

CyberAssassination: Social Security Numbers Publicized on Critics' Websites

Public records with personal information vulnerable; lack of adequate enforcement.

Raleigh, N.C., Apr 23 /PRNEWSWIRE/ Internet bloggers maliciously publicizing personal identity information including the victim's Social Security number is emerging as a major identity theft problem, and the information is often culled from online public records.

From her Durham, NC home Lauranell "Nell" Burch publishes a website where she and others offer complaints about Lasik, the popular laser eye surgery. Recently Burch's website began showing the personal and financial information of Glenn Hagele, director of the Council for Refractive Surgery Quality Assurance (USAeyes.org).

"This is a CyberAssassination; an Internet hit job," complains Glenn Hagele, who founded the nonprofit USAeyes.org in 1997. "I've had my Social Security number, bank account numbers, credit card numbers, and even samples of my signature publicized."

Burch attained Hagele's identity from public records and court documents that had not redacted his private information. For decades the practical obscurity of documents buried in government archives kept abuse to a minimum. Public documents including lawsuits, divorce, bankruptcy, child support, and even traffic violations may contain sensitive information. The recent availability of public records over the Internet has renewed the controversy between the public's right to know and an individual's right to privacy. The line is further blurred by the subtle difference between just obtaining a public document and publicizing it to millions over the Internet, exposing the victim to identity theft.

"What's bizarre is that we had nothing to do with Ms. Burch or her Lasik," says Hagele. "She did not seek our advice and did not use a Lasik doctor affiliated with our organization." Hagele's concern extends beyond his own financial identity. "Any advocate, anyone who voices an opinion, any blogger, any identifiable group can become the target of this kind of CyberAssassination. I deal with laser eye surgery and I've been targeted. How safe is someone who raises a major controversy?"

Internet publication of personal identity data has become so problematic that Google, the world's most popular Internet search engine according to a 2006 *Advertising Age* analysis, has dedicated a web page for victims to report incidents. A Software & Information Industry Association analysis identified service institutions, especially Internet-based service institutions such as USAeyes.org, as especially at risk.

Hagele contacted authorities seeking help in blocking access to his identity information only to find them unable or hesitant to act. "Legislation has not caught up with the Internet," says Hagele. A patchwork of local, state, and national laws are often unclear.

Identity theft has topped the list of consumer complaints to the US Federal Trade Commission for the last seven consecutive years, constituting 36% of all FTC complaints in 2006.

Hagele is meeting with lawmakers, urging them to clarify and strengthen privacy law.

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Redacted samples of Hagele's publicized information are available at
<http://www.USAEyes.com/identity/>