INTERNET RESEARCH: A COLLECTION AID

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Assistant Attorney General of Texas
Consumer Protection/Anti-Trust Division 1978-1981
Adjunct Professor - Webster University 1980-1993
Associate Municipal Judge-City of El Paso 1983-1990
Member of the Consumer Law Council-State Bar of Texas 1985-1994
Treasurer of the Consumer Law Section-State Bar of Texas 1988-1990
Chairman of the Consumer Law Section-State Bar of Texas 1991-1992
President of El Paso County Probate Bar Association 1999-2000
Chairman of the Board El Paso County Probate Bar Association 2000-2001
Chairman of the El Paso Bar Association Computer/Website Committee 1998-2001
Board of Directors El Paso Bar Association 2002-2004
Publishes and maintains Website elpasolaw.com on the Internet
Created El Paso County’s Probate Court Website, theprobatecourt.com
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INTERNET RESEARCH - A COLLECTION AID

I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of a lawsuit is normally to transfer money from a defendant to a plaintiff. In this scenario a lawsuit must have three basic parameters for the plaintiff to be successful. First, there must be liability. Can the plaintiff be compensated under law for a harm incurred at the hands of the defendant? Second, did harm occur and are there damages? And, third, is the defendant solvent? If these three questions can be answered affirmatively then a lawsuit may be pursued.

This paper will deal mainly with the third question; is the defendant solvent? The best lawsuit for damages has little merit if the defendant has nothing and there is no vicarious party with a deep pocket.

So, we will explore some internet tools to help the potential plaintiff access the solvency issue as soon as possible and at a minimal expense. I have not covered the major commercial legal publishers since they market their products very well. I will focus on “FREE” and inexpensive internet resources, many of which we already pay for as taxpayers. Many of these resources simply provide WEB LINKS to government resources that exist in cyberspace.

II. TAXNETUSA

TaxNetUSA is a very helpful on-line source of property tax information. Since 1997, TaxNetUSA has hosted websites for many Texas County Appraisal Districts, which make tax roll information available to search by name, address or account number. Many of the search services are available at no charge. Texas counties are listed in the text box below (commas are omitted).

The Advanced Search Subscription allows users the ability to search by many more parameters and combinations of fields. The information will vary from county to county, but all Advanced Search Subscriptions offer searches based on name, address, deed information, abstract and/or subdivision, state code, exemptions and value ranges.

The site also offers delinquent tax information, sales information, and deed transactions for some counties and they invite first-time visitors to contact them to learn what is available and how using TaxnetUSA might benefit your law firm. Telephone-(817) 795-8378 EXT 206, or e-mail sales@taxnetusa.com.

III. PUBLICDATA.COM

PublicData.com purchases the information on their site from local, state or federal authority or from businesses who have purchased the information. Selling public data is a common practice for most states.

The three search options are, FREE, BASIC and ADVANCED. I have only used the FREE option and it has given me all the information I have needed in El Paso County.

I looked up an individual in Dallas County, as an example, and set out the real property data below on ten pieces of real estate. I have replaced the individual’s name and street name with the letter T. If you have a judgment on this person there are obvious assets to satisfy all or part of the judgment. This is good information to know prior to filing suit.

4515 TTTTTTTT $184,484
6702 TTTTTTTT $37,980
3837 TTTTTTTT $66,749
4505 TTTTTTTT $24,750
4003 TTTTTTTT $52,591
4020 TTTTTTTT $55,469
4002 TTTTTTTT $217,007
4811 TTTTTTTT $97,023
N/A N/A $77,840
3818 TTTTTTTT $39,825
TOTAL $853,718

The site also provides tax relevant downloadable forms in MicroSoft Word or PDF formats. These forms include: Homestead Exemption Form, Freeport Exemption Form, Agricultural (1-d-1) Application, Religious Exemption Form, Protest Form, and Appointment of Agent Form.
A. About PublicData.com

On 16 July 1997, PublicData.com.ai, Ltd., Incorporated in the country of Anguilla British West Indies (BWI) and began commerce on 1 September 1997. PublicData.com says it is committed to providing quick, accurate, and complete access to all public records, paid for and/or maintained at its source with tax dollars, to all members of the public.

