

# Hiding in THE VIRTUAL SHADOWS

*We've all probably done it at some point but what is it that compels us to stalk people online? And where should we draw the line?*

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In the last decade or so, social media has slowly become an integral part of our lives. While platforms like Facebook, Instagram and X (formerly known as Twitter) offer us more opportunities than ever to stay in touch with friends, family and acquaintances, they have also opened up a Pandora's box of behaviours that can blur the lines between curiosity and obsession. One such behaviour is monitoring the online activities of people we know (or possibly don't know, like a celebrity or an ex's new partner). In a study conducted into the motives and uses of Facebook, surveilling others was the second most cited reason for using the site, after staying in touch with friends. In a world where our digital lives are presented on a platter for public consumption, it can be hard to resist the urge to have a good snoop into other people's businesses. But what exactly are the motives forcing us to act like amateur cyber detectives?

Humans are naturally curious creatures and social media has provided us an outlet for satisfying that inquisitiveness in a

way that we've never experienced before. We can now have a front-row seat to the lives of others, all without ever having to leave the house or socialise with anyone. It's a convenient and easy way to stay informed without exerting any effort.

The anonymity that the internet can grant us makes it tempting to check up on those whom we would much rather remain oblivious to the fact that we are spying on them. We keep tabs on ex partners, old classmates or estranged family members not only to be nosy but to gain validation that our lives appear to be 'better' than theirs - at least online. We may also do this with our peers, ranking our achievements, relationships or how many 'likes' we have in comparison to them, in an attempt to bolster our self-esteem temporarily.

Another advantage of this anonymity is being able to gain knowledge about others without their awareness. We might Google a potential date before agreeing to meet with them in person. An employer might search for the digital footprint of a prospective candidate before agreeing to hire them. Some parents might secretly

check their children's phones to keep track of what they are doing and saying online. These types of investigations can give us a sense of control and are a way of spotting any potential red flags on the horizon that we may have missed from our interactions in the real world.

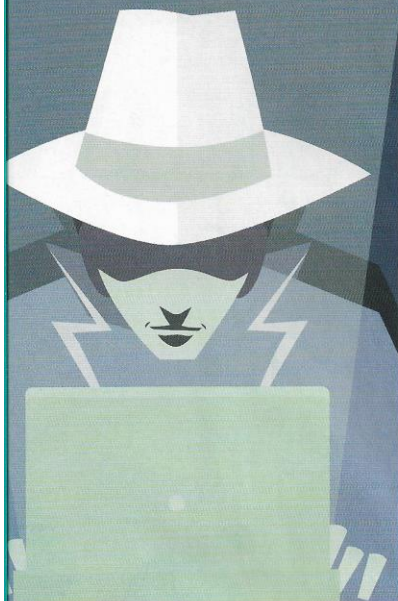
Relational uncertainty can also be another major incentive as to why we spy on others online, especially when it comes to our romantic relationships. Whether this is by going through our partner's private messages or looking at who has commented on their recent post, we scour for any sign of a potential threat. This can be understandable, especially if the offending partner has unresolved trauma from previous relationships, for example being cheated on.

According to a study conducted by the University of Toronto and the University of Guelph, women are more likely than men to monitor their partner's activities on social media, especially those with an anxious attachment style. Regarding psychologist John Bowlby's work on attachment theory, anxiously attached adults are more inclined to engage in online surveillance because they are less trusting and secure in their relationships.

Surveilling others online isn't always just an activity confined to secrecy and solitude - co-creeping with others has evolved into a modern-day form of social bonding. Evaluating and gossiping about what other people choose to display on their social media has become a replacement sewing

**“IT CAN BE HARD TO RESIST THE URGE TO HAVE A GOOD SNOOP INTO OTHER PEOPLE'S BUSINESSES”**





circle for the digital age. It allows us to engage in a real-time running commentary with others, savouring tiny morsels of tittle-tattle while running down mutual acquaintances in exchange for an ego boost and a sense of righteousness.

So where do we draw the line between harmless snooping and the more predatory practice of cyber-stalking? A lot of it boils down to the intention behind the behaviour. Cyber-stalking is defined as using the internet or other electronic communication to harass, threaten or intimidate others. This can take many forms including persistently sending unwanted messages to the victim, creating fake accounts to follow someone without their knowledge or trying to hack into their personal correspondence. Most of us wouldn't veer into this kind of territory and our snooping is usually not driven by malicious purposes. However, regularly monitoring other people's online activity can quickly turn into an unhealthy obsession.

We are all too widely aware of the negative impact that social media can have on our mental health. Multiple studies have found strong correlations between excessive social media use and an increased risk of developing psychiatric disorders like depression, anxiety and self-harm. Using social media to compulsively monitor other people's lives can play a key role in this. Having constant access to other people's content can fuel social comparison and promote feelings of inadequacy. We often forget that what we are viewing online

is a heavily curated showreel of other people's lives and not a true depiction of what may be going on behind the scenes. Excessive monitoring can also intensify any underlying issues that we already have in our relationships and detract from honest communication and nurturing real-life connections. This can create a breeding ground for feelings of isolation and loneliness, which can cause even more dependence on these sites as a means of achieving a quick dopamine fix.

The meteoric rise of social media has normalised digital voyeurism and we have become accustomed to trading our privacy for the entertainment and social currency that these platforms can provide. While it's important to acknowledge our natural human tendency to be inquisitive about the lives of others, we must also be responsible for maintaining healthy digital habits and avoid crossing into obsessive or intrusive behaviour. ■

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## CURBING YOUR ONLINE SNOOPING HABIT

Social media is purposely designed to be addictive, with its hyper-connectivity, ease of access and infinite supply of information. So how do we break the cycle of being overly fixated with other people's lives online?

### SELF-REFLECT

The next time you feel tempted to search someone up online, pause for a moment and ask yourself the following questions:

What's fuelling your desire to look for this person? Is it jealousy, insecurity, resentment or sheer curiosity? Will spying on this person stoke up any negative feelings within you? What are you planning on doing with any information that you might find out about them?

Being mindful of the factors influencing our surveillance behaviour (and the effect it might have on us after) is the first step to addressing the issue.

### REDUCE ACCESS

If you find yourself habitually checking the same profile(s) over and over again, then you may want to consider limiting your access to them. Unfriend, unfollow, block or hide their posts from your feed. Remember: out of sight, out of mind.

### FIND A BETTER SUBSTITUTE

Channel the time and energy you've been wasting dwelling in the digital realm into hobbies and activities in the real world. Find alternative coping methods for dealing with difficult emotions like boredom, loneliness or jealousy rather than relying on social media as a quick fix. Joining a club, going for a walk or writing a gratitude list are healthier ways of addressing the underlying emotional needs that we try to fulfil through social media.

### AVOID PASSIVELY USING SOCIAL MEDIA

Aim to use the time you spend online for positive, constructive purposes rather than for mindless scrolling or passively consuming other people's content. Use your digital presence to maintain connections, share interests and interact with others.

### CULTIVATE RELATIONSHIPS OFFLINE

Make a point of spending time with family, friends and acquaintances face-to-face.

Not only will this reduce feelings of isolation but it may also reduce feelings of envy too as others may be more willing to share the not-so-great aspects of their lives that you don't get to see online.