

Rob Raeside: Public Interest in Vexillology – Questions from the Public 1999 - 2006

Abstract: *Over the period 1999-2004 and again in 2006 a data base of all questions from the public at large to the Flags of the World website has been maintained for the months June to August. This sampling of queries has been used to analyze the public interest in vexillology over the seven-year period. This data set reveals a trend toward increasing sophistication of questions, probably driven by increasing availability of information on the internet, and increasing skill among people seeking vexillological information.*

From 1999 to 2006 the number of flag-related queries directed to the FOTW website has ranged from about 60 to 90 a month. At the same time, non-vexillological inquiries rose from 42 to 108 a month in 2003. Partly to address this increase of inquiries which could not be readily addressed, the contact method on FOTW changed from a personal e-mail address on every page to a single intervening page which provides advice on what cannot be answered. Although it took over a year for the revised system to be incorporated on all commonly accessed pages, the number of non-vexillological inquiries has dropped to about 20 a month.

Vexillological information has been sorted according to type: providing information (flag images, corrections to FOTW, general information) or seeking information ("meaning of flags", protocol, unidentified flags, flag evaluations, other information). In the earlier part of the study, the commonest vexillological question asked was of the form "what does this flag mean". If the information was not readily available on the website, the question was directed to the FOTW mailing list, and in due course the answers reached the website - however the frequency of the question still increased until people were forced to go through an extra page to ask a question, whereupon the frequency of the question was halved. Similarly requests for evaluations (which are not provided by FOTW) increased dramatically to 2004, before dropping.

The strongest areas of growth of inquiries are the contributions of images - some regular contributors provide images from their collections almost daily - and in requests for identification. Notable anomalies occur during major sporting events (World Cup, Olympics), when spikes occur in the number of unidentified flag requests but the overall number of contributions declines markedly.

Introduction

Flags of the World (FOTW) was established as an e-mail distribution list by Giuseppe Bottasini in 1993. By 1994, a website [1] was created in order to archive the contributions to the mailing list. From the very beginning of the website, one of the links provided at the top of every page has been a contact link, whereby visitors to the site can provide the organization with information, corrections, or inquiries. In fact, this

capability has been one of the strengths of the FOTW website – any errors of fact can be addressed by any visitor to the site.

Since 1994, the website has grown, now with over 33,000 pages and 63,000 flag images. Annual growth has varied, but starting in 2000, the rate of growth has been fairly steady at 10-40% per year. The initial phase (up to 2000) was primarily a consolidation of the display of national flags (including naval and military) with first level-subdivisions of some countries. The rapid expanse subsequent to 2000 arose from the consolidation of national and first-level sub-national flags, and the subsequent addition of municipal flags, a process which still continues.

Use of the FOTW website is more difficult to assess, as it is hosted by 13 currently active mirrors, not all of which are set up to provide usage statistics, or wish to share that with the public. In 2007 Google Analytics ^[2] was installed on some pages, and currently exists on 6% of the pages, opportunistically as they were updated in September and October 2006. Tracking of access to these sites is provided by Google, which reveals that at least one mirror receives over 5 million page hits a month. A conservative estimate would indicate that about 20 million page views occur each month.

The aim of this communication is to track the nature of the interaction between some of these site visitors and the site administrator, in order to assess how that has changed with the development and expansion of the internet since 1999. What are people looking for in FOTW? What do visitors want FOTW to know? How well is FOTW providing information to its visitors?

How the study was undertaken

Only a tiny fraction of the visitors to FOTW enter into any exchange with the site, but those that do have been tracked over the periods of June to August in the years 1999 - 2006, except for the year 2005. To assess the interest from these site visitors, a log of all off-list inquiries has been maintained for the three month period each year, and categorized by source, geographic area of the question, date, the general purpose of the question, and whether the contribution was used to add further information to the website. The categorization by source relied initially on the top-level domain (e.g., .ca, .de, .com), but where the location of the questioner from a .com, .org or .net address could be determined geographically, the latter identification of source area was used.

Inevitably some of these categories could not be determined for every question. Repeated responses to an inquiry were included as single entries, unless the inquiry expanded into new areas of questioning.

Provision of information to FOTW

Over the period 1999-2006 (less 2005), unsolicited provision of information has been a steady source of material for consideration on the FOTW mailing list and eventual inclusion on the website. All messages of this sort are forwarded to the mailing list by the director, thereby allowing the mailing list to function as an informal peer-review process for use by the editors as they consider items for inclusion.

