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From Attorney to Detective: Investigative Web Research

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From Attorney to Detective: Investigative Web Research

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Internet Legal Research CLE
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Introduction

As a lawyer, it’s not unusual to be called upon to help a client with personal investigation matters. You might find yourself needing to provide advice on topics ranging from whether a businessman is legitimate to assisting with a search for missing heirs. Since everything is on the internet now that should be a simple task, shouldn’t it? It may not be as simple as it seems. If you’ve got the time, you can usually find much investigative information on the web such as criminal records, business records, property ownership, and professional licenses, but you’ll have to be thorough, patient and careful.

With the increase in concerns about privacy and the potential for identity theft, personal information is becoming more protected. Social security numbers are particularly sensitive.

Hiring an Investigative Agency

Before you begin sleuthing on the web, you’ll need to assess whether it’s worth your time to try to find out the information yourself or it it’s a better investment of your time and energy to hire an investigative agency. If you decide to hire an agency, don’t just take the first one that you find on Google. A great many of the investigative services advertising on the web are primarily scams. It’s likely that you’ll pay $30 and all you’ll receive is a list of links from publicly available records. Some of the more reputable investigative agencies include:

- Accurint - [http://www.accurint.com](http://www.accurint.com)
- CLEAR - [https://clear.thomsonreuters.com/](https://clear.thomsonreuters.com/)

If you decide to use an investigative or background research agency that you’ve located on the web via Google, you should keep in mind the following tips when evaluating an agency:

- Before buying…learn exactly what information you will get
- Get a price quote up front.
- Make sure the agency has a working telephone number for handling billing complaints
- Read the company's privacy policy. Be sure the agency is complying with privacy, security and credit reporting laws.
- Don't hire an agency based on unsolicited e-mail. If it arrives in spam, it is most likely a scam.
The number one source of information that investigative agencies will have access to that you will likely be unable to access is credit reports. Unfortunately you have to have an account with a major credit bureau to do a credit report search. The catch is that credit bureaus will open accounts only for specific types of businesses.

Using the Internet for Personal Investigation

So let’s assume you’ve made the decision to investigate on your own using the internet. The first step is to identify what you know already about the individual or business and proceed from that point. Let’s begin with locating people.

Locating People

1. Watch for name changes and variations.

When attempting to locate an individual, your first task is to verify the person’s name including any variations, name changes, nicknames, aliases, etc. When you are viewing an individual’s online profile within services such as Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn, compare the person’s screen name with the name in the URL.

Example: if a person’s screen name is John T. Smith, but their LinkedIn profile’s web address is: www.linkedin.com/thomas-smith, you might deduce that the individual is possibly known as John Smith as well as Thomas Smith.

Note you are also likely to see variations in an individual’s name based upon the formality of the web tool you are searching.

Example:
- LinkedIn: John T. Smith
- Facebook: Johnny Smith

2. Always begin by using a well-known search engine such as Google, Bing or Yahoo.

A search engine search can locate social networking profiles, newspaper articles, obituaries, blog posts, etc., but the free telephone directory databases have dramatically reduced
the amount of information they provide for free. Nevertheless, you should always start with a basic search engine.

You can begin by typing in the first name and last name of the individual you are seeking but you’re likely to be overwhelmed by the results. A better way to begin is to type the name of the individual you are seeking in quotation marks to ensure that Google searches for the name as a phrase rather than as key words (for example, "John B. Doe").

Don’t forget to search Google images (http://images.google.com). You’d be surprised how many people include photos of themselves on various websites.

