VEXILLOLOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA:
A 35-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE FROM SNAIL MAIL TO FACEBOOK

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Australia, Flags of the World

INTRODUCTION

My early interest in vexillology was basic. I owned a couple of flag books but went to the State Library or my local school library to look at the more expensive books; I treasured the yearly flag charts produced free by the local National Australia Bank.

The best of these books was undoubtedly Dr Whitney Smith's *Flags across the World and Through the Ages*. I loved the Olympics, especially the Opening Ceremony when all the nations marched in. I would sit in front of the television with my National Australia Bank charts and my copy of Whitney Smith's book and see if any had changed.

It was on one of these occasions in 1988 that a strange flag appeared right before Australia. It was blue with two thin yellow stripes at the bottom but most curious of all it had a four-pointed red star, fimbriated white, in the canton. This was the flag of Aruba (right and at the Olympics), recently separated from the Netherland Antilles. I had never seen this flag before; my flag books had nothing on it nor did the bank flag charts.

At the earliest opportunity I rushed to the State Library. Their flag books also were not helpful. I went to the helpdesk. They suggested I try their collection of *The Flag Bulletin* and behold; one issue contained a fine article on the new flag of Aruba by Dr. Smith himself.
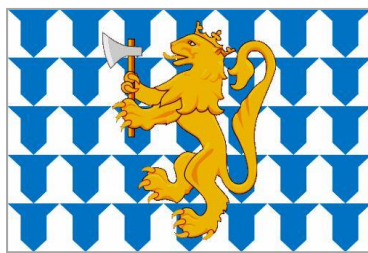

FLAG DATA RETRIEVAL BEFORE THE INTERNET

In my early years, flag research was very difficult. I can just imagine the heartache Smith, Crampton, Evans and Barraclough encountered as the pioneers of vexillology. You had to literally wait until *The Flag Bulletin* produced an article, or write a nice letter to one of these gentlemen or to an embassy and hope in a month or so you receive a reply. Sometimes you would be lucky. I remember a detailed response from William Crampton with several photocopied pages on the flags of the regions of Italy and unofficial and local flags used in the French Overseas Territories and Departments e.g. Martinique, Guadeloupe, French Guiana, and Reunion. Another time I received a beautiful booklet/brochure on the historical and unofficial National and flags of the islands of French Polynesia from a travel organisation in Tahiti. But it was exceeding difficult.
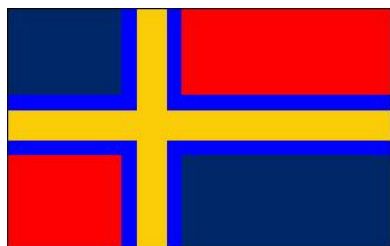
AND THEN THE INTERNET

The internet and its various search engines - Google, Bing and Alta Vista - brought massive change to flag research. At first, the information available was limited. It depended on people devoted to setting up home-pages and making the data available.

Since then, information has exploded from a variety of sources, some reliable, some not and some spurious. It has its pitfalls and I always tell new flag researchers to use a variety of sources to obtain their information not to rely only on Wikipedia, with FOTW database hopefully one of the sources. The FOTW website is excellent. It is very accurate, well-edited and reasonably up to date.

There are also sites such as *In the Darkest Hour* and *Alternate History* that make up flags and this confuses and misleads new vexillologists no end. An example of this is Spitzbergen (Svalbard) an Overseas Territory of Norway. Officially the only flag is the Norwegian flag. FOTW shows a proposal consisting of a field *vair* Azure and Argent with a Lion Rampant Or. A Google search brings up a myriad of weird and wonderful designs.

Flag of Norway (far left) Svalbard flag from FOTW (**left**) and **below,** three spurious designs from Google.

Information available on the internet isn't policed for accuracy and depends solely on somebody having the time, knowledge and skills to put it there. So even though it is a valuable tool it must be treated with a great deal of caution. Even the great resource of the internet, *Wikipedia,* should be treated with caution. Always obtain a second supporting reference, even for *Wikipedia* articles. Some *Wikipedia* flag articles are excellent, written by well established, well known and respected vexillologists. Some aren't. The case mentioned above of Svalbard and some French Overseas Territories and Departments are cases in point. Also see the weird but totally spurious flag of Sint Martin Island (**right**). But *Wikipedia* does offer a very useful tool for the beginner as a starting point.

