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Deleting your digital past -- for good

Can you erase your tracks online? We tried to get a few bad mentions off the Net forever. Here's how we did.

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November 16, 2008 ([Computerworld](#)) An unsavory connection from your past. An annoying link to your name that's dragging down your career. A spicy quote you tossed off to a reporter that you wish you could take back.

As time goes by, more of us are being tailed by some little thing out there on the Web, an awful bit that emerges when someone Googles our names, a black mark that we'd like to erase before a colleague or a prospective employer sees it.

A whole industry -- known as [online reputation management](#) -- has grown up around helping individual clients and corporate clients [suppress negative information](#) online by creating more positive and search-engine-friendly postings.

But what if you don't just want something massaged, manipulated or suppressed? What if you want it gone? Is it possible for an ordinary person to get some damaging tidbit entirely erased from the Web?

Computerworld decided to find out. We gave ourselves a week to try to expunge unwanted online mentions, using three real-life examples as test cases:

- **A recent college graduate with a distinctive last name would like to get rid of an entry on someone else's long-abandoned online journal.** The entry mentions her full name in a rambling tale of drug-induced debauchery and sexual high jinks. It always shows up as the fourth or fifth result in a [Google](#) search on her name -- a real problem now that the young woman (let's call her WrongedGirl) is applying for jobs.
- **A freelance writer is mistakenly identified as a movie critic on [Rotten Tomatoes](#), a popular site that aggregates movie reviews from print, TV and the Web.** Although she personally admires Rotten Tomatoes, she worries that her byline juxtaposed next to the word "rotten" in the first few Google search results sets up an unpleasant association in the minds of prospective clients -- especially older business people who have no idea what Rotten Tomatoes is.
- **In an interview seven years ago, an IT professional gave a quote to *Computerworld* that included a salty phrase.** She recently contacted the editors, asking them to either remove her name from the piece or prevent the article from being found in a search. Her goal: "I don't want any hits at all when my name is searched."



We started by calling a couple of online image management professionals for some free advice.

What not to do

If you're trying to get something erased from the Web, your first instinct might be to pursue legal action. Resist this urge, says Michael Fertik, CEO of [ReputationDefender Inc.](#), an online reputation management and privacy company in Redwood City, Calif.

Why? The [Communications Decency Act](#) of 1996 gives almost total immunity to Web sites, says Fertik. Even if you can establish a legal case, the distinctly nonphysical nature of the Web -- where you, your defamer and the company that hosts the offending material can be in different states or countries, or simply be unknown -- means that sorting out jurisdictions can turn into a legal quagmire.

Likewise, Fertik adds, another surprise dead end is the place where many people launch their erasure efforts: Google.

If an item doesn't show up in a Google search, it's as good as being truly gone, right?

Wrong. "Removing content from Google or another search engine would still leave the original content that exists on the Web," says a Google spokesman.

The better route, according to the spokesman: "Users that want content removed from the Internet should contact the webmaster of the page or the Internet hosting companies or ISPs hosting the content to find out their content removal policies."

Strike One: Misbegotten Quote

Computerworld started with three real-life instances in which people wanted material expunged from online sites, but the experts we consulted were optimistic about only one case -- the situation in which a young woman's first and last name were included in a salacious online journal entry.

Here's a look at another case:

• **IT manager talks salty to a business publication -- *Computerworld* -- and later regrets it.** On this topic, our experts were divided. [Columbia University](#) journalism professor Todd Gitlin says it would be exceedingly rare for any mainstream publication to change the record for any reason. (*Computerworld's* editors agreed. The quote, with the source's name attached to it, still stands.)

ReputationDefender CEO Michael Fertik sees a little wiggle room, however. True, [The New York Times](#) is unlikely to change the record, but some smaller outlets might, he says.

"I don't know if I buy the journalistic integrity argument -- though I respect it. A lot of small newspapers will fold right away as soon as you threaten them," he says.

That said, he notes that ReputationDefender does not handle requests to expunge material from mainstream media.

Google does offer [tools on its support page](#) to help with urgent requests to prevent personal content from appearing in a search result, such as when credit card or Social Security numbers are accidentally or maliciously published on the Web. If you do manage to successfully remove such an item, you'll need to also make sure that Google no longer caches the information, the representative says.

If legal action is prohibitively complicated and Google and other search engines can't help, what's the best tactic for getting something erased? A little digital digging and a lot of good old-fashioned human contact.

Priority No. 1 is to try to reach a human being, says Chris Martin, founder of [ReputationHawk.com](#), an online reputation management service. His company starts by tracking down someone who has access to the Web site in question -- either the author of the material or a third party like a webmaster or Web hosting service. "If the Web host is billing that person every month, if it's a paid account, they'll be able to contact them," Martin says.

The talking cure

If that approach fails, his company tries to reach people through various social media sites such as [MySpace](#) or [Facebook](#) or Web portals like Yahoo.

The bottom line: An address or a live e-mail account is good; a human on the phone is better, Martin says. "We call," he says. "We say we're from an Internet privacy corporation. We explain the situation, and we say, 'You need to take care of this as soon as possible.' "

Many times, people do, he says. "The situation can resolve really quickly," Martin says. "If there's a legitimate problem, it's natural for someone to go in there and take the material down."

ReputationHawk's fees vary by case. For a situation like WrongedGirl's, the charge would be \$500 or less, Martin says. ReputationDefender doesn't take on ad hoc erasure cases. Instead, clients pay \$9.95 per month for a yearly subscription and \$29.95 per removal.

