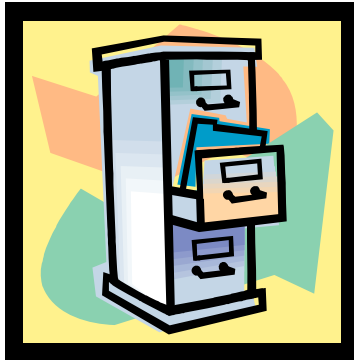**Public Sleuthing: Searching for Individuals Using Public Records**
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www.kcll.org

Public records are generally held by governmental bodies, from local and county levels to state and federal. These records include real estate, court files, professional licenses, tax liens and judgments, voter registration, divorce decrees, and more. The records are generally open to public inspection. Previously, you could access these records only by visiting the organization holding them. But with the advent of the Internet, and the posting of many of these records on governmental web sites, they have become much easier to obtain.

These public records differ from state to state, as each state will define public records in its own way. For instance, in Washington State, the definition of public records can be found in the Revised Code of Washington (RCW) 40.14.010. Definition and classification of public records states "As used in this chapter, the term "public records" shall include any paper, correspondence, completed form, bound record book, photograph, film, sound recording, map drawing, machine-readable material, compact disc meeting current industry ISO specifications, or other document, regardless of physical form or characteristics, and including such copies thereof, that have been made by or received by any agency of the state of Washington in connection with the transaction of public business, and legislative records as described in RCW 40.14.100."

Oregon's definition of public records is contained in Oregon Revised Statutes (ORS) 192.005 and 192.410. ORS 192.005(5) states "Public record" includes, but is not limited to, a document, book, paper, photograph, file, sound recording or machine readable electronic record, regardless of physical form or characteristics, made, received, filed or recorded in pursuance of law or in connection with the transaction of public business, whether or not confidential or restricted in use."

ORS 192.410(4)(a) Inspection of Public Records states "Public record" includes any writing that contains information relating to the conduct of the public's business,

including but not limited to court records, mortgages, and deed records, prepared, owned, used or retained by a public body regardless of physical form or characteristics."

These public records contain personal information such as full names, Social Security numbers, birth dates, addresses, financial information, and more. People provide this information often to governmental bodies when applying for benefits, filing court cases, selling real property, etc. Once the information is filed with a governmental agency, it is sometimes sold to public record vendors and other times the information is simply put on the Internet without redacting sensitive information. When this happens, the information becomes "publicly available" rather than simply contained in public records.

Other types of information that become "publicly available" are postings to the Internet, professional writing, podcasts, blogs, and other facts that you voluntarily provide, such as name and address to the telephone company, zip code when you make a purchase, and data that you give when signing up to use a web site or give to companies when entering contests and subscribing to magazines. Much of this information is collected by information brokers and then resold.

You can use public records and publicly available information to search for friends, family, litigants and more. The King County Law Library provides training classes using this type of searching for criminal background research and for skip tracing. "Skip tracing" is the procedure of tracking down a debtor, witness, company, defendant, etc. by following his/her paper trail from a known address to his/her new location.

Find our Public Sleuthing Links by visiting the King County Law Library web site at: www.kcll.org and choose Research Links then Public Sleuthing, from the Home page.

Public Record Meta sites

BRB Public Records links: http://www.brbpub.com/pubrecsites.asp
This is my favorite one for linking to free sites. This site provides links to state, county, city, and federal sites where public information is available for free. In addition, it also has a pay site that can link the searcher to much more. The annual cost of the paid site is approximately $120 a year, a great bargain. Sign up for their monthly email notification or RSS feed, which gives you news about new sites, changes in state and local access policies and more.

State and Local Government: www.statelocalgov.net/ will link you to information from other states. For instance, you can link to the Secretary of State sites for all states; find local county government entities and more. This site is also organized by topic area. Great resource!

Public Records Finder: www.publicrecordfinder.com Business and personal records links. The site is organized by categories. Includes links to other countries. However, it also links to many paid resources. It does not contain as many free resource links as the others.

Public Records Info: www.publicrecordsinfo.com This site links to USSearch for paid background information, at a premium price. But the site does contain categories and many free links that can be useful for further resources.

Black Book Online: www.blackbookonline.info/ is maintained by the author of "The Investigator's Little Black Book." The site is particularly robust, with many good starting points, but does contain many paid links.

Portico: http://indorgs.virginia.edu/portico/ This web site's links to public record web sites, is organized topically, and then by state. It also contains links to calculators, electronic magazines, libraries, and other reference sources. It has a particularly strong set of links for real property information available through county assessors and auditors.

Zabasearch: www.zabasearch.com. This site gives you multiple results when searching on a person's name. Sometimes it can be very revealing. But the site regularly links to paid resources. It is still a great first place to start for those hard-to-find people.

