



WEB WISE WOMEN

How does my information get on the web?

In this electronic age, we all have heightened concerns over the security of our personal information. However, victims of domestic violence, sexual violence, and stalking have even more complex safety risks and concerns when their personal information ends up on the Internet.

To understand how information about us is getting collected, shared, and archived online, we need to first understand how information gets posted online. Information ends up on the Internet in one of two ways: either you post it or someone else posts it.

Information You Post

Below are some examples of ways you post your personal information online.

- Sign up for social networks, like MySpace and Facebook, or dating sites, like Match.com
- Make comments on articles or blogs or reviews
- Share photographs through Flickr or Shutterfly
- Post videos on YouTube or websites
- Interact with virtual worlds or games such as Second Life or World of Warcraft

While some information you post may not seem to be identifying, it can reveal a lot about you.

If you have joined any website where you create a profile, like MySpace, Classmates.com, Flickr, or Match.com, be sure to check out your privacy settings. Typically, the default setting will allow anyone who visits that site (family members, potential employers, and stalkers) to see your personal information.

Even if you aren't posting personally identifying information (such as address, phone number, or gender) directly on the Internet, when you sign up for a free email address through Yahoo or Hotmail or join a group or open an online account, you may be asked to give your name, birthday, gender, ZIP code, and other personal information. This information typically is not private, especially if you chose to be included in the public directory of any of these sites. Even though you may have opted not to receive advertisements or further communication from that website, that doesn't mean that they haven't shared your information with their partner companies. Your personal information is valuable for many reasons, particularly for marketing and advertising companies.

Safety Tips:

- If you join sites where you create an account and a profile, check out the privacy settings. These sites are meant to draw in as many people as possible, and, by default, your information may be available to anyone.
- If you sign up for anything, take a look at that organization's privacy policy, which is often posted online. Read it to understand what they do with your information. Similarly, read the terms of agreements. Many people just click "I Agree" and move on, but reading the terms of conditions or terms of agreement will help you understand what happens to your personal information.

Information Others Post about You

Anyone can post information about you, including your friends, family (including your children and current and former partners), employer, church, community groups, school, government, information brokers, and others. Information about you can come from different sources including:

- Court Records
- Employer staff directory
- Web directories
- Newspapers
- Voting Registration Records
- Faith Community/Work/School Newsletters
- Social Networking Sites

Other information about you may be published to the web from less obvious routes:

- Merchants: When you give your phone number or email address to a store, that information may be sold to an on-line directory.
- Grocery and Drug Store Discount card programs: When you sign up for discount card programs, the information you give them may be sold to other databases, which may be posted online.
- Newsletters or articles published before the Internet: Some organizations are scanning old newsletters and publishing them online. Some newspapers are doing the same thing, publishing old articles.

Court & Government Records

Many courts now publish records online, often without providing notice for all citizens or providing ways for citizens to request their records not be published to the web (opt-out). For more information see www.ncsconline.org/WC/CourTopics/ResourceGuide.asp?topic=PriPub

Examples of courts publishing records online:

- Local courts like Cincinnati (Hamilton County, OH) are publishing divorce, traffic violations, and other records to the Web: (www.courtclerk.org).
- Until 2005, the Montgomery County, PA., court published addresses and case details of victims of domestic violence who file for a civil restraining order (and their minor children) without providing notice or options to the victims.
- PACER (<http://pacer.psc.uscourts.gov>) provides electronic access to Federal District, Bankruptcy, and Appellate court records.

In many communities, property tax appraisal records are published to the Internet and can be searched by name or address. A search may find a photo, address, map, and sometimes even a floor plan to the taxed property. (See www.dallascad.org or www2.county.allegHENY.pa.us/RealEstate/Search for examples). Voter registration records have always been public information; however, state governments are now publishing these records to the Internet. Nearly every state publishes their voter registration records online; some states reveal more information than others.

Example of voter registration records online:

Durham County, NC's website lets anyone search their voter registration records by partial name, address, street name, or voter registration number. They note that, "A registered voter may keep their address confidential only if a court-issued protective order can be produced." The search returns registered voters' full names, associated residential addresses, and voter registration numbers (<http://www.durhamcountync.gov/departments/elec/votersearch/index.cfm>).

Safety Tips:

- When sharing information with any court or government agency, ask if any of the information you provide will be posted online. Ask if there is an opt-out option and what you can do to opt out.
- Find out what information your state's online voter registration site reveals.
- Find out if you can register to vote with a confidential address or PO Box address. Check to see if your state has a Voter Confidentiality or Address Confidentiality Program.

Friends, Family, & Colleagues

Most organizations and even many individuals now have websites. If you have ever performed in an artistic event, been on a sports team, or spoken at a conference, your name, biography, and contact information may be on the host organization's website. If you have been quoted by the media or highlighted by them for any reason, your information may be on the web. Community organizations may post its newsletters online, including names of donors, volunteers, staff, board members, and even participants in fundraisers. Even Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) are posting minutes of their meetings, including names of attendees.

