

ERASING THE DIGITAL SHADOW

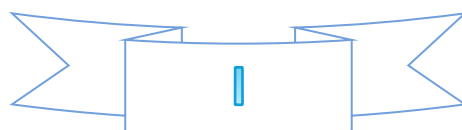
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ABSTRACT

THIS RESEARCH PAPER INVESTIGATES THROUGH MIXED METHODS HOW VULNERABLE INDIVIDUALS RESIDING IN THE U.S. CAN ACTIVELY REMOVE PERSONAL DATA FROM ONLINE PLATFORMS TO DEFEND AGAINST CYBER THREATS. THROUGH STATUTORY ANALYSIS, MANUAL OPT-OUTS, AND THIRD-PARTY REMOVAL SERVICES, THIS PAPER IDENTIFIES REALISTIC TACTICS AND LIMITATIONS IN REMOVING THE DIGITAL SHADOW. FOR INSTANCE, KANARY'S REMOVAL TOOL ONLY OPERATES ON IPHONE OPERATION SYSTEM DEVICES. LIKEWISE, MANUAL INPUTS TO REMOVE PERSONAL INFORMATION FROM DATA BROKER WEBSITES CAN RESULT IN RETALIATION BY DATA BROKER WEBSITES INCLUDING PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE AND REPOSTING OF PERSONAL INFORMATION. WHILE FREE TOOLS OFFER PARTIAL COVERAGE, PAID AGENCIES LIKE NORTON REPUTATION DEFENDER PRESENT THE MOST COMPREHENSIVE SOLUTIONS, PARTICULARLY AGAINST NON-COMPLIANT DATA BROKERS.



CONTEXTUALIZATION

AS SOMEONE WHO HAS INFORMED ON ONE OF THE FBI'S TOP 10 MOST WANTED FUGITIVES, ALONG WITH MULTIPLE OTHER FBI FUGITIVES, AND HAS ATTEMPTED SUICIDE BECAUSE OF CYBERHARASSMENT, I AM DEEPLY COMMITTED TO HELPING OUR VULNERABLE PROTECT THEMSELVES, THEIR FRIENDS, AND THEIR FAMILIES ONLINE AND OFFLINE. I UNDERSTAND AND FEEL WHAT IT MEANS TO BE TARGETED, ISOLATED, AND SILENCED—AND I REFUSE TO ALLOW IT TO HAPPEN TO OTHERS.

ONE SUCH VULNERABILITY IS DOXING—MALICIOUS PUBLICATION OF ONE'S CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION ONLINE WITHOUT CONSENT. DOXING CAN HAPPEN THROUGH MULTIPLE METHODS, LIKE PUBLIC RECORD SCRAPING AND DATA BREACHES. ONCE ONE HAS BEEN DOXED—IT CAN ENABLE STALKING, HARASSMENT, IDENTITY THEFT, AND PERMANENT REPUTATIONAL HARM.

Removals

To remove your record please follow these instructions EXACTLY.

(Just FYI, tons of people use [REDACTED] to verify their dates are real before meeting in real life. If you use dating apps and remove your record here it looks like a red flag. There's a chance you will get unmatched and blocked.)

AN EXAMPLE OF A DATA BROKER PLATFORM NOT ONLY EXPOSING TENS OF MILLIONS OF AMERICANS' DATA BUT ALSO LEVERAGING SOCIETAL PRESSURE TO DISCOURAGE EFFORTS TO REMOVE IT.

THESIS

THE SIGNIFICANT EXTENT TO WHICH AN INDIVIDUAL RESIDING IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA CAN REMOVE THEIR PERSONAL INFORMATION ONLINE TO AVOID CYBERATTACKS USING PROFESSIONAL RESOURCES AND PROTECT THEMSELVES FROM INDIVIDUALS ATTEMPTING TO PUBLISH SAID PERSONAL INFORMATION ONLINE. WHILE NOT ALL DATA CAN BE REALISTICALLY SCRUBBED FROM THE INTERNET—A SIGNIFICANT AMOUNT OF INFORMATION CAN.

LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

BEFORE WE CAN EXPLORE METHODS OF REMOVING ONE’S PERSONAL INFORMATION ONLINE, WE MUST DEFINE AND KNOW THE LEGAL FRAMEWORKS THAT FACILITATE IT. FOR INSTANCE, IN CALIFORNIA, INDIVIDUALS CAN REMOVE THEIR PERSONAL INFORMATION ONLINE WITH THE CALIFORNIA PRIVACY RIGHTS ACT (REFER TO THE TABLE BELOW FOR COMPREHENSIVE DETAILS). HOWEVER, IF THE PERSON IS NOT IN A STATE THAT HAS THESE PROTECTIONS, THEIR INFORMATION WILL BE MORE DIFFICULT TO REMOVE, AS NOT ALL STATES HAVE THESE ACTS. FOR EASE OF REFERENCE, READERS CAN USE KEYBOARD SHORTCUTS (E.G., CTRL + F) TO LOCATE THEIR STATE WITHIN THE FULL LIST.

ACT TITLE	STATE JURISDICTION	GOVERNING RIGHT
CALIFORNIA CONSUMER PRIVACY RIGHTS ACT & CALIFORNIA PRIVACY RIGHTS ACT.	CALIFORNIA	“THE RIGHT TO DELETE PERSONAL INFORMATION COLLECTED FROM THEM” AND “THE RIGHT TO LIMIT THE USE AND DISCLOSURE OF SENSITIVE PERSONAL INFORMATION COLLECTED ABOUT THEM” (1)
CONNECTICUT DATA PRIVACY ACT <i>(LARGE ENTITIES ONLY; A)</i>	CONNECTICUT	“AS OF JANUARY 1, 2025, BUSINESSES COVERED UNDER THE CTDPA MUST HONOR UNIVERSAL OPT OUT PREFERENCE SIGNALS SENT BY CONNECTICUT RESIDENTS.” (6)
COLORADO PRIVACY ACT	COLORADO	“UNDER THE CPA, COLORADO RESIDENTS HAVE THE RIGHTS TO: OPT OUT FROM THE SALE OF THEIR PERSONAL DATA, OR USE OF PERSONAL DATA FOR TARGETED ADVERTISING AND CERTAIN TYPES OF PROFILING” (4)
DELAWARE PERSONAL DATA PRIVACY ACT	DELAWARE	“RESIDENTS OF THIS STATE WILL HAVE THE RIGHT TO KNOW WHAT INFORMATION IS BEING COLLECTED ABOUT THEM, SEE THE INFORMATION, CORRECT ANY INACCURACIES, OR REQUEST DELETION OF THEIR PERSONAL DATA THAT IS BEING MAINTAINED BY ENTITIES OR PEOPLE.” (9)

IOWA CONSUMER DATA PROTECTION ACT	IOWA	IN SUM, YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO ACCESS APPLICABLE PERSONAL DATA, DELETE PERSONAL DATA PROVIDED BY THE CONSUMER, AND OBTAIN A COPY OF PERSONAL DATA. (8)
CONSUMER DATA PROTECTION ACT <i>(EFFECTIVE JAN 1, 2026)</i>	INDIANA	"TO DELETE PERSONAL DATA PROVIDED BY OR OBTAINED ABOUT THE CONSUMER... TO OPT OUT OF THE PROCESSING OF THE CONSUMER'S PERSONAL DATA FOR PURPOSES OF: (A) TARGETED ADVERTISING; (B) THE SALE OF PERSONAL DATA; OR (C) PROFILING IN FURTHERANCE OF DECISIONS THAT PRODUCE LEGAL OR SIMILARLY SIGNIFICANT EFFECTS CONCERNING THE CONSUMER." (17)
MARYLAND ONLINE DATA PRIVACY ACT	MARYLAND	"REQUIRE A CONTROLLER TO DELETE PERSONAL DATA PROVIDED BY, OR OBTAINED ABOUT, THE CONSUMER UNLESS RETENTION OF THE PERSONAL DATA IS REQUIRED BY LAW" (15)
MINNESOTA CONSUMER DATA PRIVACY ACT	MINNESOTA	"YOU HAVE A RIGHT TO DELETE PERSONAL AND SENSITIVE INFORMATION THAT IT HAS COLLECTED ABOUT YOU." (14)
MONTANA CONSUMER DATA PRIVACY ACT	MONTANA	"DELETE PERSONAL DATA ABOUT THE CONSUMER" (16)
NEBRASKA DATA PRIVACY ACT	NEBRASKA	"DELETE PERSONAL DATA PROVIDED BY OR OBTAINED ABOUT THE CONSUMER" (10)
NEW HAMPSHIRE PRIVACY ACT <i>(EXCLUDING NON-PROFITS)</i>	NEW HAMPSHIRE	"A CONSUMER CAN OPT-OUT OF THE SALE OF PERSONAL DATA TO THIRD PARTIES. THE CONTROLLER MUST PROVIDE A PROCESS FOR SUBMITTING AN OPT-OUT REQUEST. A CONSUMER CAN ALSO DESIGNATE A