FLAGS OF THE WORLD (FOTW)

Flags of the World is an internet-based vexillological association and resource. Its principal project is the internet's largest website devoted to vexillology, containing comprehensive information about all kinds of flags, (its own flag shown here) an associated mailing list, complemented more recently by a Facebook group with a membership nearing 4,000. The mailing list began as a discussion group in about September 1993, the website established by Giuseppe Bottasini in December 1994.   followed in 2009, founded by Dr. Edward Mooney. FOTW became the 56th member of the FIAV in 2001 with a delegate representing it on the General Assembly.

Flags of the World describes itself as "...an internet group, the sole purpose of which is the advancement of the pursuit of vexillology, that is the creation and development of a body of knowledge about flags and flag usage of all types."

All three - the website, mailing list and Facebook group - operate in English, though there are members from around the world and as such, information from many languages is translated and included. **The mailing list** is monitored by the FOTW Listmaster, while work on the website is coordinated by the FOTW Editorial Director. FOTW Facebook Group is administered by a Head Administrator and six sub-administrators of whom yours truly is one.

The Website is managed and edited by an editorial staff of 21 unpaid volunteers. As of mid-2009 the FOTW website contains more than 41,000 pages about flags and more than 78,000 images of flags, and also includes an extensive on-line dictionary of vexillology. The website is updated once a week with fresh material; some mirrors update monthly. Due to the high amount of material there is an editing backlog, causing some areas of FOTW to contain outdated information. There are also some mirrors that have not been updated for varying periods of time and which are therefore considered "historical."

The Flags of the World website was created by Giuseppe Bottasini, (**left**) of Milan, Italy, in the early days of general public access to the internet (late 1994). This is his personal flag.

Giuseppe initially operated both the website and mailing list from CESI (Centro Elettrotecnico Sperimentale Italiano) until bandwidth pressures resulting from the site's popularity required him to look for a more permanent site. In January 1997 a devastating system crash at CESI forced the immediate move, briefly through an Israeli mirror, to a site at Digibel in Belgium.

Giuseppe continued to manage the website, initially assisted by Željko Heimer, who was responsible for ensuring a flag on every page, and who standardized the layout of the pages, the image sizes and palettes and introduced the use of ISO codes for file names. Željko "retired" when he went to do military service in Croatia in late 1997, although he has intermittently remained active as an editor. Rob Raeside took over as assistant, until June 1998 when Giuseppe announced his resignation as director and Rob took over. The website continued to grow, exceeding 100 Mbytes in size in October 2000. In May 2001, the "home site" at Digibel in Belgium closed, and FOTW continued as a dispersed series of mirrors operating in USA, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Germany, and Puerto Rico.

Table 1 (below) shows the History of FOTW Directors, List masters and Website hosts since inception.
Table 2 (below) shows the history of the FOTW website office bearers since inception.
Table 3 (below) the Growth of FOTW since its inception.

The Mailing List was begun as a discussion group of about a dozen people, including Giuseppe Bottasini, Christopher Vance, and Alessio Bragadini, in about September 1993. It soon expanded to include a regular group of about 100 to 150 addresses. Many of the images initially distributed via the mailing list were written in PostScript by Christopher Vance, who maintained the best flag-site on the internet at the time.

The mailing list was initially managed by Giuseppe Bottasini, until it moved on 24 July 1977 to a majordomo list at University of California, Berkeley, managed by Josh Fruhlinger, an MA candidate in Classical History. On 1 August 1998 the mailing list moved to QNET.com, a majordomo list, managed by Edward Mooney, a Social Studies teacher in Palmdale, Antelope Valley, California. In April 2000, spam found its way through the majordomo list server, despite Edward's heroic efforts in stopping it. The experience forced a move from the majordomo to groups, subsequently acquired by YahooGroups, the current host of the mailing list. In January 2000, Ole Andersen, of Copenhagen, Denmark, was appointed Assistant List Master, taking over full management of the list on 1 August 2000 for a 2-year appointment. He was replaced by Steve Kramer in 2002. Steve had to relinquish his term in December 2003 due to illness, and was replaced by António Martins-Tuválkin until 1 December 2005, when André Coutanche took over as List Master, assisted by Pascal Gross and Jonathan Dixon as apprentice.

