

Fake Yourself On The Web

COVER
FEATURE

Don't let hackers, spammers and scammers steal your identity – cover your online tracks using fabricated data. **Robert Irvine** explains why and how you should create a trail of false information

The word 'fake' generally has negative connotations, especially when we're talking about the web. With fake sites trying to steal our bank details, fake news poisoning our minds and fake reviews tricking us into buying shoddy products, 'fakes' are surely something to be avoided. Faking your *own* data has benefits for online privacy and security, however, because withholding your personal information is one of the best ways to foil scammers, spammers and advertisers intent on hoovering it up.

In this feature, we explain the best ways to 'fake yourself' on the web, legally and ethically – we're not suggesting you commit fraud or try to dupe anyone. Instead, we show you how to spoof your personal details when registering with sites that don't need your real information, withhold your phone number, disguise your location without resorting to a VPN, stop facial-recognition technology identifying you and much more. We even suggest a way to fake your attendance in Zoom video chats when you'd rather be out in the sun.



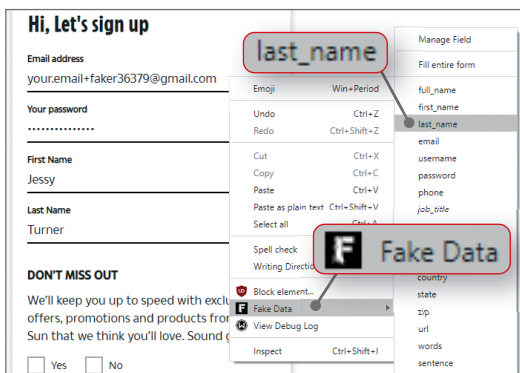
YOUR PERSONAL DETAILS

Fake your details in online forms

Some websites require you to use your real name when signing up – for example, those that involve financial transactions. Similarly, Facebook states that “the name on your profile should be the name that your friends call you in everyday life... and also appear on an ID document” (bit.ly/fbname508). In other instances, however, it’s a sensible precaution to adopt a pseudonym as a way of avoiding online fraud, unwanted communication and intrusions into your privacy.

Rather than allowing your browser to fill in your name and other personal details automatically, you can use Fake Data (fakedata.haterapps.com) to enter random information and make the sign-up process more secure. Available for Chrome, Firefox, Edge and Opera, this extension lets you right-click a text field and choose an option from its menu, including first and last name, username, address, phone number and more. There’s also an option to ‘Fill entire form’.

Fake Data is set to ‘United States (English)’ by default, but you can change this to ‘Great Britain (English)’ in the settings to obtain more relevant entries. None of the email addresses it generates link to a real inbox, so don’t use this option if the site you’re signing up for needs to verify your account.

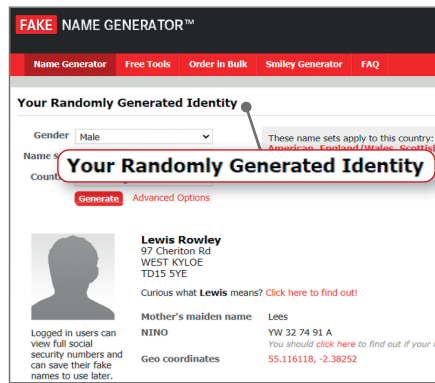


Use Fake Data to fill in online forms with bogus names and other details

If you’re not impressed by Fake Data’s bogus names, try the Chrome extension Name Generator (bit.ly/name508), which sources made-up monikers from four different sources and lets you copy and paste them into text fields with a couple of clicks.

