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# Cashing in on Family: The Influence of Private Companies on Online Family History Construction

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**Abstract**

Private companies are influential intermediaries in the construction of family histories on the web. Their preoccupation with profit may have considerable influence on who has access to virtual family histories and the types of family histories that are constructed. Companies are promoting and providing tools for the production of particular forms of family histories that are easily mined for data reuse, such as family trees, while providing few avenues for the production of more narrative forms of family histories. Narrative forms of histories often include “family stories,” which are important in the creation of a shared heritage.

**Author Keywords**

Genealogy, family history, peer production

**ACM Classification Keywords**

H.5.3 [Information Interfaces]: Group and Organization Interfaces – Collaborative computing, Computer-supported cooperative work, Web-based interaction

**General Terms**

Human Factors

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## **Introduction**

According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 54 million Americans belong to a family where someone in the family has used the Internet to research their family history or genealogy [5]. The pervasive use of the web for genealogical research is coupled with an increasing use of the web for the production of family histories. The web offers a venue for not only constructing family histories with linked images, but also for sharing those artifacts with the wider public. The most popular websites for family history construction in the United States are owned by private companies and, as a result, understanding the mediating role that private vendors are playing is important to understanding the landscape of memory creation in the virtual world.

## **Family History Construction on the Web**

One way individuals will be memorialized in the virtual world is through the purposeful construction of family histories. Family histories can take many forms: 1) narratives or stories about families; 2) family trees; and 3) image, document, and artifact archives. In the web environment, a small number of websites provide paid-for or free access to online tools for family history creation. Most of the production tools available on these websites are for building online family trees and linking images to family trees. Users of the websites are encouraged to work collaboratively and connect their family trees to other trees, thus creating massive databases of interrelated family trees. These websites, however, seem little interested in providing robust tools for the collaborative development and online publishing of narrative forms of family history.

## **A Virtual Duopoly**

Based on the number of users, Ancestry.com and Geni.com appear to be dominating the virtual family history market in the United States. Ancestry.com has 1.7 million subscribers who have contributed 29 million family trees. For a subscription fee, Ancestry.com provides family tree construction tools, virtual storage for family trees and linked images, and access to the company's large databases filled with familial data drawn from website users and public records. The reasons for Ancestry.com's popularity are possibly due to: 1) wide-spread advertising that reaches large audiences (e.g. TV commercials); 2) one-stop shopping for both familial data and family tree construction; and 3) a website and a family tree interface that is easy to use and aesthetically pleasing.

Ancestry.com's popularity also may be partly attributed to its efforts to appeal to the communal values of family history researchers. Promoting the website as a virtual space for family history researchers to share their knowledge and data is a sage marketing tactic for Ancestry.com, as published studies about the genealogical community suggest that this group has a strong commitment to giving back to the community by sharing information and building joint resources [3][7].



**Figure 1.** Ancestry.com family tree webpage

An alternative to the Ancestry.com is Geni.com, a popular family tree and social-networking site. Geni.com was the brainchild of David Sacks, the former chief operating officer of Paypal, and has received an influx of funds from Silicon Valley venture capitalists. The website has a Facebook feel and provides tools for people to connect with living relatives and build family trees together. Unlike Ancestry.com, user-created family trees on Geni.com are open to the public and basic family tree tools are available free of charge. To help fund the website's infrastructure and further development, Geni.com offers a fee-based premium service that gives users access to advanced family tree tools with export functionality. Like Ancestry.com, Geni.com engages in extensive web advertising and markets itself as a venue for family history researchers to share with others through peer production.

The peer production of family trees on Ancestry.com and Geni.com evokes a commons-based economic model, but with important differences. Benkler introduced the idea of commons-based peer production as an alternative to traditional modes of economic production: peer-produced goods are generated by

individuals in self-organized communities who are generally not compensated directly for their contributions [1]. Importantly, members of the community, rather than a "managerial hierarchy," govern the production process. Internet-based collaboration platforms have made peer-production increasingly viable; and many companies are incorporating aspects of peer-production into their online services and goods. Often, these hybrid spaces lack an important feature of Benkler's vision: the commons. This is true for Geni.com and Ancestry.com: both companies retain ownership of the information their users produce, as well as, retaining oversight of the production process.



**Figure 2.** Geni.com family tree webpage

Open commons models do exist, such as Wikitree.com, but they have a much smaller user base. Possibly the small numbers of users is due to the fact that many genealogists are older, have limited computer skills [2], and potentially are less aware of the little advertised,

open source applications available on the web. While further research is needed, it appears that the open source and creative commons communities are disconnected from the genealogy community. This may lead genealogists to use more widely publicized fee-based websites. Accordingly, the dominance of private, for-profit companies, like Ancestry.com and Geni.com, will potentially have a greater impact on access to family histories and the types of family histories available to future generations.

