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Using the Web as an Investigation Tool

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Introduction

The Web can be a very powerful tool for tracking down facts of various kinds. It is often possible to use free resources available on the Internet to track down a current address, telephone number, and email address for witnesses, heirs, potential civil defendants, and other necessary individuals who have gone 'missing'. In addition, you can use free Web sites to discover information about individuals such as whether they have been involved in civil litigation, have filed bankruptcy, gotten divorced, or been convicted of a crime, have bought or sold real estate, hold a professional license, run a Web site, or are registered to vote. A great deal of information about publicly traded companies is also available for free on the Web, including contact information, officers, boards of directors, and financial reports. You can also find patent and trademark registrations, OSHA violations and other regulatory infractions, and UCC recordings. Many useful isolated facts are easily discovered on the Web, as well. Historical stock quotes, economic and demographic information, and weather data are all available.

In order to be an effective user of the Web for investigative purposes, however, you must understand not only the strengths of this vast collection of resources but also its limitations. For example, we all know that public records can offer a rich source for information about individuals and that many public records are now available on the Web. Still, experts on public records research estimate that only 35% of the available public records are accessible via the Web. Similarly, directory information such as telephone white and yellow pages is now routinely available on the Web; but often the pages that aggregate that information have insufficiently frequent updating routines, so that the information they direct you to is out of date.

As in all research, the vital first steps in effective Internet research include assessing your information need (stating definitively what it is you want to know); enumerating everything

relevant you already know; lining up the resources available to you; thinking about what those resources offer and how they are organized; and then working to formulate questions or other search strategies. Finally, you must be realistic and careful about what you find.

These steps are very similar to those you would take in any kind of research project. One important difference must be kept in mind. Not all information that you can find on the Web is reliable; even once correct data may be out of date. Never end your Web research by assuming that what you have found is gospel and simply proceeding to use the information. Assess the quality of the site from which you get information, and verify facts upon which you must rely if you are not certain that your source is fully reliable. You can probably feel quite comfortable using facts you garner at the county tax assessor's Web page. At the same time, assume that you must verify information you find on databases that you can access through freely available nongovernmental Web sites

Here is a very simple example of the entire process. You are trying to track down a distant cousin of the heirs to an estate in order to try and clear title to some land that a common grandfather owned when he died in testate. You know you need contact information (address or phone number, or maybe email address) for this individual. You already have a first and last name, an approximate age, and an heir's memory that this cousin's branch of the family moved to Alabama sixty years ago. After attending this CLE, you know that many of the white pages directories available on the Web allow searching by first and last name of the records of an entire state. Some of them show ages of the individuals listed in your results. You can access one of these sites; enter the first and last name; choose 'Alabama' as the state to search; and then use the age you've been given to identify the most promising results. If you are lucky enough that the cousin has a name that is somewhat unusual, and he or she has remained in Alabama, your

results may very well include the individual for whom you are searching. As you make further

inquiry by writing to each of the individuals remaining in your results list, you discover that two

of your 'hits' showed out of date information (imagine the "Moved. No forwarding address"

message) and another two 'hits' are not the right person after all. Of course, in this example I

can decree that the fifth person listed in your results is the missing cousin, thus proving the value

of Internet research.

The rest of this paper will focus on the specifics of using free Web resources to locate

people, discover information about them, research public companies, and track down other

useful isolated facts. I will also mention at least a few for-fee people locating, record retrieval,

and background check services. Locating individuals with little or no information to go on, or

when it has been a long time since their where abouts were known can prove more complicated

than the resources discussed here can handle. In addition, compiling detailed background reports

probably requires resources or services beyond the scope of what's available for free on the Web.

Investigations of People

Some information about individuals can only be thought of as public information. Most

people voluntarily provide at least some data about themselves to one public resource or another

such as a telephone or professional directory. Information from many, if not most, directories is

available on the Web. The primary drawback of many sites that provide directory information is

that they are not updated routinely enough.

Public records are another rich source of data about people. Increasingly, government

entities at all levels (municipal, county, state, and federal) are making available over the Internet

many of the documents they maintain. These can include court dockets and filings, liens,

criminal histories, real estate transactions, tax assessors' files, motor vehicle registration, drivers' license information, voter registration, and vital records (birth, death, marriage, and divorce).

