


Fading footprint

So much of our lives is now digital, removing yourself from the web is harder than you might imagine, says **Ros Page**



If it feels like your digital life is overtaking your real life, perhaps it's time to start extracting yourself from it.

It's easy enough to delete yourself from popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (see opposite). But if you want to erase yourself from the internet altogether, it's very difficult to guarantee every bit of your e-life is

removed. That's because Google, the Internet Archive (see page 21) and other sites and organisations store copies of websites.

However, all's not lost – there are paid services that can help you delete your digital presence. And there's always the option to go through sites one by one to shut down your online existence.

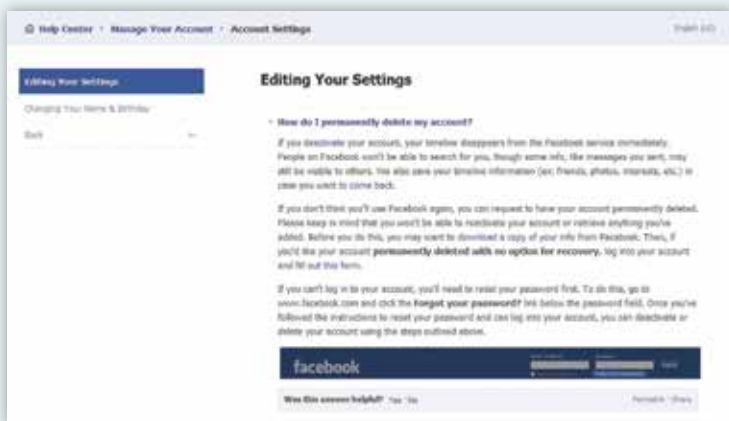
WAVE THE WEB GOODBYE

- As best you can, list every site you've registered with or joined.
- Close down any old or unwanted blogs or personal sites.
- Unsubscribe from mailing lists.
- Close old webmail accounts.
- Remove yourself from unused sites, including unis, gaming and networking sites.
- Remove yourself from any forums, chat sites or member websites.
- Delete photo albums from sites such as Flickr.
- Do an audit of sites you no longer use (shopping, banking, telcos) and request removal.
- Ask friends to remove photos, posts or mentions of you.
- Remove your internet history, cache and cookies from internet-connected devices.

Stop the social spin

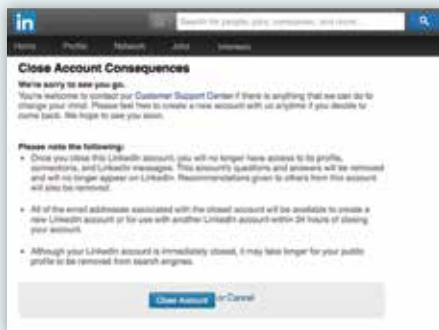
Most social media sites allow you to close your account and remove your data. It takes a bit of time to dig through the settings, so here are the steps for a few of the popular platforms you might want to exit. You may want to remove as much data as possible before deleting the account.

facebook **FACEBOOK** allows you to deactivate your account or permanently delete it. Log in and then type **Help** in the search bar to get to the **Help Centre** → **Manage Your Account** → **Account Settings** → **Editing Your Settings** → **How do I permanently delete my account?** Click the **fill out this form** link to enter your details to remove your account.



LinkedIn

LINKEDIN Log in and go to **Settings** → **Account** → **Close Your Account**. You'll jump to a verification screen, where LinkedIn will ask you why you want to close your account. Select a reason, and then click **Continue** to delete your account.



SEARCH ENGINES also publish information about you, and if it's something you don't like, you can request that Google and Bing (Microsoft) remove the page from their search results. The first step is to contact the website and ask for the page or the offending section to be removed.

For **Google**, go to support.google.com/webmasters/answer/164734?hl=en to get pages removed from the search results. There are also options for removing other content from the search results.

To contact **Bing**, go to onlinehelp.microsoft.com/en-us/bing/ff808455.aspx and click the **Report a Violation Support form**. If it's outdated links or cache, go to bing.com/webmaster/help/bing-content-removal-tool-cb6c294d to submit a request to have it removed.