3. **To locate addresses, emails or telephone numbers, try using a specialized people search engine.**

Most of these search engines provide information that is normally included in telephone directories. Note: although individuals may choose to post their cell phone numbers online, **there is no comprehensive listing of cell phone available.** Do not be seduced by promises from websites that offer to search cell phone databases. Some of the recommended specialized engines include:

- **Zaba Search** - [http://zabasearch.com](http://zabasearch.com) – described by Lifehacker (lifehacker.com) as creepily comprehensive. Phone numbers and addresses.
- **Whitepages** – [http://www.whitepages.com](http://www.whitepages.com) - search people, businesses, reverse phone lookup, and a search for "Address " which allows you to find out the names of everyone residing in a particular area and their age range.
- **AnyWho** – [http://www.anywho.com](http://www.anywho.com) - from AT&T, provides White Pages information, Yellow Pages information, reverse phone lookup, zip code lookup and maps.
- **Infobel** - [http://www.infobel.com/en/world](http://www.infobel.com/en/world) - Telephone directories from around the world

When searching these directories, keep in mind the following techniques:

- If you’re unsure of the individual’s last name, use a shortened form of the name. You generally only need to include the first four letters of the last name in order for the search to run.
- Similarly, if you’re unsure of an individual’s first name, you usually only need to include the first initial.
- Omit thoroughfare designations such as St., Rd., Ave, etc.
- Always use the zip code if you know it.
4. **Determine whether the individual is possibly deceased.**

Lawyers often have reasons to determine if an individual is dead. If you find yourself in this situation, try searching the following websites:

- **Social Security Death Index** - [http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=3693](http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=3693) – 1935 – present – Although it’s not a free service, it is a valuable resource provided by Ancestry.com. The cost is $19.95 per month and a free trial is available. The index contains records of deceased persons possessing social security numbers and whose deaths were reported to the Social Security Administration.
- **Internment.net** - [http://internment.net](http://internment.net) - a free online database of cemetery records
- **National Obituary Archive** - [http://www.nationalobituaryarchive.com/](http://www.nationalobituaryarchive.com/) - Nearly 60 million entries make this database a rich repository of death records. Information is supplied by funeral directors, news organizations, and Social Security Administration files.

**Locating People via Social Media**

Social media is one of the deepest gold mines of information. Searching social media for openly available information is considered due diligence. Note, however, that attempting to “friend” an opposing individual in a case or misrepresenting your intentions crosses an ethical line.

We could devote an entire CLE solely to tips for searching social media. One of the best resources providing an overview of tips for locating people via social media is:

- **Top 10 Tips for Researching People Using Social Media** by Mary Ellen Bates - [http://www.slideshare.net/MaryEllenBates/mebs-123s-top-10-tips-for-researching-people-using-social-media](http://www.slideshare.net/MaryEllenBates/mebs-123s-top-10-tips-for-researching-people-using-social-media) - This 15 minute video’s top 10 tips are highly recommended.

My top three recommended tips for Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook from the above video include:

1. **LinkedIn**: Cover your tracks. Change your privacy settings to prevent your name from being displayed when you view the profiles of others. (Edit My Profile > Connections > Customize Visibility). Also, always used the Advanced Search feature on LinkedIn rather than the basic search which defaults to keyword.
2. **Twitter**: Use Google to search for Twitter posts. Don’t forget to use a placeholder for a middle initial. **Example**: “John *Doe”
3. **Facebook**: There is no comprehensive search on Facebook, but you can improve your chances of locating a specific individual by using the following search syntax.  
**Example**: People named John Doe who live near Atlanta GA

Of course, you should begin by conducting basic searches in Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, but don’t overlook some of the less obvious possibilities:

- **Yelp** - [http://www.yelp.com](http://www.yelp.com) - Once you are logging into your Yelp account, you have the option for locating friends. You can try searching for the individual you are seeking. You might obtain clues about their geographic location by discovering the restaurants and other entertainment businesses that they frequent.
- **Search All Junk** - [http://www.searchalljunk.com/](http://www.searchalljunk.com/) - simultaneously search Craigslist ads, Penny Saver ads, and several other classifieds.
- **LinkedIn Premium** – a premium account provides access to advanced searching filters and expanded views of all LinkedIn profiles (not just your 1st or 2nd connection profiles which are available for free.
- **Classmates.com** – While Classmates.com might seem like a less credible resource than the types of legal resources, lawyers are accustomed to searching. It is enormously popular. It boasts more than 57 million participants and includes digitized yearbooks. In order to use it effectively, you will need to pay for a subscription. Packages range in price and duration -- the longer the term of membership, the lower the price.
- **Tweeps** – [http://www.tweeps.com](http://www.tweeps.com) - search for Twitter handles by name, email address, profession, religious affiliation and other identifying characteristics.

