

What do you think?

Family History Societies Membership, Expenses and Resources

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I was sitting reading with anticipation the latest edition of AFTC when I thought about the future of organised genealogy. Although I, like many others, love to find the monthly magazine in my post box, the idea of a hard copy form of news or information is rapidly becoming old hat. It seems that even the not too old technology of a website has been passed by and the rage at present is social media, particularly Facebook. But, I hear many of you say, we don't need to change and the Family History Society and its paper based records, newsletters and books is still our favourite and will stay that way for a long time.

So let's look at what is happening. Our Family History Society just 5 or so years ago somewhat reluctantly decided to add the option of email for sending out our monthly newsletters which had previously only been sent by post. At first there were just six takers for this kind of information transfer. Now, more than half of our members get their news rapidly by email at little cost to the Society.

We exchange over 100 journals with other Societies and currently about 17 of them only do so if we take an electronic copy. I strongly suspect that within another 5 years or so, more than half will only transmit their magazines by an electronic method. The management committee has to meet these changes and that brings about different costs and workloads that were not evident a few years ago. Other (non-genealogy based) groups I belong to regularly publish all their news and activity details on a Facebook page. Hundreds of people 'like' these groups, and in fact it is common for there to be many more likers than paid up members.

Finally, Family History Societies have over the last 30 or so years, collected rooms full of books, microfiche and binders full of clippings lovingly cut from newspapers, and cabinets full of card indexes. But how many are still handwriting index cards today? Probably none.

So where is this likely to lead us in the near future? Will people feel they are getting value for money when they pay to join a Family History Society when they can look up coming events on a Facebook page? Will the fact that most Societies have the internet available in their research rooms, attract new members, or will it make no difference? Will younger people even join a Society, when you can 'do' your family tree in just an hour or so by joining an online subscription service? How can we offer an alternative?

I don't have the answers to these questions. I do know that people who have been members of organised genealogy for decades have enthusiastically grabbed technology such as computerised family history programs, mobile phones and the ability to email contacts all over the world and get a reply in minutes or hours. But whether your friendly Society will continue to buy resources for a diminishing number of members, or will even have paid members to raise funds to keep their research rooms open, I don't know.

Can we think of ways for Family History Societies to remain relevant and to attract researchers? I think the desire of individuals to find out more about their ancestors will only grow greater in the future, not recede.

About the author

Gary Croker is the President of a Family History Society, however his views are personal and in no way reflect the views of that organisation.

For and Against

- It does not cost a Society anything for members to read the hard copies of journals and newsletters it receives, whereas to make electronic copies of journals and newsletters available to readers involves both a work and monetary cost.
- If Societies become fully electronic, what point will there be for members and visitors to visit their reading rooms and avail themselves of all the valuable information contained in hard copy publications on the shelves?

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