Cyber Matters

2: Digital footprints and where to find them

As I started thinking about cyber issues more deeply as part of this course, I did what I think any sane person would—I Googled myself. I found mostly what I expected at first: my social media profiles (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, etc.), my Github account, some photos and articles about me from my high school days, and results from a half marathon I ran recently. When I started to get into the depths of the Google search pages , though, I started to see things I wasn't quite ready for—my "discography" (a very brief feature on a song released by one of my high-school friends), the obituaries of my uncle and my grandmother, the results of all of my high school tennis matches and cross-country meets, and my birthday, to name a few.

My birthday, innocently shared by my childhood church in their weekly publication

[PDF] the extended family - Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church
1xowko9tbcf3arx61fgu1biq.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com › uploads › 2019/08 ▾
Aug 24, 2019 - September Birthdays! **Liam Pulsifer**. Sept. 4. Natalie Cowal. Sept. 15. John Laney. Sept. 23. Elizabeth Cook. Sept. 27 ...

But wait, I already share all of that information on my public Instagram account, easily accessible to anyone who might want it!

@liampulsiferxx - Liam Pulsifer Instagram Videos and Photos
globalinta.com › liampulsiferxx ▾
September 2017. I spent so much time trying to find the right set of pictures to represent my 19th year that I ran out of birthday, but if you want to know how I feel ...

Hopefully, that will teach me to use my birthday as a password.

It's also easy to triangulate who my family members are from public obituaries

Obituary of Gail Olsen Pulsifer

Gail Olsen Pulsifer, age 75, died Tuesday, January 12, 2010 in The Villages, Florida.

Scott; her brother Brian F. Olsen and 10 grandchildren, Margaret V. Maclin, H. Wilson Maclin IV,

Brian H. Pulsifer, Parker P. Pulsifer, S. Abigail Maclin, Liam W. Pulsifer, Zachary L. Pulsifer,

Erin G. Ackerman, Michael S. Ackerman and Benjamin A. Ackerman.

uncles, and cousins, his beloved nephews and nieces Curt VanDerzee and his wife Meg, Kevin VanDerzee, Duncan Green, Liam Pulsifer, Zachary Pulsifer, Kimberly McFerran and her husband Bill, and special great nieces Mollie McFerran and Hannah VanDerzee.

That's over half of my cousins represented. I was definitely surprised by exactly how easy it would be to come pretty close to mapping my entire family tree without my knowledge or permission (unlike through social media, where I ostensibly have some small level of control over who can look at my data). This also shows off exactly how silly it is to have a security question like "what was your mother's maiden name?" as a backup for any website login.

I also found out that my name is apparently the "perfect" first name for someone with the last name Pulsifer, though I'm not really sure what to make of that information.

100 Perfect Boy Baby Names If Your Last Name is Pulsifer.
www.babynamescience.com › best-boy-names-matching-last-name-Pulsifer ▾
These Names Are Perfect If Your Surname is Pulsifer. ... We've Analyzed Pulsifer And Applied The Following Rules. ... 2, **Liam Pulsifer**, 18,342, 1 in 200.
You visited this page on 12/11/19.

Why do we care?

Of course, nothing in there was truly scandalous, but that's partly because I haven't spent much time living on my own, accumulating public data yet. What was really astounding was the sheer breadth and volume of the data I found—I never would have guessed, for example, that anyone was interested in keeping track of all of the finish times of cross-country runners from my high school, Christ School, but indeed there's a site that does just that. When I started snooping around, investigating what kind of data *might* be out there, I was shocked at the different kinds of data which are considered "public record" and are thus available to any citizen who can find the time to make a request of whichever government office might have said data. Check Criminal Record.com says the list is as follows:

- Your Name
- Birth Date
- Home and Mailing Addresses
- Driver's License Number
- Physical Description
- Social Security Number <— *This one's not actually public record, but isn't it a little scary that a search website says it is?*
- Failures to Appear in Court
- Failures to Pay Traffic Fines
- Driver's License Status (whether it's valid, revoked, suspended, or expired, for example)
- Major traffic convictions stretching back 7 years (and minor traffic convictions stretching back 3 years)

- Birth Certificates
- Marriage Certificates
- Death Certificates
- Property Records
- Court Records
- Divorce Records
- Arrest Records
- Postal Address Information

Now you might ask—checkcriminalrecord.com? That doesn't sound like a very credible source, right? And that's definitely true, but the way that the not-so-credible sources define what's public record is the definition that you actually have to worry about because these are the sites that are going to be least scrupulous about selling your data to the highest bidder, most notably to advertising agencies. And in fact, some states have even more lenient definitions of public record data than this one. North Carolina, for example, defines "public record" in N.C. General Statue 132-1, as data "regardless of physical form and characteristics" which is "made or received pursuant to law or ordinance in connection with the transaction of public business." North Carolina courts have maintained an extremely broad reading of the statute, deciding in *News and Observer Publishing Co. v. Wake County Hospital System Inc.* that the term includes any material kept in carrying out a government agency's lawful duties [1] .

What's Next?

All this is to say that it's quite likely that any or all of the information above is *out there*, whatever that means, and for many of us, that might not be an ideal state of affairs. That's not even getting into the myriad data from social media networks or other online memberships that might be leaking into the ether. Not to get alarmist, but think about the last time you had to prove your identity. How much more information did it require than what's on the list above? I'm guessing not too much. If you can find a social security number, you'll have all you need to apply for a credit card, for example. Luckily for attackers, social security numbers get leaked all the time, and it's even feasible in some cases to guess them [2] .

The real issue for me isn't that all this data is out there. I know that's a nearly inevitable consequence of living in our modern world, and a consequence of living in a society that values public access to information. I would object, in fact, to restrictions on who can access many of the data I mentioned above. For example, I certainly want land purchases to remain public record so that corporations can't quietly buy up land for nefarious purposes. It's difficult to know exactly what your digital footprint looks like, though, without constantly Googling yourself, which is obviously a lot of work and would take up almost all of your time. In the next post, I'll describe a tool that I think could help with that.

1. 55 N.C. App. 1, 284 S.E.2d 542 (1981). Accessed via https://www.sog.unc.edu/sites/www.sog.unc.edu/files/course_materials/public_records_overview.pdf↵

2. https://arstechnica.com/science/2009/07/social-insecurity-numbers-open-to-hacking/↵