Vexillological information provided to FOTW has been subdivided into three categories. The first category is *contribution of an image*, which usually is in the form of a photograph or drawing of a flag, although increasingly (but not tracked separately) this can be in the form of a

computer image lifted from a webpage, *e.g.*, the organization's or municipality's own webpage or another web data source, like Wikipedia. In all cases, an acknowledgment is always provided immediately, to the effect that the image has been received and forwarded to the mailing list for consideration and possible discussion, and a comment that the contributors name will be included with any posting we make. In situations where it seems likely that the image is the intellectual property of another individual, a request is made to identify the source, and if only minimal information is provided along with the image, a request is made to provide a comment on the location, sighting, significance, and design of the flag. Submissions of municipal flags appear to be particularly successful in garnering responses – it seems that when people first get connected to the internet (or discover the availability of search engines), one of the first places they seek is their home town. In many cases an FOTW webpage comes up near the top of the choices and if it listed as “flag unknown”, it often generates a response.

The second type of contribution is a *correction*. Many people are willing to offer their own understanding of the significance of the elements or history of a flag, and respond readily to any perceived inaccuracies on FOTW. This is one of the strengths of the website, that it can accept such corrections and respond quickly. In such cases, the corrections are assessed: they are forwarded to the mailing list for potential discussion and modification of the website if they are new corrections; if they have already been addressed, a polite note is returned saying we have received the correction and are in the process of fixing it; or if the correction is itself known to be wrong, the informant is politely informed that their understanding is wrong.



An example of the last type would be the colour of the top stripe of the Indian flag – the commonest *correction* contribution. It seems that

different monitors display this colour differently, and the subject of the precise colour is clearly a sensitive issue to Indians.

The third category of contribution is *other vexillological information*. This is a general catch-all category for any contribution that is not a new image, nor a correction. Such information may be further details about the design, history, significance or use of a particular flag, and it follows the same procedure as the *contribution of an image* category.

The numbers of inquiries that has provided FOTW with information over the tracking period are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Number of cases of provision of vexillological information to FOTW from 1999-2004 and 2006*

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2006
contribution of image	37	42	44	28	48	41	78
Correction	34	40	22	17	19	15	11
vex-information	5	8	11	13	14	10	13
Total	76	90	77	58	81	66	102

This table shows a fairly steady total rate of contributions at approximately one to two useful contributions every day over the study period. Of note, the number of image contributions (with or without an image) has generally risen, and the number of corrections has fallen – the latter presumably because the information gets incorporated on to the website. Taking the case of corrections to the saffron colour of the Indian flag, although the data have not been tracked separately, it is possible to separate out the number of contributions in the category *correction* and about India. The values for the 7 years of the study (in order) are: 3, 4, 2, 3, 0, 1, 1. Although these numbers may include other corrections to Indian pages, it appears that the number of “corrections” dropped after the inclusion of a link immediately below the front page top image to “Colours of the flag” and inclusion of the comment in late 2002 “Note: we have found it almost impossible to represent the shade of saffron on the Indian flag adequately for all monitors - some show it too yellow, other too orange. If you compare it with the colours on the flag of Brunei and Ireland you will see we have indeed chosen a tone between orange and yellow, as close to saffron as we can.” Links are

provided to the Brunei and Irish flags, so visitors can compare the shades of yellow, saffron and orange. Other corrections commonly are in the form of urban legends, and have been similarly addressed on the relevant pages.



The particularly large number of contributions in 2003 and 2006 reflect the contributions of single individuals who have provided a series of items from their own collections, but who forward them to the director for inclusion, because they are unable to sustain the volume of traffic on the mailing list – FOTW increasingly seems to be benefiting from these contributions, with extensive submissions of flags of shipping lines, and flags of German and Canadian municipalities extending now over a period of years. Perhaps of note is the overall dip in contributions in 2002 – the first month of the study period coincided with the World Cup in Korea and Japan, and it is very evident from the director’s point of view that the overall number of off-list inquiries decreases drastically during the World Cup (the effect is masked in 2006 by the backlog of material from two on-going series of contributions from regular off-list contributors).

Request for information from FOTW

The “write us” link on every FOTW page also generates many requests for information. Over the period of the study, this has averaged about 36% of all contributions, and 65% of all vexillological inquiries. These queries were subdivided into six categories as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Number of cases of information requests for vexillological information from FOTW from 1999-2004 and 2006*

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2006
meaning of flag	45	48	51	39	68	34	15
Protocol	25	20	18	15	11	11	8
Identification request	45	39	22	52	41	18	53
Heraldry	1	2	2	0	6	1	2
Evaluation	5	8	15	30	41	25	8
other information	35	43	28	22	38	28	25
Total	156	160	136	158	205	117	111

