*University of*
**Georgia**
*Law*

**University of Georgia School of Law**
**Digital Commons @ Georgia Law**

Continuing Legal Education Presentations                     March 24, 2014

Mar 24th, 10:55 AM - 11:55 AM

# When You Need To Know, These Are the Places To Go: Investigative Research on the Web

Suzanne R. Graham
*University of Georgia School of Law Library,* srgraham@uga.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.law.uga.edu/cle

Part of the Information Literacy Commons, and the Legal Writing and Research Commons

When You Need to Know, These are the Places to Go:
Investigative Research on the Web


Suzanne R. Graham
Cataloging Services Librarian
University of Georgia School of Law Library


March 24, 2014

# Table of Contents

## Introduction

"Cyberstalking" and "privacy invasion" are not synonyms for conducting investigative research online. Reading someone's Facebook page or scanning his pictures on Flickr might give too much information, but many state bar associations and judges have determined that seeking publicly available information on the Internet is essential to proper due diligence. Publicly-available information is not considered private, and numerous cases since 2001 have found that internet communications via emails or postings to open websites are public information.[1]

The two critical keys in legitimatizing the important place of investigative research is the same online as it is the "real" gumshoe world—the need to know and intent. "Cyberstalking" is addressed under "stalking" in the Georgia code and actions must be "harassing or intimidating" to qualify.[2] Uncovering contact information or general biographical detail is no more inherently harassing online as it is when performed in a telephone directory. "Invasion of privacy" is the unjustified intrusion into the private life of another person.[3] The Georgia Bar Association successfully argued before the Georgia Supreme Court in 2011 that "sending material into cyberspace with no regard for where material might end up" transforms it from private to unprotected public information.[4] Like a letter, once the receiver is in possession of it, the sender no longer has control of its distribution or a claim to privacy. In cases, in which the poster

---

[1] Ann K. Wooster, *Expectation of Privacy in and Discovery of Social Networking Web Site Postings and Communications*, 88 A.L.R.6th 319 (2013).
[2] OCGA 16-5-90 (a)(1)
[3] *Black's Law Dictionary* 684-685 (8th ed. 2004).
[4] re Levin 289 Ga 170

had not attempted to limit access to the post but had made it available to anyone who came across it, the courts have ruled that the post is public.

While lawyers should search the Internet and review open social networking sites, they also should be careful about trusting the information they find online. Just because some information is online doesn't mean it is good or current information. At a minimum, run each site through an "I.R.S. Audit."

- **Identification**—Identify the source of the article or website by finding the tagline or reading the "About Us" or "History" section.
- **Reputation**—Seek out more information about the author or sponsor and their credentials and their other works and activities.
- **Sources**—Look critically at where the person or organization draws its information and how much of its data is cited. Also find out when the site was last updated.

Even the most reputable government sites come with their own list of disclaimers and caveats that must be reviewed and understood. These sites can be good starts to the bread crumb trail but not the final destination. Investigators should attempt to verify the information in other sources. Furthermore, courts will expect certified copies of records, not printed PDFs.

## Public Records

Governments have collected personal information for millennia, and census records and tax rolls remain vital to some investigative inquiries. Fortunately, access to contemporary official files is much improved in 2014 over Hammurabi's time. In efforts

to improve access to public records, many states have scanned documents and made them retrievable online. However there are variances among states as each legislature and court decides how to balance citizen privacy with freedom of information. Federal and state laws define what information is covered under the umbrella phrase "public records" and set levels of protection and authorization.

The Georgia Open Records Act (OPA), which was greatly expanded in 2012, defines public records as:

> "All documents, papers, letters, maps, books, tapes, photographs, computer based or generated information, data, data fields, or similar material prepared and maintained or received by an agency or by a private person or entity in the performance of a service or function for or on behalf of an agency or when such documents have been transferred to a private person or entity by an agency for storage or future governmental use."[5]

The law explicitly lists the protected classes of materials, such as financial and medical records, employment files, social security numbers, and mother's maiden name.[6] This information is not available in any online searches and will be redacted wherever it appears in records requested.[7]

## Finding People

Even with all the improved broadband and increased chatter on social networking sites, conducting investigative research online is harder and more expensive now than it was just five years ago. Straight-forward investigative research, like finding

---

[5] Official Code of Georgia (OCGA) 50-18-70(b)(2).
[6] OCGA 50-18-72.
[7] OCGA 50-18-72(20)(a).

addresses or phone numbers, used to be quick, easy, and free if the persons or

companies have not taken specific steps to conceal themselves. Few had.

