



Identity Searching in the Digital World

How identity resolution engines can help law enforcement and fraud experts verify and investigate entities

In today's digital world, identities are increasingly fractured. Along with traditional identity markers like Social Security numbers and driver's licenses, people now have digital identity markers such as email addresses, social media handles and cell phone numbers.

This plethora of identity data poses a challenge for law enforcement agencies that want to gain a comprehensive picture of a suspect, as well as for fraud prevention teams that want to verify a particular identity.

Law enforcement personnel and investigators typically rely on traditional public records databases that provide access to government-generated information like criminal and court records. But these databases have a glaring blind spot when it comes to online identities.

"Law enforcement agencies are increasingly searching for a username rather than a first and last name," explains David Popham, director of global data solutions for Pipl. "They are looking for aliases, usernames and social media activity to track down individuals. It's hard to connect those dots if your database only shows you traditional identity markers."

By connecting identity fragments across digital platforms, an identity solution empowers investigators, removing the blind spot in traditional databases.

This blind spot in public records databases makes it difficult for law enforcement and investigators to understand a person's digital actions and associations.

"This is a problem, because that is how people behave in today's world — they engage and interact digitally," adds Popham.

Without access to a person's online behaviors, agencies also struggle to verify whether or not an identity is real. This kind of identity verification is critical to prevent fraud across government benefit programs like Medicare and Unemployment Insurance.

To gain comprehensive insight into a person's identity, some investigators rely on a combination of traditional public records databases and search engines like Google. But searching through a broad search engine is time consuming.

"You can imagine how much time searching Google adds to the task of trying to track someone down," says Cody Young, private consultant for Pipl. "There might be scraps of information out there, but the time that adds to an investigator's workload is untenable."

Beyond the Public Record

Investigators and the intelligence community can now turn to identity resolution solutions that utilize open-source public records to go beyond the information in traditional public records and understand a person's virtual identity more clearly.

An identity resolution solution can comb through global data from the internet, public records and other sources. It is more comprehensive and user-friendly than a traditional database, but it is also more focused and manageable than a broad Google search.

These identity solutions do not simply find the identity fragments people are willing to share with the public, such as a phone or driver's license number. They also provide access to online identity information, including usernames and social media activity.

"It is a tool that is effective in unmasking identity fragments that a person uses when they are purposefully trying to hide themselves," says Young.

Similarly, it can help investigators quickly recognize when a person is propping up an altogether fake identity to perpetrate a crime.

Law enforcement and investigators can also utilize an identity solution's analytics tools to draw connections between disparate pieces of information. For example, some solutions employ entity-relationship graphing, in which an algorithm links identity fragments likely related to the same person, building a complex identity profile of a person of interest.

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This piece was written and produced by the Center for Digital Government Content Studio, with information and input from Pipl.



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Getting Started

Agencies can utilize an identification resolution solution in multiple ways, depending on their needs and goals.

For investigators who are beginning their search with limited information on a person, they can employ what Popham calls the "start with anything and find everything" method. Using this strategy, users can begin with any piece of data — a name, email address, phone number or social media handle — and see where it takes them. Starting with one piece of data, they can then cast a wide net to find any and all related identity fragments.

Alternatively, users can begin a search by inputting as much information as possible, and then use that information to narrow down their search. Using this method, the more data points an investigator can provide, the more likely they will be able to pinpoint a particular person.

Another strategy to help an investigator narrow a search is to think critically about the kind of information they are putting into the system. Users should focus on inputting information not typically shared by multiple people. For example, an email address and social media handle are more likely to help an investigator identify a particular person, whereas a home address might generate multiple identities.

Regardless of method, an identity solution allows investigators and the intelligence community to verify identities and gather critical data on people of interest.

Gain Actionable Intelligence

When using an identity resolution engine that relies on open-source public records, there is almost no limit to what agencies can learn about a person. Whether a law enforcement agent is looking to gain more information on a suspect, or a fraud prevention specialist is investigating the identity of an applicant for a small business loan, an identity solution can help users understand identities quickly and easily.

Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of an identity resolution solution is the amount of time and effort it saves.

"With a rich supply of information at an investigator's fingertips, and an intuitive solution, investigators and law enforcement no longer have to struggle with complicated or limited technology," says Young. "Instead, they can get to work."



Today, people's lives unfold online to nearly the same degree that they do in real life. For law enforcement professionals, the information created by this activity can be more useful than the identifiers returned by their traditional toolsets, such as driver's licenses and credit headers. The problem? Finding and verifying identity information that's scattered across the web is a monumental task. Pipl has done the hard work of collecting, connecting, and corroborating the traces of people's digital activity to create an index of nearly 4 billion online identities. Learn how this tool is helping law enforcement professionals follow people into the digital world and close cases faster. [Learn more.](#)