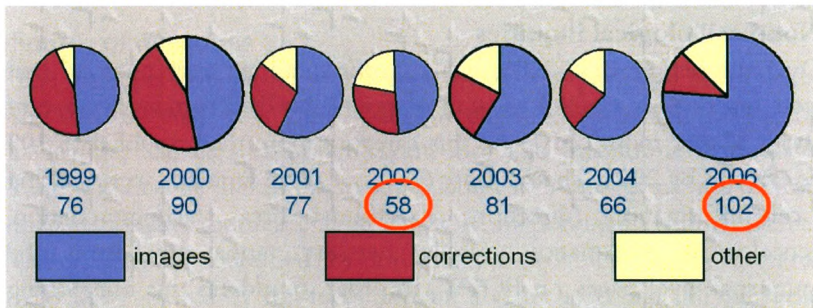
The overall number of information requests has declined since the direct e-mail link on all pages was replaced by an intervening page explaining what we cannot answer. In particular, requests for evaluations of flags were substantially reduced, rising from 5 in the survey period in 1999 to 41 in 2003, then falling to 8 by 2006. Over the seven study periods, the total number of requests for evaluations of flags was 136 – of these, at least 101 appear to have originated in USA. Breaking the data down further, 45 were for evaluations of historical US national flags, and 18 of these were for 13-star flags. All these 13-star flags bore an appearance of age, and most probably dated from the centennial celebrations in 1876. The next largest group of requested evaluations (42) was for German World War 2 flags – a huge number of these flags were returned to USA after the war. Most were for simple swastika flags, although 10 were for the war ensign, and 6 for imperial era ensigns taken in 1945-46. Six of the WW2 German flags were claimed to have been taken directly from the Reichstag – it appears that the building must have been wrapped in flags, or the germination period for family lore is less than 60 years.

A steady stream of requests asks about the meaning of a flag – this type of request usually appears to be from school children who are doing projects on countries or their flags. There is a clear perception that every element of a flag must carry a meaning. For the first part of the study, the increase in these inquiries probably reflects increasing use of the internet as an information source, balanced by the gradual addition of such information to FOTW. Since all national front pages should have been updated within 2-3 years, the continued request for this

information presumably represents an impatience in the public to read through the information provided. Most responses to this request now simply involve cut and paste of the relevant paragraph from FOTW, or the return of a standard response to the effect the colours carry no meaning in themselves.

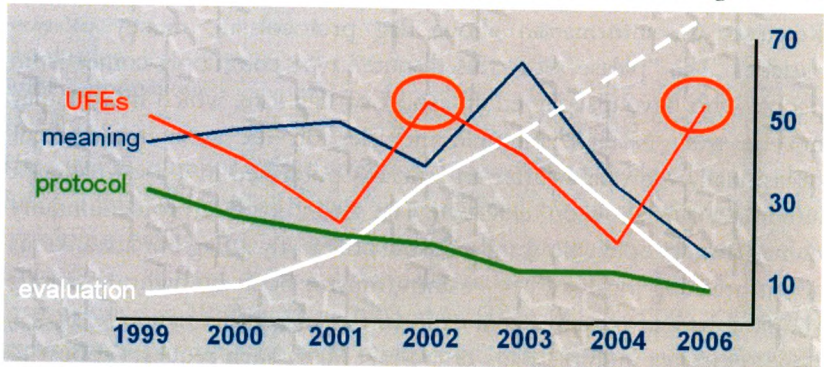
Requests for information about flag protocol are mostly of two varieties. The “please settle this dispute” type commonly comes from people who have discovered an aspect of flag lore, which may or may not be true. Notable multiple inquiries on the same topic occur occasionally – probably after an article is published in a local paper or aired on a quiz show on television. The second type of protocol inquiry comes from people who want to know how to fly a flag but are anxious about breaking local laws or custom (must it be lit by night; how long should it be half-masted; can a national flag of another nation be flown; how to arrange multiple flags on poles?) Many such requests appear to stem from an incomplete understanding of the US flag code (even from inquirers outside USA).

Since flags are often the public’s first point of entry into heraldry, FOTW also receives a steady stream of inquiries about heraldry. Leaving aside family coats of arms (these are classified as non-vexillological inquiries), these inquiries typically are requests for information about the significance of elements on coats of arms on municipal flags.



Perhaps the most interesting type of inquiry is the request for identification. The number of such requests is steady throughout the year, with spikes during periods of turmoil, when many political flags

are seen, or during major sporting events when rarely seen national flags make an appearance (note the peaks in 2002 and 2006, when the first month of the survey coincided with World Cup competitions). The majority of these sightings can easily be answered, but any that cannot be identified by the director are forwarded to the mailing list for



assistance. About 40% of those are immediately confirmed, a few inspire discussion which may run for a few days, sometimes elucidating further information, and an eventual identification, and the remainder remain unknown. These unknown flags (referred to as UFEs – unidentified flags or ensigns – on FOTW) are then posted on the UFE pages of FOTW – currently over 60 such flags are posted [3]. While some of these images have been on-line for several years, FOTW does receive identifications and the original inquirers are eventually informed of the identity of the flag.