A basic search engine search can yield still social networking profiles, newspaper

articles, obituaries, award presentations, and blog posts, but the free telephone directory

databases have dramatically reduced what is available. Much of this information is going

to fee-based sites.

## Search Engines
http://www.dogpile.com, www.google.com, http://www.yahoo.com, http://bing.com,
etc.

A basic search engine query for a person's name might be the first and last search

depending on the depth of information required and the Web presence of the person

sought.  A general Google (or other search engine) search has the advantages of

potentially retrieving information about the person's professional, social, and personal

life and of being international in scope. For example, results might include place of

employment with email and business phone number, newspaper articles, internet sites

produced by the person (personal or professional in nature), links to professional

organizations to which he/she belongs, social networking sites, photographs, and

obituaries.

The avalanche of results for common names is a considerable disadvantage for

general search engine queries.  Unless a little more is known about the person, it is hard

to sift through and know what information pertains to *the* person sought. Many Suzanne

Grahams pop up when that search string is entered. Fortunately, they live in different

areas of the world so it's unlikely that anyone would think they are the same person, but

the results might not always be so clear and sometimes people do move between

Australia to Georgia to California. Likely, the process will be iterative: one site will provide some distinguishing information that can then to be used to revise the query.

When investigating a more prominent person, using the Google Blog search, could be an efficient way to keep up with unfolding events. With a couple of clicks, researchers can create an email alert for the chosen search term. Perform the search once. Any future results come in automatically, as Google continues to run the search periodically and relay any results until instructed to stop. As always, exercise great caution in reviewing third-party posts. Anyone can get their facts wrong, and it's important to verify information gleaned about someone from another person.

## Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites (like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Flickr and LinkedIn) are not wise places to post nefarious exploits, and yet, people do. Instagram openly reminds users, "We are providing a platform for you to post content, including photos, comments and other materials ... to the Service and to share User Content publicly. This means that other Users may search for, see, use, or share any of your User Content that you make publicly available through the Service."[8]

Facebook allows users to adjust privacy settings from "public" to "friends only," but until they do, their pages are completely open to anyone. A more privacy-cautious person, will adjust the settings to only allow friends (people vetted in advance) to view

---

[8] Instagram Privacy Policy. http://instagram.com/about/legal/privacy/# [Accessed Feb. 24, 2014].

full pages. Court decisions have been more evenly split over whether adjustments to privacy settings are sufficient actions to make communications private.

While the findings of various case studies encourage lawyers to use *open* social networking information as part of diligence, ethical lines have been drawn for attempting to "friend" other participants in a case or for misrepresenting the true purpose of the request.

Even if no steps have been taken to conceal, it is hard to find specific people on these sites if they have common names. Retrieval depends on how items are tagged (what keywords and names are associated with it), and most sites do not have advanced search features to reduce results. The main caution is not to spend much time on these sites. Rather than search each individually, prefer to use search engines to retrieve results.

## Commercial Services

- **Intelius.com and Anywho.com**
  http://www.intelius.com ; http://anywho.com

Intelius.com offers more than just names and addresses, but access to most of its data incurs a fee. Basic investigative research runs from $0.95 (for date of birth, phone number, and address) to $6.95 (for basic report plus email and social network profiles) to $39.95 for a background report (includes criminal check, bankruptcies, liens, lawsuits, judgments, and marriage reports for a limited number of states).

Intelius offers a warning under its terms and conditions that are equally valid for all commercial sites: "Customers should use extreme caution when interpreting the results of a criminal or civil background search for any type of personal verification.

