



# Public Information and the Internet

From the Office of Minnesota Attorney General Lori Swanson

The Internet is a great source for finding old friends, reading breaking news, and shopping from home. Unfortunately, protecting your personal information on the Internet is nearly impossible. Many companies engage in “data mining” and compile and sell publicly available personal and financial information to third parties. There are dozens, possibly hundreds, of database compilers and brokers. For example, doing an Internet search of the name “John Doe” will return a database that, for a small fee, will report John Doe’s finances, family information, marital status and other personal data.

Citizens sometimes express frustration that their private information is surreptitiously gathered and then broadcast over the Internet. Citizens and businesses alike complain that information on the Internet is often inaccurate or even defamatory. There are few restrictions on companies’ ability to gather and display personal information on the Internet, and the Supreme Court has ruled that most information published on the Internet is protected speech. As a result, it is almost impossible to meaningfully protect your privacy while using the Internet. But knowing how companies gather your information may help you minimize the release of information you wish to keep private.

## How Information is Gathered

**Government Records.** Government data typically includes important records such as real estate transfer documents, property tax records, and records of government-issued professional licenses, all of which contain information on individuals. Most counties post real estate taxpayer information on the Internet. In some counties, these records may include not only financial and identity information, but even diagrams of the taxpayers’ homes. Under a Minnesota law called the Government Data Practices Act, government agencies are required to permit citizens to inspect public government data at reasonable times and places, for

which government agencies may not assess a charge or a fee.

**Databases.** Internet databases, sometimes known as “People Search Databases,” collect information on individuals from different public and commercial data sources without their knowledge and permission. You may be surprised to conduct an internet search and find that your personal records are published on the Internet and are available for others to search, including your salary, address, phone number, employer, and other identifying information. Obtaining and revealing this information on the Internet is relatively easy and lucrative for database operators. Unfortunately, removing personal information from these databases can be very difficult.

**Internet Search Histories.** Some internet providers track every website you visit and log all of your on-line searches. Minnesota does not have a law preventing internet providers from selling this information to third parties. Check with your internet provider to see if you can opt out of making this information available to third parties.

**Social Networks and Blogs.** Information that you provide on social networking sites enables bullies, business competitors, and others to spread this information instantaneously. Many companies also find that negative reviews are posted about their company, which are sometimes inaccurate and hurt their business.

## Restricting Personal Information on the Internet

The following tips will not stop private information from being gathered about you but may reduce what personal information is acquired and disseminated:

- **Opt Out.** Many websites allow consumers to “opt out” of having their information provided to third parties. Review the website’s privacy policy for determining how to opt out.

- **Ask For Your Information To Be Removed.** Some websites do not easily allow consumers to opt out online. Write, call or email the website to see if your information can be removed—especially if the information is false. Also ask your internet provider to stop sharing your search history with third parties.
- **Hire a Professional.** Some companies assist individuals and companies in removing unwanted information from the Internet completely and immediately. Make sure you ask plenty of questions and review any written contract before you hire a professional.
- **Use Private Settings.** If you belong to a social networking site, make sure that your account settings are set to “private.”
- **Be On Guard.** Never give out personal information over the Internet to an unknown website provider or to unsolicited requests for such information.
- **Take Legal Action.** Some information from public records in states and counties can be removed or blocked through legal process, typically through a court order.

The Internet provides users with opportunities to learn and communicate. It is a limitless resource for acquiring information and interacting on a global scale. But it comes with a price tag on an individual’s privacy. It is important to take proper steps to avoid personal information from being transmitted throughout the Internet. If you have questions concerning Internet privacy, the following government agencies might have additional information:

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(651) 296-3353 (Twin Cities Calling Area)

(800) 657-3787 (Outside the Twin Cities)

TTY: (651) 297-7206 or (800) 366-4812

[www.ag.state.mn.us](http://www.ag.state.mn.us)

**Federal Trade Commission**

**Consumer Response Center**

600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW

Washington, D.C. 20580

(877) 382-4357

TTY: (866) 653-4261

[www.ftccomplaintassistant.gov](http://www.ftccomplaintassistant.gov)

