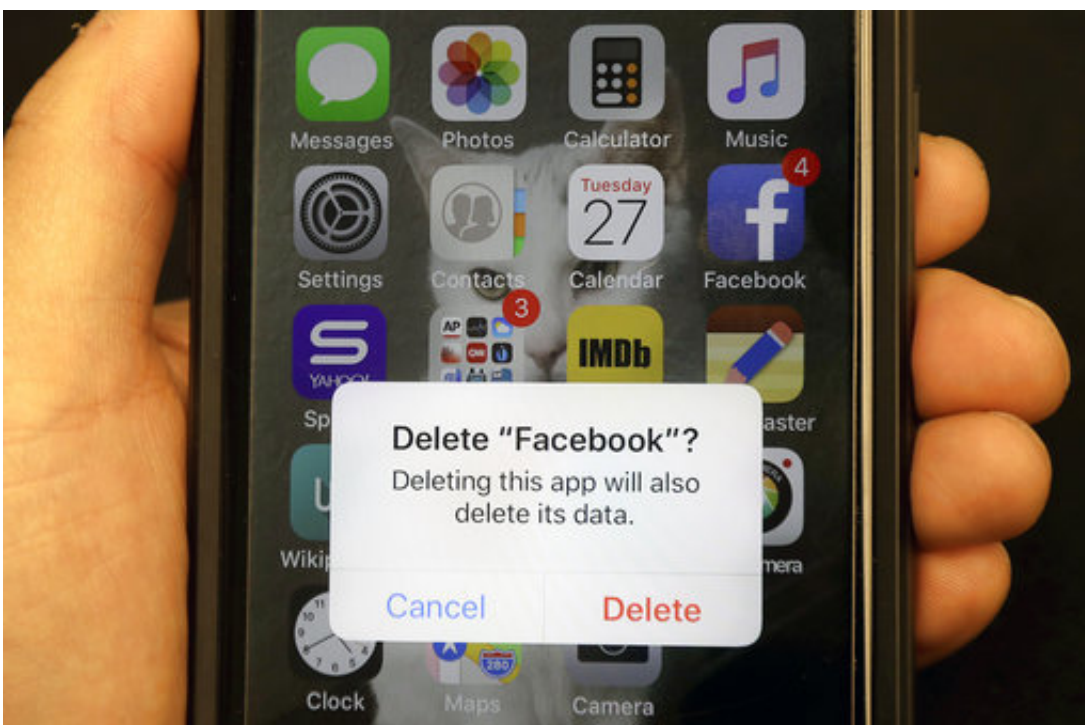


Purging long-forgotten online accounts: Worth the trouble?

October 12 2018, by Barbara Ortutay



In this March 27, 2018, file photo, a reporter holds a phone showing the Facebook app in San Francisco. It might not seem like a big deal to have long-forgotten accounts on social media linger. But with hacking in the news constantly, including a breach affecting 50 million Facebook accounts, you might not want all that data sitting around. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu, File)

The internet is riddled with long-forgotten accounts on social media, dating apps and various shopping sites used once or twice. Sure, you should delete all those unused logins and passwords. And eat your

vegetables. And go to the gym.

But is it even possible to delete your zombie online footprints—or worth your time to do so?

Earlier this month, a little-used social network notified its few users that it will soon shut down. No, not Google Plus; that came five days later, following the disclosure of a bug that exposed data on a half-million people. The earlier shutdown involved Path, created by a former Facebook employee in 2010 as an alternative to Facebook. Then there's Ello sending you monthly emails to remind you that this plucky but little-known social network still exists somehow.

It might not seem like a big deal to have these accounts linger. But with hacking in the news constantly, including a breach affecting nearly 30 million Facebook accounts, you might not want all that data sitting around.

You might not have a choice if it's a [service](#) you use regularly. But for those you no longer use, consider a purge. Plus, it might feel good to get your online life in order, the way organizing a closet does.

Take dating apps such as Tinder, long after you found a steady partner or gave up on finding one. You might have deleted Tinder from your phone, but the ghost of your Tinder account is still out there—just not getting any matches, as Tinder shows only "active" users to potential mates.

Or consider Yahoo. Long after many people stopped using it, Yahoo in 2016 suffered the biggest publicly disclosed hack in history, exposing the names, email addresses, birth dates and other information from 3 billion active and dormant accounts. This sort of information is a goldmine for malicious actors looking to steal identities and gain access

to financial accounts.

Trouble is, cleaning up your digital past isn't easy.

For one, finding all the old accounts can be a pain. For some of us, it might not even be possible to recall every dating site and every would-be Twitter that never was, not to mention shopping or event ticketing sites you bought one thing from and forgot about.

Then, you'll have to figure out which of your many email accounts you used to log in to a service, then recover passwords and answer annoying security questions—assuming you even remember what your favorite movie or fruit was at the time. Only then might you discover that you can't even delete your account. Yahoo, for instance, didn't allow users to delete accounts or change personally identifying information they shared, such as their birthday, until pressured to do so after the breach.

Even without these hurdles, real life gets in the way. There are probably good reasons you still haven't organized your closet, either.

Perhaps a better approach is to focus on the most sensitive accounts. It might not matter that a news site still has your log in, if you never gave it a credit card or other personal details (of course, if you reused your bank password you might be at risk).

Rich Mogull, CEO of data security firm Securosis, said people should think about what information they had provided to services they no longer use and whether that information could be damaging should private posts and messages inadvertently become public.

Dating sites, in particular, can be a trove of potentially damaging information. Once you're in a relationship, delete those accounts.

It's wise to set aside a time each year—maybe after you do your taxes or right after the holidays—to manage old accounts, said Theresa Payton, who runs the security consulting company Fortalice Solutions and served under President George W. Bush as White House chief information officer.

For starters, visit haveibeenpwned.com. This popular tool lets you enter your email addresses and check if it has been compromised in a data breach. Ideally, the attacked company should have notified you already, but that's not guaranteed. Change passwords and close accounts you don't need.

You might also check justdeleteme.xyz, which Payton said could help navigate the "complexities of saying goodbye." The site has a list of common and obscure services. Looking through it might remind you of some of the services you've used back in the days. Click on a service for details on how to delete your [account](#).

You might discover that some services simply won't let you go. That could be an oversight from a startup prioritizing other features over a deletion tool. Or, it could be intentional to keep users coming back. There's not much you can do beyond deleting as many posts, photos and other personal data as you can.

What to do with accounts of people who have died is a whole other story . That said, the prospect of the Grim Reaper—and what sorts of [information](#) about you may be exposed after you shed this mortal coil—might just be the motivation you need to clean up your online trail.

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