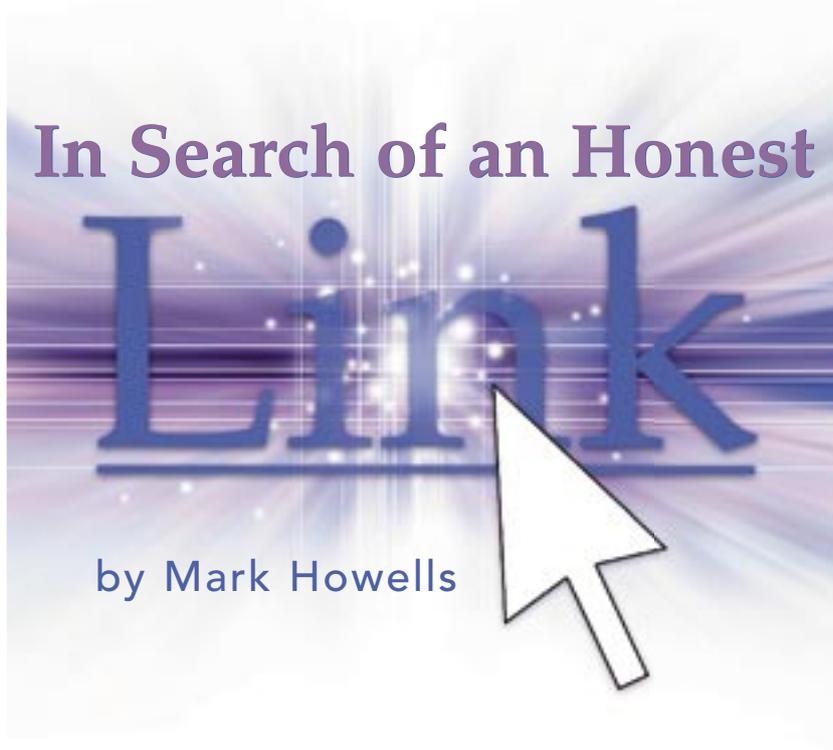# In Search of an Honest Link

by Mark Howells

I have clicked on thousands of genealogy links in my time online. I'm not talking about webpages; I'm talking about links to webpages. Links should not be confused with the webpages themselves. Links are the transport mechanism—webpages are the destination. Links are those mostly underlined, mostly blue, mostly text parts on a webpage that magically whisk you to another webpage. Sometimes links are attached to graphics or are otherwise obscured, but you know you've found one when you hover your cursor over something and the cursor turns into a little pointing hand.

Links are tools to get from one web page to another. Just like any other tool, they can either be designed well or poorly by their creator—the referring webmaster. Well-tempered links are a joy to use. They are obvious in function, they clearly identify what they are going to transport you to, and they are kept in working order. Poorly designed links, on the other hand, are difficult to find on a website, obscure as to their intended destination, and often broken.

Web technology has become so ubiquitous that well-designed links are hardly given a second thought. On the other hand, links that are broken are considered failures of upkeep in a rapidly changing online environment. But there is a problem with links that transcends good design or poor maintenance: links that are designed with the intent to mislead.

The Gory Details

In order to understand the ability of webmasters to mislead their visitors through deliberately created links, it is necessary to understand what makes up a link. We all recognize a link when we see one in our browser. In the background source code for that link, there are two primary components that a link could not exist without: the destination and its title.

For example, the simple link Ancestry – Genealogy and Family History Records is actually coded Ancestry – Genealogy and Family History Records. The link has a destination, which is the URL http://www.ancestry.com, and a title, "Ancestry – Genealogy and Family History Records." The angle brackets, equal sign, quotation marks, and other gobbledygook is the HTML programming language that need not concern us for our purposes here. In order for the above link to function, the URL destination address must be correctly formatted. A bad URL means the link will be broken. It's what I call the decorative part of the link, the title, which first concerns us regarding deceptive links.

Bait and Switch

The title of a link is under the control of the referring webmaster creating the link itself. In the above example, I happened to use the exact title of the destination website. But as a referring webmaster, I can make the title anything (or nothing if I prefer to attach a link to a graphic). For instance, I could have just as easily made the title Renew Your Invaluable Subscription to Ancestry Magazine Here with the code Renew Your Invaluable Subscription to Ancestry Magazine Here. Same destination URL, but a different title text.