In March 2007, Pascal had to relinquish his duties as assistant. At that point Jonathan was promoted to assistant, and Ivan Sache came on board for an 8-month stint as apprentice. On 1 December 2007, André completed his term as List Master: Jonathan Dixon took over and Ivan Sache assumed the post of assistant. Nathan Lamm stepped in as apprentice.

The mailing list duties continued unabated through the 2009 and 2011 change-overs, with Jan Mertens and Dirk Schönberger added to the roster. By the December 2013 change-over, however, we had lost contact with Jan Mertens, so Dirk Schönberger was appointed List Master (effective 1 January 2014), and new assistant

and apprentice List Masters were appointed, Zoltán Horvath and Dean McGee. **Table 4** outlines the growth of the mailing list since inception.

Following the great success of the FOTW website, many flag related websites popped up with the major ones *Vexilla Mundi* edited by Mello Luchtenburg and the *World Flag Database* hosted by the current FIAV Secretary Graham Bartram. Whatever your interest in flags or vexillological organisation, there is a website that will answer your questions.
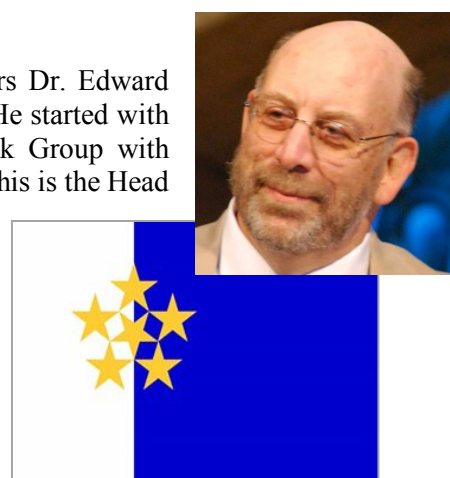
So new flag data information is now at the click of a mouse. If you have any questions you can email the various website masters. However, flag data retrieval wasn't finished yet. People demanded instantaneous information and feedback, and so FOTW Facebook was developed.

A fourth but very small section of FOTW also exists, a physical presence. Since its elevation to membership of FIAV, FOTW has been granted its own meeting time at the Biennial International Conference of Vexillology. This is a unique opportunity for members of the group to get together to chat, mingle, socialise and discuss in person the issues pertaining uniquely to FOTW and its direction into the future.

FOTW FACEBOOK GROUP

Not long after the founding of Facebook one of the Ex-List masters Dr. Edward Mooney (**right**) decided FOTW should have a presence there also. He started with only a Facebook page, but in mid-2009 founded FOTW Facebook Group with himself as Head Administrator, a position he still holds to this day. This is the Head Administrator's flag.

He soon appointed Robert Raeside (Canada), Zachary Harden (United States) and Ole Palnatoke Anderson (Denmark) as Assistants. With the group continuing to grow in January 2013, two more were added: James Dignan (New Zealand) and myself. In June 2014 Philippe Bondurand (France) was appointed and in June 2015 Krystof Huk from Croatia was appointed as the 8th Administrator.

Edward Mooney, its founder, describes FOTW Facebook as "a place for vexillologists to socialize. This is NOT meant as a substitute for the FOTW Mailing List; if you have scholarly information on flags and decide to post it here, submit the information to the FOTW-Mailing List as well to ensure it will be placed on our website. Please remember that Respect is Rule Number 1 on FOTW-Facebook."

When I became an Assistant Administrator, membership was 800. At the time of this presentation, this had increased to just under the 4,000 members. The reason for this rapid expansion is unclear. I suspect it is partly due to the popularity of Dr Sheldon Cooper, Big Bang Theory and his video segment *Fun with Flags*.

FOTW Facebook provides a forum for vexillologists to chat, socialise, impart new information, have fun and ask questions. It tries to strike a balance between the pure academic flag group which a lot of our members still think it should be, and the typical fun Facebook group. It doesn't discriminate with age, flag knowledge, language or reasons for joining. Members come from all cultures, English levels, age groups and walks of life. Members are as young as 12 and as old as 85.

By and large all members seem to socialise well with the occasional hiccup. Posts to the group must be completely relevant to flags, vexillology or the running of the groups and free as much as possible of politics.