Professional Licenses

Many professions require licensing through state or local agencies. For instance, the Department of Licensing in Washington State licenses private investigators, real estate agents, engineers, cosmetologists, and more. Contractors, electricians, and plumbers must register with the Department of Labor and Industries, and the Washington State Department of Health issues credentials for medical personnel. These professional licenses contain much information. The licensing sites often include disciplinary information.

Washington State - Use the following:
- Secretary of State, Corporations: http://www.secstate.wa.gov/corps/
- Department of Labor & Industries, Contractors: https://fortress.wa.gov/lni/bbip/
- Department of Licensing, Professionals: http://www.dol.wa.gov/business/professionals.html
- Department of Health, Health Care Providers: https://fortress.wa.gov/doh/hpqa1/Application/Credential_Search/profile.asp
- Department of Revenue, Business Owners: http://dor.wa.gov/content/doingbusiness/registermybusiness/brd/default.aspx
- Washington State Bar Lawyer Directory: http://pro.wsba.org/

Oregon - The state web site page at http://licenseinfo.oregon.gov/ contains links to state, city and county license sites, and information by category. This web page is a one-stop site for professional licensing, and as such is much better than the Washington sites, as you do not have to guess which state or local agency is responsible for the particular professional license you need.

Professional Information Sources, Web-based

The following web sites can be useful when trying to find information on company members and experts.

ZoomInfo: www.zoominfo.com This site uses the Web to pull together biographical information. It partners with other sites such as Xing, which is a social networking site for professional connections.

LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com One of the first professional networking sites, this one can help to find connections. It often gives former and current work places.

Spoke: http://spoke.com This site says of itself, find business people by location, industry, title, education, or interests. Sometimes results are a bit behind, but if the person you are looking for is high enough in a company's structure, you may find him/her here.

Xing: www.xing.com Bills itself as a professional contact management network and partners with ZoomInfo. Social networking supposedly taken to the next level, the web site competes with LinkedIn.

Criminal Records

Many people are still under the impression – mostly through watching movies – that finding out about someone's criminal record is easy. You simply find a computer, do a few searches by hacking into an all-knowing government web site containing information on everyone's criminal record and you are done. This type of search does not exist. While the Federal Bureau of Investigation has the National Crime Information Center (NCIC), this is only available to authorized entities, usually police organizations. In addition, this information is only as good as the information provided to it through the state and local criminal agencies. And it does not contain misdemeanor information at all.

Criminal records include such information as arrest records, criminal court convictions, correction department and prisoner information, and state criminal records repositories, such as the Washington State Patrol, which maintains the criminal records for our state and the Oregon State Police, which maintains the records for Oregon.

Since this information is contained at the local, state and federal level, doing a criminal background search is difficult. There are paid databases that claim to do this, but most do not go as far as searching locally available information. This is still one area where the researcher often needs to visit local courts, along with paying for access to the State repository information.

The Federal Bureau of Prisons Inmate Locator is available for searching via the Internet at: http://www.bop.gov/. It contains information on prisoners from 1980 to present.

Information on prison inmates is available in some states, but not all.
Two good web sites for finding inmate information are VINELink, which is the online version of VINE (Victim Information and Notification Everyday), the National Victim Notification Network at www.Vinelink.com and Corrections Connection at: http://www.corrections.com/.

Sex Offender information is beginning to become more available. The Department of Justice has gathered the links together in one site at: http://www.nsopr.gov/ This site links to the statewide sex offender sites such as the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs state wide sex offender search (only level 2 and 3 offenders) at: http://ml.waspc.org/SearchAround.aspx and the Oregon State Police sex offender search at: http://sexoffenders.oregon.gov/SorPublic/Web.dll/main.

For more criminal records information use a good research oriented web site such as Genie Tyburski's Virtual Chase at: www.virtualchase.com. This web site contains many links to other criminal record information on the federal and state level. Her links to state criminal information are particularly good.

Vital Statistics

Most vital statistics records are maintained at the local level. For instance, in Washington, birth certificates are first filed at the county level and then sent on to the Washington State Department of Health, Center for Health Statistics. Accessing these records usually requires the payment of a fee. In King County the Public Health Department maintains birth and death information. Marriage certificates are filed at the County Recorder's office and divorce decrees are filed at the Superior Court Clerk's Office. The State Department of Vital Statistics has birth and death certificates from 1907 to present and marriage and divorce certificates from 1968 to present. More recent records must be obtained from the individual county in which the person resided or resides.

In Oregon, the Department of Humans Services, Center for Health Statistics is responsible for issuing certified copies of vital records, including birth, death, marriage and divorce certificates. The office has birth and death records dating from July, 1903; marriage records from 1906 and divorce certificates (not decrees) from 1925.
The easiest records to obtain are death records. Genealogy sites such as Rootsweb and Ancestry.com contain links to the Social Security Death Index (the database of deaths reported to the Social Security Administration (SSA) from 1962 to the present): http://ssdi.rootsweb.com/.