		THIRD PARTY TO OPT-OUT ON HIS OR HER BEHALF AND CAN USE AN OPT-OUT PREFERENCE SIGNAL” (II)
NEW JERSEY DATA PRIVACY ACT	NEW JERSEY	“THE NJDPL PROTECTS THE RIGHT OF NEW JERSEY CONSUMERS TO: CONFIRM WHETHER A CONTROLLER PROCESSES THEIR DATA; CORRECT INACCURACIES IN THEIR PERSONAL DATA; DELETE THEIR PERSONAL DATA; SAY “NO” TO (OPT OUT OF) A CONTROLLER SELLING THEIR PERSONAL DATA OR USING THEIR PERSONAL DATA FOR TARGETED ADVERTISING AND SOME TYPES OF PROFILING (FOR EXAMPLE, PROFILING TO DETERMINE WHETHER A CONSUMER SHOULD RECEIVE A LOAN OR MORTGAGE, A JOB OFFER, OR AN INSURANCE POLICY).” (12)
OREGON CONSUMER PRIVACY ACT	OREGON	“YOU CAN OPT-OUT (SAY “NO”) TO A BUSINESS SELLING, PROFILING, AND USING TARGETED ADVERTISING WITH YOUR PERSONAL INFORMATION... YOU CAN KNOW WHAT INFORMATION A BUSINESS HAS COLLECTED ABOUT YOU... YOU CAN DELETE PERSONAL AND SENSITIVE INFORMATION BUSINESSES HAVE ABOUT YOU.” (2)
TENNESSEE INFORMATION PROTECTION ACT	TENNESSEE	“DELETE PERSONAL INFORMATION PROVIDED BY OR OBTAINED ABOUT THE CONSUMER. A BUSINESS IS NOT REQUIRED TO DELETE INFORMATION THAT IT MAINTAINS OR USES AS AGGREGATE OR DE-IDENTIFIED DATA, PROVIDED THAT SUCH DATA IN THE POSSESSION OF THE BUSINESS IS NOT LINKED TO A SPECIFIC CONSUMER.” (13)
TEXAS DATA PRIVACY AND SECURITY ACT	TEXAS	“RIGHT TO DELETE PERSONAL DATA PROVIDED BY OR OBTAINED ABOUT THE CONSUMER” (3)

CONSUMER DATA PROTECTION ACT	VIRGINIA	"TO DELETE PERSONAL DATA PROVIDED BY OR OBTAINED ABOUT THE CONSUMER" (5)
UTAH CONSUMER PRIVACY ACT (LARGE ENTITIES ONLY; B)	UTAH	"YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO CONFIRM WHETHER A BUSINESS IS PROCESSING YOUR PERSONAL DATA. IF A BUSINESS IS PROCESSING YOUR DATA, YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO ACCESS THAT DATA AND REQUEST IT BE DELETED. YOU CAN ALSO OBTAIN A COPY OF THE DATA YOU PREVIOUSLY PROVIDED TO THE BUSINESS" (7)

A: "THE CTDPA APPLIES TO PEOPLE WHO CONDUCT BUSINESS IN CONNECTICUT OR WHO PRODUCE PRODUCTS OR SERVICES TARGETED TO CONNECTICUT RESIDENTS AND THAT, DURING THE PRIOR CALENDAR YEAR, CONTROLLED OR PROCESSED THE PERSONAL DATA OF:

- AT LEAST 100,000 CONSUMERS; OR
- 25,000 OR MORE CONSUMERS AND DERIVED OVER 25% OF GROSS REVENUE FROM THE SALE OF PERSONAL DATA.

