

Investigating Social Networking Information

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In the context of computers and the Internet, "social networking" is defined as the process of disclosing personal information to other people via a web site that is specifically designed to make it easy to share text including emails, music, videos, games and other data with members of the same site. Thousands of social networking sites exist today. Some focus on a particular subject or common interest while others simply exist to allow people to communicate with one another. Typically, members create a user profile through which they share their personal information. Profiles can be connected in a variety of ways to create "friends" groups that form subsets within the greater social network scheme. Popular social networking sites include Facebook, MySpace, Friendster, LinkedIn, Tagged and Bebo. (Definition from Rick Stroup)

An alternate definition is "a person's family, neighbors, and friends with whom they are socially involved." This definition does not rely on the information being in electronic form or available on the Internet. (From Dictionary.com. *Webster's New Millennium™ Dictionary of English, Preview Edition (v 0.9.7)*. Lexico Publishing Group, LLC. http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/social_network (last accessed: Oct. 1, 2008).

In addition, online social networking is defined by its reliance on **social software**, that is, "software that resides on an individual's computer or on a website, with which users can create personal profiles, form groups and exchange messages." (From: Economics Network of the UK (accessed: June 05, 2008).

Online social software is a "type of software or Web service that allows people to communicate and collaborate while using the application. E-mail, blogs, and even instant messaging are all examples of social software." (From Webopedia, accessed: June 4, 2008).

You can find social networking information by looking at data made public by the individual on the Internet, by using public records, and by searching information available through databases.

The information provided by those who use social software and visit social networking web sites can be found by using the social web sites themselves or by using other web-based search engines. This information that becomes "publicly available" includes postings to the Internet, professional writing, podcasts, blogs, videos, social profiles, and other facts that you voluntarily provide; that is, digital traces of your presence. Other publicly available information that you can discover includes name and address provided to the telephone company, zip code given when you make a purchase, and data that you furnish when signing up to use a web site or supply to companies when entering contests, buying items, and subscribing to magazines.

Publicly available information differs from public records information in that public records are generally held by governmental bodies, from local and county levels to state and federal. These records include real estate, court files, professional licenses, tax liens and judgments, voter registration, divorce decrees, and more. The records are generally open to public inspection. Previously, you could access these records only by visiting the organization holding them. But with the advent of the Internet, and the posting of many of these records on governmental web sites, they have become much easier to obtain.

Public records contain personal information such as full names, Social Security numbers, birth dates, addresses, financial information, and more. People provide this information to governmental bodies when applying for benefits, filing court cases, selling real property, etc. Once the information is filed with a governmental agency, it is sometimes sold to public record vendors and other times the information is simply put on the Internet without redacting sensitive information. When this happens, the information becomes "publicly available" rather than simply contained in public records.

You can use public records and publicly available information to search for friends, family, litigants, and more. The King County Law Library provides training classes using this type of public sleuthing searching for criminal background research and for skip tracing. "Skip tracing" is the procedure of tracking down a debtor, witness, company, defendant, etc. by following his/her paper trail from a known address to his/her new location.

Find our Public Sleuthing Links by visiting the King County Law Library web site at: www.kccll.org, choose Research Links then Public Sleuthing, from the Home page.

The goal of this document is to inform the user about how to investigate social networking information on the Internet.

Search for Web Presence, Including Social Networking Web sites

Search the Internet for information on the person you are researching. Use multiple search engines and multiple types of searches as the search engines have very little overlap.

General Search Engines

www.google.com – Currently the best known search engine. It uses PageRank™, a system for ranking web pages, along with text-matching techniques and combines them to find relevant information.

www.exalead.com – This search engines has advanced search features that allow Boolean search. It will also make suggestions as to alternate searches you may wish to add.

www.clusty.com – This search engine does a good job of searching blog entries, in addition to regular searches. "Clusty queries several top search engines, combines the results, and generates an ordered list based on comparative ranking." Then it groups similar results into "clusters."

www.live.com - Microsoft's LiveSearch is the successor to MSN. It has a focus on social networking, using its blogging and profile settings. LiveSearch allows some Boolean searching.

www.ask.com – Ask has a new focus, which is more social site than search engine. It is promoting tools as the way to get your information.

www.yahoo.com - is one of the best known and most popular Internet portals, second in ranking to Google. Originally a subject directory of sites, it now is a search engine, directory, and portal.

Messages and news groups

For example, if you are looking for information on a company or product which may be going through litigation, try searching the Google Groups postings. These postings date back to the early 1980s, as they contain the old Internet Usenet postings along with more recent postings. Go to <http://groups.google.com> to search. Search for a Yahoo group on the subject you want by going to: <http://groups.yahoo.com/>.

Blogs and Micro-blogs

Search, web logs, or "blogs" – which are defined as frequent, chronological publications of personal thoughts and Web links, or simply web based journals. A blog is often a mixture of what is happening in a person's life and what is happening on the Web, a kind of hybrid diary/guide site, although there are as many unique types of blogs as there are people. The entries are usually in reverse chronological order. Blogs can be found on any subject. Use a search engine such as Clusty at <http://clusty.com/> to search for blog information. You can also search some blogging sites such as LiveJournal at www.livejournal.com. You can now search Twitter, the micro-blogging service, via Twitter Search at <http://search.twitter.com/>.

