

What do people-finder sites know about you?

Websites like FamilyTreeNow and even Whitepages have a surprising amount of your personal information.



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People-finder and data broker sites are not illegal. They crawl the information found in public records and aggregate large sums of our personal information. (Photo: Rawpixel.com/Shutterstock)

In January, my worried Facebook friends circulated a link for a genealogy site called FamilyTreeNow.com that presents itself as a free resource with tabs titled “Build Your Family Tree” and “Discover Your Past.” My friends were creeped out, as was the writer of this [Washington Post](#) article. Digital expert Kim Komando even posted a [web tutorial](#) for deleting your information.

When I searched my own name, I found my birth year, current and past addresses, possible relatives, and possible associates, including two people who had lived in the downstairs apartment unit from me in the mid-'90s. The other names I didn't know. Past addresses went back to the early 1990s to include a house I'd rented a room in, where I'd never had bills or a rental agreement in my name. Not exactly family tree material. And, in fact, this site is not a genealogy site. It's a people-finder site. What makes it creepy is the amount of information available for free.

As ominous as FamilyTreeNow seems, people-finder and [data broker](#) sites are nothing new and they're not illegal. Whitepages, Intelius, PeekYou, Spokeo and many more “crawl” the information of all kinds of public records everywhere, and they aggregate large sums of information that seems personal to us but in reality isn't that personal, says Rich Matta, CEO of Reputation Defender, a service that protects consumer privacy and online reputations.

The three primary reasons for information collection, he says, are: "First, to sell your information to third-party marketing organizations so they can better target you. Second, to sell your information directly to other individuals online that might want to know more about you, or third, simply to dangle your information for free as a way of attracting visitors to their websites and displaying online ads to them." Indeed, ads related to your online searches will pop up on FamilyTreeNow.

Because public record information is public, it contains few, if any, restrictions on collection, making it a gold mine for direct marketers. Common public record information includes property records, court records, driver's license files, voting records, birth certificates, marriage certificates, death certificates and tax liens. Thankfully, minors typically aren't traceable. (FamilyTreeNow didn't have records for my teens ... yet.)

What's the threat level?

So how big a deal are these sites? Can they hurt you? I'm one of those people who tend not to worry about them, but Matta says it's worth paying attention to them to protect yourself from the possibility of cyberstalking, identity theft or even in-person stalking. “You can't completely eliminate all types of information about yourself because some of it is public record, but you can make yourself harder to find, and you become less interesting to online attackers,” Matta says. “They're going to go for whoever's easiest to find with plenty of information associated with them.”

Most of these sites will let you opt out on request, but the problem consumers face is the sheer number of sites and the opt-out hoops they require. However, even taking a few steps will make you less obvious. Your information won't be completely inaccessible, but it will be less accessible. Here's what Matta recommends:

- Perform an online search of your name periodically to see what pops up, and be sure to troll into the third and fourth page.
- Set up a [Google alert](#) for your name and your family's names to monitor what appears in Google.
- Opt out of the people-finder/data broker sites, as much as you can. This [article](#) includes detailed instructions for 10 sites, and StopDataMining.me provides an [opt-out list](#) of top data brokers.
- Use strong passwords for your social media accounts and change them often.
- Ensure your social media privacy settings align with the level of exposure you intend.

To take extra-cautious steps, you can also visit your county clerk to [alter or redact](#) certain elements of personal information from public records, Matta says.

The same day I talked to Matta, I opted out of FamilyTreeNow, Whitepages and Spokeo; all had user-friendly forms, and now my records are gone. Others take more time. Persopo requires you to send your listing's information to them in an email, and they promise to have it removed within 10 to 12 business days. It took one day for mine. Intelius requires a form of identification, such as a driver's license with the photo and license number blacked out.

If you want someone to take a deeper look at your public profile and scrub it, you can pay a subscription fee for a service like Abine or Reputation Defender, which also offers a free tool. But for most people, the free tips above will help you be less visible. Additionally, active social media accounts, such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and other legitimate links associated with you can crowd out the people-finder sites, dropping them to page two or three of Google. Just make sure your Facebook page isn't leaking all over the Internet.

Keep in mind that deleted records may pop up again on these sites. You'll need to make monitoring your privacy a regular thing — just like going to the dentist.



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