

Trace Labs OSINT Search Party CTF Coach Guide



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Revision History

Date	Change Author	Notes
23 Oct 2019	Katniss-Melb & Belouve	Version 1 - Initial Document
06 April 2020	Belouve, Adrian (AK47Intel), and James (Blackbeard)	Version 2 - Revisions for Global CTF IV
18 June 2020	Adrian Korn (AK47Intel)	Version 3 – Updated links and terminology
28 July 2021	Alex Minster (Belouve)	Version 4 – Updated links and guidance
26 October 2022	Tom Hocker (humanDecoded)	Updated Categories
24 January 2024	Alex Minster (Belouve)	Overhaul to change to OSINT Coach guide



Welcome and Thank You

Thank you all so much for volunteering to help in such a positive way, to demonstrate the effectiveness of #OSINTforGood, help sharpen the tradecraft of many other hackers, and above all else... to help many families through what may be a terrible reality by assisting law enforcement in the reunification process. Though this may be gamified, the ultimate goal is not for teams to put points on a board, but to help law enforcement gain traction in their missing persons investigations through solid and well-reported pieces of open source intelligence. You, as an OSINT Coach, are a valued part of that process. Again, thank you!

A primary change: From Judge to OSINT Coach

In 2024, Trace Labs decided it was appropriate to evolve the role from that of a judge, to that of an OSINT Coach. The original responsibilities of our back end volunteers are still in place. They're still a layer of filtering in the intel collection process and the ones that make the CTF an actual competition.

The current role is so much more than a "judge" though. Our coaches want their teams to succeed, get points and even "win" the CTF. They want their teams to submit as much quality intelligence as possible.

Our announcement and details on it can be found here:

<https://www.tracelabs.org/blog/volunteer-osint-coaches>

We are continuing to make edits, so anywhere here or elsewhere that you see a Trace Labs Judge being referred to, it should be a Trace Labs OSINT Coach.

Before the CTF

1. Set-up your [Trace Labs Discord](#) and OSINT Search Party **CTF platform** accounts. OSINT Search Party can be accessed at <https://searchparty.tracelabs.org>. Within a few days of the OSINT Search Party CTF, one of the Trace Labs organizers will set up a coach account for you.
2. Trace Labs has a 3 part training series that provides:
 - a. An introduction to Trace Labs
 - b. How to get started as a contestant on the OSINT Search Party CTF Platform



c. How to be a volunteer OSINT Coach in an OSINT Search Party CTF

You can view this training series [here](#) to get some background on our organization and our CTF before reading onwards.

3. We also have a humorous 5 minute video put together for what to expect as a Trace Labs CTF OSINT Coach. This can be found on YouTube here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-cX-DJgxoE>
4. Attend the OSINT Coach Briefing, which is held by our Admins Belouve and HumanDecoded. This is usually a few days before the CTF and attendance allows for a great Q&A opportunity. If unable to attend, a recording will be made available that is recommended to watch before the CTF.
5. Set-up burner accounts (otherwise known as ‘sock puppet’ accounts) in different social media platforms like Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, etc. Consider using a photo from <https://thispersondoesnotexist.com/> These accounts can be used for subsequent CTFs and do not need to be burned after each CTF, though this is up to each coach’s discretion. This can take about 30 to 45 minutes, depending on the depth you apply to your sock puppet accounts.
 - a. An introduction to setting up Sock Puppet accounts, from TraceLabs, is located here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3KPO58wkw7M>
 - b. TraceLabs held a webinar on Sock Puppets that is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EEeJcZhxAf4> “An Evening With The Puppet Masters: A discussion on alternate social media accounts”
 - c. Jake Creps, a member of that panel, has a great guide to learn more about the process involved: <https://jakecreps.com/sock-puppets/>
6. Set up a VPN to use. We have several recommendations in the TraceLabs Discord. Realistically, it is up to you for which works best. Please take care to protect your own privacy and security. There may also be times where a VPN blocks access to a piece of intel that you need to validate. Please plan for this, and coordinate with another coach if you are having trouble accessing a submission from your team.

You might also set up a VM (Virtual Machine) to operate in. This will further isolate your system and can be deleted or reverted at the conclusion of the CTF. Some use the TraceLabs OSINT VM or other VM systems, and this is up to you and your comfort with your system. Recommendations are available if you ask in the TraceLabs Discord.

