

page-one desk agreed that if the story was as big as it sounded he could have whatever space he needed to tell it.

Under the flashline, "Strong Medicine," Michael's page-one story of June 14 began, "Fifteen years into the global AIDS epidemic, researchers are seeing the first glimmerings of a cure." He proceeded to describe case after case of AIDS patients destined to die in a matter of months suddenly recovering their health. He delved into the history of the new protease inhibitors, taking the reader into the drug company laboratories where they had been developed and into the academic labs where the drugs helped scientists uncover new evidence that made it clear that only a cocktail of medicines could thwart HIV.

And he emphasized the researchers' worries that at any moment the deadly HIV might suddenly begin circumventing the drugs' action.

The story apparently was a little too astonishing for the competition. It got only a minimal 'pickup' the day after it appeared. But over the next few days, as other medical and science reporters made their own inquiries, it began to pop up on other front pages and in evening newscasts. Within two weeks. Michael followed up his initial report with another page-one story about how the drugs' cost and complicated dosing schedule was going to deny the use of the drugs to the poor. In July Michael had the satisfaction of covering the international AIDS conference in Seattle and hearing the data he had included in his story being formally presented. By then, every major publication and network had confirmed it.

Ironically, there was one editor at the *Journal* who thought Michael's story was too good to be true.

The *Journal* editors, realizing they were well ahead of any competition on the story, mobilized additional reporters to cover stories identified by Michael. (The *Journal* editors apparently weren't contemplating a Pulitzer since it's well known that the Pulitzer committee prefers to give prizes to individual reporters.) Michael was told to keep reporting the impact of the new treatment. He ended the year with a profile of researcher David Ho and his efforts to produce a cure, just weeks before *Time Magazine* named Ho its "Man of the Year."

Ironically, there was one editor at the *Journal* who thought Michael's story was too good to be true. In November 1995, a few weeks before Michael started working on his story about the slow progress of AIDS drug research, David Sanford, a senior rewrite editor on the page-one desk, had sent a note to the managing editor, Paul Steiger. Sanford revealed that he was gay and that he was dying of AIDS, the consequence of a

promiscuous homosexual encounter years earlier. He said that he preferred to be open about his illness and impending death rather than letting it become the subject of gossip and speculation on the *Journal's* grapevine. Steiger not only asked Sanford to work as long as he felt like it, but he complied with Sanford's wishes, distributing his note to the *Journal* staff worldwide, accompanied with his own praise of Sanford's courage in making the revelation.

While Michael was well aware that Sanford was dying of AIDS, he didn't know that in January 1996, Sanford's physician had put him on one of the new protease inhibitors. Sanford was beginning to feel his health rebound but until he read Michael's story as it was being edited by another page-one editor, he thought it was only a temporary improvement. In November, five months after Michael's first story appeared, the *Journal* carried Sanford's poignant 5,000-word account of his personal battle with AIDS and the rebound of his health. Now, he wrote, "Thanks to the arrival of the new drugs called protease inhibitors, I am probably more likely to be hit by a truck than to die of AIDS."

Although the Pulitzer went to a *Journal* team of seven reporters and editors, the *Journal* itself made clear in its own story of the award that it was the stories by Michael and David Sanford that carried the day. □

SOCIAL SECURITY AGENCY WAS MORE THAN SOCIAL, BUT NOT REALLY SECURE

by Simson L. Garfinkel

On April 7, 1997, *USA Today* ran a front-page story about how the actions of the Social Security Administration were potentially compromising the privacy of millions of Americans. The story was picked up nationally, touched off tens of thousands of calls to Congress, sparked a round of hearings, and in less than a week resulted in forcing the Social Security Administration to reverse its policy and take the information off the Internet.

"Social Insecurity: Your salary history is on the Net, and it's not hard to read. What was the government thinking?" read the headline.

Social Security hadn't intended to violate the privacy of millions of Americans, of course. The agency was simply trying to take advantage of the Internet to cut costs and improve customer service, in line with Vice President Al Gore's "reinventing government" project. But something had gone wrong. In its effort to improve customer service, Social Security failed to anticipate the ways that the information might be misused.