**Locating People When You Know More Than Just Their Name**

Let’s say you know a little more information than just John Doe, what possible information resources exist?

1. **Do you know anything about the individual’s educational background?**

   Although transcripts, financial information and other personal details of an individual’s educational experience are confidential, a school may release directory type information such as name, address and degrees earned unless a student has given notice otherwise.

   - If the individual is currently a student, you can visit their current educational institution and usually find a student’s email address.
   - Check alumni and reunion websites of any educational institution that an individual attended.
2. Do you know where the person works?

   The person may have an e-mail account through his or her job. Visit the company's Web site and use its directory. If the site has no directory, try sending an e-mail message to the person at firstname.lastname@company.com

   If you can't find the individual email address from the company directory, try a specialized google search. Oftentimes Google will find more results than a company's internal search engine. I recommend using the following syntax:

     site:companywebsite.com + [name] + email

   **Example:** site:jcrew.com + Jenna Lyons + email

3. Do you know what the individual does for a living?

   If the individual is in a professional occupation, you can try searching professional directories. Most professions have organization directories. For example, I belong to the American Association of Law Libraries and you can easily find me in their online directory. Here are some common professional directories, but don’t limit yourself just to this list.

- Lawyers - [http://www.lawyers.com](http://www.lawyers.com)
- CPAs - [http://www.cpadirectory.com](http://www.cpadirectory.com)

   Also BRB Publications provides links to various occupational licensing boards from each of the 50 states at the following address:


   Most of these state websites include a search engine for locating licensed professionals.
4. Was the individual in the military?

Since 9/11, it’s much more difficult to locate information about military personnel online. Furthermore, under the federal Privacy Act, service records are confidential and can only be released under limited circumstances. Note, however, certain military branches may be able forward some messages to veterans or active service personnel.

For a description of these services and other tips for locating military personnel, review the suggestions provided by the National Archives: http://www.archives.gov/veterans/locate-service-members.html.

Also review the resources listed in Zimmerman’s Research Guides: Military Records - http://law.lexisnexis.com/infopro/zimmermans/disp.aspx?z=1694

Other options also still exist such as:

- **GIsearch.com** - Service members, veterans and their families can enter information about themselves.
- Next of kin of deceased relatives can order copies of military personnel records from the National Personnel Center at - http://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/index.html
- Several military publications and web services regularly publish ads from veterans seeking to get in touch with others with whom they served. These publications also include military locators on their subscription websites. Examples include:
  - Army Times - http://www.armytimes.com/

5. Do you know the individual’s social security number?

The Social Security Administration “will forward letters under circumstances involving a matter of great importance, such as a death or serious illness in the missing person's immediate family, or a sizeable amount of money that is due the missing person.” There is no charge for forwarding letters that have a humanitarian purpose. However, the SSA charges $35 (effective to
cover costs when the letter is to inform the missing person of money or property due him or her. For more information, visit the Social Security Administration’s website:


The Social Security Administration also offers a social security number validation service for wage purposes only. To learn more about this service, visit:

http://www.ssa.gov/employer/verifySSN.htm

Researching Background Information about Individuals

Finding or locating people is only one half of the puzzle. Often, you may have the contact information for an individual, but you need to know more about them. For example, what are their assets? Does the individual have a criminal history? What is the individual’s reputation? Is the individual credible? Depending upon the reason for your investigation, there are specialized resources available to help you in this endeavor.