Create a fake online personality

Setting up a fake online profile to trick someone into befriending you – a practice known as catfishing – isn’t (yet)



Fake Name Generator creates a complete new identity for you to use online

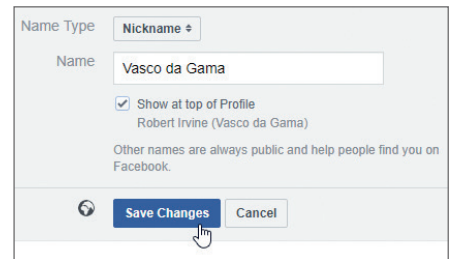
illegal but it’s certainly unethical, and we’re not encouraging any such behaviour in this feature. However, there are benefits to using fictitious information online to protect your real details from criminals and spammers, and reduce your digital footprint.

You could make up this information yourself whenever you’re asked to provide it, but an easier option is to turn to the fabulous Fake Name Generator (www.fakenamegenerator.com) instead. This free site offers ready-made identities based on the gender, nationality and country of your choice, from Australia to Uruguay. It goes beyond merely generating names, and provides a realistic address and postcode, a fake phone number that automated site tests will think is valid, a disposable email account, a birthday and star sign, physical characteristics such as height, weight and blood type, an occupation, a vehicle and even a favourite colour.

As well as protecting your privacy when signing up for websites, Fake Name Generator is a helpful resource for authors who want to give their characters a little more detail, and web designers who need dummy data to test their databases. The site stresses that it doesn’t “condone, support, or encourage illegal activity of any kind”.

Use a fake name on social media

Facebook requires you to supply your real name, email address and phone number, but the fact that it removed more than 5.4 billion fake accounts last year (bit.ly/billion508) suggests that it doesn’t always police this too thoroughly. Still, if you want to stay on the right side of the social network by obeying the rules, you can use a nickname to make your life a bit easier.



You can add a nickname on Facebook but you can’t use a pseudonym

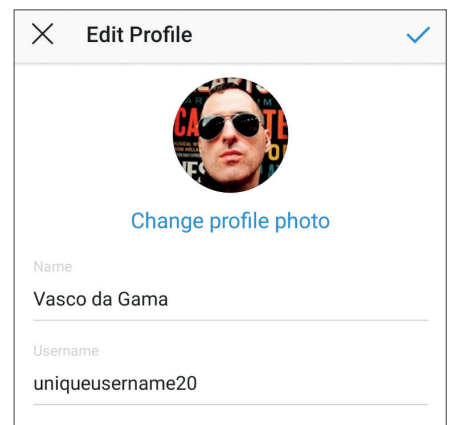
On your profile page, click About, ‘Details about you’, ‘Add a nickname or birth name’ and enter the name you want to use. Select ‘Show at top of profile’, click Save Changes and your nickname will appear in brackets after your real one.

If you spot a fake account that’s pretending to be you or someone you know, you can alert Facebook by clicking the three-dot button on the imposter’s cover photo and choosing ‘Find support or report profile’ or go to bit.ly/reportfake508.

Twitter is much more flexible about using fake names, which is why celebrities verify their identities with a blue tick to stop others pretending to be them. To change your displayed username, click More on your profile page, choose ‘Settings & privacy’ and enter an alternative handle in the Username field.

To do the same in Instagram, choose Edit Profile and enter a new name and unique username in the relevant fields. If you want to change your moniker on Google services, including YouTube, Gmail and Photos, go to myaccount.google.com/profile and click Name – you can also add a Nickname here.

To use an alias for Zoom chats, sign into the Zoom website, select Profile and click Edit next to your name.



Instagram makes it very easy to change your name and username

YOUR.PHONE.NUMBER

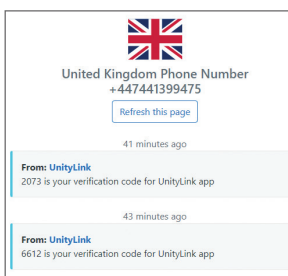
Sign up with a fake phone number

Many websites and online services insist that you provide a phone number when you register, often for no apparent reason other than to harvest your data. Although you can make up a number or use a fake-data tool to generate one, there's always a risk that you might hit on a valid number, which would link a real person to your account. To prevent this unfortunate situation, the ethical Fake Number (fakenumbers.org) service provides dozens of UK landline (bit.ly/fakeland508) and mobile (bit.ly/fakemobile508) numbers that telephone companies can't assign to customers "under current legislation". Indeed, the site's 01632 and 0770 numbers are used in British films, TV shows and radio series to ensure that fictional characters aren't accidentally given real phone numbers, creating a nuisance for the owner. Fake Number can provide phone numbers for specific UK cities, complete with correct area codes, as well as many other countries.