As the author of the story, I didn't start out planning to write a major article about privacy issues. I

Simson L. Garfinkel is returning to his base in Vineyard Haven, MA. E-mail: simsong@vineyard.net

didn't even start out writing an article for *USA Today*. Things just sort of worked out that way.

In March, an editor of mine from the *San Jose Mercury News* took a job with Microsoft's online service, MSN, as the editor of a new online financial magazine. My editor asked me if I would like to have a weekly column. I jumped at the opportunity. The first column that I decided to write was about the Social Security Administration's Personal Earnings Benefit Estimate Statement (PEBES), a statement that the Administration can prepare for taxpayers to tell them how much money they've earned during their lifetime and their expected retirement and death benefits. Besides being a good tool for helping to plan retirement, the PEBES is a good way to find out if somebody else is using your social security number.

In the past, getting a PEBES was a complicated procedure. First you had to call up SSA and request the form. Once you got the form in the mail, you had to fill it out, mail it in, and wait for statement to be sent to you by mail. It took anywhere from two weeks to a month. The process was also expensive, costing SSA an estimated \$5.23 to answer a single inquiry.

...less than two minutes later
I saw my complete earnings
history displayed on the
computer's screen.

In 1996 the Internal Revenue Service took a big step forward into the information age and put all the US tax forms on the Internet. In March, I thought that the Social Security Administration might have done the same with the PEBES request form, so I clicked into the web site at <http://www.ssa.gov/> to look around. Instead of finding a way to download the form, I found an electronic form, ready for me to fill out. I went through the steps, clicked a button, and less than two minutes later I saw my complete earnings history displayed on the computer's screen.

Immediately, I knew that I had a big story—one far bigger than a small 500-word column on Microsoft's web site. If I could access my own PEBES report, what was to stop me from viewing Bill Gates' report, or President Clinton's, or anybody else's report, for that matter?

I called up SSA's public affairs office and was eventually granted an interview with Bruce Carter, the SSA's webmaster. To prepare for the interview, I sent

PRIVACY ISSUE

SSA mulls restoring Net data

BY ROBERT LEWIS

After beating a hasty retreat from its Internet site, the Social Security Administration (SSA) is looking for ways to restore a valuable information service to individuals without violating their privacy.

Acting Commissioner John Callahan

Carter a list of questions by e-mail. I wanted to know what security checks they had in place to prevent me from accessing some else's report. By this point, I was particularly worried about the use of the information on the web site for credit fraud. I was also worried about people overseas, like Nigerian credit fraud rings or unscrupulous Asian businessmen using the system to get information on American citizens.

In total, I asked Carter about a dozen questions. The responses surprised me even more. Although the electronic PEBES request form asked for a person's address, the amount of earnings that

they reported on last year's tax return, and other information, only five pieces of data were used to verify the identity of a person trying to view their report. Those pieces were the person's name, social security number, date of birth, state of birth, and mother's maiden name. The site had been fully functional for about a month, he said. When I asked him about security concerns, he brushed them off.

"A few people have expressed concern over the security but most people are very pleased to be able to get this information online. We do get a lot of complaints [and] expressions of concern from people who are unable to match their information. We give them alternatives for receiving their PEBES information and suggest that they call our 800 number if they have any concerns."

At this point, I knew I had a great story. After shopping around a bit, I decided to sell the piece to *USA Today*. I told my editor there that I would interview a few privacy experts, to get their side of the story, but that I was pretty confident with my own interpretation. After all, I've been covering privacy issues for more than a decade. This seemed to be a clear case in which a federal agency had violated one of the fundamental principles of data protection: the responsibility of an organization holding personal information to make sure that it is not disseminated to unauthorized individuals.

When I called Marc Rotenberg, director of the Electronic Privacy Information Center in Washington DC, I got a completely different interpretation. Rotenberg said that he had concerns about the website, but he didn't want to see it taken down, because he thought that it was important to grant people easy access to their data.

