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From Attorney to Detective: Using the Web as an Investigative Tool

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**From Attorney to Detective:
Using the Web as An Investigative Tool**

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I. Introduction

The web is a handy investigative tool, allowing a researcher to obtain some kinds of information previously requiring the services of a private detective. One can find a subject's email address, home address, telephone number, criminal records, property records, vital statistics information, and more. Much of the information is free, but considerably more is available for a fee. Most of the sites providing free information heavily promote paid services that provide more extensive information. The vast number of sites providing access to information about persons, property and things makes it impossible to provide an inclusive list; therefore, this chapter strives only to provide a sampling of representative sites.

I note out the outset that we need to strike a balance between access to public information and protection of personal information. The news is filled with stories of identity theft and stalking incidents. The legal system is beginning to catch up with the technology, and state and federal legislation increasingly strives to protect individuals from these crimes. Many sites now restrict the information they provide, or they require an affirmation from the requestor that the information will be used only for the specified authorized purposes.

II. Sites for Locating People

Many tools now exist for finding addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses. The following are examples of a few of these sites:

InfoSpace at <http://www.infospace.com/> searches White and Yellow pages for people and businesses. The people-searching screen requires a last name but also allows for limiting by first name, city and state. Businesses can be searched by name or type of business. The records include address and Mapquest map. InfoSpace records for individuals link to the People Data record for the individual. See more information about People Data below.

WhoWhere at <http://www.whowhere.com/> also searches White Pages for listings by name. The search screen allows for wildcard searching if the searcher only knows the first part of a name or address. The records include telephone number in addition to name and address information.

Yahoo! People Search at <http://people.yahoo.com/> retrieves physical addresses and email addresses. The only required field in the search screen is "last name," but the searcher can also enter first name, city and state to narrow the results. A search for my own name retrieved several old email addresses, the most recent being six years old.

AnyWho Reverse Lookup at <http://www.anywho.com/rl.html> provides the name and address of individuals attached to a phone number. Hyperlinked street names jump

the searcher to all records for addresses on that street, making this a handy tool for identifying a subject's neighbors.

MetaEmailSearchAgent (MESA) at <http://mesa.rrzn.uni-hannover.de/>, a service of the Computer Center of Lower Saxony, University of Hanover, simultaneously searches several email search sites, including **Populus**, **IAF**, **WhoWhere**, **Switchboard**, **Yahoo People Search**, **Bigfoot**, and **Usenet Addresses**.

Entering an email address into a general search engine, such as **Google** or **AltaVista**, may provide information about the person owning that address. Also, try going to the domain in the email address and searching it for information about the person using that email address. Here's an example using a fictitious email address and domain: you receive an email where the sender fails to identify him or herself. The address is jsmith@georgiasnoops.com. Go to <http://www.georgiasnoops.com> and search for any identifying information about a "jsmith" at that entity.

III. Sites for Gathering Information about People, Property & Things

The overwhelming number of tools for searching for public records and similar information might lead a searcher to forget the usefulness of web search engines. A simple search of a person's name in **Google** or **AltaVista** often provides a surprising amount of information about that person. If the subject has a common name, try adding a limiting term. For example, if looking for information about the UGA Law Librarian James Donovan, a simple Google search for "James Donovan" retrieves numerous sites about a number of different James Donovans. Adding the word "law" to the search narrows the results dramatically, and the first page of results links to a newsletter article profiling UGA's James Donovan.

A **Google image search** (click on Images at <http://www.google.com/>) may also be useful in finding a photograph of the subject. For example, entering "Wendy Moore UGA" in the Google image search box retrieves a photograph of this UGA Law Librarian.

The web supplies a plethora of public records searching sites. Many of the sites are fee-based, and it can be difficult to distinguish useful sites from those that are merely advertising a service. **Public Records Sources** at <http://www.publicrecordsources.com/> lists both free and subscription sites useful in locating public records over the web. One of the most helpful sites listed is **BRB Publication's listing of free government information sites** at <http://www.brbpub.com/pubrecsites.asp>. The list includes resources covering multiple states as well as a state-by-state and county-by-county listing. The amount and type of information available varies widely by county and is likely to increase as more courts are

working to make their records readily available. Gwinnett County, for example, provides access to court records at <http://www.gwinnettcourts.com/>. The records are searchable by party name or case number. The results include brief information including relevant dates, type of action (e.g., divorce, probate, warrant issued), and parties' names.

— Death Records

The **National Obituary Archive** at <http://www.arrangeonline.com/> serves as a large repository of obituaries and death records with more than 55 million individual entries on file. Visitors may search the free archive, which contains information supplied by funeral directors across North America. The site also uses information from international news organizations to report the most prominent deaths of the day. In addition, many of the archives are based on Social Security Administration files and other verified public records. The information provided includes name, date of birth, date of death, and last known place of residence. New names are added to the National Obituary Archive daily.

— Driver=s License Records

Once a tried-and-true source of personal information, motor vehicle and driver's license information is now regulated to protect the privacy of the driver. The federal Driver's Privacy Protection Act, 18 U.S.C. ' ' 2721 - 2725, regulates the sharing of information contained in drivers' records. The act sets forth the limited permissible uses for personal information contained in motor vehicle records.