Fake Number	
United States	United Kingdom
Fake UK Telephone Numbers, United Kingdom	
Local (UK)	International (UK)
01632 960254	+44 1632 960254
01632 960950	+44 1632 960950
01632 960949	+44 1632 960949
01632 960315	+44 1632 960315
01632 960012	+44 1632 960012
01632 960481	+44 1632 960481

Fake Number provides phony phone numbers that don't belong to anyone

A major obstacle to using a fake number when signing up to a website is that you may need to activate your account by entering a verification code you receive by text message. You can beat this restriction by using a free site such as SMS24.me (sms24.me) or Receive SMS Online (receive-sms.cc), which not only provide disposable UK phone numbers, but let you access the relevant 'inbox' to retrieve any codes you need. The inboxes are anonymous but public, so don't use them for accounts that contain sensitive information.



There's also a handy Chrome extension called

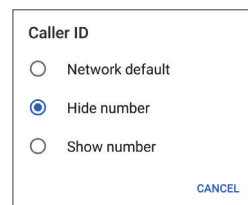
SMS24.me lets you use a fake phone number to receive account verification codes

Disposable Number (bit.ly/disposable508), which provides instant access to fake numbers and their inboxes as you browse the web.

Withhold your mobile number

It's sometimes desirable to conceal your phone number from a person or company you're calling. For example, you might want to report something anonymously to the authorities, prevent marketing companies from harvesting your number or ensure that no one tries to call you back at an inconvenient time.

The easiest way to withhold your mobile number for a single call is to press 141 before dialling, as you would on a landline phone. If you're on the ID Mobile network, type #31#. To conceal your number for all calls, you need to tweak your phone's settings to hide your caller ID. On an Android device, open the Phone app, tap the three-dot



Turn off Caller ID to stop people seeing your real mobile number

tap 'Additional settings', Caller ID and choose 'Hide number'.

On an iPhone, open Settings, choose Phone and untick Show My Caller ID.

Use a temporary phone number

Some companies (and people) won't accept calls from withheld 'private' numbers, so if you hide your caller ID,

you won't get through. One solution is to use a disposable 'burner' phone number to avoid revealing your real one, but without straying into the legally dubious territory of number 'spoofing' (disguising your caller ID by pretending to be someone else). Burner numbers can also forward calls to your main number, and let you send and receive text messages without compromising your privacy.

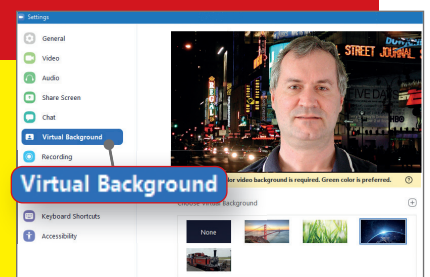
Plenty of free apps offer temporary phone numbers, but most either don't work or have dodgy privacy policies, so you're better off paying for a trustworthy service, then cancelling it once your burner number has served its purpose. Most providers are US-based, but Hushed (hushed.com) covers the UK, too, and is available for Android and iOS devices – including tablets, if you call over Wi-Fi. Sign up, choose a disposable phone number and select a plan. Prices start at \$2 (£1.52) for seven days, which includes 20 minutes of talk time or 60 texts, and you can top up with extra credit. There's also Flipper (flipperapp.co.uk) for iOS devices, although it has been suspiciously quiet on social media since last year.



