



Project Visible

Can we use our digital footprints to prove where we live?

Introduction

As our lives move online, the world's collective focus has turned to the threat of our digital trails being used against us; the specter of privacy invasion and surveillance is everywhere. But let's not forget that this abundance of new data can be used for good, too. Consider how the financial inclusion sector is already relying on [digital footprints](#) to offer banking services to populations previously deemed un-creditworthy. The humanitarian sector, meanwhile, is turning to social media and cell phone location data to locate [disaster survivors](#). Governments around the world are using smartphone location and social media data for COVID-related contact tracing.

New America's [Future of Property Rights](#) program is developing a new use case for the power of digital evidence: helping hundreds of millions of people prove where they live.

The Right to be Seen

While much of the developed world is properly demanding – and securing – a “right to be forgotten,” many around the world are posing a very different question: What about the right to be seen?

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the land rights and housing sector.

Nearly [half](#) the world's population lacks a title or any other way to prove where they live. This simple fact has immense repercussions. In Puerto Rico, 75,000 FEMA housing assistance claims [were rejected](#) after Hurricane Maria because applicants couldn't provide home titles. In Colombia, millions cannot return to homes taken by the FARC, because they cannot prove they had once occupied those homes. And in India, land disputes clog 25% of all court cases because neither party has the documents to prove their residency.

And yet, as our social and economic lives move online, we generate a wealth of data that reveals important things about us. When we use services like Google Maps, Facebook, MPesa and Lyft, we generate a rich tapestry of evidence about where we go, what we purchase, whom we interact with.

A critical question emerges: can citizens be empowered to harness their own trove of digital evidence to prove where they live, and access the services they have been locked out of?

Our Work Thus Far

The generous support of Omidyar Network allowed us to move this work forward in 2019. Through OpEds in Project Syndicate, the Miami Herald, ID2020 and other outlets, we have [made the case](#) for using digital evidence to prove where we live.

In a report called “[The Credential Highway](#)” we proposed an emerging digital identity system, called self-sovereign identity (SSI), is the vehicle for responsibly harnessing this wealth of new data.

We then [convened](#) stakeholders from tech, government, and academia to put this topic on the table and discuss what it would take to make it a reality. Based on the results of this convening, we are running a **proof of concept** (POC) in Uganda to test the accuracy of digital trails in a Global South context.

