Become Web Dead: Erase Your Online Identity in 10 Steps

Wednesday, August 20th, 2008

The Scenario

So you went a little nuts on your MySpace profile - you posted your age, your interests, some of your funniest home movies and the secret spots you like to frequent on Saturday following your morning dog walk. It felt freeing and liberating to tout your spot in this world and advertise your status to your online "friends".

And it exploded from there: you started posting in public forums without hesitating to include your full, given name (so you can get credit for your impassioned responses), then proceeded to open numerous accounts on the Facebooks, Friendsters, LinkedIns and Meebos of the world. You even dropped your digits at one point on Craigslist, where they remain cached to this day on Yahoo!. There's no question about it: you're now officially "out there".

But as your friends began to accumulate and as your forum posts became popular (and distributed), your online presence began to balloon to uncontrollable (and uncomfortable) proportions. Personal commentary, asides and intimate information usually reserved for loved ones was now on public display - an inadvertent consequence of your own making.

And with the recent advent of employers [checking potential job candidates online](#) before making their hiring decisions, it might be wise for the current job-seeker to first pull those incriminating pix from *that week* in Vegas before going in for an interview: because what happens in Vegas, stays *online*.

But what can we do? Is the Internet simply an information black hole that sucks up personal data, disseminates it to page after page and never lets go?

Not exactly.

There are some practical steps a savvy surfer can take to prevent (and reverse) the "morning after" effects associated with putting TMI on the web.

Becoming "Web Dead"

*[**Track your online profile:** Start by performing an Internet search for your name on <u>all</u> known search engines to get a feel for the damage. Use quotes, "John Hancock" and if you have the time, go through ALL of the returned search results. Make a reference file with the results that point to you.]*

Give **Google** a shot (*profanity is filtered*): [   ] [Search]

Google™
Custom Search

1. Delete What You Can First

Deletion is the first reactionary response to get rid of your unwanted personalities online, but the procedure may not be as straight forward as it seems. Signing up for online services can be a contagious affair, and we often forget the countless accounts we've created in haste.

A simple remedy, and prescription in going forward, is to create an *Account Sheet* (hard copy) detailing the URLs at which we've lifted our proverbial Internet legs.

Commonly forgotten repositories of information include Flickr (and associated comments), old blogs, online resumes, FS (for sale) advertisements on non-expiring websites, want ads, personal ads, geneology webs and bartering sites. Trying to delete profiles on social networks like Facebook are an exercise in

futility unless you know the ins and outs of the deletion procedure, detailed here (ironically a procedure written by a group on Facebook itself).

2. Use Webpage Removal Request Tools

Google and Yahoo! and have implemented "Delete URL" functionality for website administrators. This means that if you are a webmaster (or blog owner), you now have the power to stop specific URLS from being indexed (using a Robots.txt file). Non-admins also can also take advantage of these tools and request that "private" information be taken down, or request that webmasters use the aforementioned to

remove the pages with your name from indexing.

Ask.com includes an "AskEraser" that will completely delete your search *queries* and data from Ask.com servers, including: your IP address, User ID and Session ID cookies, as well as the complete text of your search query–all within a matter of hours:

Tool Links: Google Yahoo! Ask

3. E-mail Webmasters Directly

For the uninitiated, the mere mention of a webmaster conjures up images of reclusive talismen, shamen or any other untouchable overseer who is beyond the reach of a simple e-mail. For larger enterprises, this may almost be a reality - but the fact is: webmasters are people too (most of them). In many cases, if a reference to your name occurs on a blog or website that isn't agreeable to you, a simple e-mail to the site's webmaster will fix the problem in short order.

Occasionally you'll encounter websites that tuck away any type of contact information, making it nearly impossible to find an administrator's e-mail address or phone number. By using the publicly available WHOIS service, you're able to type in the website's domain (e.g. www.autobloggreen.com) and fetch domain registration information, including contact information. If e-mail isn't available, write a well-worded (firm) snail mail letter to the address on file about taking your name off of the offending site.

4. Employ ReputationDefender

"Desperate times call for desperate measures", don't they? Well this California-based company seems to operate by this motto. ReputationDefender was founded in an effort to protect *your good name* on the Internet. Did someone hack America's Most Wanted and put your mug on display? Are you unable to persuade a webmaster to remove your information no matter how many times you say please? This is where the company steps in and takes the wheel.