Positive or false matches in criminal or civil searches may not provide confirmation of an individual's criminal or civil background. Proper use of these reports is the responsibility of you, the customer."[9]

AnyWho.com and YP.com are two free address and phone look-up services powered by Intelius data, not phone company records. As such, these services provide more information about the person searched, including age, addresses, maps, in addition to phone numbers for free in a clean display. AnyWho claims to update its information weekly, as does Intelius. Users should be aware that results to searches entered in the AnyWho interface currently display in the YP.com interface, which could indicate a pending merger of these services.

- **White Pages Goes Green**
  http://www.yellowpagesgoesgreen.org/whitepages/

Rather than enter a query for a phone number (area code-XXX-XXXX) in a Google, Bing or Yahoo! search box to find the people and address associated with that number, use the reverse phone lookup in the online Yellow Pages Directory.[10] This resource captures all phone numbers listed in the print telephone directories and also searches other online directories like WhitePages.com. People that do not appear in the free services offered by Intelius often can be found here. Unfortunately, advertisements appear as the first several results and clutters the page. Users need to scroll down to the

---

[9] Intelius Terms & Conditions "Additional restrictions" https://www.intelius.com/useragreement.php [Accessed Feb. 24, 2014].
[10] White Pages Goes Green Reverse Phone Lookup http://www.yellowpagesgoesgreen.org/whitepages/reverse-phone-lookup [Accessed Feb. 22, 2014]

headings in blue borders to retrieve the actual search results from YellowPagesGoesGreen.

- **Argali.com**
  http://www.argali.com

Argali allows researchers to query simultaneously twenty white- and yellow-page indexes (including Google, Anywho, and the United States Postal Service) and to retrieve a tidy consolidated list of results. For personal use, the service is free. Professionals must register for ArgaliPro for $29.95 per year. Argali requires downloading special software, so its functionality is tied to one computer (it does not travel with a researcher like other Web-based services). Since trying several databases and indexes is prudent, using a meta-search engine, like Argali, can save time and effort.

- **InfoBel.com**
  http://www.infobel.com

InfoBel is the place to start for international publicly-available information. InfoBel started producing Belgian telephone directories on CD-ROM in 1995. InfoBel's main focus remains Europe (its site boasts over 130 million European telephone subscribers in the database), and there are expanded search capabilities for several European countries. The site covers an important niche, and basic searches for addresses and telephone numbers are free. Other people-search databases use InfoBel data for listings in foreign countries, so one might as well go directly to InfoBel for the most current updates. InfoBel continues to expand beyond Europe and offers results from nearly 200 countries.

## Vital Records Online

In cases where records about "vital" events in a person's life (birth, marriage, divorce, and death) are needed, researchers should start with government offices at the state and county level that hold these records. Regardless of the jurisdiction and resource needed, only authorized persons may request to see an official vital record. The definition of "authorized persons" varies by office and by record, but the Georgia Department of Community Health website offers clear guidance in its Frequently Asked Questions page. For example, only parents or legal guardians, grandparents, adult children, adult siblings, and current spouses may request birth certificates.[11]

- **NETR Online Directory**
  http://publicrecords.netronline.com

This powerful portal continues to improve and become more useful for all kinds of investigative research. Not only does it maintain links to official county sites for accessing public records in all fifty states, specifically the tax assessors' offices, tax collectors' offices, and county clerks/recorders. For states, like Alabama, that do not have a state-wide site, NETR at least pulls together the relevant links. The site offers comprehensive links for real estate information and public records research, and recently added environmental data and historic aerial photographs. The environmental data section compiles records on suspected contamination and natural environmental hazards that can be searched by company name or by address.[12] For some states, like Florida, NETR database contains actual pdfs of vital records. Searches are free and most can be done by last name only.

---

[11] http://health.state.ga.us/programs/vitalrecords/faq.asp [Accessed Feb. 24, 2014].
[12] Environmental Records Database Viewer and Report Generator. http://environmental.netronline.com/ [Accessed Feb. 24, 2014].