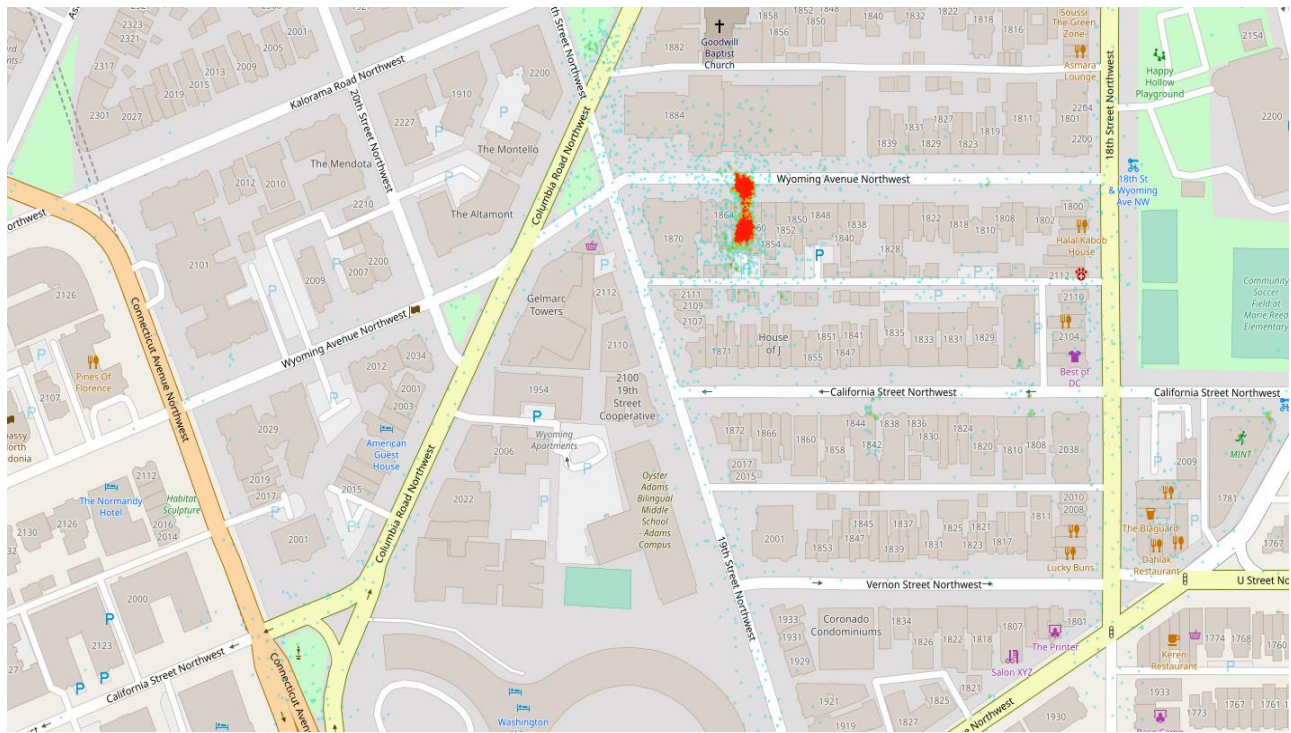


Figure 1: A heat map generated from FPR Director Yuliya Panfil's Google Maps location history in 2015. The data shows the exact location of her home during that period.

Next Steps

Having established a theoretical basis for this use case, the Future of Property Rights program seeks to:

- Conduct **targeted research** to answer questions such as:
 - What is the easiest way for data subjects to **collect, store and share** relevant digital information about themselves? Particularly if they aren't tech-savvy?
 - What does this data **prove**, and what does it not prove?
 - Under what **conditions** would administrative agencies and other 'end users' trust and accept 'digital proof of address'?
 - Which existing or emerging **systems** could 'digital proof of address' most easily map on to? For example, digital ID systems.
 - How would such a system be rolled out in a **privacy-preserving** way?
 - What **transferable lessons** can be learned from financial inclusion and other sectors that are successfully using digital credentials?
 - What does a digital proof of address **credential ecosystem** look like? In other words, who are the 'credential providers' (e.g. Google, Facebook, MPesa, various telcos, Paypal), who are possible 'accepters' of credentials (e.g. FEMA, UNHCR, land agencies), and who are the 'middleman entities' who would make such a system work (e.g. digi.me)?
- **Pilot** this idea and reconvene stakeholders to examine the results.



Why This, Why Now?

Global displacement is on the rise. The interplay of climate change and conflict has led to a record [70 million](#) forced from their homes, and this number will likely grow. As we write, wildfires rage in Australia, and the world emerges from its most disaster-prone decade on record. Helping people return to their homes quickly and safely is an urgent and growing problem that must be solved.

But this work has bigger implications. Instead of being at the mercy of corporate giants and government agencies, people should be empowered to use their own data to prove vital facts about themselves, advocate for their own interests, and advance their own goals. This bottom-up approach upends the traditional power structures in which governments and Big Tech collect large troves of data to advance their own goals. It's a powerful leveler.

Project Leadership

Yuliya Panfil is a senior fellow and director of New America's Future of Property Rights program. Prior to joining New America, Panfil sourced and managed property rights investments at Omidyar Network, and served as a land governance and legal advisor at USAID. Panfil began her career as a journalist for *The Miami Herald* and has also written for *The Washington Post*, CNN, *USA Today*, *Slate*, *Project Syndicate*, *New York Daily News*, *Newsday*, and *The South Florida Business Journal*. Panfil holds a law degree from Columbia Law School and a bachelor's degree in journalism from Northwestern University.

About New America

New America is dedicated to renewing America by continuing the quest to realize our nation's highest ideals, honestly confronting the challenges caused by rapid technological and social change, and seizing the opportunities those changes create. As part of ensuring our mission, New America is guided by principles of full transparency, independence, and accessibility in all its activities and partnerships. New America does not engage in research or educational activities directed or influenced in any way by financial supporters. Read our [full Gift Guidelines here](#).

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