1. Search public vital records such as marriage records, UCC filings and property deeds

Most information located through public records online is not as detailed as the original source records that you can examine in the courthouse or relevant state agency. BRB Publications estimates that only about 35% of public records are available online. Furthermore, navigating public records online is a jumbled maze. Because the laws vary in each of the fifty states as to what information is a matter of public record, public records are not consistent between states. However, if you are patient and persistence, you can still discover valuable information searching through official public records. Public records typically include: driving and voting records; birth, marriage, and death certificates; and court records such as property and divorce documents. Other records, such as medical, tax, and school records, are confidential and not available to the public.

To find out what free public records are available in each state I recommend visiting the 50 state listing from either:
Public Records available in Georgia

Many public records are available in Georgia including marriage, incarceration, property and incorporation records. Visiting the BRB Publications website will list the various agencies with free public records that you may search. Below are a few tidbits about Georgia records that you might not know that could be useful in your investigation.

- The Georgia Superior Court Clerks Cooperative Authority website - [https://www.gsccca.org/](https://www.gsccca.org/) provides access to UCC filings, real estate records and notary public registrations.
  - Four hour access to these databases is available for a fee of $5.00.
  - Regular search cost is $11.95 per month, per user.
  - Premium search cost is $24.95 per month, per user.

2. Check for criminal records

You should keep in mind that there’s no such thing as a nationwide criminal database. The FBI has a central database known as the NCIC (National Crime Information Center), but it’s not public record and is only available to law enforcement agencies. The availability of criminal records, like so many of the records we’re discussed above varies from state to state and even at the federal or county level.

- Findlaw maintains a state-specific list of criminal records resources and policies regarding expungement from sources such as state judiciaries, attorneys general, and state police agencies. While focused on expungement, the resources often describe a state’s criminal records policy: [http://criminal.findlaw.com/expungement/expungement-and-criminal-records-state-specific-information.html#sthash.NufLrJmE.dpuf](http://criminal.findlaw.com/expungement/expungement-and-criminal-records-state-specific-information.html#sthash.NufLrJmE.dpuf)
- In criminal cases, O.C.G.A. § 35-3-34 (a) (2) provides that an attorney may obtain criminal history records of a client, other defendant, or witness in a criminal action. The request must be submitted in writing to include the style of the case, case number, full name, date of birth, race, sex, and social security number (if available) for each person. In civil actions, only felony conviction criminal history information is disseminated in compliance with public information law.
• The Federal Bureau of Prisons provides an inmate locator with records on all inmates incarcerated for any period of time since 1982: http://www.bop.gov/iloc2/LocateInmate.jsp
• The Georgia Department of Corrections provides a similar service that also include photos of inmates: http://www.dcor.state.ga.us/GDC/OffenderQuery/jsp/OffQryForm.jsp

3. Determine whether the individual has ever been involved in a lawsuit

• The best place to search for federal litigants is PACER. It is relatively inexpensive and provides searching across multiple federal jurisdictions - https://www.pacer.gov/
• Try searching case law databases such as Findlaw.com, Cornell’s Legal Information Institute, the Public Library of Law for the individual’s name.
• If you’re unable to find any information using free resources, a low-cost choice is Legal Dockets Online: http://www.legaldockets.com/. In addition to its low cost (approximately $199 for one year), the service will allow you a free one week trial with no strings attached.

4. Have there been any news articles or broadcasts about the individual?

News is what somebody somewhere wants to suppress; all the rest is advertising.  
Lord Northcliffe, British publisher 1865-1922

Depending upon the public profile of the individual you are researching, it is possible that media coverage can provide you with background information. With our ever constant 24 hours news coverage and always-on social media, it’s hard for more high profile individuals to stay out of the public eye. While a general Google search will pick up many news articles, using specialized news aggregator resources can speed up your search for any publicity about an individual.

News-focused resources include:

• Newslink.org - http://newslink.org/index.html - maintains a comprehensive list of links to news sources such as newspapers, radio, tv, magazines and even blogs.
• Google News – http://news.google.com - Google News is a computer-generated news site that aggregates headlines from news sources worldwide and groups similar stories together. The service covers news articles appearing within the past 30 days from more than 25,000 publishers.
• Yahoo News Local - http://news.yahoo.com/local/ - If you know the geographic location of the individual you are researching, consider switching to local Yahoo news and searching in localized news sources.
5. Investigate whether the individual or business entity has had difficulties with any U.S. government agencies.