Page footers caution users with the same statement "Nationwide Environmental Title Research, LLC (NETR) makes no warrantees expressed or implied as to the accuracy or completeness of this data. This data is not to be construed as legal advice."[13]

- **VitalChek**
  https://www.vitalchek.com/

Should you need to help a client obtain vital records for themselves or for an immediate family member, every state except Wyoming, contracts with VitalChek (a Lexis-Nexis company) to provide this data. VitalChek allows qualified parties to order certified government-issued vital records online. The service is not free; for example, a birth certificate is $25 directly from local offices of the Georgia Department of Community Health. VitalChek adds another $9 "processing fee" in addition to shipping fees.[14] Also note that the same official departmental definition of qualified or "interested parties" applies to this online service and requests must be accompanied by proof of entitlement.

## Confirming Deaths

In the event that the person sought is deceased or is thought to be deceased, several online resources can provide confirmation of death.  Enterprising private sites have purchased the official social security index, mounted it online, and provided fairly sophisticated search interfaces. Genealogical sites also offer extensive access to funeral, cemetery, and obituary information that might provide verification and dates of

---

[13] NETROnline home page. http://www.netronline.com/ [Accessed Feb. 24, 2014]
[14] Oder an Official Birth Certificate. http://www/vitalchek.com/birth-certificates [Accessed Feb. 24, 2014]

someone's death. As mentioned above VitalChek also can confirm death dates for additional fees.

- **Social Security Death Index**
  http://search.ancestry.com/SSDI ; http://genealogybank.com.gbnk/SSDI

Previously available via Rootsweb.com, the Social Security Death Index (SSDI) is now separate indexes within ancestry.com and genealogybank.com. While the change heightens the index's profile, it does require users to be paid members of ancestry.com or account holders of genealogybank.com.

The SSDI contains date of death information for over 94 million persons whose deaths were reported to the Social Security Administration between 1936 and 2014. The basic search accepts name and location, and the social security number is not a required field as it has been in other social security indexes. The form of name contained in the index is the legal name at time of death, and for common names the result list can be overwhelming.

- **National Obituary Archive**
  http://www.nationalobituaryarchive.com

The National Obituary Archive (NOA) is very current. Funeral directors all across the United States update the archive continually throughout the day, making it the place to go if it is likely the person passed away recently or was known to be living the year before. The free archive contains more than 55 million records, and the site boasts that it "assembled the largest collection of obituaries and death records in the world."[15] NOA went live in October 2000, so don't expect to find earlier obituaries, and since it relies

---

[15] http://www.nationalobituaryarchive.com/Company/companyInfo.asp [Accessed Feb. 24, 2014].

on funeral directors to contribute voluntarily, the coverage is spotty. For example, in Athens only one funeral home, Bernstein Funeral Home, contributes data.[16]

- **Georgia Deaths, 1919-1998**
  http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=5426

One free Georgia-specific resource that might be of use is the Georgia Deaths database. The site boasts of over 2.7 million death records, and the beginning date coincides with the first year that Georgia compiled this information at the state-level. This resource is not adding more current data. As the title clearly states, the last year entered is 1998, and no one who died after 1998 is included. However, if one needs particulars about a death certificate issued a decade or more ago, the results show the name of the deceased, date of death, the race of the deceased, the gender of the deceased, the county of death, the death certificate number, the date the certificate was filed, and the deceased's age at time of death.

## Finding Assets

Banking accounts and investment portfolios are private information and are therefore unavailable online to all but the financial institutions involved, account holders, and authorized financial advisors. Incomplete glimpses of assets, however, can be seen online for taxable real estate holdings, corporate ventures, and state employees' salaries.

## Real Estate Assets

Even after the collapse of real estate markets across the United States, the family home remains the average person's biggest monetary asset. Online resources do not

---

[16] http://www.nationalobituaryarchive.com/FuneralHomes/ [Accessed Feb. 24, 2014].

offer debt or mortgage information, but many sites reveal purchase price for homes and home value as assessed by the county tax office (not a fair market value assessed by a real estate agent). Google top links for street address searches go to real estate sites like trulia.com. Most results include names of current owners, last selling price (if sold recently), square footage, appraisal value, maps of neighborhood, and a panoramic full color view from the location courtesy of GoogleMaps. If the first set of results are unsatisfactory, try abbreviating street, road, court (st, rd, ct, respectively).