B. How to use a Public Data Account?

Once you create an account with PublicData.com and have received your password, you may visit the PublicData.com home page and logon to your account. To learn how the system works, you may view the brief PublicData.com Demo from the home page, or read the following details.

Once you logon, proceed to the Database selection page. On this page, you may select to search from any PublicData.com database. The databases are listed with the search criteria needed. Some databases may be searched by name, date of birth, or number such as a license plate number or a VIN.

To search by name, a search criteria page for the database is displayed. It may have check boxes underneath the criteria. You may check or uncheck the boxes to enable or disable the search to include the database specified. At least one box must be checked. You may check some or all boxes, if you wish. You must provide a last name (required). You may provide a first name (suggested). You may provide a portion of the first name. You may provide a middle name (optional). If you provide a middle name, you must provide a correct last and first name. You are returned a list of names that match the criteria, which may be no matches, a short list of one or a very long list. Only 100 names are displayed at a time. To view the next set of names, select "Click here for more." Each set of names count as part of a Search Lookup. The search will return a list of people who have that last name and match the first name or portion of first name if specified. If no first name is specified, the list will return with people whose last names start with the criteria specified. Please remember that some people do not use their actual first name in every day life, but they are located in the database under their legal, given name. If you have selected to search more than one database at a time, the search result list will contain where this item was found. Each item in the list will also have some additional information to help you identify if this is the person for which you were looking. However, you will probably need to see more information of this person, so you click on that name in the list. This will bring up the detail information on the person from the database. What information you see depends on which database contains the details. This detail view is the other part of a Search Lookup.

Furthermore, the detail view from some databases contain address information which is linked to other records in the database, which is shown as a hyperlink. For example a Driver License database may contain links to people who have the same address or people who live on the same side of the block, that is they have the same 9-digit ZIP code. There may be people in this linked list who have not updated their address information, so there may be people who no longer live at the address displayed.

To search by date of birth, a search criteria page with the fields for month, day, and year is displayed. You will be returned a list of people who have that birth date in the database. This search criteria may also have check boxes to search multiple databases.

Frequently this list is fairly long, but can be a method to locate someone if their common name is not found. To search by number, a search criteria page for the database is displayed. If you provide only the starting portion of the number, certain databases will return a list of entries that match the criteria. This would include VIN or Plate Numbers on DMV databases.

The price plans for pubicdata.com service are set out in Appendix "A”.

IV. KNOWX.COM

KnowX.com provides its users with access to national public records. The information provided is compiled from official records collection sources and updated regularly.

A. What is the Ultimate People Finder?

Ultimate People Finder listings will include addresses and phone numbers for all of the matches found by your search. (NOTE: non-published or unlisted phone numbers will not be included in the report due to privacy concerns).

Part of the value of the KnowX Ultimate People Finder module is that, in addition to nationwide White Pages, it also searches real property records & up-to-the-minute directory services to locate the search subject.

To perform an Ultimate People Finder search, simply enter the name you wish to search. You can enter only a first or last name, or you can enter both a first and last name. You may also enter a city, state, and zip code, or "All States” if you desire.
The initial search is free and will return a list of names matching your request. It will also include the city and state in which the person resides. If you wish to view all of resulting addresses and phone numbers, click the "Buy All Listings" link at the top of the Results page. You may also view an individual record by clicking on the pertinent highlighted record from the search summary. At this point, you get the option of viewing unlimited Ultimate People Finder records for 24 hours at a cost of $29.95.

You will be prompted to click the "Purchase" button in order to complete your transaction. The records will then be displayed on-screen.