### **The Impact of Private Vendors on the Character of Family Histories on the Web**

#### **Previous Research**

To address the lack of research on how online environments influence family history production, we recently conducted a study of Ancestry.com's public message boards and found that the web context shapes the types of exchanges and cooperative activities in which genealogists engage in online [6]. Previous research on the face-to-face interactions of genealogists found that genealogists tend to help other genealogists by providing instructional guidance both on a one-to-one and a many-to-one basis [7]. In contrast, our findings suggest that the presence of online genealogical data and the affordances of interactive computer technologies are pushing message board answerers away from providing instruction on *how* to find family history data and pushing them toward providing family data outright. Additionally, answerers on the message board worked cooperatively to provide family data, suggesting that the web context is leading many genealogists to engage in cooperative research, not collaborative instruction. These findings indicate that many of the interactions between

genealogists on the web involve data exchange. Our findings also suggest that for-profit genealogical data purveyors, such as Ancestry.com, are one of the reasons for the regular exchange of familial data among genealogists interacting on the web.

This exploratory study provides a glimpse of how digital archives of genealogical data and the business models of the companies that maintain them are transforming the interactions between genealogists. Looking forward, we believe these businesses may have other, as yet undocumented long-term effects on family history production.

#### **Data over Narrative**

In addition to controlling access to family histories, private vendors are also shaping the characteristics of family memory on the web. Ancestry.com and Geni.com have few tools to help families construct narrative, rather than structured forms of family histories. Instead, Ancestry.com and Geni.com provide extensive tools for family tree construction. There is no question that family trees are a critical aspect of genealogical work, since they serve as a data collection container, a visual representation of connections between individuals, and a kind of research guide to help genealogists in their ongoing family history exploration. But family trees are a limited form of family history, narrowing histories to data, such as birth and death dates, and connections between individuals. More narrative forms of family histories tend to capture contextual information and provide richer details about ancestors that are passed in families via oral history telling. With family trees, the emphasis is on facts, not heritage.

The problem with narrative forms of family histories in terms of their use by online family history vendors, such as Ancestry.com and Geni.com, is that they are not easily used as data sources. Ancestry.com's and Geni.com's economic success is dependent on building large data repositories that can be mined easily using search tools, as users not only want family tree production tools, but also familial data. The search for familial data, as users expand their family histories, is an ongoing, never-ending process, and so new data are continually needed by genealogists [7]. Genealogists tend to start with researching their immediate family members and then extend outward, collecting data on more distantly-related individuals. As a result, family history narratives and family trees produced by others are often good sources of familial data. Unlike narratives, family trees are easy to mine with web search tools: small chunks of structured data contained in family trees can be searched easily and presented in a neat fashion to inquirers on Geni.com or Ancestry.com.

On the other hand, mining natural language narratives for familial information presents more technical challenges. Also, family narratives may contain stories that are not based on facts or data drawn from "objective" sources such as birth records or military records, so they may be seen by Ancestry.com and Geni.com as less trustworthy and an unverifiable source of data. For these reasons, it makes little sense for such companies to invest resources to develop robust tools for the online construction and publishing of family history narratives, particularly when building tools to grow family trees makes more business sense. The tools offered to users for connecting family trees to create "one family tree for the entire world" [4] directly

benefits genealogists by providing access to useful data, but also it benefits Ancestry.com's and Geni.com's bottom line. For these companies, the closer they become to fulfilling their goal of creating one massive family tree with millions of interconnected families, the more attractive the websites become as a definitive data resource and a means for genealogists to connect their family trees to more and more distantly related people, the more genealogists use their sites, and the more opportunities they have to increase the number of subscribers. In the end, there is not a strong profit motive for companies like Ancestry.com or Geni.com to provide robust collaborative tools for the creation of family history narratives.

Lastly, the well-advertised Ancestry.com and Geni.com may be a gateway for newbies interested in beginning family history exploration. The content of these popular websites may impact what forms of family histories are created by future family historians or genealogists. If newbies are only exposed to family trees and other highly structured forms of family history as would be the case on Ancestry.com and Geni.com, they may be disinclined to create other forms of family history.

## **Discussion**

Ancestry.com's and Geni.com's focus on family tree construction and genealogists' data needs may lead to the production of family trees at the expense of more narrative forms of family histories. Families may privately keep their family stories or narratives. However, the web presents an opportunity for those stories to be shared with many. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be a strong profit motive for privately owned family history websites to develop robust and

easy-to-use tools to help individuals publish their family stories to share with the public. Nor do these companies seem to view themselves as arbiters of historical memory, and thus, do not see their potential role in preserving rich and colorful family histories for future generations.

We believe our analysis of the potential impact of private companies on memory creation points to an urgent and interesting problem space for designers of online environments that support collaborative family history production. If family history production is to be supported online in a way that encourages reflection, identity building, and storytelling, not only are new tools and environments needed, but also whole socio-technical systems that value these activities in their own right.

More robust tools for the construction of family histories would allow family historians to create narratives with images and allow for the anchoring of narratives to family trees; thereby enabling users to mix visuals, stories, and facts to create interpretations of the past. Such family histories would not only be a source of information for future family historians, but may be of interest to a myriad of researchers from sociologists to social historians. Moreover, such rich data could prove to be the basis for a more ecologically valid business model. Taken as a group, peer-produced histories could become our collective past.

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