- The U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency maintains a list of blocked or sanctioned persons or entities. For more information, see: http://www.cbp.gov/trade/trade-community/programs-outreach/blocked-denied-debarred
- The U.S. Department of Justice provides a National Sex Offender Registry - http://www.nsopr.gov/
- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services maintains a database of individuals and entities excluded from participating in federal healthcare programs due to fraud: https://oig.hhs.gov/exclusions/

Specialized Searching

In addition to the resources discussed above, perhaps you are trying to find investigate information in special circumstances. If so, perhaps the resources below will be useful for your search.

1. Are you searching for a missing or runaway child?

- National Center for Missing and Exploited Children - http://www.missingkids.com/home - One of the best known resources, NCMEC is a a nonprofit organization that serves as a clearinghouse for information that helps locate missing children and prevent child abduction and exploitation.
- Code Amber - http://www.codeamber.org/ - While law enforcement agencies are responsible for activating a Code Amber, at the Code Amber website you can search the named of children from previously issued alerts.

2. Are you searching for an adoptee or an adoptee’s birth parent?

birth relatives, reunion, obtaining birth and adoption records, support groups, and relevant laws and policies

3. Are you searching for information on a broker or investment adviser?

• [http://www.sec.gov/investor/brokers.htm](http://www.sec.gov/investor/brokers.htm) - The U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission provides information on checking the background of brokers and investment advisors.

4. Are you searching for background information on an expert witness?

• Search Google to locate an expert’s personal web pages, presentations, speaking engagements and even postings to discussion groups.
• Search WorldCat - [http://www.worldcat.org/](http://www.worldcat.org/) - to determine if the expert witness has authored any books.
• Search Google Scholar - [http://scholar.google.com/](http://scholar.google.com/) - to determine if the expert witness has authored any scholarly articles.
• Search the news sources mentioned above to determine if there have been any news stories about the expert witness.
• Expert witness names often appear in reported cases. Try searching Findlaw.com (http://www.findlaw.com/), Cornell’s Legal Information Institute (http://www.law.cornell.edu/), Google Scholar (http://scholar.google.com/), or the Public Library of Law (http://www.plol.org/) for the expert witness’ name.

5. Are you searching for information about a business entity?

• Company websites usually offer a wealth of information and should be your starting point. Start your search for the company’s website by searching for the business’ name in Google.
• Search the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commissions’ **EDGAR** database - [http://www.sec.gov/edgar/searchedgar/webusers.htm](http://www.sec.gov/edgar/searchedgar/webusers.htm) - for company filings required by the S.E.C.
• Similarly, you can search the Secretary of State’s website for most of the fifty states to find state corporation filings. For example, Georgia’s Secretary of State’s website provides for searching corporation records. Note Georgia requires free registration before allowing you to search corporate records. [http://sos.ga.gov/](http://sos.ga.gov/)
• You can browse basic information about more than 16 million companies for free at Hoover’s - [http://www.hoovers.com/](http://www.hoovers.com/)
• Search the **Better Business Bureau**’s website to find out information on more than 2.5 million companies - [http://www.bbb.org/](http://www.bbb.org/)
• **Wayback Machine** - [https://archive.org/web/](https://archive.org/web/) - Look at past versions of the business’ website

• **Twitter** – [http://twitter.com](http://twitter.com) – Review the company’s tweets. Also examine who they are Following and their Followers to identify key relationships.

**Conclusion**

If you are willing to invest some time, you can find a wealth of information on the web including items such as birth, marriage, and death records; education background; addresses past and present; employment history; property ownership; social and professional relationships, military records; and court records, just to name a few. With patience and persistence, you can become a Cyber Sleuth Extraordinaire!