A brief tour of the TraceLabs VM is available here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FIGdSZk1F6o>

The Introduction and installation of the TraceLabs VM is available here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjK0nvmOeUA>



TraceLabs additionally held a Live Demo with Q&A on the TraceLabs VM:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZdOb-NSiAw>

7. Prep some form of tracking for what your teams have submitted. You may be assigned multiple teams, and it gets hectic. Being able to have a document, tool, whatever works for you, to keep track of what a team has established, will help quite a bit. Some notes like “they established who the significant other is (light detail)” or “they found this social media account for the subject”. It will help you to be able to string together their process of established information. An example will be provided in the “*Team Tracking and Notes*” section, and will feature CherryTree. Feel free to use whatever tracking mechanism you want to use to cut through the confusion, so that you know where your teams are at, what they have established, etc. We trust you to be able to figure out what works best for your tracking.

Please note: It is not recommended for thorough notes to be retained on the cases worked on. Please ensure that the notes are cleared away at the conclusion of the contest. This will be reiterated in the “*After the CTF*” section.

8. Become familiar with the different categories and points. I put details for the different categories and points at the end of this document for easy reference.
9. <https://searchparty.tracelabs.org/categories>
10. Review the canned responses in a later section. This should help in multiple ways, as you may use these to wordsmith a professional response to your teams, help build the tradecraft and reporting skills of your teams, and inform you of what types of intel would be rejected.

Please note: Trace Labs will sometimes encounter high-profile or high-publicity cases. Speculation and speculation forums are not accepted. News sites are also not accepted. Sites that are an aggregate or collection of news media articles or known information are not accepted. Encourage your teams to do good intel and good solid reporting.

11. Plan for how you will transition from the CTF to the rest of your day/night. As seen in videos above, OSINT Coaching can be tense. More details will be in the “*After the CTF*” section, but please prepare as needed to stay well.

During the CTF

1. **Important Note:** It is expected that you will have no pre-existing conflicts with the team you are assigned. These conflicts could be either personal or professional. If there is anything that would prevent you from objectively evaluating your team's submissions please reach out to the admins for a team reassignment.



2. Log into the CTF platform. You will see the names of the missing persons under cases. Click on the small I icon to view the details that Trace Labs has for the missing person.
3. Log in to the Trace Labs Discord group. This is how we will communicate with you and how you can ask questions. Please also note who the senior OSINT Coaches are that you can consult. We will try to announce senior OSINT Coaches that can be consulted for each event, but feel free to inquire in the channel for anything that you need additional guidance on. Beyond senior OSINT Coaches is the leadership staff, who can be consulted as needed with a @Leadership tag or directly contacting anyone with the Leadership role.
4. On the right side, you will see the incoming submissions for the team(s) assigned to you. Click on the submission to expand it.
5. You'll need to validate their submissions by visiting the submitted URL. You may need to log into the social media platform using your burner account. If the URL is behind a paywall, this submission can be rejected. This is an open source CTF activity.
6. Once you have validated the submission, you click on the accept button and the team will get the points. You can also provide a comment to help motivate the team. If the category selected by the team was incorrect (maybe the team member didn't pay attention to the categories), you can change the category from the drop-down menu so that they get the correct points.
7. For exceptional submissions that may provide a lot of value for the law enforcement agency, you can use the "star" option. This will automatically accept the submission.

Important Note: For *any* Location submission (Highest value flag for 5000 points), in order for it to be approved, it must be brought up with multiple OSINT Coaches. Final approval can only be done by a member of the Core Team. Announce it in the coach channel and have other senior coaches consult on it. If needed to get final approval of the submission, routing through the Admins of @Belouve and @HumanDecoded will be the proper approach. We'll discuss with the core team and decide if we award points for such submissions. Additionally, any other high-value submission (1000 points or more) is recommended to have additional review, but not required.

8. Watch out for some teams who may keep on gaming the system by providing duplicate submissions. Check if they submitted the first entry under a lower point category and they realized that they should have submitted it under a higher point category. In this case, you can go back to the previous submission by clicking "History" in the CTF platform. Then choose the team name and change the first entry submission status to reject. Then accept the second entry and put in a comment that the previously accepted one has been rejected and that you're giving them the higher points instead.