- **Specific Georgia County Tax Assessors' Offices**
  http://www.qpublic.net/ga/<insert county name>

Several of the services listed earlier in the "Finding People" section of this paper provide household earnings and tax assessments for real estate, but in Georgia going directly to the county tax assessor's Web site is a prudent stop for home-owner data. The tax offices offer free searches and provide clear indications of date of sale, price of sale, square footage, site improvements, tax value, and all persons financially responsible for the residence.

- **Georgia Superior Court Clerks' Cooperative Authority (GSCCCA)**
  http://www.gsccca.org/search/

The real estate index contains 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. Historical records 1993-1998 have been in the works since 2009 with an expectation that earlier years will be added in the future.[17] The lien index is the most limited, going

---

[17] http://www.gsccca.org/search/RealEstate/deedindex.asp [Accessed 2/22/2010].

back to only 2004. It contains additional real estate and personal property information, including liens.

- **MyFloridaCounty.com**
  http://www.myfloridacounty.com

Florida is very generous about making public records available for view or order on the internet. Many Florida public documents appear online as digitized PDFs with relatively little redaction. This site and its data are supported by the County Clerks of Florida. The service will mail a wide variety of documents for a small processing fee.[18] The availability of records varies by county, but most range from 1950s to within the past three months.

## Business Assets

If the person's general line of profession is known, a quick search for licensing and business registration may help in the calculation of assets.

- **EDGAR**
  http://www.sec.gov/edgar/searchedgar/companysearch.html

For nationwide searches, EDGAR, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission's database, offers a clean, informative interface. All company filings required by the SEC since 1996 should appear in EDGAR. Basic search fields are:

- company name
- ticker symbol
- file #

---

[18] MyFlorida.com. https://www.myfloridacounty.com/official_records/index.html [Accessed Feb. 24, 2014]

Full text searching of the EDGAR archived documents is now available. Personal names of firm general officers can be entered in the keyword search box.[19]

- **Secretaries of State Websites**
  http://sos.ga.gov/corporations/

The Georgia Secretary of State's Corporation Division offers a means to track corporations registered in the state. Unlike the old service, the new site requires researchers to register, but after registrations searches are free and can be performed by name of business or of corporate officer.[20]

Uniform Commercial Code filings in South Carolina are available directly from that state's Secretary of State's UCC Online site for $5 per search and $2 certification fee per document.[21] Information for Alabama is less detailed. Alabama offers a variety of government records on the Secretary of State's site, but the site has no PDFs of the UCC filings, only confirmation of such a filing, debtor, guarantor, opening and expiration dates.[22]

- **Georgia Superior Court Clerks' Cooperative Authority (GSCCCA)**
  http://www.gsccca.org/search/

When the county of residence is unknown, the GSCCCA offers a Georgia-wide search of UCC statements. The clerks' site is a subscription-based service, but it enables both broad state-wide or targeted county-specific searches. The UCC index contains financing statement data from all counties since January 1, 1995 and sis current to

---

[19] Search Historical SEC EDGAR Archives. http://www.sec.gov/cgi-bin/srch-edgar [Accessed Feb. 24, 2014]
[20] Georgia Secretary of State Corporate Search Log In.
https://cgov.sos.state.ga.us/Account.aspx/LogOn?ReturnUrl=%2f [Accessed Feb. 24, 2014].
[21] South Carolina Secretary of State. UCC Online https://ucconline.sc.gov/UCCFiling/UCCMainPage.aspx [Accessed Feb. 24, 2014]
[22] Alabama Secretary of State http://www.sos.state.al.us/GovtRecords/Default.aspx [Accessed Feb. 24, 2014]

within the week. The database can be searched by name, taxpayer ID, and file number. Additionally, the PDF images of the corresponding UCC statement appears.

## Income Data

Although generally dated, some annual income information can be mined online from freely-available resources. Since this data tends to be at least a year out-of-date, it should be used with caution and with the expectation that the values have changed.

- **Open Georgia**
  http://www.open.georgia.gov/

The salaries of state employees, including people working at state agencies, schools, and public institutions of higher learning, in any of the fifty states are public information. Most states provide this information online, but for some of the states the sites can be hard to find. The Open Georgia initiative provides data on government spending, including the salaries of state personnel, and Georgia's records are easy to locate. The search interface is simple and requires only the first letter of the last name to pull results from five categories of state employment: state agencies/commissions, university system, regional education services, technical colleges, and local boards of education. Be aware that the site is at least one fiscal year out-of-date and that "salaries" may include travel awards and grant funding in addition taxable income.

