

Module 1 video 1: Investigating people and social media accounts - Building a Profile

[00:00:00] Hi, welcome to the first module in this course, Investigating people and social media accounts. I'm Brandy Zdrozny an investigative and features reporter for NBC News.

[00:00:10] Nearly every story I report involves some kind of social media sleuthing from profile backgrounding to breaking news to longer investigations. Social media platforms offer some of the best ways to learn about a subject's real life and give a window into secret thoughts and hidden online identities. Let's get started.

[00:00:28] Locating and archiving social media posts has been the key to breaking big stories fast, including ones that revealed motivations behind a recent wave of shootings tied to violent extremists and militia movements. Since we can't engineer a breaking news event and we don't want to do a private citizen by Mooc, I'll be using myself for many of the searches I'm about to show you. But before we begin, I'd like you to choose a person to investigate.

[00:00:55] Most breaking stories, all I get is a name, and I have to determine all that I can about that person and their activities from their online presence. As we discover accounts, emails and usernames associated with a person of interest. We can start building out a profile. Despite having a lot of tools in my toolbox, my first step is usually Google.

[00:01:17] Google your target's name in quotes along with the city and state of residents, if you have it. I'll be using my name a lot today, but you should plug in yours or the name of your target. If you've got a breaking news situation, you may find a lot of noise here. It can help to use Google's tools option and input a custom date range with the cut off being a day or a week before the breaking news event.

[00:01:39] This is my LinkedIn profile. It also gives me a username. Mine is obvious and many are. I also use a public record service like LexisNexis or People. But free Web sites like Fast People Search can also help get you started and provide relatives and associates that'll be useful in verifying accounts later on. I'll provide links for all of the sites and tools I talk about later.

[00:02:02] When I have a username, I'll plug it into an online tool like Namech_k, which looks for username availability across multiple platforms that aren't always picked up by the big search engines. You may not think all of the results as places to glean much, but a lot of people tend to leave a trail even in unexpected places like comments sections, reviews and forums, and that can lead you to information and other accounts. When I found a new user name or email I think might belong to my subject. I'll go back to Google at first and scoop up everything new that I can. Now, each of these accounts becomes a tip. Something I need to verify. And not all of them are going to be correct.

[00:02:41] Take a minute to enter the username that you use across Web sites and see what results you get. If you're looking for emails, there are also sites that search data breaches for user information and can be a quick way to validate an email address and provide new leads. It's good practice to search the big sites Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikToc using their native search features. As you collect information, you're gonna want to keep things organized.

[00:03:11] You may have access to an investigation capture program, but if not a running document of what you know and a folder where you can organize your findings, we'll do fine. As you collect accounts and images, note how you found the account and how you verified it. And then take each new piece of information you find, a phone number, an email, a username, run it through Google and the other new search engines and follow those new trails.

[00:03:36] So you found an account that you think belongs to your target. The next step is verification. There are lots of ways to verify accounts. Cross referencing photos, biographical details, family and friend associations are a few of the best.

[00:03:50] For photos, you can use reverse image search to verify details in a photo and find multiple new accounts. Here's an example. This is one of the most popular anti vaccination Web

sites in the world. It's helmed by a social media marketer who I wrote about for a story about how women become radicalized in anti vaccination groups on Facebook. I use a couple of extensions which allow me to select an image and search for its match across multiple platforms. We can use search by image to find other accounts and Web sites that Cook may be behind. These results across Google being Yandex and TinEye. Point me to several other anti vaccination and Covid denial websites and fundraisers all connected to Cook.

[00:04:34] Reverse image searching is less helpful if you're investigating someone who's not a public figure, but suddenly becomes news. A mass shooter, for example. In those cases I've used photos of people or things like cars, homes or pets as a way to connect individual accounts and build a network around my target.

[00:04:54] When we were trying to confirm the social accounts of a man who shot and killed nine people outside of a bar in Dayton, Ohio, we got a name and a date of birth from police sources. We found a Twitter account we thought could be him, which also offered clues to his political ideology, his handle was unique and didn't include his real name or even a variation. But this Twitter account did have photos of a man and a dog. On Facebook we found photos of his family who had posted images of what appeared to be the same dog. We used that as the first piece of verification. The second was a post from his father, which also included the dog and a happy birthday message.

[00:05:34] Since a date of birth is often one of the first identifying pieces of information given by the police in a breaking news situation. It's a reliable way to verify a social media account. On Twitter you can use the advanced search function to identify a birthday. On Facebook you can scroll to the month and day and question on a suspected account and look out for birthday wishes or just use the search function after identifying close friends and family who might post about it.

[00:06:01] Birthdays are just one example. Weddings, funerals, holidays, anniversaries, graduations, you name it. Nearly every major life marker is celebrated on social media. These provide an opening for searching and investigating other accounts.

[00:06:17] I'll leave you with some tips. Search for targets, using platforms, native search functions, but also in Google and other search engines. Think about the platform. Don't focus solely on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Targets, especially younger ones, may be more likely to be on TikToc or gaming platforms. This is where user name search engines can be really helpful. Look out for more than just faces, cars, homes and pets are a great way to connect people. Document your verification process and collect all the evidence as you go in case it's deleted. Leave breadcrumbs in the form of notes, links, archives and screenshots. Otherwise, you're down the rabbit hole and you're unable to reproduce your work.

[00:06:59] I'll include my favorite applications for capturing investigations in the links below. That's all for now. Thanks.