

OXYMORON: PRIVACY AND THE INTERNET

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Genealogists use RootsWeb and the incredible power of the Internet to learn more about ancestors and to find far-flung cousins. However we are caught in an incongruous position on privacy matters. Everyone wants their privacy respected, but are you invading that of your relatives? Technology enables us to share genealogical information easily and quickly via e-mail, mailing lists, chat rooms, bulletin boards, newsgroups, GEDCOMs, CDs and Web sites. In our eagerness to obtain and to share data we forget that our living family members have a right to privacy. We also post personal details about ourselves that we would not put on the local supermarket bulletin board.

Aunt Martha might reveal her real birth date and confess that she had a child out of wedlock when she was 19. Sweet old Uncle Jim may tell you that he has been married and divorced six times. However, you are invading their privacy if you publish this information or if you share it with others via a GEDCOM or family group sheets. Information on home pages, bulletin boards, and mailing lists is electronic publication. It is OK to collect and compile information about your living relatives, but don't share it (unless you have their permission, of course) with others -- in any format via any means.

During the preparation of a talk for my local genealogical society on this subject, I searched hundreds of genealogy-related home pages. At one I found the names and details about everyone in the family, including when and where they were all born, right down to a one-month-old grandson, listing the hospital in which he was born.

One researcher reports, "In just one file that I downloaded . . . I found more than 200 names of persons born within the last 70 years . . ."

Another notes, "I was shocked and dismayed to find that someone had copied my entire GEDCOM and put it up on their Web site. While I have no objection to anyone using my dead ancestors, this person had included the living as well . . ."

Now, I've heard from several genealogists who claim it does not matter what we put up on our home pages or share on the Internet since "this information is all public information, anyway." Another one argues that "unless and until they quit putting

births, deaths and marriages in the newspapers the basic relationships and names are and will remain public info."

I have no quarrel about marriage and death records -- if they are really obtained from public sources. However, I asked several correspondents to provide me with the source of the birth information posted on their home pages, and guess what I learned?

In every instance the data were either supplied by a cousin or obtained from a GEDCOM that someone had sent them. In other words, they had not found the information in a public source at all.

Take a look at the policy posted at "Don't Mess with the Living, Texas"
<http://home.sprynet.com/~harrisfarm/warning.htm>>

"It is the policy of the Texas GenWeb Project to protect the rights and privacy of our living relatives. We strongly encourage all involved to do their best not to place information on the Internet about anyone who is still living, unless you have their express permission to do so."

Among the suggestions for ways to protect living family members are:

- When requesting information (via e-mail, chat, queries, etc.) do not include personal information on living persons.
- When responding to requests for information, especially to someone you really do not know, do not provide them with personal information about living persons. They could post it on the Web or do who knows what else with it.
- Before sharing GEDCOM files with others, expunge information on all living persons. Programs such as GEDClean, GEDLiving, and GEDPrivy will do this for you.

- If you have a genealogy Web site, remove information about all living persons.

- (Check Cyndi's Genealogy Home Page

Construction Kit <http://www.cyndislist.com/construc.htm> for tips and links to the several GEDCOM utility programs that will exclude such data.

British genealogists are using the "GEN100" logo to signify that their Web site respects a cut-off date of 100 years, and to advise that information which is less than 100 years old will not be divulged. Many Americans use January 1920 as the cut-off point, since that is the most recent federal census available to the public.

We should exercise good manners and respect the privacy of our families -- those generous relatives who have shared information with us or who shared with a cousin of a cousin. Additionally, there is another and growing problem -- identity theft. Why make

it easy for cyberthieves to steal your or a loved one's identity? When you post public messages about your research, it is sufficient to say you are researching a Cynthia Jones line. You don't have reveal relationship by saying she is your mother or

maternal grandmother. To learn more about identity theft and other privacy issues visit: <http://www.identitytheft.org> and <http://www.privacyrights.org>.

In the pursuit of our ancestors, let's not hurt ourselves or our living family members. Think before you post or share data.

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