It provides a forum for asking questions, posting interesting flag images, flags in the news and personal flag collections. It has its benefits over the mailing list in that the comments, feedback and socialisation is instantaneous, answering simple questions is quick, although at the moment the information doesn't reach the Editors of the Website for updating pages - a problem we are currently trying to fix.
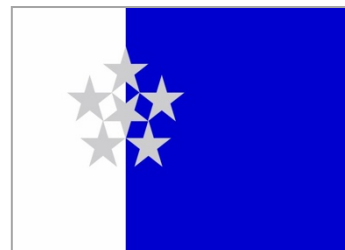An additional benefit of the group is that members can make long-time friends and message them off-group if they want clarification or just to chat as well using the various graphic packages to depict current flags and possible new flag designs. So, information of excellent nature with many references is now instantaneous.

Many of the world's leading vexillologists are members, so the information is as accurate as humanly possible. The FOTW Facebook Group is very tight and is more of a family than a group.

MY TIME AS AN ASSISTANT ADMINISTRATOR

The Flag of the Assistant Administrators

Since my appointment in January 2013 the job has been interesting to say the least. You need to think on your feet and resolve conflicts in moments – it's a very steep learning curve.

The major role of the moderators is to ensure the group is free of spam and advertisements. Members are vetted as much as possible prior to admission to ensure they aren't spammers, have a genuine interest in flags and are of a character consistent with the values of FOTW and have interests and ideologies in keeping with those of FOTW. Moderators scan posts for the delicate balance between purely academic vexillology, trivia and fun. We try to remind the pure vexillologists that they were once novices also, whilst encouraging those who post image-only posts to search for more interesting images, add something about the images to our knowledge base or why they like that flag or what that symbolism means to them.

The last and most difficult role of the moderator is conflict resolution, deleting insulting comments and posts and reminding members of the group's rules, of which the most important is RESPECT. We have a saying amongst the other Administrators "Don't mention the K word". In this case K stands for Kosovo. The sheer mention of the word in a post or the posting of the flag can cause uproar on the group and it is in these moments your skills as a moderator shine.
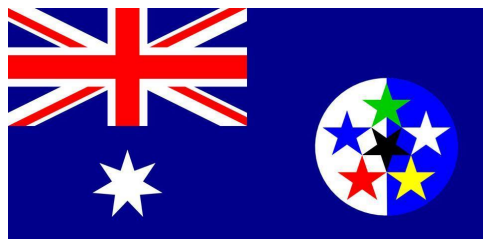
A FINAL WORD - "WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?"

As I have shown during this presentation the collection of flag data for research purposes has come a long way. From those snail-mail days of thirty-five years ago to the almost instantaneous access via *Facebook* and *Wikipedia* of today, vexillology also has come a long way. More than that, through *Facebook*, it has brought our community closer together. We can put a face to a name and chat as if they are in the next room.

So, what does the future hold?

In the immediate future the biggest issue is how to transfer information from *Facebook* to the website and obtaining new List-masters, Administrators and Editors to donate their time as the Facebook membership gets bigger and the volume of FOTW pages increases. As always one of our biggest challenges is increasing our female membership. Currently, the staff of FOTW-Facebook is looking at appointing a female Administrator as well as Administrators in Africa and Asia.

In the long term it is to ascertain the continuing relevance of books, journals, and paper-based material and hard copy. In my opinion the next big step will be live video streaming of Facebook Groups. This will mean you can actually converse with other vexillologists face-to-face from all over the world.
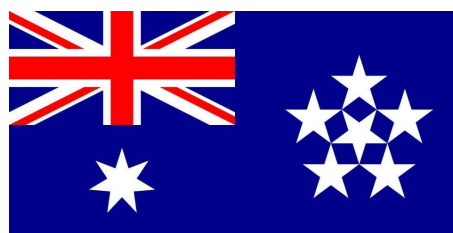
Fun flags of FOTW!