B. What is the Background Check Module?
This module includes five individual database searches. These are:
- Lawsuits
- Liens
- Judgements
- UCC
- Bankruptcy

This search is intended to be a time saver since it covers several databases at once. There may not be records on file for the same individual in all of the included databases. To determine which states and regions are included in these databases BEFORE actually purchasing a search, please click the link entitled "Coverage Area" found in the "Product Information" box on the right side of the Search page. The cost for searching in Background Check is $9.95. However, each database can also be accessed individually from the Site Map and the prices will vary depending upon the database chosen.

If your search is successful, you will be presented with a summary showing which record types were found. You will then have the option of purchasing a single record ($7.95 each), or all of the records resulting from your search ($29.95).

Guarantee: You will ALWAYS receive a price tag giving you the price and an option to cancel your request!

C. What are public records?
Public Records are those documents compiled by various public offices and agencies which are made available to the general public. Examples of public records include real estate records, lien filings, business entity filings, lawsuit information and court dockets, court decisions and death records - most of which is available on KnowX.com. Private or non-public information is not generally available from public records or commercial sources. Non-public information includes data, which is protected from disclosure by law or by custom, such as medical records, employment records, tax returns and financial records. Non-public information is not available on KnowX.com.

D. How are the public records collected?
Many individuals are curious to know how public record databases, such as KnowX.com, obtain literally millions of public record filings and if the databases are complete and accurate. It is important to note that KnowX.com does not key any of the public record filings. After filings are recorded at the official public office or agency, in most cases, the records are compiled by data entry specialists in an automated format at the various public filing locations. The public record information that is compiled for KnowX.com is "indexed" information. "Indexed" means the full document will not be retrieved online, instead a snapshot of the basic filing information is provided. The process of keying or scanning millions of records as you can imagine is a rather cumbersome one. Once records are keyed, they are distributed to companies, such as KnowX.com, then refined and formatted to fit into the custom-designed KnowX.com program models. However, the process does not stop here. Every day additional filings are recorded at official public record offices or agencies in jurisdictions throughout the U.S., so the compilation process is a never-ending cycle.

Depending on the KnowX.com database, most public record material is updated daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, or yearly. Updates include new filing information, changes to existing records, deletions, etc. KnowX.com does its best to put the most recent information in each of the databases online as soon as it is received by the source, but with the long process of keying records, a lag time or delays can happen. Since data entry specialists key public record material, there are processes in place to check for accuracy; however, mistakes will happen due to human error. If a mistake is found on a KnowX.com database, contact KnowX.com via e-mail with any incorrect information so that the source may correct the data entry specialist's mistake.
E. Why use KnowX.com for public record information?

A frequently asked question of public records is "Why should I use a service like KnowX.com for public record material when any individual can run down to the local courthouse and obtain the document for the designated fee?" Many individuals and companies are willing to pay for the convenience of gaining information online rather than spending time driving to a local courthouse or a Secretary of State Office. Plus, KnowX.com offers many types of records across various jurisdictions and makes them available at your fingertips in one concise database.

F. Coverage

Most of the public record material available on KnowX.com is collected from largely populated jurisdictions. Various types of public record databases on KnowX.com are nationwide, covering the entire U.S., while others may only contain selected jurisdictions throughout the U.S. Collection of public record material from remote counties is often impossible since many of them are not yet fully-automated. KnowX.com is continually adding new types of public records, and enhancing its coverage in existing databases.

G. How KnowX Pricing Works

There is no monthly, subscription, or registration fee for using KnowX.com. Our charges are by the search or detail record only as described in the following:

1. Searches

Many KnowX.com searches are free, but for others, there is a small charge. If your search returns a summary of matches found, you may choose to purchase more detailed information (called "Detail Records"). You will be charged the search fee whether records are found or not.

2. Detail Records

Detail Records range in price (see Appendix “B”). If your search returns multiple name matches and you wish to view more than one, we also offer a multi-record discount which allows you to "buy them all”. Full price information is located at http://www.knowx.com/statmnts.exe?form=statmnts/pricetbl.htm&userid=guest&password=welcome.