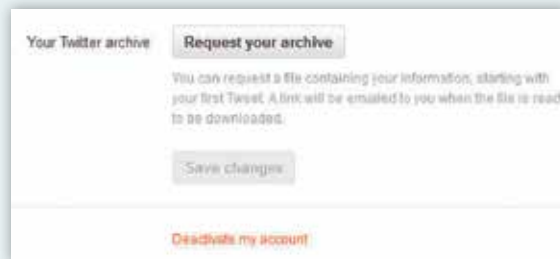
IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK



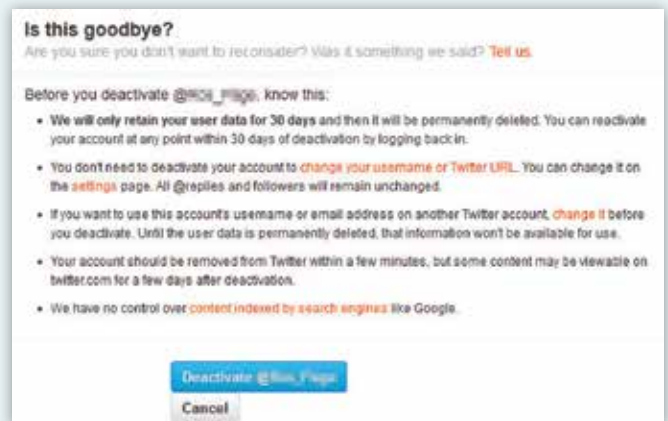
GOOGLE data can be collected from Google services such as +1s, Blogger, Contacts and Circles, Drive, Gmail, Google+ Profiles, Pages and Streams, Picasa Web Albums, Google Voice and YouTube. You can delete your account or set the rules for what happens to it if it's no longer used.

Click on the profile picture in the top-right corner of the window, then click **Account**. Under **Account Management** there are several options.

Click **Close account and delete all services and information associated with it** to remove your details from Google services. Check the boxes for the services you want to delete, enter your password and then click the **Delete Google Account** button.



TWITTER lets you deactivate your account with relative ease. Just log in and click the little **cog**, then go to **Settings** → **Account** and click the **Deactivate my account** link at the bottom of the page. Read the information and then click the **Deactivate** button. ▶



EXIT WITH EASE



justdelete.me rates the removal process for sites from easy to impossible, and has a short description of the process and a link to the delete tool.



knowem.com will search for your username across 500 different sites, including Tumblr, YouTube and Etsy, and remind you of long-forgotten sites you might have registered with. You can search different usernames if you use more than one.



Where's the online eraser button?

If you've ever thought the web needs a giant delete button, you're not alone. Many of us have posted something we'd rather forget – a silly photo on Facebook or a comment tweeted in haste.

Unfortunately, social media sites trade on people sharing more information, not less, to keep a rich vein of content flowing to people's feeds. It's not in their interests to make it easy for us to withdraw.

There are some moves from governments to offer a degree of protection for young people who may be more prone than other generations to sharing in a way they might come to regret later in life. California, for example, has a new law that will allow teens and children under 18 to remove content from a site.

OWN YOUR PERSONAL INFO

You may be aware of companies that specialise in collecting personal data for background checks that are used by financial institutions or other groups looking to verify people's identities. If you're concerned about this, there are also services that let you remove your details from sites where they may be collected.

Abine, which makes privacy apps, lists places to go to delete your personal information that can be used for background checks at abine.com/optouts.php. It also has a paid service called DeleteMe, which will remove your details from sites that collect and aggregate personal information. These sites relate mostly to US citizens, so may have limited applicability here.

The great beyond

With the digital revolution encouraging people to put more of their lives online, what happens to all the emails, videos, photos and other e-footprints once we're gone is a growing concern. There may come a time when you need to deal with end-of-life planning for your, or a loved one's, digital assets.

If you know how you want your digital life treated, you could take matters into your own hands. You can, for example, detail in your will what you want done with your e-life and who should take possession of your files and passwords. You might also leave instructions for how you want your accounts treated when you're gone. Do you want them deleted, for example, or memorialised so loved ones can still access them? Another option is to create a secure file with information on all the e-services with logins and passwords, and instructions



to delete your accounts that is left to the executor of your estate.

If you're not comfortable with the DIY approach, however, there are sites that let you create an e-vault for your electronic files. We haven't tested them, so we suggest you compare costs and features of a few. The [passwordbox.com](#) site records a beneficiary for your digital content, and stores passwords that can be passed on, as well as backups of important documents such as wills. At [assetlock.net](#) you can store digital

copies of documents, final messages and passwords.

Some sites, such as the posthumous message service [mygoodbyemessage.com](#), even send pre-determined notes, emails, videos and other messages to friends and family after you've passed on. Or, if you'd like to create an online memorial, [memorialmatters.com](#) is worth a look.

[Thedigitalbeyond.com](#) blog is a useful place to find news, helpful articles and list of sites for digital estate planning.

Step back in time

The Internet Archive ([archive.org](#)) is an ongoing project to build a digital collection of websites, as well as text, images, audio, video and software, to prevent it being "lost". The Wayback Machine site ([waybackmachine.org](#)), linked to the Internet Archive, shows you previous versions of websites. Check out, for example, what the CHOICE site looked like on 6 October 2001 as recorded by the Wayback Machine (right). ■