TABLE 1

SUMMARY HISTORY OF THE FOTW

Date	Director	Listmaster	List host
September 1993 -		Giuseppe Bottasini (Italy)	CESI
Late 1994 -	Giuseppe Bottasini (Italy)		
24 July 1997 -		Josh Fruhlinger (USA)	University of California, Berkeley
June 1998 -	Rob Raeside (Canada)		
1 August 1998 -		Edward Mooney (USA)	QNET.com
April 2000 -			eGroups.com
1 August 2000 -		Ole Andersen (Denmark)	
January 2001 -			YahooGroups.com
1 August 2002		Steve Kramer (USA)	
1 December 2003		António Martins-Tuválkin (Portugal)	
1 December 2005		André Coutanche (UK)	
1 December 2007		Jonathan Dixon (Australia)	
1 December 2009		Ivan Sache (France)	
1 December 2011		Nachum Lamm (Israel)	
1 January 2014		Dirk Schönberger (Germany)	

TABLE 2: SUMMARY OF ALL OFFICERS' POSITIONS

LM   List Master
ALM   Assistant List Master,
APLM   Apprentice List master

Sep 93	Jul 97	Aug 98	Jan 00	Aug 00	Jun 02	Dec 03	Dec 05	Mar 07	Dec 07	Dec 09	Dec 11	Jan 14	
List-master	List-master Emeritus												Giuseppe Bottasini
	List-mast	List-master Emeritus											Josh Fruhlinger
		List-master	List-master Emeritus										Edward Mooney
			As. Lm.	List-master	List-master Emeritus								Ole Andersen
			Ap. Lm.	As. Lm.	List-master	List-master Emeritus							Steve Kramer
				Ap. Lm.	As. Lm.	List-master	List-master Emeritus						António Martins

Ap. Lm.	As. Lm.	List-master	List-master Emeritus	André Coutanche
	Ap. Lm.	As. Lm.	As. List-master Emeritus	Pascal Gross
Ap. Lm.	As. Lm.	List-master	Lm. E.	Jonathan Dixon
Ap. Lm.	As. Lm.	List-master	Lm. E.	Ivan Sache
Ap. Lm.	As. Lm.	List-master	Lm. E.	Nathan Lamm
Ap. Lm.	As. Lm.			Jan Mertens
Ap. Lm.	List-master			Dirk Schönberger
As. Lm.				Zoltán Horvath
Ap. Lm.				Dean McGee

TABLE 3: GROWTH OF THE FOTW WEBSITE

Year	Pages	Images	Pages + Images		Images/page	Yearly growth*	Growth (x times 1996)
1996	674	710	1,381		1.1		
1997	1,100	1,400	2,500		1.3	81%	1
1998	1,900	3,600	5,500		1.9	120%	3
1999	2,400	5,000	7,400		2.1	35%	4
2000	8,200	14,900	23,100		1.8	212%	17
2001	11,400	20,700	32,100		1.8	39%	23
2002	16,600	29,400	46,000		1.8	43%	33
2003	19,000	36,000	55,000		1.9	20%	40
2004	23,000	43,000	66,000		1.9	20%	48
2005	29,000	54,000	83,000		1.9	26%	60
2006	31,000	58,000	89,000		1.9	7%	64
2007	34,000	64,000	98,000		1.9	10%	71
2008	38,000	70,000	108,000		1.8	10%	78
2009	42,000	78,000	120,000		1.9	11%	87
2010	45,000	85,000	130,000		1.9	8%	94
2011	49,000	90,000	139,000		1.8	7%	100
2012	52,000	97,000	149,000		1.9	7%	108
2013	53,000	102,000	155,000		1.9	4%	112

TABLE 4 SUMMARY OF THE MAILING LIST'S GROWTH

Year	Image files submitted	Total files size	Size/file (kB/image)
1995	295	945 kB	3.20
1996	1,704	6.06 MB	3.56
1997	2,386	9.19 MB	3.85
1998	3,434	14.4 MB	4.19
1999	7,576	30.3 MB	4.00
2000	7,336	40.0 MB	5.45

2001	10,785	59.7 MB	5.62
2002	9,142	51.4 MB	5.62
2003	6,696	39.4 MB	5.88
2004	6,949	59.6 MB	8.58
2005	8,181	74.6 MB	9.12
2006	7,851	73.1 MB	9.31
2007	7,420	69.5 MB	9.37
2008	7,633	93.2 MB	12.21
2009	7,676	125.0 MB	16.28
2010	15,575	244.8 MB	15.72
2011	5,974	75.4 MB	12.62
2012	5,501	94.4 MB	17.16
2013	5,588	90.4 MB	16.18

In closing, the last thirty-five years has been a glorious ride, and I look forward to the future and its innovations with great anticipation but always thankful and with a great deal of awe for the hard work and diligence and the results our pioneers achieved with little more than pen and paper.

Shall we never forget them!

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