This is a simple example of the title of a link being under the control of the referring webmaster who created the link. Some of us have fallen for the more severe joke of clicking on a link titled "Disney," for instance, and have subsequently found ourselves viewing a website the grandchildren shouldn't see. That's an extreme form of the bait and switch problem.

You're lured into clicking on a link by its promising title only to find that the destination website is not what was promised. Please note that the

destination webpage is not the cause of the problem here. The webmaster who wrote the link that you clicked is the one who tricked you. The Walt Disney Company certainly did not request this sort of unpleasant association in the minds of its potential customers.

Genealogy has its own varieties of bait and switch. Just as you would cite the title of a book exactly for documentation purposes in support of your family history research, the best referring webmasters will have their link titles match the actual webpage title of the destination URL. Now this gets confusing, so bear with me. The title of the link is not required to be the title of the destination webpage. The title of the link is under the control of the webmaster of the referring webpage—the one who created the link. The title of the webpage is under the control of the creator of the destination webpage. If they are the same, it's because the referring page webmaster has matched the link title to the destination webpage title. Using the same title for the link as the link's destination webpage is simply good design stretching back to before the Internet. For example, paper library card catalogs would identify Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* by its actual title, not by the librarian's own preferred description of the play—*Melancholy Dane Tragedy* or something similar.

Unfortunately, a few misguided webmasters are making a hash out of the links they create. I recently visited a county webpage that claimed it contained links to over 2,000 birth, marriage, and obituary announcements. I was suitably impressed when I did indeed see that many links for just one county organized by surname. As I began visiting these links, I found that all 2,000 links pointed to the same five individual webpages. The destination pages had not used the HTML <name> tag to locate each

individual surname, so the referring links could not even take my browser to the position on the destination page where that surname occurred.

Some hard-working volunteer had transcribed a large amount of vital record announcements from a local newspaper and put them all on the five destination webpages. Some webmaster had indexed every surname on the volunteer's five pages and created his own index of 2,000 links that point to them. When I clicked on a link titled "Obituary for John Smith," I was sent to the top of a page titled "Obituaries from the Hopkinsville Clarion-Democrat" and was left to my own devices to find John Smith. This is classic bait and switch.

Look Before You Leap

By this time, experienced Web users should be objecting that I haven't yet mentioned the use of the browser status bar. The status bar is at the bottom of your browser and should display the destination URL of the link you are hovering your cursor over. By keeping an eye on the status bar, you needn't click through on a link to determine where it is intending to send your browser. Using the status bar, you are not dependent on the referring link's title to see where you're going. The status bar, unfortunately, is not user friendly. It shows the destination URL and not the destination webpage's title. So unless you enjoy looking at URLs as much as user-friendly titles, the use of the status bar is not foolproof. Worse yet, it can be defeated by the referring webmaster.

Using an "on mouseover" command within a referring hypertext link with an associated "window.status=" command can hide or change what appears in the status bar as you hover your cursor over a link. This form of mouseover command associated with a referring link will instruct your status bar to display something other

than the destination URL, which is the default. So while you hover your cursor over the link, the status bar will display what the referring webmaster wants you to see instead of the URL of the destination web page.

As with any tool, this has both good and bad applications. In the happy sunlit uplands where referring webmasters want to assist their visitors in understanding what they are about to click on, mouseover commands can display the actual user-friendly titles of the destination websites. In the darker regions, mouseover commands are usually used to prevent the visitor from seeing the actual destination URL by substituting a misleading title, message, or even a false destination URL. You can experiment with these mouseover commands online at <www.htmlbasix.com/ hidelink.shtml> to get an idea of how they work and to create examples.

Text Without Context Is Pretext

Why on earth would any referring webmaster want to use deceptive links? Why would he or she want to mislabel links for visitors or obscure the destinations of links? Perhaps they have their own reasons for purposely misleading visitors. Perhaps they believe that people will not visit their site unless they provide some interesting if not aptly named links. As a visitor, when you see a mislabeled or obscured link, be on your guard. If that is how they treat information for their visitors, I would hate to see these webmasters' source citations for their own genealogical research! ✍

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