Another genealogy web site hosts Death Indexes by State and County (Most are subscription-based) but you can link via: http://www.deathindexes.com/.

Divorce records are usually found at the court where the divorce took place, so knowing the residence for the people involved is particularly important.

Real/Personal Property Records

There are many good web sites that help you find real property records, not quite as many for personal property such as boats, vehicles and the rest. Start this search at a good metasite such as Portico or State and Local Government. BRB Pubs also has many links to this information.

Do unclaimed property searches at the state level such as the Washington State Department of Revenue's Unclaimed Property web site at: http://ucp.dor.wa.gov/. Unclaimed Property for Oregon is searched at: http://www.oregon.gov/DSL/UP/index.shtml

Real property records are generally going to reside at the county level. These records often can only be searched using an address or a parcel number. Searching for real property records at the Tax Assessor's office by name is often difficult or impossible. For instance, if you are searching for real property in King County you would want to start at the Department of Development and Environmental Services: www.metrokc.gov/ddes/property.htm (property research main page; use iMAP or Parcel Viewer to hone in and get taxpayer names). Go to: http://www.metrokc.gov/gis/mapportal/PViewer_main.htm

This search will then connect you to the King County Assessor's Office for the property assessment information and to the King County Treasurer for the tax information. www.metrokc.gov/assessor/eRealProperty/Disclaimer.asp

Vehicle and vessel information is at the Department of Licensing and in order to access that information you have to sign up for an account.

But often you want to start your search for real property deeds, judgments, liens, and other information at the county recorder's web site before you go to the parcel search. This way you can find information on ownership first and then do the property searches. The King County Recorder's Office search is located at: http://www.metrokc.gov/recelec/records/. I always start here and then go to the other county sites.

The Portico web site is especially strong with its links to county real property records at assessor's offices throughout the country. Start at: http://indorgs.virginia.edu/portico/personalproperty.html.

BRB Pubs links you to many of these assessor's sites, but also links to other county records that can be used in conjunction with the Assessor's records. Find these links at: http://www.brbpub.com/pubrecsitesStates.asp.

Locating Persons and Finding Background Information

There are many web sites for finding information on people. Searches for people can be for many reasons, but one of the most common reasons for doing this type of search is for tracing purposes, more often skip tracing, or for tracking down old friends. Often you may simply start with a phone directory search if you have the person's name or phone number with no other information. Phone directories are often out-of-date, so use more than one.

Directories – Phone, Address & Reverse Directories

www.yellowpages.com (includes links to public records databases – for a price).
www.switchboard.com (includes quick connections for your town).
http://infospace.com (one of the first – includes reverse lookup)
411 – http://www.411.com/ (phone directory for free people and business searches in the US and Canada).
http://www.superpages.com/ - Verizon Superpages
www.infobel.com (phone books from around the world). Use this site when you want to find information from countries around the world.
www.fonefinder.net (by area code, prefix, or city; good for international too – finds the phone company serving the area).
DexKnows at: www.dexknows.com (This includes recent listings for this area – Use this to get the most up-to-date information for our area).

A site that is not strictly for phone numbers and addresses, but contains interesting information is the Sound Politics Washington State Voter Database at: http://www.soundpolitics.com/voterlookup.html. This service provides online access to a public release of the Washington State Voter Registration Database (March 3, 2008). You can search it by address or name and find one particularly normally private piece of information, the person's complete date of birth. This is useful for elimination purposes and for confirmation that you are looking at the correct person.

Information Data Brokers

Most reputable information brokers are available to law enforcement, government and professional businesses for stated purposes only. The first four listed here require background searches before they let you use them. The others I list are available to the general public. The quality and reliability of the information of the readily available databases is not as good as the data brokers who vet their customers.

Accurint – (www.accurint.com/) A professional skip tracing database, Accurint provides personal names, aliases, social security numbers, current and historical addresses (going back 30 years), telephone numbers, month and year of birth, names of those living at the current address, property ownership, names of relatives (up to 3 degrees of

separation), neighbors, death information and more. This company was bought by Lexis in 2005.

ChoicePoint – (www.choicepoint.com) ChoicePoint Online, formerly CDB Infotek and cdb4web, offers an extensive database of public records. It provides people locating tools, corporate records, real property records, a reverse telephone directory, driver records, boat and vehicle registrations, physician reports including criminal and disciplinary data, bankruptcies, liens and judgments, UCCs, Federal Employer Identification Numbers (FEIN), OSHA investigation records and more. ChoicePoint costs more than some of the others, but has a large database.

