

Beware of Spokeo

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I expect that a hundred years from now, everyone will be using a computer. Things such as pen and paper, typewriters and even some of the earliest computer models will be in thousands of museums across the globe waiting to be viewed by eye-wide children, untrusting skeptics and “serious” professionals. Even in 2011, I was surprised, flabbergasted and enticed after learning about a recent professor. What makes him such an enigma? He doesn’t use a computer.

The computer and by extension, the internet, has played an intricate role in expanding liberty. Wikipedia, founded by an Objectivist, has put the life of many influential libertarians from Lao-tzu to Ludwig Von Mises as well as their life’s work on an easy to read internet encyclopedia. The Cato Institute informs followers of their crusades over social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace. During the 2008 Presidential Election, Representative Ron Paul made headlines for his record-breaking money bombs, millions of dollars raised by individuals over the internet. These “series of tubes” have blessed our movement immeasurably. But with every blessing, there is a curse and this curse often takes the form of internet search forums including Spokeo.com.

Spokeo, whose catch phrase is, “Not your grandma’s white pages”, allows anyone to type in a name and locate a human being. Whether you are looking for a long lost friend, a runaway spouse or trying to find a reclusive celebrity, Spokeo can be your personal private investigator with just the touch of a few buttons. For no charge, you can find where someone lives, their marital status, their relatives, how much their house is worth and their hobbies. For a flat monthly rate, Spokeo will give you nearly anything else you want to know about that person including photographs.

This website and websites like it should alarm not just libertarians but anyone who is worried about the safety, security and privacy of themselves and their family. For years, Americans had to worry about what the government knew and wanted to know about them. Now, this has spilled over into the private sector where websites like Spokeo are trying to make a profit by exploiting the private lives of ordinary citizens.

While there is no way to escape the growing curse of the internet or of websites such as these, there are several precautions you can take to avoid their intrusions. First, know that just because you are not in the phone book does not mean that you aren’t on Spokeo. A family member of mine argued that since he was unlisted, Spokeo wouldn’t have his information. I found him in thirty seconds. Second, be careful about what you post on social networking sites. Spokeo gathers much of its information from sites such as Facebook. When setting up your profile, make sure to exclude sensitive material about yourself or your family from the page.

Lastly, look for ways to delete yourself from such sites. Spokeo gives you an option to delete yourself by clicking on the “privacy” tab located at the bottom of the website. Though this should permanently delete your information from the website, be skeptical and verify their promise every few months or so. When it comes to retaining your liberty and privacy, every possible precaution should be taken. Tell your friends and family about Spokeo.com and keep your eyes peeled for any other privacy stealing websites.