

News For Public Officials

The Truth About Redaction

REDACTION David Bloys - [News for Public Officials](#)

**What they aren't
telling you**

<http://www.davickservices.com/REDACTION.htm>



It is a story that is playing out across America as county agencies that have published whole collections of community records online respond to criticism from citizens and legislators. They turn to their technology vendors for answers and repeat the reassurances given them by companies that sold the software that allowed the documents to be published online. The companies promise that, for a price, they can remove the information that identity thieves might use. But the expensive redaction software the vendors offer as an answer is proving to be almost totally ineffective.

Records in Suffolk County, New York, for example, show the legislation was warned that sensitive information contained in the records on the County Clerk's Website could be accessed by identity thieves, terrorists and stalkers. But lawmakers expanded the system after being assured the county clerk's office was creating a way to protect private information.

Those assurances, however, did not apply to the records already available, a point some lawmakers now claim they did not grasp at the time. The system for accessing records in Suffolk County, such as mortgages and deeds was taken off the Internet indefinitely until the problem -- the exposure of thousands of personal identities -- can be resolved.

Many of these records have already been mined, aggregated and sold in bulk form. They are being sold all over the world. These records will never be redacted.

During a legislative hearing in November, 2004 former New Jersey County Clerk Edward Romaine, who is now a legislator, and his director of information technology, Peter Schlussler, testified they had developed software that would protect the citizens of Suffolk County.

Sounding like an ad for a software company, Romaine testified: "We think this is going to be a tremendous benefit in terms of protecting people against identity theft, because we will, and we have developed a tool, and my ID director can talk to that, that will block out signatures and Social Security numbers on the subscription service."

"The signatures and private numbers", Romaine testified, are "something you can get now in Riverhead" from records filed at the clerk's office."

He didn't mention that the clerk's website would make the records available to anyone with an Internet connection in Bombay, Tehran or Bucharest.

In other counties across the country, clerks are claiming they have the technology to retroactively "redact" the Social Security numbers they have published to cyberspace. Do they? Or is this just another misleading statement from the vendors to sell more expensive software? Last summer Hart Intercivic won a \$500,000 contract to redact the Social Security number's from document's displayed in Orange County, Florida. But the software was found to be only partially effective at identifying and redacting some Social Security numbers from the official web site.

Tip: Ask your County IT department for a report on foreign visitors to the County Website. [Click here for an example.](#)

News for Public Officials was unable to identify any company offering software that claims 100% accuracy or any ability to automatically redact hand written numbers.

Many, if not most Social Security numbers appear in the online records in handwritten form. *News for Public Officials* found a single page from one document on the Fort Bend County, Texas website containing twenty-two signatures and Social Security numbers. Eighteen of the numbers are handwritten and easily discernible by identity thieves, terrorists and stalkers from anywhere in the world but virtually invisible to redaction software. The attached copy (Figure 1) illustrates why corporate attorneys are not likely to allow technology vendors to assume legal responsibility for removing all the Social Security numbers from the records they publish online.

In order to protect the people whose names and numbers appear on this single page we have done what software programs and county clerks can not do for the millions of documents displayed on county websites. We have altered the document by hand to obscure the Social Security numbers that were displayed on the Fort Bend County Website. However, this document, and millions like it, remain visible with the numbers intact on state sponsored websites across the country.

When Florida Governor Jeb Bush was notified his hand-written Social Security number was appearing on the Dade County Website, he signed a law allowing Florida residents to request their numbers be redacted from official sites. Dade County was quick to comply when the Governor request and both his and his wife's numbers were redacted from a Quit Claim Deed.

It was too little, too late. A simple Google search reveals the governor's number on seven websites including two websites that originate in foreign countries. It is impossible to determine how many more sites around the world are displaying sensitive information previously downloaded from the Dade County Website.

While some companies work to develop software to redact the sensitive information, others provide services that mine and extract the online information to create background reports and dossiers on American citizens. One "back office" company claims their unique selling point is a local office in the U.S. and offshore hubs in India, The Philippines and China. They supply 60,000 reports a month from information extracted from databases and websites in over 400 county websites.