You may also consult the "*Team Tracking and Notes*" section for tricks on limiting this issue.



9. When you reject the submission, you can choose any of the “instant” rejection reasons. **Note:** When you use the canned “rejection” reasons, any text you put in the comment field will disappear.
10. To better help the team members improve their tradecraft, provide a short comment/explanation. But make sure that you don’t use the “instant” rejection reasons because your text will disappear. Just use the normal reject button. I’ve provided some canned responses in a later section that have been used over several competitions.
11. **Most Valuable OSINT** - We also want to give the reminder that we want our friendly competition to be talented people vs. the missing persons problem, and less of talented people vs. talented people. Work alongside everyone, not against anyone. Additionally, our competition has always sought out quality over quantity, and we’ll clarify that the HIGHEST PRIZE that is equivalent to our Black Badge, is the Most Valuable OSINT award :mvo: . Top point earner is not the top prize, and they get a gold badge.

The MVO features OSINT that is

- Highly Actionable
- Unique OSINT Technique Used
- High level of difficulty to find
- Exceptional context and supporting evidence provided

The MVO is nominated by OSINT Coaches. So go ahead and advocate for the most impactful submission you have seen! Encourage them to have it well-crafted and meeting as many of the above items as possible.

After the CTF

Clean Up Your Data

Take steps to protect your identity and the security of your system. Some recommended steps are:

1. Revert or delete your VM environment
2. Clear out any notes taken in your private tools (CherryTree, Notepad, etc).
3. Log out of any of your sock puppet / burner accounts. If you intend for them to be burnt at the end of this contest, make plans to have them removed.
4. An antivirus / antimalware scan may be prudent on your machine as well.

These are recommendations, and you will know best how to clean up your machine and data. If you need guidance, reach out to others on the Discord channel.



Please note: It is not recommended for thorough notes to be retained on the cases worked on. Please ensure that the notes are cleared away at the conclusion of the contest.

OSINT Coach Feedback Form

You may be sent a feedback form to fill out, which should take less than 10 minutes. This helps Trace Labs be able to adjust and evolve for future events. This can be done immediately at the end, or within a day or two.

OSINT Coach Mental Health

The cases and intel, and the high rate of speed of the intel, can add a high degree of mental stress for a coach.. In addition to this, the material may be disturbing, with examples being human trafficking, prostitution, pornography, suicide, and death of subject. There may be a number of heartbreaking tales that you just worked through in a short amount of time. This does not serve to be an all-encompassing mental health guide, but encouragement to keep aware.

Feel free to step away during if you need a moment to process something rough. I myself (Belouve) have done so in past cases, and you can hand off your work if needed. A recommendation I have, from the “*Before the CTF*” section that is mirrored here, is to have some planned transition from the end of the CTF. Whether you plan to commit to watching a lighthearted movie at the end, hang out with your family, go for treats, or hang with friends. A planned positive activity after going through the CTF has always worked wonders personally. I say this at a time where there is a lot of global collective trauma with regards to the pandemic. For resources, we are working on additional avenues, including those on a more global level, but we wanted to leave the following resources here. If you need to reach out to a fellow OSINT Coach or admin, please do so. Additional resources are listed at this site, from the National Alliance on Mental Health : <https://nami.org/Find-Support>

Additional Reference Sections and Guides

Team Tracking and Notes

One option is to use CherryTree for this, and will insert a screenshot below. (<https://www.giuspen.com/cherrytree/#downl>) It also comes pre-loaded into Kali Linux, and is fairly cross-platform.

You can set up a hierarchy of:



Name of Trace Labs Event (Like Trace Labs Global 2024.01)

|--- Missing Subject Name (Like John Wick)

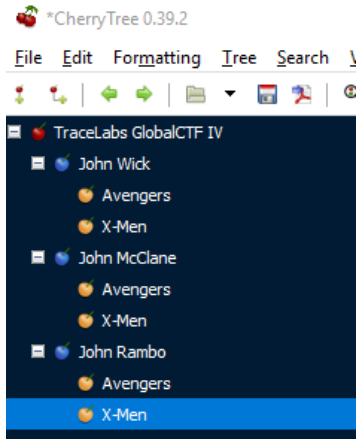
 |--- One of your assigned teams (like Avengers)

 |--- Another of your assigned teams (like X-Men)

|--- Another Missing Subject Name (like John McClane)

 |--- One of your assigned teams (like Avengers)

 |--- Another of your assigned teams (like X-Men)