Every state (and sometimes, individual counties and municipalities) has a different scheme determining what public records are actually publicly accessible. Georgia limits access to some public records that other states make easily available. For instance, O.C.G.A Section 40-5-2(d) limits both the recipients and the uses for different elements of a Georgia driver's record. At the same time, Georgia has moved more quickly than lots of states to make many of its publicly accessible records obtainable over the Internet.

Personal information (such as date of birth, or social security number) is generally not available in public resources like directories (though some directories that offer biographical sketches do include dates of birth). To the extent that personal information is gathered in public records, that portion of the public record is often not generally accessible. However, do be aware that personal information is sometimes hidden in public records such as court filings.

Although it is usually improbable that you will find much usable data about an individual employing only general search engines like Google or Yahoo, running a search using these tools can be a helpful starting point. You will need a complete name and some other identifying information such as occupation, state or locality of residence, or publications. Using the name along with another appropriate search term—i.e. "law", "Georgia", "football"—will limit your results and make it more likely that they include the actual individual for whom you are searching. The results of such a search can often give you information about the person you are researching which will make further searching more productive.

Locating People

Tracking down an individual's current address, phone number, email, or work place can often be easily done using the Internet. There are numerous general white pages, address, and email directories available online. While these directories will only contain published directory information, remember that otherwise unpublished phone numbers or addresses may show up in public records. Executives and members of certain professions can be located using specialized directories. If you are searching for someone who, as far as you know, has not been located for some time, don't forget to search death records.

When using any of these online databases, a few techniques will help when you are unsure of the exact name of the person for whom you are searching. Most of the search engines these sites utilize will return all results for a shortened form of a name. In other words, if you enter "Mart" for a last name, the results will include "Martin", "Marten", Martins", and the like. Always use at least the first four letters of a last name when trying this. In first name boxes, if you are unsure of spelling, use on the first letter of the name. Try variants of hyphenated names (with and without hyphen, the portion before and the portion after the hyphen. Leave off thoroughfare designations (St., Rd., Ave, etc.). In search boxes that allow it, always use the zip code, if you know it.

General Directories

Anywho: http://www.anywho.com/

White pages, yellow pages, reverse phone number lookup Allows national, state, or local searching. Listings are obtained from local phone records. The database is updated every three months.

Argali White and Yellow: http://www.argali.com/

White pages, yellow pages, reverse phone number lookup, toll free, area code, email addresses. Allows national, state, or local searching. Searches more than twenty

databases (including **Anywho**, **Bigfoot, Infospace,** and **Whitepages**) simultaneously and aggregates the results. Requires downloading. Carries no spy ware or popups.

Bigfoot: http://search.bigfoot.com/index.jsp

White pages, yellow pages, email addresses. Allows searching only by state. Links to **Addresses.com** which provides limited reverse email and street address searching.

Freereality: http://www.freeality.com/findpeople.htm

Offers forms that allow searching of various directories, including **411.com**, **Addresses.com**, and **Whitepages**. Also provides links to a number of for fee people finder services.

Infospace: http://www.infospace.com/

White pages, yellow pages, email addresses. Also offers a public records search that requires first and last name and state entries and returns a list of individuals with an approximate age and the city of their residence (a good place to start if you don't know the city an individual lives in and want a means of narrowing choices within a state)

Whitepages: http://www.whitepages.com/

White pages, yellow pages, reverse telephone number and address lookup. Allows national, state, and local searching.

Specialized Directories

The Architect Finder: http://www.aia.org/architect_finder/

A database containing all American Institute of Architects. Provides a list of architects within a 50 mile radius of the zip code entered in search box. Lists firms, not necessarily individual architects.

AMA Physician Select: http://dbapps.ama-assn.org/aps/amahg.htm

"AMA Physician Select provides basic professional information on virtually every licensed physician in the United States and its possessions, including more than 690,000 doctors of medicine (MD) and doctors of osteopathy or osteopathic medicine (DO)." The site requires acceptance of its terms of use policy, which restricts acceptable usage of the site to "the personal convenience of individual members of the general public to facilitate quick access to information about physicians with whom they may be consulting regarding medical services".

CPA Directory: http://www.cpadirectory.com/

Bills itself as "the largest online database of Certified Public Accountants" in the U.S. Allows searching by individual or firm name, or by location. Name search requires location entry. Provides name and address of individual or firm, no telephone numbers.

