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## DIGITS

# Escaping the 'Scrapers'

By *WSJ Staff*

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The Internet has given rise to a dizzying array of people-search sites and data brokers that gather and compile public information and social-networking profiles. The sites gather information from public sources such as property records and telephone listings, and other information is harvested by "scraping" -- or copying -- websites where people post information about themselves.



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The fact that the information is from public records or posted on the Internet generally means that the companies have a right to use it. And many of the firms emphasize that the data will still be available in public records or elsewhere online, even if the information is removed from specific sites. As long as the source of the information remains available, it can simply be scraped again. But determined consumers willing to navigate the maze of companies have some options for requesting that their data be removed from certain sites.

Below, a guide to seeking removal of information from some of the largest sites.

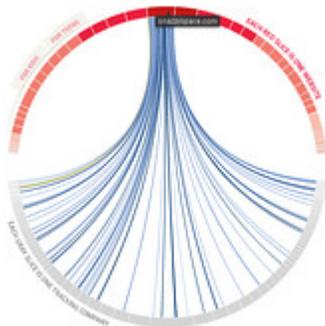
The Privacy Rights Clearinghouse, a non-profit consumer group, keeps a list of online data brokers and scrapers, and whether they allow users to opt out. A few more details can be found in a guide provided to California public officials under a state law that allows them to demand data removal. The Wall Street Journal obtained the guide via a California Public Records Act request. Further information can sometimes be obtained from the companies in question. The Journal contacted several of them separately.

The people-search sites that receive the most visitors, according to comScore Inc., are Intelius Inc., Spokeo Inc. and 123people Internetservices GmbH.

**Intelius:** Intelius accepts requests via fax only, at 425-974-6194. The number for California officials is listed as 425-974-6196. To be removed from the company's public-records database,

a consumer must send a copy of identification, such as a driver's license, that has the person's name, address and birth date. The photo and license number can be crossed out. The process takes four to six weeks, the company says.

#### Explore the Data



#### What They Know

See more about online privacy from the Wall Street Journal's series on Internet-tracking technology.

- 'Scrapers' Dig Deep for Data on the Web
- Follow @whattheyknow on Twitter

**Spokeo:** Consumers who want to remove information from Spokeo should look up their data on the site first. Once they have found the appropriate profile, they can copy the Web address of that profile from the top of their Internet browser and paste it into a form on Spokeo's site. They also must provide their email address, and Spokeo says it will then remove the listing.

**123people:** This site, based in Austria, compiles mostly links to other Web pages with user data, such as social-networking sites. To remove that data, 123people first suggests contacting the original source. But users also can request the removal of links from 123people by emailing their name and the offending links to the company through a form.

Instructions for removing information from other well-known sites are as follows:

**Google Inc.:** In addition to crawling the Web, the search giant maintains a phone book collected from telephone directories and other public records. To remove residential-listing information from the phone book, Web surfers can fill out a form with the contents of the entry they want excluded. The form does not remove information from other websites that might appear in a Google search.

**US Search Inc.:** To be removed from US Search, the company says users must look themselves up on the service, select all records that pertain to them and then print out a sheet that includes the number of the record. This sheet must be mailed or faxed along with a copy of an ID card to the fax number or address listed on the sheet.

The blocking service, called PrivacyLock, will remove only those records that correspond to the exact name the user requests to be blocked, the company says. So requests to remove "James

Smith," for example, won't prevent the site from using records for "Jim Smith." And if consumers move or get a new phone number, those new records will likely show up on the site. The Federal Trade Commission said recently that it settled charges with US Search over a version of PrivacyLock that cost \$10 and claimed to block a customer's information on the website for a year, although it had the same problems as the current, free version. US Search said it discontinued the paid service in March.

**LexisNexis:** LexisNexis, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc., allows some people to opt out of having personal information available through its KnowX and Accurint products, although some disclosures can still be made to law enforcement, according to the company's website. LexisNexis says KnowX makes public records available to the general public over the Internet, and Accurint is a "locate and research" tool available to government, law enforcement and commercial customers.