□ An example of the above setup

Validation Tips and Tricks

- Recognize that the submitted intel for many categories needs to focus on the missing person. With some high-profile cases, there may be a lot of intel submitted on individuals that are not the missing person, but a person of interest. This would not count in many of the categories such as Basic Subject Info or Advanced Subject Info, unless it can have a strong tie to the subject.
- Quickly discern the rejected sources. News sites, media sites (like a TV show about the missing person), speculation and speculation forums (like websleuths or Reddit), or aggregates of known data (such as Wikipedia or a fan site for the case) would also be rejected.
- All rejected items do have an exception, but it is extremely rare for it to do so. An example: News sites are not excepted, but there was a case where a news article referenced a funeral, and in that reference, was a very thorough family tree that included the subject. This was acceptable at the Family category for points. Again, very rare for exceptions, and there must be some very solid reporting and rationale for the intel.



Disputes

There will likely be disputes encountered on your rulings. Here are a few quick tips for them:

- First, make sure they saw or received the rejection notes. Sometimes they do get removed (glitch or an error on the OSINT Coach's part), and to them, it seems like it was rejected with no reason given.
- Your teams should be clearly articulating the submissions they are making.
- Your teams should be staying true to the spirit of the competition and not be "spamming" submissions.
- Please always work to sharpen their tradecraft. A lot of times a dispute may arise because the intel is clear to them, but not clear to the coach or to any law enforcement that will then review it.
- Feel free to consult the canned coach notes for some guidance on common rejection reasons.
- Feel free to ask in the OSINT Coach Discord channel. Someone may be able to give you a response.
- Clarify to your team that you have consulted with other coaches, and what the current ruling is.
- Also: accept that you, as an OSINT Coach, might make mistakes. This will clear up a lot of tension in disputes, if you are willing to admit to your team that you erred.
- Additionally, do not be afraid to consult one of the senior OSINT Coaches. They will be announced for each event. The senior OSINT Coaches often spend a lot of their time helping out with disputes on rulings. We are here to help everyone.

Canned OSINT Coach Notes

Please read through the below canned responses in order to help shape your determinations of what good submissions we are looking for. These responses (and any notes about them) can help you to strengthen the value of your teams' submissions.

1. News media sites are not accepted for submissions, as information is likely already known to police. If established that the news site information is not known to police, then it can be evaluated and scored.
2. This is sort of a missing persons website/aggregate. Any leads such as these would have been shared with law enforcement, and may not be a new lead.
3. This podcast/YouTube video is sort of an aggregate of known missing persons information. Any leads such as these would have been shared with law enforcement, and may not be a new lead.
4. This video submission is not narrowed down enough to provide the reviewer with specific information. Please resubmit with notes calling out the specific timestamp and information enclosed. *(This is for submissions that may be a 20-minute video that does*



include valuable information, but not specified where. Coaches may not have the time to watch a lengthy video in order to come across the piece if intel desired.)

5. Speculation forums would not reach the level of validation needed. If more direct intel is provided, a resubmission will be retrieved.
6. Submission is information already included in police reports. *(This unfortunately happens more often than thought. The picture they submit as intel will be the same picture in the police report. Same for some other details, where your team may have just grabbed a name and started digging. The police report is on the tab within Search Party, and should be reviewed by coaches and contestants. If an issue, please guide your teams to review the police report to not restate known information.)*
7. We do not see a clear connection established between this submission and the missing person.
8. Submission is behind a paywall or a paywall(ed) site.

We are not accepting the rationale of all followers are friends. The end goal is not getting points on a board, but providing actionable intel to law enforcement. Giving them pages of all followers will harm the Trace Labs relation with law enforcement and may delay the reunification process for the missing individual. We have had individuals script and strip every Facebook friend, and that has been rejected. If there is a case that the follower is an acquaintance of the subject, then that should be detailed in the submission, with a link that would make sense to law enforcement.

Categories

NOTE: Any information that can be used to help locate the subject has value. While many items are listed below, there will be many items that are not and will be valued as the CTF progresses. More is better and you will likely get points for items not listed here if it is deemed to help the investigation.

