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Worries on Privacy Resurface; E-mail Gives Tips on Using Web to Find Personal Data

By Purva Patel

A decade ago, if you wanted to find out where someone lived, you went about it the old-fashioned way: with a phone book and a map.

It was cumbersome, and it took time.

Today, all you need is Google and a listed phone number, and within seconds you'll get a corresponding address and map – complete with step-by-step driving directions.

There's nothing really new about that. Google and other sites have offered reverse phone directories, allowing you to find addresses armed with just a phone number, for a few years now.

But an old e-mail showing people how easy it is to track them down is making the rounds again and raising concerns.

It also doesn't help that ChoicePoint recently admitted that identity thieves compromised the security of its giant database of personal information.

Simple to use

Perhaps what scares people most about reverse directories is how easy they are to use.

“People also don't know. They're surprised when there's information collected about them and they don't know how it got there,” said Ari Schwartz, an associate director of the Center for Democracy and Technology, a policy organization in Washington. “They didn't turn information directly over to Google.”

It's the same with ChoicePoint.

“People were really upset because they didn't know ChoicePoint had their information,” he said.

Aware of the risks

Still, the mountain of historically private information available online will likely only swell.

Consumers just have to be aware of the risks, said Siva Vaidhyanathan, an assistant professor of culture and communication at New York University.

“Unless we want to live in an authoritarian society or completely dark culture, we have to accept there are risks associated with free information,” he said. “I’m actually kind of pleased by the fact it’s coming to people’s attention more and more. Every day people must confront how open their lives are. Living under the old illusion is not healthy.”

Some sites, such as Infospace.com and Anywho.com, scour public records and offer links to other paid services such as background checks or criminal histories. And as more people learn about them, some are raising concerns that such services chip away at individual privacy.

“The biggest complaint we get is people just feel they don’t have any control over the availability of their information maintained in public records,” said Jordana Beebe, a spokeswoman for Privacy Rights Clearinghouse, a San Diego-based consumer group that works with victims of identity theft and counsels stalking victims.

Threat of stalking

The thought of being tracked down so easily is especially worrisome to victims of domestic violence or stalking, she added.

Google’s site says its directory information is gathered by a third-party provider, which collects telephone directories and other public records available elsewhere on the Web. MapQuest supplies road maps and driving directions for Google and InfoSpace, and the information is free to Internet users.

Users can opt out if they want. But opting out won’t take your information out of other sites, and there are hundreds of online reverse and direct directories out there.

“Unfortunately, it’s difficult to opt out of these directories,” said Steve Latham, CEO of Spur Digital, a Houston-based online marketing company. “Most require you to physically mail your information to them. Some require you to call from your home number. Some even ask for your Social Security number, which is alarming itself.”

At the very least, you can delist your number by calling your phone company and asking to be unlisted and unpublished.

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