Videos or Photos

*[Flickr](http://www.flickr.com/) - The most popular photo sharing site. Upload photos, create sets. You can search for photos at this site.

YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/>, is the king of the video sharing sites, it has more users and videos than the others. Any video you can think of it probably already on YouTube. You can search for videos at this site.

Deep People Search

Use a search engine such as PIPL at www.pipl.com. This search engine claims to find much more information on people than any other search engines, as it searches database-driven information. It claims, "since most personal profiles, public records and other people-related documents are stored in databases and not on static web pages, most of the higher-quality information about people is simply "invisible" to a regular search engine," but supposedly not to this search engine. It does appear to combine some interesting results. I often use this to find that "deep web" information I need.

Social Profile Pages

Search for other “social networking” information using a search engine such as <http://www.yoname.com>, which does a people search across social networks and brings up profiles from MySpace, LinkedIn, FaceBook, and other web sites. This searching is especially important for finding information on Web 2.0 web based sites. When you are searching for information on younger adults searching social networking sites is critical, as these people often cannot be found using the normal telephone and address directories. Use multiple social search engines, such as Spock at www.spock.com and Wink at <http://wink.com/>.

Search the social networking friend’s sites directly if you are having difficulty finding information. Try the two biggest sites first, MySpace at <http://www.myspace.com/> or Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/>. MySpace is an international site that offers email, a forum, communities, videos and weblog space. It is the largest social networking site, with Facebook as the second most used social site. MySpace started with a music and teen focus, while Facebook was originally only open to college students. Since Facebook has opened to others, it is growing faster than any other social site. While you can search both of these sites directly, you may only view profiles that are not set to private. Or, you may try to find someone who is already a friend of the person you are trying to contact and then try to get an introduction. Both of these sites are extremely useful for background research.

Social Bookmarking and News Clipping Sites

del.icio.us at <http://del.icio.us/>. You add your bookmarks and access them from anywhere.

Digg at www.digg.com Synonymous with social bookmarking: you Digg a story, others Digg it, the more popular it gets the better chance it has of hitting the first page. There are many more included in the appendix at the end of this document.

Professional Information Networking, Web-based

The following web sites can be useful when trying to find information on company members and experts.

ZoomInfo: www.zoominfo.com This site uses the Web to pull together biographical information. It partners with other sites such as Xing, which is a social networking site for professional connections.

LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com One of the first professional networking sites, this one can help to find connections. It often gives former and current work places.

Spoke: <http://spoke.com> This site says of itself, find business people by location, industry, title, education, or interests. Sometimes results are a bit behind, but if the person you are looking for is high enough in a company’s structure, you may find him/her here.

Xing: www.xing.com Bills itself as a professional contact management network and partners with ZoomInfo. Social networking supposedly taken to the next level, the web site competes with LinkedIn.

Public Record Meta sites

BRB Public Records links: <http://www.brbbpub.com/pubrecsites.asp>

This is my favorite one for linking to free sites. This site provides links to state, county, city, and federal sites where public information is available for free. In addition, it also has a pay site that can link the searcher to much more. Sign up for their monthly email notification or RSS feed, which gives you news about new sites, changes in state and local access policies and more.

State and Local Government: www.statelocalgov.net/ will link you to information from other states. For instance, you can link to the Secretary of State sites for all states; find local county government entities and more. This site is also organized by topic area. Great resource!

Public Records Finder: www.publicrecordfinder.com Business and personal records links. The site is organized by categories. Includes links to other countries. However, it also links to many paid resources. It does not contain as many free resource links as the others.

Public Records Info: www.publicrecordsinfo.com This site links to USSearch for paid background information, at a premium price. But the site does contain categories and many free links that can be useful for further resources.

Black Book Online: www.blackbookonline.info/ is maintained by the author of "The Investigator's Little Black Book." The site is particularly robust, with many good starting points, but does contain many paid links.

Portico: <http://indorgs.virginia.edu/portico/> This web site's links to public record web sites, is organized topically, and then by state. It also contains links to calculators, electronic magazines, libraries, and other reference sources. It has a particularly strong set of links for real property information available through county assessors and auditors.

Zabasearch: www.zabasearch.com. This site gives you multiple results when searching on a person's name. Sometimes it can be very revealing. But the site regularly links to paid resources. It is still a great first place to start for those hard-to-find people.

How you search and where you start your search depends on the information you have to start the process. When I teach this class for criminal background research or for skip tracing I use a check list to keep track of the places and databases I have looked. Use the Public Sleuthing Links from our web page and create your own checklist. Finding

information on that person, whether an old friend, someone you need for litigation purposes or someone you need to check out for employment purposes is getting both more difficult and easier than ever. And using the online social networking sites can help in your search.