Data miners have been using "redaction" software for years to extract information and compile it into virtual dossiers on American citizens. Use Florida Governor Bush's "redacted" Social Security number as the search criteria at a data miner's website and you will be presented with a screen telling you the site is searching billions of records contained in the "public" records of online agencies to extract and compile your free report. Wait four seconds and the site tells you the Governor's previous addresses. For an additional \$50 you can buy an eleven page report on the Governor, his neighbors, friends and family members - all extracted from the online public records.

Try this: We used a similar method to uncover one website that was openly displaying the Social Security numbers of over 3,000 former Enron employees. Enter **ss number** into any search engine.

Notice the ads from companies offering you someone else's private information. If you check out their free searches you will discover that they are searching billions of online "public records" to provide you with a complete profile. Don't be surprised at how much they already know about you.

Finally, search on **ID theft protection**. You will find some companies offering some very good protection and some that is virtually worthless. You may be surprised to find some of the same companies that offered to sell the information in the first search will sell you protection from the information they sell in the

second. It is like giving the neighborhood bully your lunch money so he won't punch you in the face.

Some lawyers want to stop these bullies and they won't charge you anything. [Click here to learn more](#) or [here to submit your claim](#)

If the goal of redaction is to protect local citizens from outside criminals, redacting nine numbers from online documents will do little to protect anyone. It is the whole document that must be removed from the Internet. The Constitution promises citizens we will be secure in our papers not just a few bits of information that might be extracted from the papers. There is no security in papers published over the Internet where they can be searched and seized by anyone on the other side of the world. Removing a Security Number does nothing to protect the document or the people. Social Security numbers have been called the key to identity theft. Extracting this number from the documents while publishing the rest of the document is like taking away the key to an unlocked box.

Some redaction schemes call for removal of only the first five numbers in the series and leave the last four numbers intact. These schemes only succeed in removing the numbers that identity thieves do not need. Call your credit card company and they will ask you to verify who you are by giving them only the last four digits of your Social Security number. Anyone who can give these four numbers to the person with the foreign accent on the other end of the line can do anything they want with your account.

Contrary to popular belief, a Social Security number is not necessary for most types of identity fraud. A SSN (or the last 4 digits) can help criminals commit credit card fraud but most identity fraud does not involve credit cards. The Federal Trade Commission reports that victim's information is used nationally for credit card fraud in only 32% of reported cases. In Texas the information is used for credit card fraud in only 21% of reported cases.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation calls deed fraud the fastest growing white collar crime in America. An authorized signature and notary seal extracted from a County Website is all the 21st century criminal needs to take your home.

An identity thief can draw a draft on your bank account with any merchant that accepts "checks by phone". All that is needed is a copy of a check that displays the account number and bank routing number. Thousands of these images can be found on any County Website that displays the imaged documents.

All a stalker or terrorist needs is the home address of his victim. Last year, over one hundred judges cited the murder of a federal judge's family in their Chicago home when they petitioned the Allegheny County Clerk (PA) to remove their names and addresses from the county website. Some state laws allow judges and police officers to block some government agencies from displaying their home addresses in cyberspace. But these laws often do not apply to County Clerks providing remote access to the same information on county websites.

Secret locations of women's protective shelters are no longer secret in online counties and are easily accessible by abusive ex-spouses.

There are approximately twenty two of the two hundred fifty four counties in Texas that face the impossible task of redacting personal information from documents they have already released over the Internet. There are thousands more in other states where county government rushed to embrace a technology they did not fully understand. Some agencies are turning to their vendors for solutions to a problem the vendors helped create. Vendors often respond with promises of software that will remove the information but will not accept legal responsibility if the software fails to identify information that needs to

be removed. Redaction software's greatest success may be in extracting taxpayer dollars from the County Treasury.

Redaction software is an expensive non-answer to the question of how county government will protect the citizens now that they have published their sensitive papers to the world.

The answer is neither complicated or expensive. It doesn't require redaction software, technology or money. The answer that was established by our forefathers is still valid today. It is a system that protected Americans and our documents for more than 200 years. Keep the documents accessible only within the jurisdiction where they were filed.

County officials who consider the safety of their constituents more important than the convenience of those outside the jurisdiction should take the people's documents offline immediately.

*"The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, **papers**, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated"* United States Constitution

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From Fort Bend County Website

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Figure 1: Example of hand written social security numbers on the web