HOWEVER, THE CTDPA APPLIES TO ALL CONSUMER HEALTH DATA CONTROLLERS WHO DO BUSINESS IN CONNECTICUT, REGARDLESS OF THEIR SIZE OR THE NATURE OF THEIR DATA PROCESSING ACTIVITIES (SEE BELOW SECTION REGARDING CONSUMER HEALTH DATA CONTROLLERS).

THE CTDPA ALSO APPLIES TO SERVICE PROVIDERS (CALLED "PROCESSORS") THAT MAINTAIN OR PROVIDE SERVICES INVOLVING PERSONAL DATA ON BEHALF OF COVERED BUSINESSES." (6)

B: "THESE CONTROLLERS AND PROCESSORS MUST: HAVE AN ANNUAL REVENUE OF \$25,000,000 OR MORE AND EITHER CONTROL OR PROCESS PERSONAL DATA OF 100,000 OR MORE CONSUMERS DURING A CALENDAR YEAR, OR DERIVE OVER 50% OF THEIR GROSS REVENUE FROM THE SALE OF PERSONAL DATA AND CONTROL OR PROCESS PERSONAL DATA OF 25,000 OR MORE CONSUMERS" (7)

C: "THIS CHAPTER APPLIES TO A PERSON CONDUCTING BUSINESS IN THE STATE OR PRODUCING PRODUCTS OR SERVICES THAT ARE TARGETED TO CONSUMERS WHO ARE RESIDENTS OF THE STATE AND THAT DURING A CALENDAR YEAR DOES EITHER OF THE FOLLOWING:

- A. CONTROLS OR PROCESSES PERSONAL DATA OF AT LEAST ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND CONSUMERS.**
- B. CONTROLS OR PROCESSES PERSONAL DATA OF AT LEAST TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND CONSUMERS AND DERIVES OVER FIFTY PERCENT OF GROSS REVENUE FROM THE SALE OF PERSONAL DATA." (8)**

METHODOLOGY

THIS RESEARCH PAPER WILL EMPLOY A MIXED-METHOD APPROACH TO DETERMINE THE EXTENT TO WHICH A PERSON CAN REMOVE THEIR INFORMATION ONLINE. FOR THIS RESEARCH, “PERSONAL INFORMATION” IS DEFINED AS DATA THAT CAN BE LINKED TO AN INDIVIDUAL, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO FULL NAME, RESIDENTIAL ADDRESS, TELEPHONE NUMBER, DATE OF BIRTH, EMAIL ADDRESS, AND BIOMETRIC IDENTIFIERS.

THIS STUDY EXAMINES ONLY DATA THAT IS FREELY ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC WITHOUT CIRCUMVENTION OF AUTHENTICATION MEASURES AND STORED INSIDE U.S.-BASED ONLINE PLATFORMS OR DATABASES. INFORMATION EXCLUSIVELY HELD IN PRIVATE IS EXCLUDED FROM THE SCOPE. DUE TO A LACK OF FUNDING, THIS STUDY WILL NOT EVALUATE WHETHER GRATIS REMOVER AGENCIES WORK INDEPENDENTLY AND RELY ON PERSONAL TESTIMONIES TO EVALUATE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF HOW WELL THEY WORK.

GRATIS REMOVER AGENCIES

WITHIN THE UNITED STATES, MULTIPLE GRATIS REMOVAL AGENCIES EXIST THAT FACILITATE INDIVIDUALS TO DELETE THEIR PERSONAL INFORMATION ONLINE. FOR INSTANCE, GOOGLE ALLOWS A PERSON TO REMOVE THEIR PERSONAL INFORMATION FROM SEARCH RESULTS (18), WHICH CAN BE VERY HELPFUL, SINCE INSTEAD OF REMOVING IT FROM DATA BROKERS' WEBSITES THEMSELVES, THEIR PAGE IS REMOVED FROM GOOGLE'S INDEXING. THIS METHOD IS USEFUL IN CASES WHERE AMATEUR CYBERATTACKS USE GOOGLE CHROME FOR THEIR WORK AND ARE UNSURE WHERE TO LOOK FOR THEIR INFORMATION.