Both services claim that they have a much higher success rate than individuals. The reason? You're a newbie; they do this all day, every day.

ReputationDefender has taken on about 1,000 cases with an 85% success rate, according to Fertik. He says

the cases build upon one another as relationships develop. "If you call them informally enough times, let them know you're not an abusive company, you're not sending legal letters, then you can have a very high success rate."

In contrast, says Martin, an individual trying to clean up his own reputation starts from scratch and has almost no clout. "We can dig and find contact information pretty quickly, and we're going to have a lot more pull when contacting the Web site owner," he says.

Setting WrongedGirl right

Of our three cases, both experts said the case of WrongedGirl stood the best chance of being resolved. That's good news, since it's the type of scenario that's playing out ever more frequently as the Net generation enters the workforce.

Armed with advice from the pros, we set out one recent Monday to see how far we could get in righting WrongedGirl's reputation in a week.

We first tried to track down the journal author herself, with the idea that we could entreat her to take down the offensive material. (Perhaps she had matured since her partying days.) It seems that five years ago, she set up an account at a free online journal site and posted half a dozen entries in 10 days -- most apparently written under the influence of one substance or another -- before abandoning the site.

We knew only her first name, her hometown from five years ago and the [bands she liked](#) at that time. The e-mail address listed in the user account for her online journal was defunct.

Strike Two: Rotten Tomatoes

Our final attempt to erase someone's digital tracks also met with defeat.

• **Freelance journalist wants her name taken off the [Rotten Tomatoes](#) movie-review Web site.**

Good luck with that, say [ReputationDefender Inc.](#) CEO Michael Fertik, [ReputationHawk](#) founder Chris Martin and Columbia University journalism professor [Todd Gitlin](#). Large, commercial (implication: lucrative) Web sites have little need to accommodate your petty requests. If you get through and find a sympathetic person on the end of a phone line, perhaps you'll get lucky. Otherwise, fuggedaboutit.

That prediction turned out to be on the money. Multiple e-mails to various Rotten Tomatoes addresses went unanswered or were bounced back as undeliverable. Messages left at the phone number for the parent company, [IGN Entertainment Inc.](#), likewise went nowhere.

Apparently, the journalist's best course of action would be to do what reputation mavens recommended in the first place: Create enough positive, search-engine-friendly content to push the "rotten + journalist's name" search result to Google's second page of results.

WrongedGirl provided us with a possible last name for the author, but unfortunately, like the author's first name, it was too common to be helpful. Her first and possibly last names together garnered 1,260 hits on Google, including multiple references on YouTube and multiple accounts on [LinkedIn and Facebook](#), none of which appeared to be our author.

After a couple of mind-numbing hours trolling MySpace accounts, we did find an entry that looked promising (same first name, same state and county, if not exact hometown, and same favorite bands), but that too had been updated only a few times before being abandoned more than two years ago. It looked like we had a serial journaler on our hands.

We gave up on trying to track down the author and turned to the site where the journal was posted -- [Blurty](#). We posted our request to remove the offending material in the support forum. A few moments later, we received an automated e-mail response, with a tracking number, saying that our request had been received and would be addressed as soon as possible. But over the next four days, nobody responded.

Scoping out the site

Trying another angle, we trolled through Blurty's support, legal, privacy and terms of service documents and sent e-mails to any other addresses we found there ([abuse@blurty.com](#), for example), asking that the entry in question be taken down.

Two days later, with no response on any front, we used [Whois](#) to try to find a physical address for Blurty. Its technical contact was listed as being in Encinitas, Calif. When we called the phone number given in the Whois listing, a recorded voice informed us we'd reached [Sunlane Media LLC](#).

Back to the Web for more searching: Our heart sank when we found that Sunlane has registered hundreds of other domains, nearly all of which appeared to be porn sites. Wonderful.

We called three separate phone numbers we found for Sunlane in various Whois listings -- two of which sounded like cell phones and one that had the quality of a home answering machine circa 1995. None had a

live person on the other end. We left messages at each number, trying to sound professional enough to elicit a swift response and distressed enough to elicit sympathy.

Resolution

The next day was Friday, our self-imposed deadline. We sent one final e-mail -- replying to the webmaster address from which we'd received the tracking number earlier in the week -- and requesting a response that leaned even more heavily on the sympathy angle.

Still nothing. At the end of the day, feeling discouraged, we drafted an e-mail to Fertik at ReputationDefender, requesting suggestions for further action. But when we Googled WrongedGirl's name to find and furnish the link to the offensive journal entry, it was gone from Google.

Amazed, we flipped over to the Internet Explorer bookmark we'd made for the page and saw this message: "[Error. This journal has been suspended.](#)"

Excellent! But just what had done the job -- which e-mail or phone call? We had no way of knowing, though a full 10 days later, an e-mail arrived from the abuse@blurty.com address, telling us what we'd already figured out: The journal had been taken down.

Have your say

[Have you ever tried to erase your tracks online? Tell us how you did.](#)

We were ebullient but also chastened. Yes, we had managed restore WrongedGirl's good name, but we had no clear understanding of exactly how we had done it, and our other two attempts at erasing unwanted online tracks (see [here](#) and [here](#)) had come up dry.

In the end, Fertik's words came back to haunt us: "A lot of this stuff you can do yourself -- if you have the time, the expertise and the temperament to get it done," he had told us before we began. "But how many people change the oil in their own car anymore?"

Of course, Fertik has a vested interest in urging people to hire companies like his own, but we had to concede that he also had a point: Erasing your tracks online takes time, perseverance and more than a little luck.

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