Inmate Search: **http://www.ancestorhunt.com/prison_search.htm**
                     http://www.bop.gov/iloc2/LocateInmate.jsp

Individual states offer online directories of state prison inmates. The first site listed provides links to all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The second site is the inmate locator for the Federal Bureau of Prisons. That database includes listings of all inmates in the federal prison system since 1982.

Martindale-Hubbell: http://www.martindale.com/

A database of over one million lawyers and law firms in 160 countries. Allows searching by name, or (by clinking tabs) by location/area of practice, by firm, or for lawyers in corporations, agencies of the US government, or law school faculty.

PeopleTracker: http://www.forbes.com/peopletracker/

Allows tracking of over 120,000 prominent executives, as well as others on Forbes' lists of the well to do and famous. Requires registration.

Death and Burial Records

National Obituary Archive: http://www.arrangeonline.com/

Nearly 60 million entries make this database a rich repository of death records. Information is supplied by funeral directors, international news organizations, and retrieved from Social Security Administration files. Information offered includes name, date of birth, date of death, and last known place of residence.

Social Security Death Index: http://ssdi.rootsweb.com/

This database contains nearly 75 million death records. Clearly, the more detail you have about an individual, the more likely you are to be successful in limiting your search results to a workable number. There is a detailed tutorial on how to best use the search features of the site.

Discovering Information about People

The Web offers a dizzying array of resources that allow tracking down information beyond the where-abouts of individuals. Many of these sources are public records. Remember that only about 35% of public records are available online, and that every state will offer access to different sorts and levels of information through public records. Still, a great deal of data can be obtained on the Web.

In Georgia, both the Secretary of State and the Superior Court Clerk's Cooperative Authority have pushed to make a vast array of public records available online. These include liens, professional licensing, UCC filings, trademarks and service marks, and real property transactions. Individual counties also have additional records available online. These generally include tax assessor's records; a few counties also provide county inmate lists, and some court filings.

There are numerous Web sites that cumulate links to public records sites. They include federal, state, county, and municipal sources. These sites can provide a wonderful starting point for public records research. Many of these sites, however, make no distinction between commercial suppliers of information and governmental sources. I will recommend only two such sites. One lists only governmental sources. The other very clearly labels commercial sites.

One difficult area of public records investigation is researching criminal records. A number of states provide some recent information about criminal convictions, either through a specific criminal background check site or through a trial court index. Be aware, however, that no thorough criminal background check can be conducted completely online. Even specialized databases utilized by expert services have

inaccuracies and omissions. Manual research at the county level is probably the only way to complete a totally thorough criminal background investigation.

Many, many companies provide fee-based 'background checks' and people locating services. Unfortunately, the popularity of tracking down old classmates and lovers (a sign, no doubt that the population is aging) and the common necessity of locating missing heirs, dead beat parents, and disappearing con artists have combined to create such a demand that "search scams" are abundant. Many for-fee sites that claim to offer search services provide nothing more than lists of links to public Web sites. When you absolutely must track down someone, or information about him/her; and the project is more involved than you can handle there are reputable search professionals and services. I will identify a few possibilities.

Georgia Public Records Sites and Directories of Public Records Sites

Georgia Secretary of State: http://www.sos.state.ga.us/

Includes a corporations index that can be searched by entity or registered agent name; campaign contribution disclosure reports; and professional licenses.

Superior Court Clerks Cooperative Authority: http://www.gsccca.org/

This group provides online access to several statewide indexes, most notably:
- the lien index – liens on both personal and real property filed pursuant to OCGA Section 44-2-2 (beginning January 1, 2004)
- the UCC index -- UCC financing statement data from all counties since January 1, 1995; can be searched by name, taxpayer ID, file date and file number. Additionally, the actual image of the corresponding UCC statement can be displayed and printed.
- The real estate deed index -- property transactions from all counties since January 1, 1999, including the name of the seller and buyer, location of the property, any liens on the property, and the book and page where the actual deed is filed in the county.

Searches can be performed by name, property (subdivision, unit, block and lot) or instrument type, and can be done by county, region (i.e. a county plus all counties that border it) or statewide.