V. EL PASO COUNTY

Using El Paso County as an example, I have set out below the eight areas of public records available on El Paso County’s web site. Many other Texas counties have similar sites and links to these sites will be discussed in the next section. Governmental inertia (things at rest wish to remain at rest) kept this data out of internet public access for several years. The technology has been available for a long time but many governmental officials and bureaucrats were appalled that public data should be made public. But, there is new and correct thinking now and great strides are being made.

EL PASO COUNTY PUBLIC RECORDS

County Clerk Official Public Records
Deed and property, liens, etc.
County Clerk Birth Records
County Clerk Assumed Names Records
County Clerk Death Records
County Clerk Marriage Records
County Tax Roll Search
Criminal Case Search
Civil Case Search

Each of these record sections are linked to a search engine that allows you to query the database for the desired information. You click on the section heading and then you fill in the query fields with what you want and your data is then displayed.

The El Paso County site also includes job listings, bidding opportunities and Commissioners Court agendas linked to official minutes that report what actions Commissioners Court has taken. Online links from each agenda item will allow the public to view and download the same agenda briefing materials and reports that Commissioners Court members receive days before their meetings and use in reaching decisions.

VI. SEARCHSYSTEMS.NET

Searchsystems.net began operations as pac-info.com. It claims that it was the first and continues to be the largest and most comprehensive collection of links to free public record databases on the Internet. It was founded as Search Systems in 1990 and added Internet services in 1997. Search Systems, searchsystems.net, and pac-info.com are owned by Pacific Information Resources, Inc. of Thousand Oaks, California.

The site provides over 13,263 (as of March 28, 2003) links to free public record databases around the
world to help locate businesses, people, and other information.

There is no fee or sign up to use the site. Most of the database links on the site are free. However, there are some links to databases where the provider charges a fee. Each link is labeled "free" or "pay" so you'll know up front whether or not to expect to pay for the service.

This web site has links to the El Paso County records mentioned in the previous section as well as to many other Texas county public records. For other Texas counties go to the United States by State link and choose Texas, an enormous set of public data links will then be displayed. Click on your topic (Property) and another set of links will appear including “counties”. Click on the county and there you are.

The site is organized as follows:

! U.S. Nationwide
! United States by State
! U.S. Territories
! U.S. Tribal Governments
! U.S. Virgin Islands
! Canada Nationwide
! Canada by Province
! Worldwide
! Africa
! Asia
! Australia
! Central America & Caribbean
! Europe
! Middle East
! New Zealand
! North America
! Pacific Islands
! South America
! Outer Space (for your enjoyment)

VII. CONCLUSION

The internet has enormous data resources that can aid in collecting judgments. I have discussed a few above that I use regularly and others are included as well in Appendix “B” that may be useful.
APPENDIX “A”

PublicData.Com Price Plans

Individual Year Access Plan - 10 cents a query! $25.00 a year For $25.00, have access to the databases for the entire year. This plan entitles a user to up to 250 look-ups per year. Payment can be made by charge card (MasterCard, Visa or American Express).

Standard Individual Use Plan - This is priced at 5 cents per look-up. $9.95 per month allows a user to perform up to 200 look-ups a month.. Payment can be made by charge card (MasterCard, Visa or American Express).

Virtually Unlimited Individual Use Plan, $19.95 per month This account allows almost unlimited access to the database. Up to 500 monthly look-ups for $19.95 each month. Payment can be made by charge card (MasterCard, Visa or American Express).

Individual Business Use Plan, $75.00 per month This plan allows for 2500 look-ups to be made each month. Payment can be made by charge card (MasterCard, Visa or American Express).

Executive Business Use Plan. $75.00 per month Businesses can have multiple users access the site for $75.00 per month. This plan allows for 2500 look-ups to be made each month. Invoices can be sent for businesses or payment can be made by check or charge card (MasterCard, Visa or American Express).

