactions with a variety of media and formats. Working with electronic texts combines some traditional information and research practices into new patterns of information behavior. The practice called “netchaining” combines aspects of networking with information-seeking practices to establish and shape online information chains, which link sources and people. Different forms of exploration of participants’ research questions were enabled by interactions with electronic texts.

**Database:** INFOSCI, File 7: Social SciSearch [Dialog]

**Method of Searching:** Keyword Search

**Search Strategy:** (seeking()behavior or information()seek?) AND historian?