The Internet is a great source for finding old friends, reading breaking news, and shopping from home. Unfortunately, controlling the information that is on the Internet is nearly impossible. Many companies compile personal information about citizens and display the information in an Internet database. These companies make money by data-mining; that is, gathering, compiling, and reselling personal information about an individual based on public records that are readily available from various government and commercial agencies. 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. Many people feel that this is an invasion of privacy.

Under the law, government agencies are required to make certain records available to the public while minimizing the cost of doing so. Supporters of a public record system believe that both citizens and the media have legitimate reasons to inquire about a person's record. As the Internet has grown in recent years, government agencies have witnessed an eruption of record requests. With the Internet, what was once a public record collecting dust in the basement of a courthouse is now online for the world to see.

Citizens, slowly becoming aware of this collection activity, 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. Laws regulating the Internet are either underdeveloped or nonexistent. Over the past twenty years, Congress has declined to exercise any substantive regulation of information gathered and displayed on the Internet. As a result, it is almost impossible to protect privacy while using the Internet. Having said that, there are several steps individuals can take to protect

their personal information. This publication will discuss how your information is gathered by the databases, the laws that regulate (or more accurately don't regulate) the Internet, and the steps that can be taken to protect personal information.

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 will 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 an individual from different public and commercial data sources without their knowledge and permission. Typically, an individual will conduct an Internet search and find that most of the individual's personal records are published on the Internet and available for others to search. Information about an individual may include 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.

Social Networks and Blogs. Social networking sites and blogs have expanded our abilities to connect with people and have a voice in a large forum, but, at the same time, bullies, business competitors, and others have also become able to spread cruel and embarrassing rumors

in hypersonic speed. Many companies also find that negative reviews are posted about their company, which are sometimes inaccurate and hurt their business. The effects of posting destructive and humiliating messages about a person's reputation can cause problems with self esteem and, effectively, destruction to livelihood.

Internet Regulation

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution proclaims the right to free speech, and the Supreme Court, referring to the First Amendment, has been very tolerant with the types of information that are used and published on the Internet. The federal government has provided some regulation on the Internet through child pornography and gambling laws. There are few regulations, however, that are geared toward protecting the transmission of personal information.

A few years ago, the Federal Trade Commission created the Fair Information Practice Principles as a response to concerns about the methods used by Internet operators to collect and use personal information. The principles are broken into five parts: (1) Notice/Awareness, which informs an individual about an entity's data collection methods before personal information is compiled from them, (2) Choice/Consent, which gives the consumer the ability to control how personal information is collected and used, (3) Access/Participation, which allows a consumer to review the information an entity has compiled from them and to dispute the veracity of the data, (4) Integrity/Security, which simply means the data must be true and protected, and (5) Enforcement/Redress, which means compliance of the principles derives from self regulation, private remedies, and government enforcement, such as criminal or civil penalties.

Restricting Personal Information on the Internet

So what can you do to protect your privacy? The following tips will not stop private information from being gathered about you, but it will give you more control as to how it is acquired and disseminated:

1. Many websites have a process for "opting out" of their databases. Review the website's privacy policy for determining how to opt out.

2. Websites that do not provide for opting out can sometimes be contacted via the website's owner or webmaster, who can remove content upon written request by an individual.

3. Some companies assist individuals and companies in removing unwanted information from the Internet completely and immediately. Typically, you will have to pay a fee for this service.

4. If you belong to a social networking site, make sure that your account settings are set to "private."

5. Never give out personal information over the Internet to an unknown website provider or to unsolicited requests for such information.

6. Some information from public records in states and counties can be removed or blocked through legal process, typically through a court order.

7. If you find that false information has been posted about you or your business, write, call, or email the website operator and ask that it be promptly deleted or corrected or, at the very least, that you be allowed to post a correction item with your version of the facts.

The Internet provides users with opportunities to learn and communicate. It is a limitless resource for acquiring information and interacting on a global scale. These capabilities, however, come with a price tag on an individual's privacy, so 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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Lori Swanson
445 Minnesota Street, Suite 1400
St. Paul, MN 55101
651-296-3353 or 800-657-3787
TTY: 651-297-7206 or 800-366-4812
www.ag.state.mn.us

Federal Trade Commission
Consumer Response Center
600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20580
1-877-382-4357