Business Use 5000 Plan. At $500.00 per year Businesses can receive up to 5000 look-ups per year with this special account. Invoices can be sent for businesses or payment can be made by check or charge card (MasterCard, Visa or American Express). Because this is a business account, multiple users in a single corporation can access this account. The only way to register for this account is from the "Register a corporate account" screen.

Business use 1500 Plan - 1500 look-ups at $250.00 per year This exclusive account allows businesses to receive up to 1500 look-ups per year. Invoices can be sent for businesses or payment can be made by check or charge card (MasterCard, Visa or American Express). Because this is a business account, multiple users in a single corporation can access this account. The only way to register for this account is from the "Register a corporate account” screen.
## APPENDIX “B”

### Web Sites That Are Discussed Above and Others That Should Be Explored

#### Main Websites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENTITY/WEBSITE</th>
<th>URL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>El Paso Law</td>
<td><a href="http://www.elpasolaw.com">http://www.elpasolaw.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tax Net USA</td>
<td><a href="http://www.taxnetusa.com/">http://www.taxnetusa.com/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Data</td>
<td><a href="http://www.publicdata.com/">http://www.publicdata.com/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KnowX</td>
<td><a href="http://www.knowx.com/">http://www.knowx.com/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Paso County</td>
<td><a href="http://www.co.el-paso.tx.us/">http://www.co.el-paso.tx.us/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search Systems</td>
<td><a href="http://www.searchsystems.net/index.php">http://www.searchsystems.net/index.php</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Other Websites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENTITY/WEBSITE</th>
<th>URL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lawmart Dallas Based Paralegal Research/legal Service Company</td>
<td><a href="http://www.lawmart.to/">http://www.lawmart.to/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reverse Telephone Directory</td>
<td><a href="http://www.reversephonedirectory.com/">http://www.reversephonedirectory.com/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 State Dmv Driving Record Site</td>
<td><a href="http://www.dmv-driving-record-search.com/dmv-drivin">http://www.dmv-driving-record-search.com/dmv-drivin</a> g-record.html</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Msn White/yellow Pages</td>
<td><a href="http://www.msn.com/">http://www.msn.com/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infousa.com Multi Level Research Site</td>
<td><a href="http://www.infousa.com/">http://www.infousa.com/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martindale Lawyer Locator</td>
<td><a href="http://lawyers.martindale.com/xp/Martindale/home.xml">http://lawyers.martindale.com/xp/Martindale/home.xml</a></td>
</tr>
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<td>Crimcheck, Inc</td>
<td><a href="http://www.infotel.net/crimcheck/">http://www.infotel.net/crimcheck/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas Real Estate Commission</td>
<td><a href="http://www.trec.state.tx.us/">http://www.trec.state.tx.us/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas State Board of Medical Examiners</td>
<td><a href="http://www.tsbme.state.tx.us/">http://www.tsbme.state.tx.us/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas State Board of Veterinary Medical Examiners</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas State Board of Dental Examiners</td>
<td><a href="http://www.tsbde.state.tx.us/dbsearch/">http://www.tsbde.state.tx.us/dbsearch/</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>United States Census Bureau</td>
<td><a href="http://www.census.gov/">http://www.census.gov/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better Business Bureau</td>
<td><a href="http://www.bbb.org/">http://www.bbb.org/</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bureau of Naval Personnel</td>
<td><a href="http://www.bupers.navy.mil/">http://www.bupers.navy.mil/</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>National Archives and Records Administration (Nara)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.archives.gov/welcome/index.html">http://www.archives.gov/welcome/index.html</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to Find Peoples’ E-mail Addresses</td>
<td><a href="http://www.qucis.queensu.ca/FAQs/email/bigfinding.html">http://www.qucis.queensu.ca/FAQs/email/bigfinding.html</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net Detective</td>
<td><a href="http://www.netdetective.net/nd/netsecure">http://www.netdetective.net/nd/netsecure</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any Who</td>
<td><a href="http://www.anywho.com/">http://www.anywho.com/</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>