LIKEWISE, THIS IS HELPFUL FOR REMOVING GOVERNMENT DATA POINTS (I.E. VOTING RECORDS) FROM GOOGLE'S SEARCH ENGINE INDEX. HOWEVER, THIS METHOD HAS SIGNIFICANT LIMITATIONS. FOR STARTERS, THE SCENARIO APPLIES NARROWLY AND DOESN'T ACCOUNT FOR TARGETED SEARCHES WITHIN DATA BROKER PLATFORMS OR SEARCHES ON ALTERNATE SEARCH ENGINES OR DIRECTLY ON DATA BROKER PLATFORMS, WHICH WOULD RENDER THIS APPROACH INEFFECTIVE.

GIVEN GOOGLE'S LIMITATIONS, ONE MIGHT NEXT CONSIDER MANUALLY OPTING OUT OF DATA BROKER PLATFORMS DIRECTLY, WHICH MAY WORK. HOWEVER, MANUALLY REMOVING DATA FROM OVER 200 (20) DATA BROKER

WEBSITES IS REALISTICALLY IMPOSSIBLE. THIS ALSO DOES NOT ACCOUNT FOR RETALIATION BY INFAMOUS DATA BROKERS, INCLUDING PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE (REFER TO THE FIRST IMAGE OF THIS PAPER), DELIBERATELY IGNORING TAKEDOWN REQUESTS, AND REPOSTING PERSONAL INFORMATION. THIS WOULD REQUIRE LEGAL TAKEDOWNS, UNDERMINING THE IDEA OF A GRATIS REMOVER AGENCY. (19)

GIVEN THESE CONSTRAINTS, ONE MIGHT THEN CONSIDER AUTOMATED SERVICES AS A MORE VIABLE SOLUTION, INCLUDING KANARY. ALONG WITH AUTOMATICALLY SUBMITTING TAKEDOWN REQUESTS TO DATA BROKERS, IT IS STRAIGHTFORWARD TO COMPLETE, MAKING IT ACCESSIBLE TO A BROAD RANGE OF INDIVIDUALS. HOWEVER, A PARAMOUNT LIMITATION OF THIS SERVICE IS THAT IT CURRENTLY ONLY OPERATES ON IOS DEVICES (21) AND COVERS A RELATIVELY SMALL SET OF DATA BROKERS, RENDERING IT INEFFECTIVE AGAINST SKILLED CYBERATTACKERS WHO MAINTAIN A COMPREHENSIVE LIST OF BROKER WEBSITES. FURTHERMORE, KANARY DOES NOT ACCOUNT FOR BROKERS THAT DELIBERATELY IGNORE TAKEDOWN REQUESTS, LEAVING A SIGNIFICANT PORTION OF PERSONAL INFORMATION POTENTIALLY EXPOSED.

IN SUM, WHILE GOOGLE INDEED OFFERS ONE QUICK AND FREE SOLUTION FOR NARROW SCENARIOS, AND KANARY PROVIDES AUTOMATION FOR A BROAD AUDIENCE YET ONLY FAMOUS DATA BROKERS, NEITHER APPROACH FULLY ADDRESSES THE GRAND SCALE OR PERSISTENCE OF THE THREAT POSED BY DETERMINED CYBERATTACKERS. THIS GAP, DEFINED BY INSUFFICIENT COVERAGE AND RETALIATORY BROKER BEHAVIOR, LEAVES NON-GRATIS REMOVER AGENCIES AS THE ONLY REMAINING PATH TO A PROPER APPROACH TO PERSONAL INFORMATION REMOVAL, WHICH WILL BE EXAMINED IN MY FOLLOWING SECTION.