Safety Tips:

- Ask organizations that you are a part of if they have any publications or websites. If you are concerned about your privacy and safety, ask to them not to publish your information.
- Be aware of what schools or employers may post online about you and your children.
- If friends have websites or blogs or social networking sites, ask them to not mention you or post pictures or videos of you.

Information Brokers

Information brokers compile data from public agencies (assessor's offices, court records, voter registrations, and other public records), phone books, consumer surveys, warranty cards, merchants, and more. Information brokers often sell the information to media outlets, law enforcement, employers, landlords, major banks, credit cards companies, car companies, the federal government, and private investigators. There are many sites where you can search for people, including www.zabasearch.com, www.docusearch.com, www.pipl.com, and www.peoplefind.com. Most of these sites provide some information for free, and for a small fee, you can get more in-depth information about an individual.

For Safety Tips, see: "Can I remove information that's already on the Web?" on page 5.

How do I know what's already on the web?

If you can find information about yourself online, someone else can find it, too.

Use a search engine like Google or Yahoo to search for yourself.

“Search engines” (such as Google) index the web and create virtual card catalogs that link to the actual content. Search engines have existed since the web was developed, and they are getting faster and smarter every day. Sometimes the index record exists long after a web page has been changed. Even if a website is changed to remove inaccurate or dangerous information, the old web content might still be indexed by a search engine.

Most search engines periodically “archive” or “cache” websites by saving copies of every website so that users can still access the content, even if the website is offline, has changed, or is otherwise unavailable. This means that any information ever published online will potentially be available forever (or as long as the Internet exists). For example, Internet archive (www.archive.org) has more than 55 billion web pages archived from 1999 through recent months.



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National Network to End Domestic Violence

The **National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV)** is a membership and advocacy organization representing the 54 state and US territory domestic violence ...
www.nnedv.org/ - [Cached](#) - [Similar](#)

Browse online directories for your information.

Online phone directories (www.switchboard.com, www.yellowpages.com), include reverse phone look-up sites where searching a phone number can result in the name, address, map and sometimes a satellite photo of the address associated with that phone number. Even if your phone number is unlisted, your address, phone number, and a map to your house may be available from directories that obtain records from marketing companies and other databases.

Browse websites where you think your information may be posted.

Visit websites for groups and places that you're connected to: your job, faith community, sports teams, community and volunteer groups, etc.

Can I remove information that's already on the web?

Search engines like Google and Yahoo typically aren't responsible for posting your personal information on the Internet. Often, they simply search to find all the websites that list your information. To fully remove your information, you will need to go to each of those individual sites and request that your information be removed.

Depending on the accuracy and sensitivity of the information, it may be best to leave it alone. Some less reputable websites gather information from many sources and the compiled information may not be accurate. Often, sites will ask you to submit more information to confirm your identity. The less reputable sites may then turn around and sell this additional information. Confirmed and correct information is worth more to information brokers.

If the information you find on the web is correct and potentially dangerous, you can try contacting the website and asking them to remove the information. For more information about removing your information, go to <http://www.privacyrights.org/fs/fs18a-OnlPvcyFAQ.htm>

Even if one website is willing to remove information at your request, if the web page has been saved ("cached") or archived by another website or a search engine, it may be online forever. The faster the information is removed, the better, but it is unlikely that information published to the web can be completely removed.

If the information published about you on the web is extremely dangerous, inaccurate, or otherwise damaging, you can speak with an attorney in your state to advise you if you have any legal options.

How do I prevent further information about me from being posted?

The best way to prevent further information from being posted online is to prevent the information from being collected in the first place. Though easier said than done, here are some tips to get you started:

- When a cashier asks for your phone number, don't share it. In situations where you must, provide a phone number, consider giving your work number instead of your home number.
- If you register for a grocery/drugstore discount card program, fill in very little information. Many stores have a "store card" that you can ask to use.
- Use a pen name when writing letters to the editor or posting online.
- Give donations anonymously.
- Whenever possible, avoid paying with credit cards.
- If you belong to organizations that have a website, ask that your name not be included in publications and ask that you not be "tagged" in photos that are posted.
- When looking for jobs, don't post your resume on any of the career sites. Instead, search the web for available jobs and send resumes directly to those you're interested in.
- Ask friends not to blog about you, post things about you on their social networking pages, or post photos or videos of you.

In addition to preventing information from being posted online, you can try to monitor what does get posted. Set up a "Google Alert" that will email you any time it finds your name online. A number of different websites, including zabasearch.com, also offer similar alert features. When signing up for alerts, share as little personal information as possible. Another option is to use a fee-based reputation protector service that will scour the web and remove your personal information.

If location information about you is on the web and your safety risk is severe, you may want to think about relocating. For more tips on how to increase your privacy see the Privacy Planning handout.