Links to additional public records offered at the county level:
http://www.brbpub.com/pubrecsites.asp
http://www.searchsystems.net/

These two sites offer hundreds of links to sources for public records. At the address listed above, BRB Publications offers links only to government public record sites. Other portions of their Web site list recommended local document retrieval services and public record vendors. The Search Systems site lists both government and recommended commercial public record sites, but does a good job of indicating which sites require payment.

Sites for People Research Not Focused on Public Records

Business.com: **http://www.business.com/**

This site provides a "people search" feature with profiles of over 22 million individuals. A first and last name search returns a list of possible results with a couple of additional identifying facts. Profiles consist of accumulated Web documents.

News Alerts and Personalizes Search Services:
- **Google: http://www.google.com/alerts**
- **MSN Search: http://newsbot.msnbc.msn.com/**
- **Yahoo: http://alerts.yahoo.com**

These, and similar services, allow you to specify keywords about which you would like to see news stories; and either alert you via email when stories come in or accumulate stories on a page you can access. Most of these services allow fairly sophisticated search strategies to limit the stories saved for you. Even so, the greatest downside of these services is that they err on the side of inclusion and generally create an overload of information.

ZoomInfo: http://www.zoominfo.com/

This free service has gathered information about more than 25 million people by 'crawling' the Web and connecting information about individuals from a variety of online sources into a profile that usually includes employment and educational details, as well as other facts that can be found online.

For-Fee Search Professionals and Services

Accurint: http://www.accurint.com/

Accurint is primarily a people finding service. Among the data it can provide are: full names, aliases, social security numbers, current and historical addresses, telephone numbers, month and year of birth, property ownership, and names of relatives. It is a Lexis/Nexis company.

BRB Publications: **http://www.brbpub.com**

As noted above, this site offers a list of recommended local document retrieval services and public record vendors.

ChoicePoint: https://www.choicepointonline.com/

ChoicePoint provides tools for finding people, and date such as corporate records, real property records, driver records, boat and vehicle registrations, bankruptcies, liens and judgments, UCC filings, OSHA investigation records.

Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER):
http://pacer.uspci.uscourts.gov/

PACER is a service of the United States Judiciary, and is operated by the Administrative Office of the United States Courts. It is an electronic public access service that allows users to obtain case and docket information from Federal Appellate, District and Bankruptcy courts, and from the U.S. Party/Case Index. Not all Federal courts participate in the PACER system.

Unearthing Details about Public Companies

There are numerous sources of information about public companies on the Web.

Several free online services offer short profiles (usually hoping to interest the user in

more detailed reports for which they charge) of companies that include contact

information, officers, a summary of financials, and a few news items. Others offer

profiles of executives. Company web sites often provide a wealth of information; it's

always a good idea to begin company research by reviewing what the company has to say

about itself. The Securities and Exchange Commission provides free access to the reports

that public companies are required to file with it. News search services (a few specialize

in business and financial news) allow you to track news worthy events in the life of the

company. Most federal agencies now offer data about their regulatory actions on their

Web sites, making it easier to search for actions against a company you're researching.

Using this combination of resources, you can track down a reasonably complete picture

of a publicly traded company.

Company and Executive Profiles

AM Best: http://www.ambest.com/

AM Best issues ratings that assess the financial strength of insurance
related organizations and the credit quality of their obligations. Best's web
site offers a search feature that retrieves basic ratings for thousands of
insurance companies.

CorpTech: http://www.corptech.com/

This site offers a database of information about technology companies,
particularly smaller firms. Information includes a description, list of
executives with profiles of each, and sales figures.

**Forbes Global 2000:
http://www.forbes.com/2005/03/30/05f2000land.html**

Offers contact information, financials, news, and press releases for the
largest 2000 companies worldwide.

Hoovers: http://premium.hoovers.com/

Hoovers offers basic fact sheets and financials, recent news stories, and a
list of officers and board members for thousands of publicly traded
companies. More detailed company profiles are available to subscribers.

Ziggs: http://www.ziggs.com/

Nearly 2.5 million profiles of executives and business professionals are provided here. Either the individual or the firm for which he/she works submits most profiles.

Business News Sites

PRNewswire: **http://www.prnewswire.com/**

This site provides news releases from over 40,000

SEC and Other Government Sites

Tracking Down Useful Facts