Hushed gives you a 'burner' number for private calls and messages

FAKE YOURSELF IN ZOOM

Not everyone feels comfortable taking part in video chats, so if you've been press-ganged into joining a Zoom call, why not fake your participation using the service's Virtual Background feature? First, use your webcam to capture a photo or – even better – a short video clip of yourself sitting at your computer, looking attentive. Then open Zoom and click your profile picture, followed by Settings. Select the Virtual Background tab, click either Add Image or Add Video, and apply the background (a video will loop automatically, but you may want to edit it first to make sure it looks smooth). When the chat begins, greet everybody, then wait for the best moment to duck out and leave your fake self to suffer the rest of the call. Hopefully, no one will ask you a question and rumble you!



Fake your presence in a Zoom call using a virtual background



YOUR.EMAIL.ADDRESS

Sign up using a disposable email address

Unless you use your Google or Facebook account, you almost always need to provide an email address when registering with a website or online service, so it can confirm who you are and potentially pester you with marketing messages. You don't always need to use your real address, however, because you can enter a fake one from a disposable-email service instead. Use your fake address to sign up, then click the link in the confirmation message that arrives in your alternative inbox, and you'll gain access to the site without compromising your privacy.

There are dozens of free temporary-email services, but our favourite is Maildrop (maildrop.cc). It couldn't be



Create a disposable email address to stop websites knowing your real one

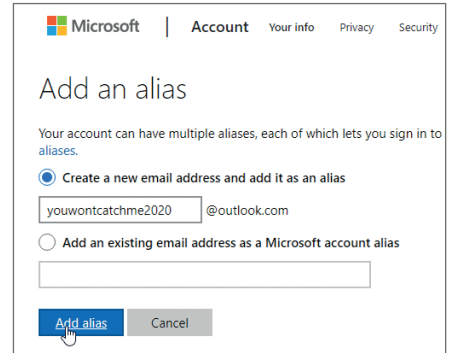
easier to use: enter a username of your choice, click Go and Maildrop will create your temporary address and accompanying inbox. Unlike rival services, Maildrop has its own spam filters and provides an alias for your address, so even your fake account won't be swamped by junk mail.

Other good options include Guerrilla Mail (guerrillamail.com), which offers a choice of domain names, and Temp-Mail (temp-mail.org), which lets you choose when to delete your disposable address. Temp-Mail also provides apps for Android and iOS, and add-ons for Chrome, Firefox and Opera.

Use an alias to mask your email address

Including your name in your email address makes you easy to identify, but it also reveals that information to hackers and scammers. You can disguise yourself by creating an alias for your email account. You'll still receive messages in your inbox as usual, but without revealing your real address.

Annoyingly, this feature isn't available in the personal version of Gmail, only in paid-for G Suite accounts, but you can add an existing email address and treat that as an alias. Go to Settings,



Create an alias for your Outlook.com account to disguise your email address

'Accounts and Import' and click 'Add another email address'. Gmail also lets you modify your address by adding full stops and placing words after a plus sign (such as web.user+blahblah@gmail.com), but that won't mask your name.

Outlook.com makes the process much easier. Either go straight to account.live.com/AddAssocId or click the cog icon in the top-right corner, choose 'View all Outlook settings' and click Email, 'Sync email', 'Manage or choose a primary alias'. Click 'Add email address', enter the alias you want to use and click 'Add alias' to confirm. You can now use this address instead of your real one.

YOUR.LOCATION

Use a fake address and postcode

Online stores obviously need to know your delivery and billing address, but there's no reason for other sites to know where you live, even if they ask for this information during registration. The easiest way to get a fake address with a valid postcode is to use a tool such as the aforementioned Fake Name Generator, or the more specific Fake Address Generator (bit.ly/address508), both of which provide false but convincingly authentic addresses and



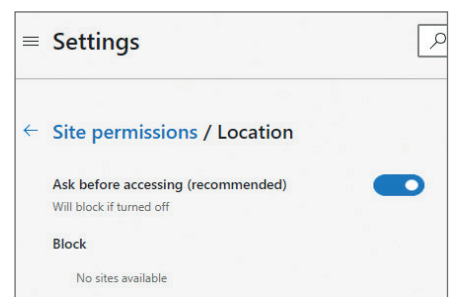
Use a fake address on websites that don't need to know your real one

postcodes for the UK and most other countries. If you don't like the tool's first suggestion, click Random Address to generate another.