"Personal information" means information that identifies an individual, including photographs, social security number, driver identification number, name, address, telephone number, and medical or disability information. The act specifically excludes zip codes and information on vehicular accidents, driving violations, and a driver's status. The act sets forth a detailed list of the uses for which personal information may be disclosed. Selected examples include for use in court proceedings, by insurers and potential employers, and in connection with matters of vehicle or driver safety.

Most states also regulate the disclosure of personal information contained in driver's records. In Georgia, O.C.G.A. ' 40-5-2(d) sets forth the authorized recipients and authorized uses for different elements of a driver's record. The Official Compilation of Rules and Regulations of the State of Georgia, sections 375-3-8-.01 through .03 also address access to driving record information.

Many states, including Georgia, provide information on the web about how authorized users can request driver's records. In many instances the requestor must pay a fee.

DWI/DUI information is becoming available for free on the web in some states. For example, the **New Mexico DWI Offender** site at <http://traffic.nmcourts.com/> allows for searching by name or Social Security number. The retrieved records provide detailed information, including the offender's name, date of birth, the

charge(s), the court, the plea, fines and fees, and more.

– **Real Estate and UCC Records**

The **Georgia Superior Court Clerk=s Cooperative Authority (GSCCCA)** at <http://www.gsccca.org> administers a statewide index for UCC, real estate and personal property filings. Their web site provides numerous applications, UCC forms, checklists, county clerk information, a central database of notaries public, and a statewide database on civil case filings. Currently underway is the Georgia Consolidated Lien Index. Another pilot project provides online access to plat images from several counties. The real estate index provides county, type of instrument, date filed, book and page where recorded, name of subdivision, and description of property. Access to the digitized documents (e.g., deed documents) requires subscription to the \$9.95/month service. Each page printed is an additional \$.25. The GSCCA does allow a one-time four-hour free guest membership.

– **Snooping in News Groups**

Many individuals provide information about themselves in postings to internet news groups and online bulletin boards. **Google Groups** at <http://www.google.com> (click on Groups) helps by providing the entire archive of Usenet discussion groups dating back to 1981. A sample search using my own name found postings revealing that I have an interest in the documents of the Council of Europe, cook with fresh ginger, listen to Celtic music, and bought a glass dragon at the

Renaissance Faire.

__ Prison Inmate Information

Both federal and state correctional systems have started to provide information about prison inmates, past and present, on the Web. The amount of information needed to locate an inmate in the database, as well as the amount of information provided by the database, varies from state to state. A number of inmate search databases are listed at <http://www.lawresearchservices.com/firms/torts/inmate-search.htm>. Here, we will focus on the federal and Georgia databases.

At the federal level, the Bureau of Prisons provides the **BOP Inmate Locator** at <http://inmateloc.bop.gov/locator/docs/home.jsp>, which includes records for federal inmates from 1982 to present. The database allows searches by AIdentification Number@ or AFirst and Last Name.@ The resulting list provides the name, age, race, and place of incarceration.

Privacy Alert: the BOP collects the following information regarding your visit to their site: 1) the name of the Internet domain (for example, "xcompany.com" if you use a private Internet access account, or "yourschool.edu" if you are connecting from a university's domain) and the IP address (a number that is automatically assigned to your computer when you are using the Internet) from which you access the site; 2) the type of browser and operating system used to access the site; 3) the date and time you access the site; 4) the internet address of the Web site from which you linked directly to the site; and 5) the pages you visit

and the information you request.

The **Georgia Department of Corrections Offender Query Database** at

<http://www.dcor.state.ga.us/OffenderQuery/asp/OffenderQueryForm.asp> allows flexible searching by either Department of Corrections I.D. number, case number, or name (including partial entries and aliases). The searcher can also enter general searches by age, gender, institution, county of conviction, and primary offense to retrieve a number of records. The records retrieved provide a detailed physical description, including race, gender, height, weight, hair color, eye color, and any tattoos, scars or marks. Other information includes the institution, the major offense, other sentences, known aliases, and tentative release dates. Please note that many of the records automatically load large photographs of the inmate, which may be disconcerting for victims of crime.

— **Web Site Information**

Tools like **WhoIs Source** at <http://www.whois.sc/> and **Better WhoIs** at <http://www.betterwhois.com> collect information retained by web domain registrars. A WhoIs Source search for the domain "asil.org" retrieves a record indicating that the American Society of International Law registers the domain, that it was created in November of 1995 and is registered through November of 2009. Contact information, including mailing and email address, is included. The WhoIs Source record also includes the type of server housing the site and the IP address.

– **Background Checks for A Fee**

Many companies provide fee-based retrieval of personal information via the Web.

Below are two examples. Please note that these companies are provided only as examples; their inclusion here does not constitute any kind of endorsement.

Data People at <https://www.people-data.com> will run an instant background check on an individual and email the results to the requestor. The \$25 fee will get you the individual's addresses and phone numbers; names and addresses for relatives, roommates and neighbors; bankruptcies; legal judgments; liens; real property; property values, and mortgage information.

Access-Central.com at <http://www.access-central.com/> runs background checks for a fee starting at \$19.95. The basic background check includes name, date of birth, aliases, current and previous addresses and phone numbers, and one statewide criminal record search. They do not provide Social Security numbers.