But only consumers who meet specific requirements can opt out. These include law-enforcement officers or public officials who are in positions that make them fear for their safety; victims of identity theft; and people who are at risk of physical harm because of stalking or a similar situation. People who request to opt out must submit documentation such as a police report or letter from a social worker explaining their situation. The information can be submitted through a Web form or mailed to the company at the address on the website.

LexisNexis also will give consumers a copy of the information the company has about them, if the users fill out and send a form including their name and other information.

**ZabaSearch:** On its site, ZabaSearch, which is owned by Intelius Inc., says that it does not "remove or suppress any information that is both accurate and publicly available" but that there are exceptions to this rule -- such as police officers, government officials and people with court protection orders. ZabaSearch allows such consumers to block records from appearing in searches on its site; however, it does not specify whether it requires documentation to prove that the person falls under an exempted category. An Intelius spokesman said the company's opt-out policy is consistent across all its properties in that it doesn't charge people to opt out and requires proof of identity.

ZabaSearch says people who want to opt out should fax a copy of their state ID or driver's license to 425-974-6194, the same number as that provided by Intelius. California documents indicate that forms might also be mailed to ZabaSearch Record Blocking at PO Box 808, Bothell, WA 98041-0808.

As with several other sites, names that differ by small amounts, such as a middle initial, will result in different records, so users must submit requests for each one.

**Acxiom:** Acxiom Corp. provides an opt-out form on its website to request the removal of contact information from its marketing and directory databases. Consumers also can call an Acxiom opt-out hotline at 1-888-322-9466 and press Option 2.

**WhitePages Inc.:** WhitePages says it's "easy" to remove listing information from the site. Users can search WhitePages for the listing they want and click on the correct result. That will take them to the "Detail View" page, where they can scroll to the bottom and click on the link that says "Is this you? Remove your listing."

Details pages also have a link that says it will allow users to edit their listing, but this requires users to become a member of WhitePages and provide their email address or log in via a service like Facebook.

**PeekYou LLC:** PeekYou's site says that users who want their information taken off the site can send a request and the Web address of their PeekYou profile to [remove@peekyou.com](mailto:remove@peekyou.com). PeekYou will "gladly remove" the information, the site says.

**AnyWho:** This brand of AT&T Interactive, a subsidiary of AT&T Inc., lists residential address and phone information. People can remove their name, address and phone number from the AnyWho White Pages by clicking "Remove Listing" on the page with their data and submitting a form. The form includes "General Privacy Concerns" as a reason for removal.

**555-1212.com Inc.:** The site 555-1212.com does not allow people to opt out directly. The company says that users must contact their telephone service provider to change or remove their data. However, under California law, some public officials can request that their information be removed by submitting a form to the company at PO Box 3713 Truckee, CA 96160.

**PublicBackgroundChecks.com:** To remove their information from the site, consumers can send a letter with their first and last names, middle initial, aliases, birth date and addresses going back 20 years to 305 5th Ave. S, Suite 201, La Crosse, WI 54601.

**Peoplefinder.com:** The site, which is owned by Digimedia.com LP, provides a Web form that consumers can use to remove their name, address and phone number from the site's White Pages product.

**PeopleFinders.com:** PeopleFinders.com requires users to submit first and last name, middle initial, aliases, address, date of birth and addresses for the past 20 years to 1821 Q Street, Sacramento, CA, 95811. The company says it will complete the opt out within 10 business days and will send a confirmation letter if the consumer provides a self-addressed envelope. Confi-Chek Inc. is the parent company of PeopleFinders.com.

**Switchboard.com:** The site, which is a subsidiary of SuperMedia LLC, offers a form online to remove name, address and phone number from its White Pages.

**USA People Search:** The company says on its site that users can send a letter to PO Box 188860, Sacramento, CA, 95818, along with their full name, aliases, date of birth, current and previous addresses and phone number so that USA People Search can identify and delete the proper records.

The Privacy Rights Clearinghouse list also includes information on other sites. Some of these, including people-search engine pipl.com and PublicData.com, do not offer the option of removing information. Users can submit complaints about such data brokers to the Federal Trade Commission.

-- *Jennifer Valentino-DeVries, Julia Angwin and Courtney Banks*

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