ReputationDefender™

From their website:

Our goal is straightforward:

- To SEARCH out all information about you and your family throughout the Internet and present it to you in a clear, easy-to-understand fashion
- To provide DESTROY assistance, helping to remove, at your request, inaccurate, inappropriate, hurtful, and slanderous information about you and your family using our proprietary in-house methodology. This same mission extends to your personally identifiable information, like name, address, and phone number.
- To deliver CONTROL over how others are able to perceive you on the Internet

5. Hide Your Ass

Well, in this case both figuratively and literally. Hidemyass is a proxy service similar to iBypass (covered in a previous SMASHgods post), aimed at hiding your online identity. You can use the service to hide your IP address and bypass your work/school web filter with relative ease.

Surfing anonymously won't eliminate or delete information that is currently on the web, but it will prevent your IP from being broadcast to sites you frequent, and from providing analytics programs from determining who you are or where you're coming from. If your goal is complete web death, you're going to want to walk as lightly as possible during your surfing sessions: this will do it.

6. Always Use Pseudonyms

This almost goes without mentioning, but you'd be surprised at the overwhelming number of novice computer users who feel an undeniable compulsion to use their real name when posting something ot the Internet. It's almost as if they feel that writing something on a website is the real-life equivalent of writing a personal check at the supermarket; that it's a legally binding contract.

To simplify things, come up with a standard pseudonym, and create an accompanying e-mail address when you post your opinions, rants, sultry pics or other juicy tidbits you wouldn't want to fall into the hands of your employer or a state official with skulls to crack. Hide your ass while you're at it (see #5).

7. Contact ChillingEffects.org

At this point, consider this bringing out the big guns. [Chilling Effects](#) valiantly dedicates itself to fighting for freedom of speech online and to educating Internet users about their rights. They also feature a form you can utilize to send a cease and desist notice to a site owner who won't comply with your request to remove your name from a particular site.

Here is the [link](#) to the C & D form.

8. RemoveYourName

A somewhat pricier, but guaranteed service is [RemoveYourName.com](#). According to their site, the RYN team will not stop working until your name is off of the major search engines, and their work is backed by a money-back guarantee. This will be a one time process.

Their prices start at **$795** for Personal use, and go up to **$2495** for the full-on business package.

9. Pull the Ol' Switch-a-Roo

So your vicious rants have made the rounds of the web and now they're all over. You don't want to pay for some of the premium services in getting your bad name expunged from public record, yet you don't want to live with the consequences of the malicious lies posted on the bathroom walls.

So why not post positive information to counteract the negative?

Companies like [ComplaintRemover](#), [RepSavior](#) and others are dedicating themselves to this very idea.

When negative Internet postings show up on the first page of Google, MSN and Yahoo it can be damaging to your reputation as a person or business!

We specialize in moving those negative listings aside and replace them with positive information about you or your company! Dont be held hostage by negative Internet listings.

You can actually do this type of thing *yourself* through [Wikipedia](#). Make a page dedicated to yourself or your company (who could do it better?) that illustrates your grace and godliness. With Wiki's reach and rank, your post will appear above the other negative slop in no time.

10. Stay Offline

No joke. Resisting the urge to reveal sensitive information is like a bad case of Tourette's for some people, and like two children who can't keep their hands off one another, separation may be the only way to go. Spend some time away from the computer and do something constructive with your time.

Deny the impulse that drives you back into the forums to post that recent pic of your Tijuana excursion with the guys. Once you feel you're ready, tip-toe back into cyberspace by limiting yourself only to selected websites that don't encourage or have the capacity for naughtiness or defamation. **You'll thank yourself later.**

So there you have it, 10 rays of hope in a world of ever-increasing threats and decreasing privacy rights.

However, we may not have to fight such a steep uphill battle for long. A European Commission Advisory body feels search engines should delete personal data held about their users within six months. This recommendation is likely to be accepted by the European Commission and could lead to a clash with search giants like Google, Yahoo and MSN. How will this affect North America and the majority of the workhorse servers?

Only time will tell.

http://smashgods.com/2008/08/20/become-web-dead-erase-your-online-identity-in-10-steps/