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Authors: Dunford, Fraser
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Abstract: The article reports on the pitfalls of the Internet and the uses of the technology for a genealogist in Canada. It highlights the important considerations for Internet use such as the safety of one's identity, the safety of data and the reliability of the data acquired on the Net. It cites the uses of the Internet for a genealogist which include looking at original documents, searching indexes and looking at prepared genealogies. Related issues are further discussed.

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Caught in the Net

The lure of the Internet is strong for beginning genealogists, but beware of its many pitfalls, says Fraser Dunford

It is the best of places — and the worst of places. People have fallen in love with the Internet and nowhere is that more apparent than with people seeking their family history.

Unfortunately, here, as elsewhere, love is blind. Wise people will take heed. Used properly, the Internet is one of the best tools a genealogist can have. However, like all other aspects of family history, you have to know what you are doing.

This is not a negative article about the Internet — far from it — but it is an article about what can go wrong on the Internet. You have to be concerned about the safety of your identity, the safety of your own data, and the reliability of the data you acquire on the Net.

For a genealogist, there are four uses of the Internet: to look at original documents; to search indexes; to look at prepared genealogies; and to contact others who are interested in the same families as you.

Viewing original documents is the safest and most valuable use of the Internet. It is a wonderful experience to see an image of a page containing your ancestor's signature and almost as wonderful to see a document that shatters one of your brick walls. However,

things may not be quite as obvious as they seem. For instance, when examining a census, "age" could mean "age now," "age next birthday," or "age rounded to nearest five-year interval." Do what the professional genealogists do — consult a good guidebook before searching the documents.

Searching indexes is "in" but hardly anyone does it properly. Consider how an index is created. Someone, somewhere, sat staring at a mass of very old documents written in probably very indifferent handwriting for the purpose of extracting some of the information, likely a name, a date, and (we all hope) a clear reference to the original document. Now consider the possibilities for error: bad handwriting, transcriber fatigue, unfamiliarity of the language, or even simply hitting the wrong keys when entering data (my nemesis is character order — there is a difference between 1879 and 1897).

The best indexes are done by genealogical societies. They know their subject and their area and they check their indexes. However, too often, the people or companies doing the indexing have no idea what they are indexing, nor any knowledge of the area the documents are from. The howlers in indexes of British and Quebec genealogical records are the stuff of legend.

Mistakes happen. In one of our own indexing projects, we used competent, Ontario-based people who, familiar with Picton, Ontario, mistakenly transcribed Pictou, Nova Scotia as Picton, N.S.

I am amazed at the number of people I have spoken with who say "Oh, I already have my family tree. I went on the Internet on Saturday and found a tree someone had already done."

When I ask, "Is it accurate?" they look at me blankly and say "But it is on the Internet!"

I then tell them that if they will give me details on their earliest known ancestor, I will, in a week, have a website up claiming that their ancestor is descended from Henry VIII. Most people get the point I'm trying to make -but a few still have their eyes light up at the thought.

Seeking prepared genealogies is the most questionable thing for a genealogist to do on the Net. Hardly any are checked, few have any citations, and some are pure works of fiction. I once saw a family tree that had a son born earlier than his father. Any thoughtful person will spot those errors. Be a thoughtful person.

Some sites provide access in exchange for data. To maintain access, a person has to keep providing data. If that person runs out of data — well, some people invent some. Remember — the genealogy is not proof of your family tree, it is only an indication of where you should look.

I should also not have to remind you to be cautious with your personal information. Con artists are prowling the genealogical chat rooms, and you have only his or her word when someone claims he or she is your fourth cousin three times removed.

Never give information on living persons. Realize that anything on the Net has become public property and you no longer have any control over how or where it will be used.

This article seems to convey a negative opinion of the Net. It has to, to counter the enormous appeal the Net seems to have. You can have a wonderful and profitable

experience on the Internet — so long as you use common sense and a healthy dose of skepticism.

So happy hunting! May you find that missing ancestor — in a genealogy with proper citations that takes you to online, original documents.

Go to TheBeaver.ca to view our new Roots website, complete with past columns, a readers' forum, and genealogy research links.

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By Fraser Dunford

Dr. Fraser Dunford is a professional engineer and a former university academic and administrator. In his second career, he is a professional genealogist and the executive director of the Ontario Genealogical Society. He is the author of several books on genealogy.

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