These are drawn from the site accessible at: <http://searchparty.tracelabs.org/categories> This may be accessible outside of a current CTF as well. In case of conflict between this guide and what is on CTF platform, the CTF platform takes priority.

**FRIENDS / 10 points**

Relevant information involving friends of the MP

"Relevance" will be determined at the discretion of the volunteer judge:

- Social Media profiles of friends shown to interact with MP
- Information involving friends of the MP relevant to the investigation. This may include meaningful interactions from Friends with the MP, meaningful photographs on Friend's social media accounts, insightful comments from Friend's concerning the disappearance of MP and so on....

EMPLOYMENT / 15 points

Relevant information involving employment of the MP

"Relevance" will be determined at the discretion of the volunteer judge:

- Name of current or previous employer(s)
- Address of current or former employer(s)
- Information involving MP's employment relevant to the investigation. This may include information about MP's behavior at work, MP's feelings toward employer and so on...

FAMILY / 20 points

Relevant information involving Family of the MP

"Relevance" will be determined at the discretion of the volunteer judge:

- Social Media profiles of family members relevant to the investigation
- Social Media comments from family relevant to the investigation
- Any other information about MP's family members relevant to the investigation

BASIC SUBJECT INFO / 50 points

Relevant information involving Basic Info of the MP

"Relevance" will be determined at the discretion of the volunteer judge:

- Aliases/Handles
- Relevant photos that would contribute to the investigation. Examples of this may include photos showcasing different hairstyles, manners of dress or other physical characteristics not mentioned in the MP report for example
- Forum profile(s) and/or relevant posts
- Dating site profile(s)/posts
- Social Media profile(s). Examples of this may include Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Reddit, Instagram, LinkedIn and so on...
- Any other online persona or profile. Examples of this may include Github, Adult Entertainment websites (either customer or content creator), Gaming profiles, Etsy, Pinterest and so on....
- Personal websites
- Email address(es)
- Any other basic information about the MP relevant to the investigation as explained in your submission



ADVANCED SUBJECT INFO / 100 points

Relevant information involving Advanced Info about the MP

"Relevance" will be determined at the discretion of the volunteer judge:

- Unique physical identifiers (e.g. tattoos, scars, piercings)
- Major medical issues/conditions. Can be physical or psychological
- Any information about where the MP might have gone. May include social media posts, social media interactions or recollections from friends/family for example
- license plate of vehicle(s)
- make and model of vehicle MP may be traveling in
- Previous missing persons history - news reports about the previous disappearance and return are acceptable
- Evidence of MP being deceased
- Evidence of MP being no longer missing
- Any other information about the MP that transcends Basic Subject Info relevant to the investigation

DAY LAST SEEN / 300 points

Relevant information regarding the subject's last day seen.

This can include but not limited to:

- Details about MP's physical appearance on day last seen (clothing, hair, etc) not stated in MP report
- Details of MP's state of mind on day last seen (mood, altercations, conversations, etc). This information could come from Friends/Family or from the MP themselves
- Any other new information about the MP on their last day seen relevant to the investigation

ADVANCING THE TIMELINE / 700 points

Information showing activity from the MP after their missing date

- Activity from a social media account (including aliases) exclusively controlled by the MP after they went missing
- Location information since subject went missing, up to the current date. An example of this would be information pointing to a city they were likely living in today (while not narrowing down their actual physical location)
- Account creation after day last seen
- CCTV picture/video of MP
- Any other information that showcases MP's activities after they were reported missing

DARK WEB / 1000 points

Relevant information found on the dark web about the subject.

Your submission must originate from a .onion URL to be considered Dark Web - Eg. <https://dsfjldsiflj.onion> and must only exist on the Tor network - Eg. <http://facebookcorewwi.onion> would not count as Dark Web

- pictures or details of subject on human trafficking related dark web sites
- the sales of goods by the subject on dark web sites
- any activity or post by the subject on the dark web

LOCATION / 5000 points

Relevant information pertaining to the current location of the subject. Current location being defined as: Exact location/address the subject has been in past 24 hours, or will imminently be present at. Broad geographical descriptions will not count for this category.

As this is the highest point flag, it will require the highest level of accuracy and thoroughness in reporting and context. Speculation has no place in this intel.

This does not include a police update saying the person was found or an obituary - this will get you 150 points and can be under the category Advanced Subject Info.