Non-vexillological inquiries

Over the period 1999-2003, many visitor inquiries were received that were not directly vexillological in nature (Table 3). From an average of about 52 per month in 1999, this category more than doubled to 108 per month by 2003. The majority (75%) of these inquiries were seeking local information (directions to tourist areas, accommodation, genealogical information, family heraldry) apparently from the municipal level pages on FOTW. In order to address this burgeoning area of inquiries, a decision was made to remove the direct e-mail contact link to the director and replace it with a link to an intermediate page explaining that FOTW does not provide such information.

Although the switch from the direct e-mail link was introduced only as pages were updated, the nature of visitor inquiries changes substantially, particularly in the area of non-vexillological inquiries.

Table 3. *Number of non-vexillological inquiries to FOTW from 1999-2004 and 2006*

Category	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2006
asking local information	10	18	60	72	101	42	8
family heraldry	4	4	7	14	24	8	1
compliments	10	8	11	9	15	11	10
purchase request	72	98	115	90	118	45	12
permission to use	5	6	44	13	16	12	10
Complaint	1	0	0	1	2	2	4
Other	2	3	5	2	6	3	3
thanks for response	23	25	31	19	42	20	12
Total	127	162	273	220	324	143	60

Some other interesting trends are apparent in these data. A spike in the number of requests for permission to use information from FOTW in 2001 followed the publication of an article about FOTW's colouring book of flags (line drawings of all national flags) in a home-schooling magazine in USA. Although the numbers are small, an increase in the number of complaints about incorrect information peaked in 2006, all of which were about incorrect depiction of Lebanese and Palestinian political flags during the Israel-Lebanon conflict in 2006. A drop in the number of non-vexillological inquiries in 2002 and 2006 occurred mainly in June each year – during the World Cup competitions.

Source of questions

The top-level domain or source area for each inquiry was also tracked through this survey. In most cases the nation can be identified by this code (.de, .ca, etc.), although .com, .org and .net top-level domains cannot always be identified. In some cases, well-known servers indicate their nationality (btinternet.com is in UK, bigpond.com is in Australia). Others can be identified by information provided by the inquirer. Allocating source by top-level domain and by assessing the questions posed, the breakdown of question source is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. *Source of inquiries to FOTW from 1999 to 2004 and 2006.*

Domains	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2006
Africa	3	4	6	8	4	2	4
Asia (excl Russia)	4	6	6	5	8	9	11
Australia & NZ	18	23	20	18	31	22	18
Canada	28	36	42	36	45	35	24
Europe (excl. UK, Ireland and Russia)	35	45	50	29	55	25	20
UK and Ireland	29	33	28	19	48	24	12
Russia	1	2	6	12	10	22	20
Central & Latin America	13	16	25	16	40	28	25
USA	129	158	192	186	189	67	51
Unidentified	99	89	111	107	180	92	88
	359	412	486	436	610	326	273

In general the trends seen in Table 4 mimic the growth of the use of the internet. The pattern of a rapid increase in inquiries to 2003 and a decrease after the introduction of an intervening page is seen in the number of inquiries from unidentified sources, and from all locations in the Americas, and Europe (including UK and Ireland). Inquiries from Africa, Russia and Asia appear not to be affected – presumably because the growth of the internet is still very active in these areas.

Conclusions

The mailbox of the FOTW director has received an average of three to six inquiries a day during the months of June to August, 1999-2006. While most of these inquiries are only peripherally relevant to the on-line discussion of the FOTW membership, all new information from these inquiries is forwarded for consideration. Such non-member contributions have generated many hours of discussion and further research, and we hope our responses have satisfied the visitors. Although not tracked, probably about half of the respondents who have been given an answer respond with an expression of their thanks, and the FOTW website ultimately benefits from their observations.



Notes:

- (1) FOTW website: <http://flagspot.net> – updated weekly
- (2) Google Analytics: <http://analytics.google.com>
- (3) FOTW website: <http://flagspot.net/flags/ufc.html>

About the author

Rob Raeside studied at the University of Aberdeen (BSc), Queen's University (MSc) and the University of Calgary (PhD) and is since 1982 Professor of mineralogy, tectonics etc. at the Acadia University. He is active as a director of FOTW.

Address of the author:

Robert Raeside, PhD
2 Glooscap Terrace
B4P 1S7 Wolfsville
CANADA
e-mail: rob.raeside@acadiau.ca



Meeting of the FOTW-group

Photo: Staack