A few more calls proved to me that Rotenberg was in the minority. Evan Hendricks, publisher of *The Privacy Times*, thought that there was a high potential for abuse. "Most people are not going to suffer, but the wolves are going to sniff this out and abuse it," he

said. Beth Givens, who runs the *Privacy Rights Clearinghouse*, confirmed for me that the information which the Social Security Administration was using for verifying the identity of individuals—social security numbers, mother's maiden names, and state of birth—could easily be learned from a variety of public records. And I dropped an e-mail message to Mark Welch, an engineer at Netscape Communications Corp., which developed the web technology used by the SSA, and asked him how he felt about the personal information being disclosed. "I just got my own information online. Yikes!" he wrote back, and then proceeded to give me a long list of many ways that the information could be abused.

"Simson... you have accomplished something many journalists wait a lifetime for..."

My editor at *USA Today* also wanted me to interview a private detective. At first I didn't want to, but eventually I gave in and started going through the yellow pages. The first person I reached gave me a great quote—"Investigators would love this"—which ended up being the headline of the second-page jump.

The day after the story ran, my editor at *USA Today* sent me a note: "Simson... you have accomplished something many journalists wait a lifetime for: The Senate Finance Committee, even as I write this, is faxing a letter to the commissioner of Social Security asking them to shut down the website until it can be made more secure. Well done."

Looking back, it's clear to me that the Social Security Administration was in a no-win situation. On the one hand, they wanted to make information in their computers more widely available. But they had a problem: There is no good way to verify the identity of people on the Internet. So the Social Security Administration tried to invent its own identification system—one which relied on information stored in SSA's own computers. What SSA failed to realize was that this same information was available through many other sources.

I am presently working on a new book that explores issues of privacy in great detail. As for the column with MSN, I changed my mind about writing the column when I received a contract that said "MICROSOFT CONFIDENTIAL." I realized that in my chosen field, even though my editor at the *Boston Globe* saw no problem with it, I would have a hard time keeping my reader's trust if I was also on Microsoft's payroll. •

*A Sample Chapter
From 'A Field Guide
For Science Writers'*

WHEN A SCIENTIST IS YOUR CO-AUTHOR: THINK ABOUT IT...

by Keay Davidson

Immediately after my first (and, so far, only) collaboration with a scientist on a popular science book, I vowed: "Never again. Next time, I go solo." Yet what have I to complain about? My co-author and I are still on speaking terms; our book was favorably reviewed and reprinted in numerous languages; we both made money. Others have been far, far less fortunate. After lengthy reflection and discussion with other collaborators—some with Kafkaesque tales of woe, others with rosy memories of the happiest collaborations since the Lunts—I have amended my vow: "Next time, I go solo ... unless the money is right."

In co-writing, the frictionless collaboration is the exception, rather than the rule. A few years ago, the science writer Dava Sobel co-authored a book with astronomer Frank Drake, whom she found to be "absolutely wonderful to work with—a wonderful father figure." Even so, after publication she and Drake were "at a symposium and [science writer] Fred Golden walked up, put an arm around both of us, and joked: 'Co-authors still speaking to each other?'"

"I know some people who make their living doing collaborations," says Joel Shurkin, another science writer and author of numerous books, including two collaborations. "They either 'ghost' books for other people or they [share authorship] with a scientist. And in most cases that I know of, it's a very unpleasant experience because you've got two egos: All writers have egos and God knows, scientists have egos."

Still, many science writers are intrigued by the prospect of a book collaboration with a scientist. In theory, the ideal collaboration unfolds as follows: The writer buys a tape recorder and interviews the scientist who, with nothing better to do, spends weeks and months recounting wonderful stories about her or his career, discoveries, mistakes, encounters with the great and near-great, insights into the underlying unity of humanity and nature, etc. The writer gains vast knowledge of a scientific field. They become the best of friends; the writer is invited to all the right parties, where Nobel laureates trade gossip with NSF officials. Finally the writer rents a house in the Santa Cruz Moun-

Keay Davidson has been science writer for the San Francisco Examiner since 1986. He has won the American Association for the Advancement of Science-Westinghouse science writing prize and the NASW Science-in-Society Award. He is co-author, with astrophysicist George Smoot, of Wrinkles in Time and author of Twister, companion book to the 1996 movie.