Turn off geo-location in your browser

Websites use geo-location to detect where you're browsing from so they can deliver relevant local information, such as details of nearby amenities or a weather forecast. If you'd rather not reveal your whereabouts, you can tweak your browser so sites have to ask your permission to access your location data.

In Chrome, click the three-dot menu button, choose Settings, 'Site settings', Location and switch on 'Ask before accessing'. You can also check which sites you've blocked and allowed. In Edge, you'll find this option under 'Site permissions', while Firefox always asks for your permission before sharing your location. To stop sites asking for your location, go to Options, Privacy & Security, Permissions, click the Settings



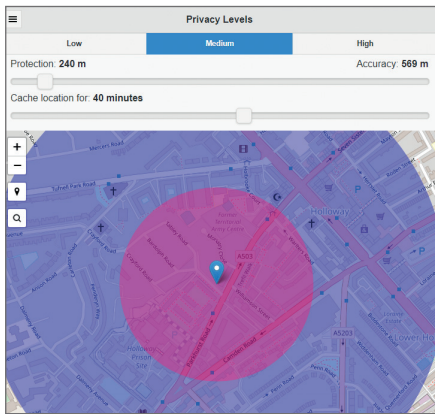
Stop sites finding out your location unless you grant permission

button next to Location and select 'Block new requests asking to access your location'.

Conceal your precise location

If you want to view local content without letting a website know exactly where you are, you can disguise your current position using the brilliant free browser tool Location Guard (bit.ly/guard508). Available for Chrome and other Chromium browsers, such as Edge, Firefox and Opera, this



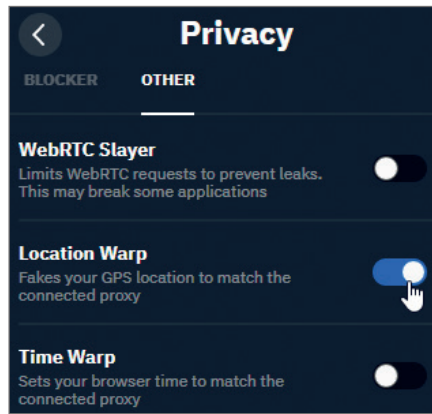


Location Guard lets you pretend to be outside your immediate area

extension works in the background, applying 'noise' to your location data to make detection less accurate. There are three levels of noise, and you can switch between them on a site-by-site basis, depending on how hidden you want to be.

Unlike Tor Browser or a VPN, Location Guard won't make you appear to be in another country - your spoofed location is up to 7,116m away (about 4.5 miles), so you'll still receive relevant local information. The add-on refreshes your fake position regularly unless you choose a fixed fake location - which, by default, is the tiny Manra Island in the Pacific Ocean.

Windscribe offers a similar feature in its proxy add-on for Chrome (bit.ly/windchrome508) and Firefox (bit.ly/windfire508). You have to sign up for it, but it's free to use and works independently of the service's desktop VPN client. Once you've chosen a

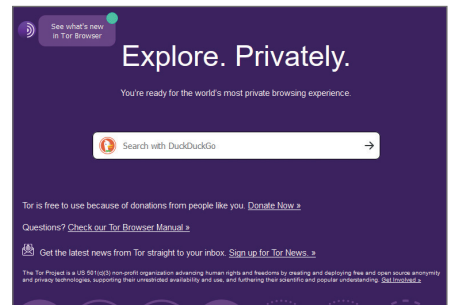


Windscribe's Location Warp fakes GPS coordinates to match your proxy

proxy server (the option won't work in Auto Pilot mode), click the extension's toolbar button, choose Privacy, then click the Other tab and switch on Location Warp. This fakes your GPS coordinates to match the proxy so that websites won't detect any discrepancy. It's also worth enabling Time Warp so your browser's time matches that of your spoofed location.

