

Can 'scrubbing' your online identity save your reputation?

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Scrubbing is a misnomer, says David Choffnes, professor in the College of Computer and Information Science. It's more like adding a coat of paint to an already tarnished online reputation. Credit: Greg Grinnell/Northeastern University

What happens when you Google yourself? For those worried about less

than favorable search results or news stories, "scrubbing" has emerged as a popular approach to improving a poor online reputation. From celebrities and large corporations to universities and organizations, there is a growing appetite to boost the online image of their brand. One way to do that is to hire experts to clean up and literally wipe negative mentions of them from the Internet. Here, David Choffnes, professor in the College of Computer and Information Science, weighs in on whether scrubbing is an effective and realistic way to manage and improve an online reputation.

Where should someone look to evaluate and manage his or her online presence and reputation, and what are some common problems individuals encounter?

The easiest platforms to manage are the obvious ones you control: your Facebook page, Twitter profile, and LinkedIn profile, among others. It's much trickier when you appear on something you don't control: someone else's Facebook page, Twitter feed, blog, or comment thread. It's even worse if you have a common name, since someone else's transgressions may be conflated as your own.

In the end, there aren't great tools for managing this beyond searching for yourself on your favorite search engine to see if anything troubling comes up. If you find something you don't like, you can request it be taken down or that it not appear in Google searches. This will probably work for cases where the content is false or inflammatory. But there is no guarantee that the site operator or moderator will remove content about you. And that doesn't even cover that numerous sites that crawl and maintain a history of website content, like the Wayback Machine, for example.

There have been stories about companies hiring firms and using various methods to clean out Google results affiliated with a person or

organization. Is "scrubbing" a viable option for repairing or maintaining online reputations?

Scrubbing is a misnomer. It's more like adding another coat of paint on top of your tarnished online reputation. In terms of effectiveness, your mileage may vary. It's certainly possible, with time and effort, to generate enough high-ranked, targeted [news stories](#) that hide certain negative information from the top search results for a given search term. However, the old news doesn't go away—in a sense, the Internet never forgets. Instead, it's simply a little harder to find. Maybe it's on page two or three of the search results.

However, if you are like UC Davis and get caught trying to scrub, then you see the unintended consequences of new negative news stories that counteract all the previous scrubbing. Then again, when I search "UC Davis police," the first reference to pepper spray or scrubbing is on page 2 of the results.

Is it worth it? Who knows. Presumably yes, because there is a market for it. Is there something more viable right now? I don't think the market has found something yet.

Even if one is successful at pushing down negative [search results](#), or "scrubbing" negative, reputation-hurting information from the Internet, is it ever erased?

Nobody can guarantee that anything publicly posted on the Web is completely erased. That isn't to say that all data will persist forever; rather, that you can't necessarily control what will or won't remain, and you can safely assume that whatever you put on the Web may never go away.

As a general rule, there is little you can do once data about you gets on

the Internet—except wait for it to become so unpopular that no one ever sees it.

The best offense, in this case, is a good defense. So think twice about posting something that might eventually come back to haunt you.

Provided by Northeastern University

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