

Reselling your personal data pays off for Spokeo

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When you do a search for yourself or others on Google, you are not alone.

People search is the number one search activity, which is why websites like Spokeo, WhitePages and MyLife have popped up, to offer [internet users](#) more information than could be found on Google.

"People are willing to pay to search for other people," says Harrison Tang. And he should know. He's the CEO and co-founder of Spokeo, a "people search engine" that he says attracts 18 million monthly visitors, and generates between \$70 million to \$80 million annual revenue from a subscriber base that pays \$13.95 monthly.

His site and rivals go beyond Google, which only indexes "publicly" distributed information, not the databases that counties and state agencies don't distribute online, but, in fact, resell to data brokers.

So if you want to find hard to Google names like John Smith, reunite with a female friend from childhood who has changed her name or to check out a potential date before meeting in person, sites like Spokeo are there to assist.

First launched in 2006, Spokeo is now operating in a new era where consumers are more aware and vocal about their privacy being invaded online. On Spokeo, as with other people search engines, our ages, home address and real estate transaction histories, court and criminal records and more are presented as available for sale, through various hard-pitches and subscription models.

But what if we don't our information on these sites? What would Tang say to those people?

The data revolution "has already happened," and there's no going back and "putting the genie back in the bottle," he says.

A search for "Jefferson Graham" shows why you might be concerned

about how you're being characterized in a people search site.

—"We found derogatory information on your background report," suggests MyLife, which said that could be fixed by paying for the report and editing it.

—"You may be shocked to find that Jefferson Graham has a criminal record," said Truthfinder, in its pitch to have me sign up. (Culprit: an illegal U-turn in 1991.) The cost: \$28.78 on a recurring basis to see the report. "We have millions of records that may expose Jefferson Graham for who he really is."

—The pitch from Spokeo? Way more simple and down to earth. Pay to view and get access to address, phone numbers, email, location, court and criminal history.

"We do not use that kind of language," like rivals, notes Tang. The heated urge words on these other sites, "makes it harder for us in the short term, but, over the long term, it will pay dividends," said Tang. "Transparency will pay off."

For the interview, we met at Spokeo's offices in this Los Angeles suburb, home to 200 employees and an expansive view of the surrounding San Gabriel Valley mountains in the distance. We had also reached out to MyLife, Intellius, WhitePages and other people search engines, but they didn't respond.

In his office—held in the "Game of Thrones" room adorned with a huge map and a crazy chair made of computer keyboards, mice and swords—Tang wanted to talk about the positives of his business model. He told of working with [law enforcement agencies](#) to help solve crimes, by offering out of state data they didn't have access to, reuniting adoptive children with their birth parents and re-connecting veterans of

military service.

Like rivals, due to current laws, Spokeo doesn't offer its services to landlords looking to check out potential renters, or employees verifying applicants.

"I believe there's been a backlash about big tech companies because people don't understand how it works," he says, talking about proposals by politicians like Sen. Elizabeth Warren and others to break up Facebook, Google and Amazon. "Take out the mystery, and it's not a black box."

In January, Spokeo is going to make a shift to show consumers where exactly the data displayed is coming from, as it prepares for changes mandated by a new law, the California Consumer Protection Act, which goes into effect Jan. 1.

Even if a company isn't based in the Golden State, by doing business here, it will have to abide by the terms and be more upfront with users about how their data is being used and sold.

Tang says he's going beyond what the law requires—for business reasons. "This is the next phase of privacy. It's about control and what information to share with others, how when and why."

There's no turning back, suggest Tang. "There is a wealth of data out there, and there will only be more of it, not less. The solution is for people to understand how it works."

Spokeo has the easiest opt-out policy among the competitors, he says, although it is hidden at the bottom of a privacy page. He notes that the numbers of people asking to be opted out are "tiny," a fraction of a percent, but he respects their wishes.

To opt-out, look for the privacy tab, and the opt-out link. From there, once you input your info, he promises you'll be out within 24 hours.

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