Disguise your location using Tor or a VPN

We've devoted plenty of coverage to the privacy benefits of VPNs and Tor this year - see Issues 504 (bit.ly/webuser504) and 499 (bit.ly/webuser499) respectively for our in-depth features - so we won't repeat ourselves here. We'll simply reiterate that they're the most powerful methods of hiding your location while online, because they mask your IP address to make it look as if you're browsing from



Tor Browser is a great way to hide your location but it can be slow

somewhere else. Both have the added benefit of letting you access web content that's blocked in the UK, too.

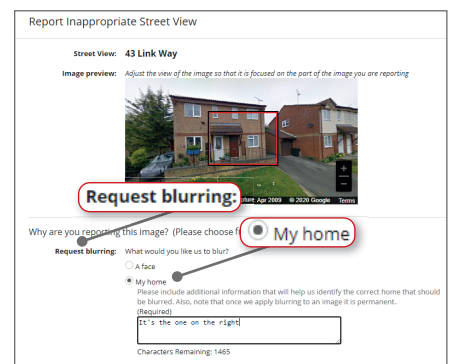
Windscribe (windscribe.com) is still our favourite free VPN, offering 10GB of anonymous data per month and servers in 11 countries, including the US. It also has affordable subscription plans for those who need more options and data.

The latest version of Tor Browser (www.torproject.org) is its most secure yet, automatically switching you to the 'onion' versions of sites where available. Tor's excellent Android app (bit.ly/tordroid508) is worth installing, too.

However, if you only want to fake specific personal information online, a VPN or Tor may be overkill, especially as their traffic-routing methods can slow your browsing speed.

Blur your house on Street View

Most of us have looked up our homes on Google Street View, but if you'd rather other people didn't see where you live, whether for privacy reasons, burglary fears or because it looked messy when Google's cameras captured the image, you can ask for it to be blurred. Click the 'Report a problem' link in the bottom-right corner of the Street View photo of your home, then adjust the red rectangle to focus on the part of the image you're reporting. Select a reason for blurring from the options below and provide any additional information. Enter your email address and click Submit. Google should apply a blur within the next few days.

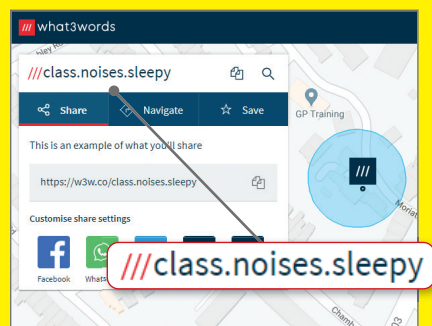


Blur your home on Google Street View to stop strangers looking at it online

SHARE YOUR LOCATION USING WHAT3WORDS

Sharing your precise location without supplying an address, postcode or coordinates may sound impossible, but What3words (what3words.com) does exactly that. This fantastic free service, which is available for Android, iOS and on the web, has divided the world into 57 trillion 3x3m squares, each of which is identified by a unique address. Unlike longitude and latitude, however, What3words' addresses are easy to remember, because each consists of three randomly assigned words separated by full stops - for example 'sage.chemistry.tigers' or 'purple.monkey.dishwasher'.

These word combinations are easy to share via email, social media and over the phone, and they allow other people to find you (and vice versa)



What3words lets you share your location without providing the address

without anyone disclosing a postal address. What3words is actually more accurate than the postcode system and could prove life-saving if you're ever lost or stranded somewhere away from a road, building or obvious landmark.



YOUR.FACE

Tweak photos to fool facial recognition

When you post a photo of yourself online, your main concern is probably to choose a decent one that doesn't make you look silly. However, a more worrying consideration is that facial-recognition tools may be able to identify you in images they scrape from websites, and use that data to build a profile of you.

