

Using investigative tools on the Internet

By FOREIGN AND INTERNATIONAL LAW LIBRARIAN ANNE BURNETT (J.D.'90)

The Web can be a handy tool for obtaining addresses, telephone numbers, death records, military service information, property records, vital statistics, photographs and more, if a lawyer can spend time following the Internet's winding paths.

When trolling the Web for this personal information, attorneys should keep in mind that investigative agencies often have access to information not available to the public on the Web. For example, a licensed investigative agency with a credit bureau account may be able to access credit report information for an individual or business in question.

Moreover, with legislation striving to protect individuals from identity theft and stalking, many sites restrict the information provided or require the requestor to affirm that the information will be used only for specified purposes. In addition, hiring an agency may be more cost-effective when searching across multiple states.

Nevertheless, with a flexible approach and the time to follow clues, a resourceful lawyer may find the Internet to be an economical source of investigative tools that are easy to use.

GETTING STARTED

Do not sell short the power of a good search engine. A quick Google search often reveals satisfactory results, and an unsuccessful search should not consume too much time.

Google provides address and phone number searching. If a query includes a name and city, publicly listed phone numbers and addresses will display at the top of the results page.

Also, try Google Image to locate images posted on workplace sites as well as those for conferences and other gatherings.

FINDING INFORMATION ABOUT PEOPLE

If the person's name and city are known, an online directory may be the quickest way to access a full street address or to obtain an e-mail address.

A few of the more popular directories are: AnyWho, PeopleFinders and *WhitePages.com*. Additionally, several provide reverse-lookup functions for phone numbers and addresses.

ZoomInfo can pull information from the Web to create a biographical profile of a person.

Also, a variety of resources exist for providing information on births, deaths, marriages, divorces, criminal background, military service, etc. Below are some of the most common.

Dead or alive?

Sites such as the Social Security Death Index and the National Obituary Archive provide information on persons whose deaths have been reported to them.

Did the person you seek serve in the military?

Security concerns have made it more difficult to find information about active military personnel, and service records are protected under federal privacy law. However, social networking sites for the military, such as *GISearch.com* and *Military.com's* Buddy Finder, may prove useful.

Do they belong to a profession?

Many professional licensing entities provide online directories of their members.

BRB Publications provides links to such licensing boards at www.brbbpub.com/freeresources/pubrecsitesOccStates.aspx.

In addition, you may find contact information or at least confirm

a person's occupation by searching the online directory of a professional organization.

Educational background

Reunion sites like *Classmates.com* contain biographical and contact information. This site alone currently has records for more than 40 million individuals.

Does the person have a criminal background?

For a list of links to sources of criminal record information, check out the Virtual Chase's online guide. There are separate search pages for federal and state records.

Additionally, the Inmate Locator at the Federal Bureau of Prisons site contains records for all inmates incarcerated in a federal facility since 1982.

In Georgia, the Board of Pardons and Paroles provides a database containing records on offenders currently under the supervision of the Parole Board, while the Inmate Query Database at the Department of Corrections has records for Georgia inmates.

In the news?

News stories may provide just the tidbit of information that opens a new path to explore. Look for online archives at newspaper Web sites for cities where the person in question has lived.

What public records are available online?

Each state has its own laws governing what kinds of information are considered public. Even if the information you seek is considered "public," it may not be available online.

BRB Publications also provides an excellent list of links to free government public records sites in all 50 states at www.brbbpub.com/pubrecsitesStates.asp.

INFORMATION ABOUT PROPERTY

The Georgia Superior Court Clerks Cooperative Authority at www.gsccca.org administers statewide indexes on real estate and personal property records, including a real estate deed index, a lien index and a plat index. Access is available for a fee.

Also, the Georgia Department of Revenue provides links to county sites with online property record searches at etax.dor.ga.gov/ptd/county/county_website_links_to_online_property_tax_services.pdf

URL: <http://www.internet.com>



A Quick guide to investigative tools on the Web

People Directories

Most online directories include phone number and address searching as well as reverse lookup services. Listed below are just a few of the many such services now available.

AnyWho – www.anywho.com

PeopleFinders – www.peoplefinders.com

Whitepages.com – www.whitepages.com

ZoomInfo – www.zoominfo.com

Death Records

Social Security Death Index (contains information on individuals who were born and died between 1875 and last year) – sdi.rootsweb.com

Interment.net (contains thousands of transcriptions of cemetery records and tombstone inscriptions from cemeteries in the United States, Canada, England, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and more, including some images of grave markers) – www.interment.net

Military Background (Information is limited due to security concerns.)

Defense Manpower Data Center (requires at least a Social Security number and a last name, and results only state whether the individual is currently on active duty) – www.dmdc.osd.millsrca/owa/home

Military.com's Buddy Finder (free but requires registration to search the more than 20 million records) – www.military.com

GSearch.com (provides a military locator, which allows service members to enter information about themselves) – www.GSearch.com

Professional Licensing Boards

BRB Publications (provides state-by-state links to licensing boards) – www.brbpub.com/freeresources/pubrecsitesOccStates.aspx

Educational Background (If you know where a person went to school, and if they have entered their information, reunion sites can be helpful.)

Classmates.com – www.classmates.com

MyLife.com (formerly *Reunion.com*) – www.mylife.com

Criminal Background

Virtual Chase guide to **federal** criminal records – www.virtualchase.com/topics/criminal_records_federal.shtml

Virtual Chase guide to **state** criminal records – www.virtualchase.com/topics/criminal_records_state.shtml

Federal Inmate Locator (contains records on federal inmates incarcerated since 1982) – www.bop.gov/iloc2/LocateInmate.jsp

Georgia Parolee Database (only includes offenders currently under the supervision of the Parole Board) – www.pap.state.ga.us/ParoleeDatabase

Georgia Inmate Query (records include convictions, sentences, where incarcerated as well as photographs and identifying information such as scars and tattoos) – www.dcor.state.ga.us/GDC/OffenderQuery/jsp/OffQryForm.jsp

Online Newspapers

To search multiple news stories simultaneously, try Google News at news.google.com. Also, use one of the following to find specific newspaper Web sites:

Newspapers.com – www.newspapers.com

Newslink – www.newslink.org

Public Records

Online accessibility varies widely from state-to-state, but most at least provide online information about how to obtain copies of public records.

BRB Publications (links to free government public records sites in all 50 states) – www.brbpub.com/pubrecsitesStates.asp

Georgia Vital Records (provides confirmation of divorce decrees, marriage applications and licenses, and death certificates for a fee. O.C.G.A. Title 31 governs the Georgia vital records program.) – health.state.ga.us/programs/vitalrecords

Georgia Property Records

The Georgia Superior Court Clerks Cooperative Authority administers statewide indexes on real estate and personal property records, including real estate deeds, liens, plats and carbon registry indexes. Although not free, access to the indexes is available either as a subscription (\$9.95/month) or as a single use account (\$5.00 for four consecutive hours of access) – www.gscca.org

Georgia Department of Revenue (links to counties with online property record searches) – etax.dor.ga.gov/ptd/county/county_web-site_links_to_online_property_tax_services.pdf