LocatePlus – (www.LocatePlus.com) Used by homeland security, many other government associated organizations, plus law firms, and others. It contains cell phones plus unlisted telephone numbers. It is less expensive than Accurint or Choicepoint.

Merlindata - (www.merlindata.com) Merlin Information Services offers a directory of sources for investigative research. Started in California, it has a particularly strong database of information for the west coast, plus more reasonable pricing than other brokers.

KnowX – (www.knowx.com/) A former Information America product now owned by ChoicePoint, KnowX caters to consumers. It provides access to addresses and telephone numbers, death, marriage, and divorce records, bankruptcies, judgments, liens and more.

Intelius – (www.intelius.com/ This service is available to the public and says about its search, "People Search is great way to find family, old friends, relatives, and just about anyone! A People Search report includes phone number, address history, age, birthdates, household members, home value, income and more." However, quality control for this service seems to be lacking (in my opinion), as it often returns incorrect information.

USSearch – (www.ussearch.com) This seems to be the most ubiquitous information broker on the Internet. Many sites link to it. The price of its searches, beyond a simple phone and address search is extremely high.

USA People Search – (www.usa-people-search.com/ This information broker gives you a quick search result that is often extremely accurate, and includes former locations. But at $40 for a report it is another pricey option.

Search for Web Presence – Including Social Search

Search the Internet for information on the person you are researching. Use multiple search engines and multiple types of searches as the search engines have very little overlap.

For example, if you are looking for information on a company or product which may be going through litigation, try searching the Google Groups postings. These postings date back to the early 1980s, as they contain the old Internet Usenet postings along with more recent postings. Go to http://groups.google.com to search. Search for a Yahoo group on the subject you want by going to: http://groups.yahoo.com/.

Search, web logs, or "blogs" – which are defined as frequent, chronological publications of personal thoughts and Web links, or simply web based journals. A blog is often a mixture of what is happening in a person's life and what is happening on the Web, a kind of hybrid diary/guide site, although there are as many unique types of blogs as there are people. The entries are usually in reverse chronological order. Blogs can be found on any subject. Use a search engine such as Clusty at http://clusty.com/ to search for blog information.

Use a search engine such as PIPL at www.pipl.com. This search engine claims to find much more information on people than any other search engines, as it searches database-driven information. It claims, "since most personal profiles, public records and other people-related documents are stored in databases and not on static web pages, most of the higher-quality information about people is simply "invisible" to a regular search engine," but supposedly not to this search engine. It does appear to combine some interesting results. I often use this to find that "deep web" information I need.

Search for other "social networking" information using a search engine such as http://www.yoname.com, which does a people search across social networks, blogs and more and brings up profiles from MySpace, LinkedIn, FaceBook, and other web sites. This searching is especially important for finding information on Web 2.0 web based sites. When you are searching for information on younger adults searching social networking sites is critical, as these people often cannot be found using the normal telephone and address directories. Use multiple social search engines, such as Spock at www.spock.com and Wink at http://wink.com/.

How you search and where you start your search depends on the information you have to start the process. When I teach this class for criminal background research or for skip tracing I use a check list to keep track of the places and databases I have looked. Use the Public Sleuthing Links from our web page and create your own checklist. Finding that person, whether an old friend, some one you need for litigation purposes or someone you need to check out for employment purposes is getting both more difficult and easier than ever.

Sample Skip tracing Checklist				

Name: _____

Address: _____

DOB: _____

SSN#: _____

Telephone: _____

Other Known Info: _____

Source – Database	Comment		Source – Database	Comment	
Directories			**Court & Criminal**		
RefUSA, other telephone directories			JIS*, SCOMIS, ACORDS		
Dexonline			Civil Search		
Reverse directory			Name Search		
InfoSpace			Courtlink*		
Infobel			Pacer*		
Fonefinder			Bankruptcy VCIS		
Post Office			BoP, Vinelink, CC		
411			WATCH – WSP*		
Other:			Other:		
Company Info			**County Records**		
Thomas Register*			Auditor		
Hoovers*			Recorder's Office		
Reference USA*			Assessor's Office		
Proquest – News search*			DDES- Property		
WA Sec State Corp			SoundPolitics – WA Voter Registration		
WA Business Records			Sex Offender		
L& I - Contractor			Other:		
DOL – Prof License			**Info Brokers**		
DOL – Driver's License*			Accurint*		
Vehicle/Vessel*			Merlindata*		
DOL –UCC*			LocatePlus*		
Web Presence			**Public Records –States Fed Other**		
Google			BRB Pub		
Ixquick or Ask			Statelocalgov		
Clusty or Exalead			Portico		
Zabasearch or Yoname			Virtualchase		
Zoominfo or Pipl			Publicrecordfinder		
Other:			Other:		

*Denotes Fee Based Database