- **Portico**
  http://indorgs.virginia.edu/portico/

Portico is a web portal constructed at the University of Virginia for development professionals. It provides a wide range of links to online information for basic salary information nation-wide and a pathfinder to county tax assessors' offices.  However, Portico links to only 29 Georgia counties. While all of the site merits a look, a link to

Salary.com is especially notable. Salary.com provides *average* salaries for many professions by city in its US Salary Wizard.[23]  For example, one can search for average salaries for entry-level, intermediate-level or senior attorneys in Decatur, Georgia.

## Finding Previous Litigation and Criminal Background Information

Drawing a complete picture of legal encounters of individuals remains challenging. Online resources are available for state and federal level case law, but access to local courts is a rare find. Likewise, incarceration record searches must be done for individual states. Only law enforcement personnel can access a truly national database of state-held inmates and past offenders.

## Previous Litigation

Knowing any previous litigation filed on behalf of or against a person might be useful in an investigation. Fortunately, three authoritative state and federal case law resources exist online.

- **FindLaw**
  http://lp.findlaw.com

FindLaw for Legal Professional is a service of the West Group family, specifically Thomson Reuters. FindLaw LP permits searches by parties, but one cannot search multiple courts simultaneously. Each court requires a separate search. Better results are achieved by searching by surname only, provided that the last name is not too common.

- **Fastcase**
  http://www.fastcase.com

---

[23] Search US Salaries. http://salary.com/category/salary/#searchUS [Accessed Feb. 24, 2014].

Fastcase is available freely through the Georgia Bar Association. A quick search of cases can be refined by jurisdiction (including only bankruptcy courts). When the exact form of the name is known, the best approach for names is to run a keyword search with the name in quotation marks.

- **Public Access to Court Electronic Records Party/Case Index**
  http://pacer.uspci.uscourts.gov/

Investigators can use the PACER Party/Case Index to determine if a party has been involved in federal litigation. This index provides on-line access to bankruptcy courts in addition to US Appellate and Federal District courts.  It contains no state or local courts.  As with the general PACER service, users must register, and all searches incur a small per page fee (even unsuccessful searches are charged $0.08).  Also note that that the PACER service assesses fees by results, not by page views or downloads. So, if the subject has a very common name, it might be advisable to avoid PACER until a more precise search can be constructed.

## Criminal Background

The state of Georgia, as well as the nation at large, increasingly provides criminal records on the Web. Although all the states do not compile their records into a single database that is available to the general public, each state has a Department of Corrections office (actual title varies) that can provide information on the state and county prison populations. Georgia has searchable databases online that cover current and past inmates and another to cover current parolees.

- **Federal Bureau of Prisons Inmate Locator**
  http://www.bop.gov/inmateloc/

Use the Inmate Locator to determine if someone is currently or has been incarcerated in a federal prison or in the District of Columbia since 1982. Read the records carefully to determine the crime and conviction because the site includes "a significant number" of pretrial detainees.[24] The search requires both first and last name and both must match the databases' holdings exactly (i.e., a search for Bill will not retrieve Billy). The site offers no information on the crime or term of sentence but only signifies if the person is currently or has ever been incarcerated in a federal prison.

- **Georgia Department of Corrections Offender Query**
  http://www.dcor.state.ga.us/GDC/OffenderQuery/jsp/OffQryForm.jsp

The advanced search of this site performs searches on partial matches for names and by sentence status, institution and primary offense. For example, investigators can retrieve all offenders convicted in a given county of a given offense. It is also possible to limit by current inmates or to include people on parole. The results display a color photograph of offenders, but only if the searcher selects to see them. The records also include a list of all prior sentences and incarceration history. However, the site does not publish records of offenders that were convicted and completed their sentence under Georgia's First Offender act.[25]

- **Georgia Parolee Database**
  http://www.pap.state.ga.us/ParoleeDatabase/

This site is the most barebones of any in this paper. Searches can be conducted by name (either first or last or both in any order), zip code or inmate number. The zip code search is useful if the exact name of the parolee is unknown. The records include

---

[24] http://www.bop.gov/inmate_locator/aboutInmateLocator.jsp [Accessed Feb. 24, 2014].
[25] http://www.dcor.state.ga.us/Help.html [Accessed 2/22/2010].

address, basic physical description and photograph as well as primary offense and dates of parole. Upon completion of the sentence, the Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles removes people from the database. Also, be aware that the site states that it was last updated on October 2011, but it contains entries as recent as November 2012.