PROPOSED SOLUTION	EASY TO USE	COVERS MANY DATA BROKERS	WORKS AGAINST RETALIATION
GOOGLE PERSONAL INFO REMOVAL	✓	- (IN SPECIFIC CASES)	- (IN SPECIFIC CASES)
MANUAL OPT-OUT FROM DATA BROKERS	X	✓	✓
AUTOMATED SERVICE (KANARY)	✓	- (IN SPECIFIC CASES)	- (IN SPECIFIC CASES)

NON-GRATIS REMOVER AGENCIES

CONTRASTING TO GRATIS REMOVER AGENCIES, NON-GRATIS REMOVER AGENCIES OFFER SERVICES THAT PROVIDE MORE COMPREHENSIVE SOLUTIONS THAT TACKLE THE CHALLENGES THAT FREE TOOLS CANNOT FULLY ADDRESS—including dealing with retaliatory data brokers and covering a broader range of platforms. AS THERE ARE MULTIPLE PAID COMPREHENSIVE SOLUTIONS AVAILABLE, WE WILL FOCUS ON ONE OBJECTIVE “BEST” OPTION BASED ON SIX CANDIDATES. REFER TO THE TABLE BELOW FOR ALL CANDIDATES AND THE CRITERIA USED TO EVALUATE WHICH IS “BEST.”

PROPOSED SOLUTION	COST	EASY TO USE	COVERS MANY DATA BROKERS	WORKS AGAINST RETALIATION
BRANDYOURSELF	CONSULTATION REQUIRED	✓	✓	✓
DELETEME	\$209.00 PER 2 YEARS	✓	✓	✓
INCOGNI	MULTIPLE TIERS	✓	✓	✓
NORTON: REPUTATION DEFENDER	CONSULTATION REQUIRED	✓	✓✓✓ (MOST COVERAGE)	✓
ONEREP	\$8.33 PER MONTH	✓	✓	✓
PRIVACYDUCK	\$15.75 PER MONTH	✓	✓	✓

USES CITATIONS 22-27 FOR FACTORS LIKE PRICING, COVERAGE, ETC.

IN SUM, OBJECTIVELY FROM THE TABLE, NORTON’S REPUTATION DEFENDER IS OBJECTIVELY THE “BEST.” INDEED, WHILE IT REQUIRES A CONSULTATION, IT IS EASY TO USE, COVERS MANY DATA BROKERS, WORKS AGAINST RETALIATORY COMPANIES, AND OFFERS ADDITIONAL SERVICES BASED ON THE PURCHASED TIER.

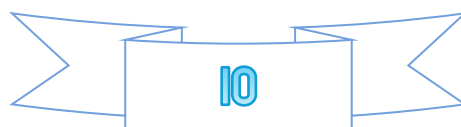
CONCLUSION

THE EXTENT TO WHICH A VULNERABLE INDIVIDUAL CAN REMOVE THEIR INFORMATION ONLINE IS CONTINGENT ON THE RESOURCES THEY USE; MULTIPLE GRATIS AGENCIES EXIST; HOWEVER, THEY ARE LIMITED AND RISK BEING SUBJECT TO RETALIATION BY DATA BROKER AGENCIES VIA THE REPOSTING OF THEIR PERSONAL INFORMATION. ON THE OTHER HAND, NON-GRATIS AGENCIES ARE MORE THOROUGH AND OFFER MORE COMPREHENSIVE FEATURES. FOR EXAMPLE, NORTON'S REPUTATION DEFENDER OFFERS ONE ON ONE COUNSELING CONCERNING THEIR INFORMATION.

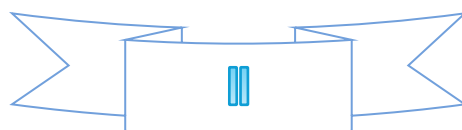
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NOTICE: FOR SAFETY REASONS, DATA BREACHES OR ANY URLS BEARING SENSITIVE INFORMATION ON THE SAME PAGE WILL NOT BE REFERENCED. AS THESE SOURCES WERE COLLECTED AT VARIOUS TIMES, CITATION STRUCTURES MAY VARY.

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