

CYBERLEX

CRIME AND THE INTERNET

What do you get when you combine "Crime" and "the internet"? CrimeNet (www.crimenet.com.au).

CrimeNet is a controversial internet site hosting, inter alia, a database of the names and details of convicted criminals.

The crime site was temporarily shut down when swamped by visitors (domestic and international). CrimeNet has again received media attention after Justice George Hempel aborted a trial in the Supreme Court of Victoria. Justice Hempel is no stranger to CrimeNet, having previously refused to abort a retrial when the defence complained about content available on CrimeNet.

What is CrimeNet?

CrimeNet is an internet service providing a combined information service on:

- criminal records;
- stolen property;
- missing persons;
- wanted persons;
- con artists; and
- unsolved crimes.

The stated mission of CrimeNet is: "... to provide the world's best information

service on crime and criminals and so help to make our family, homes, workplaces and streets a little safer."

The power underlying CrimeNet is the search facilities. A user can search the database of convicted criminals by name, type of crime and occupation of the criminal. However, there is a \$6 charge for viewing these criminal records.

CrimeNet has clear statements about privacy, credit card security and the accuracy of its records, including clear guidelines for anyone to dispute the information listed about a person on the site (of course, no site would be complete without a disclaimer).

One of the concerns raised about CrimeNet is the ease of access to the information. The exploits of criminals have been and are available on public record for those interested enough to look. However, the methods for finding this information have historically been time consuming and labour intensive.

Now with computers and especially the internet it is possible to retrieve information on any particular subject in minutes. Indeed, CrimeNet databases are compiled from sources such as newspapers and court records. It is possible to find substantially the similar information held on CrimeNet by searching newspapers and legal databases online over the internet.

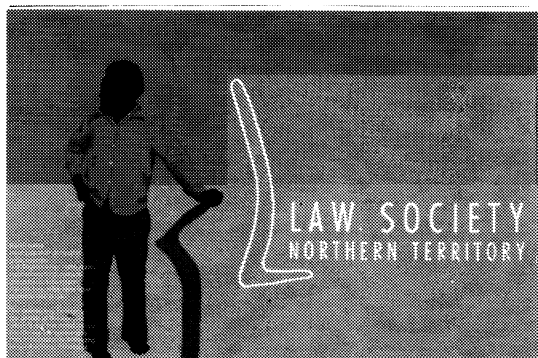


As an example of how easy it is to find information, I was able to obtain a copy of Justice Hempel's judgment, read CrimeNet's policy statements, review comments made about CrimeNet in the Victorian parliament, join, search and pay online for a newspaper article on CrimeNet in "The Age" newspaper, all in under 15 minutes.

While CrimeNet provides all this information in one location, to be concerned because of ease of access is to underestimate the power of the internet in today's environment. The real concern about CrimeNet can be found from comments by Justice Hempel in his judgement. Namely the accuracy of the information contained within CrimeNet. CrimeNet states "we attempt to do our best" — is this good enough? Is there a case for CrimeNet and similar web-sites to be bound by codes of practice? If so, how should these codes of practice be implemented — self regulation or government intervention?

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