- **SLED CATCH**
  http://www.sled.state.sc.us/sled/default.asp?Category=CATCH_SSN&Service=crc

South Carolina Law Enforcement Division (SLED) offers criminal histories for $25 per search on its SLED CATCH database.[26] Researchers can also search for criminal offenses county by county for free in the Case Records Search on the Judicial Department's site.[27]

- **Dru Sjodin National Sex Offender Public Website**
  http://nsopw.gov/

The site is a free national database of people convicted of sex offenses since 1996. Searches conducted in the basic and advanced search screens require first and last name. So it is important to know the name used in the criminal record for reliable results. Results include photographs of the person as well as charge information, current residence, and current employment.

- **Georgia Sex Offender Online Index**
  http://services.georgia.gov/gbi/gbisor/SORSearch.jsp

Georgia hosts its own sex offender online index. The Georgia index permits broad searches by county (for example). This geographically-focused search is helpful when the exact name is unknown. The results appear alphabetically, facilitating browsing,

---

[26] SLED CATCH Terms and conditions
http://www.sled.state.sc.us/sled/default.asp?Category=CATCH_SSN&Service=crc [Accessed Feb. 24, 2014]
[27] South Carolina Judicial Department. Case Records Search. http://www.judicial.state.sc.us/caseSearch/ [Accessed Feb. 24, 2014]

and the site provides color photographs to help in identity confirmation. For precise searches, name searching remains an option.

## Other Places to Go For Help

To accompany the explosion of online genealogical research tools and for-profit online background check companies, the Internet also has many helpful sites that can answer specific research questions. In the coming months as the information in this paper ages, these sites have the potential of staying current with the emergence of new databases and changes to existing ones.

- **JUSTIA Virtual Chase**
  http://www.virtualchase.justia.com

Under the "Legal Research" tab and "General Legal Resources" heading, the site contains useful tips and links to vetted databases in an annotated webliography.

- **NCSTL.org**
http://www.ncstl.org/

The National Clearinghouse for Science, Technology & the Law site brings together a rich array of resources for members of the legal and scientific communities. Like Portico, this site was primarily developed by and for another community (forensic scientists) and offers a helpful window into their professional discourse and resources. Under the "Education & Training" heading users find a variety of videos. Of particular interest is an hour-long instructional video entitled "Digging Up Dirt on Expert Witnesses."

- **FindLaw**
  http://lp.findlaw.com/

Offers a "Find an Expert" services to help locate expert witnesses and lists of background check services to assist with people searches.

- ***The Cybersleuth's Guide to the Internet: Conducting Effective Investigative & Legal Research on the Web (2012)***

Carole A. Levitt and Mark E. Rosch produced the 12th edition of this classic in 2012. It nearly doubles the length of the edition published in 2006. The book provides in-depth tips and covers a broad range of topics.

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

BRB Publications and its imprint Facts on Demand Press specializes in investigative research and public record books. Their bookstore might provide useful titles for individual needs.

## Conclusion

Virtual gum-shoeing doesn't make sense in every situation or for every lawyer. Respecting one's own acumen (or lack thereof) for online searching and recognizing when time and effort are better spent on other necessary parts of the case is critical. Free or low cost online resources exist to assist investigative research, but assessing the quality of the information remains challenging. Some sites rely on non-specified third parties for data, and it is difficult for a user to know how current the information is. Accurate information can be intermingled with out-of-date, incorrect or misleading information. When conducting investigative research online, researchers should have a

clear understanding of what kinds of records they need and whether privacy laws

protect those records.