

## Internet leaves an open window on lives of judges

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The killing of U.S. District Judge Joan Lefkow's husband and mother has rekindled an ongoing debate about how to protect the privacy and safety of judges in the Internet age.

For years, officials have struggled to inform the public about judges' qualifications and finances, while respecting the special safety concerns inherent in a job that sometimes requires ruling against dangerous or unstable people.

Some argue that over the last dozen years, the Internet has raised the stakes by making public information widely available to computer users across the nation.

Police do not yet know how or why Lefkow's family was targeted. But hate groups, angry about a ruling she issued against white supremacist Matthew Hale, had posted personal information about the judge on the Internet.

On Wednesday, a Lefkow friend and fellow judge called on the U.S. attorney general's office to take the lead in examining how to enhance the safety of judges, including the issue of online information.

"We've got to be intelligently looking at what we can do to protect the privacy of judges and judges' families, what we can do with respect to Internet information about people and so on," U.S. District Judge Wayne Andersen said.

"Suppose a [school official] says, 'Should we put your daughter's or son's picture in our weekly newsletters if she wins an award?' Well, what's your answer to that? These are questions that I've kind of put my head in the sand on in the past. This whole horrible tragedy makes me feel that it should be revisited."

In the past, public officials have wrestled with how much information to include in judicial directories and in judges' financial disclosure forms.

State court judges in New York resisted for more than a decade the idea of putting out a judicial directory, describing judges' education and legal backgrounds.

Former Judge E. Leo Milonas said he pushed for a directory about nine years ago in his role as chief administrative judge of New York, but judges, especially those who handled domestic disputes, resisted.

"They were just concerned about information being out about them," said Milonas, now in private practice in New York. "They wanted to be professional, but anonymous."

Judicial leaders finally got the directory put online earlier this year after persuading judges that it would only include information that was not personal and that much of the information could be found elsewhere on the Internet, Milonas said.

In the federal system, judges must file financial disclosure statements that reveal income, investments, paid trips and gifts.

But a law passed in the late 1990s allowed judges to redact certain information for security reasons if they received approval from federal court officials.

That provision is set to expire in December, but federal court officials will push Congress to extend it, said Karen Redmond, spokeswoman for the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts.

"Judges are in a unique situation ... because of the special job they do and some of the threats they face," Redmond said.

Once released, public information moves more quickly than ever, said Jordana Beebe, spokeswoman for Privacy Rights Clearinghouse, a San Diego-based consumer advocacy group that works with victims of identity theft and counsels some stalking victims.

Web sites post information. Companies compile it in databases. Data brokers share it for a fee. In theory, only people with a legitimate purpose are supposed to obtain data such as credit information, but those rules are not always followed online, Beebe said.

"I definitely think that we're less safe," Beebe said. To get public information in the past, "you had to physically go down to the county recorder's office or the courthouse. You had to have a face-to-face interaction with somebody. The Internet allows you to get this information in a more anonymous way ... [with] a lot more opportunity to lie about who you are."

Internet or not, some key information about judges--where they work, announcements about bar association speeches--will always be available, U.S. District Judge John F. Grady said.

"I think it's a difference in whether they can get the information in 30 seconds or two hours," Grady said Wednesday.

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