Other than trying to fool this technology by wearing glasses, fake facial hair or a mask, you could try tweaking your photos before sharing them online using a new tool called Fawkes (bit.ly/fawkes508). Developed by students at the University of Chicago, this free program uses a process called image cloaking to make tiny, pixel-level changes to your images. These adjustments can stop facial-recognition algorithms identifying you, without blurring or ruining the picture.

To use Fawkes, click the Select Image button, choose a picture to 'cloak', then click Protect Selected Image. After a minute or so, the site saves your facial-recognition-fooling photo to the original folder. We received a security warning from Microsoft Defender when we installed Fawkes, but it's completely safe to use.



BEFORE



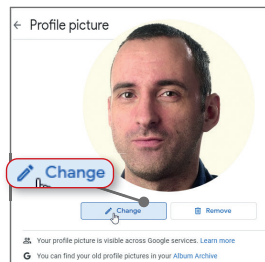
AFTER

Spot the difference: Fawkes makes tiny changes to your photos to fool facial-recognition algorithms

Hide your face in search results

Earlier this year, privacy advocates raised concerns over a facial-recognition tool called PimEyes (pimeyes.com), which allowed anyone to upload a picture of you and find matches across the web. The site now accepts only webcam photos, but Google Images and TinEye (tineye.com) can both perform similar reverse-image searches.

The best way to stop your face appearing in search results is to remove



Change or remove your Google profile photo to hide your face online

it from any sites it appears on, or at least change the picture to something less identifiable, such as a cartoon avatar or a photo of a pet. To do this for Google's services, such as Gmail, YouTube and Hangouts, go to myaccount.google.com/profile, click Profile Picture and select Change or Remove.

To hide your Facebook profile photo from search results, go to Settings, Privacy and disable the option 'Do you want search engines outside of Facebook to link to your Profile?'. For other sites and social media accounts, you'll

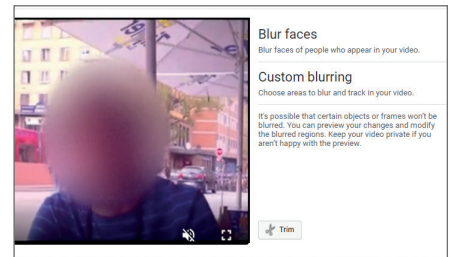
need to ask the companies and people behind them to take your photo down.

If a picture you've replaced or deleted still appears in Google's results, go to the 'Remove outdated content' page (bit.ly/removal508) and request that it be removed.

Blur your face in YouTube videos

Disguising your face in photos is relatively easy – simply use an image editor, such as LunaPic's free online tool (bit.ly/luna508), to blur it – but obscuring a moving subject in a video is much trickier. Fortunately, YouTube provides a tool that automatically detects faces in videos and lets you blur those belonging to people who may not want to be recognised – including yourself – without affecting the rest of the video. To use the tool, click Edit Video, Editor then Add Blur, which you'll find beneath the video timeline. Click the Edit button next to 'Blur faces' to choose the people whose faces you want to obscure. Play the video to make sure the blurring process has worked, then click Save.

Alternatively, select 'Custom blurring' to disguise a specific object in a video, such as a car licence plate or something embarrassing or confidential. You can blur multiple items and control how long the effect lasts. ■



YouTube can detect and blur faces in videos to protect people's privacy

NEXT ISSUE

on sale Wednesday 2 September 2020

BEST NEW PORTABLE SOFTWARE

Why install bloated programs when you can just download and go? We round up the latest free tools

PLUS...

➤ **RADIO-STREAMING APPS**
Tune into thousands of online stations on your phone or tablet

➤ **HACK & IMPROVE GMAIL**
Add useful new features to Google's webmail – for free

➤ **AUTOMATE WINDOWS**
Schedule your PC to perform mundane everyday tasks

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