

Protect Yourself Online

By Hal Karp

How easy is it for a stranger to get personal information about you online? What can you do if someone is cyberstalking you? Parry Aftab, executive director of the Internet safety organization CyberAngels, explains how to combat cyberstalkers, surf safely, and chat with caution.

How vulnerable are people online?

More vulnerable than most realize. Some people are too trusting and naive when it comes to personal information. Most share information that they would never give someone they met casually offline. Would you tell the person standing next to you in the grocery store check-out line your address and phone number? Of course not, but it's no different than doing so in a chat room, often unknowingly.

How would you do so unknowingly?

Many chat programs and Internet service providers ask you to fill out a profile about yourself. What most people don't know is that this information is frequently available to anyone who wants to see it online. So if you fill out your profile with detailed information about your life, you're vulnerable. Also, say you're chatting with someone and tell them your last name and what city you live in. All they have to do is search one of many databases available on the Net to locate more information about you.

How else can you protect your personal information?

Whenever you fill out any form online, check to see what the site's privacy policy is. Who will see your information? Will it be sold? If it's open to others' eyes, don't fill in the blanks. And if you've created your own website, don't feature any personally identifiable information. This would include pictures with identifiable features such as sweatshirts with school names and recognizable landmarks. And certainly don't post your personal address on your site. Just ask yourself, "Is there anything on my site that could help someone find me?" If there is, get rid of it.

Are there other steps to take that can make it difficult for someone to find you?

Absolutely. There are abundant directories and databases online that list their addresses, email addresses and phone numbers. Several directories now boast reverse look-ups. This is where I can type in your email address and find out who you are, or do the same with

your phone number and address. I can even find out who your neighbors are. In some states, I can pull up your driver's license onscreen. So the trick is to get your information removed from as many of these databases as possible. Start by searching for yourself, everywhere you can. If you can find you, so can they.

What other common mistakes do people make online?

They don't learn the rules before venturing into cyberspace. They don't look before they leap into a chat room or onto a discussion board. You can easily break the rules and upset others. And you never know who's angry until it's too late. Offline we all know the rules of proper social etiquette. However, there is a similar set of online rules we call netiquette. These rules are necessary for staying out of trouble. A lot of cyberstalking cases occur when people inadvertently bend or break these rules. To enter an established and unknown chat room and interrupt ongoing conversation to draw attention to yourself should be seen as no different than wandering into a bar or a party where you weren't invited and don't know anyone. Would you draw attention to yourself there?

Can you further explain netiquette?

netiquette is simple. We're talking about correct behavior, which should be the same online as it is offline. Basically show respect for others and avoid anything that hints of trouble. If you break the accepted rules of netiquette, often people deputize themselves to correct you by teaching you a lesson. Often this is done the hard way. We tell people, "Just don't park your common sense at the computer when you get online."

Is it possible to email someone or surf anonymously?

Yes. You can use a free service like [Anonymizer](#), which cloaks you completely. Any website you've visited will not be able to trace your Internet service provider. To play it safe with email, use a free web-based email account such as [Hotmail](#) when writing to strangers. There are many such services. This way no one can track where you live by tracing your Internet service provider, which might be local only to your city.

Any safety tips for chatting online?

The safest place to chat is in a chat room with people you know offline. This may sound odd, but kids do this a lot. They get home and get online with the people they just left at school. Otherwise use a genderless, non-provocative screen name and remember that the moment you get into a chat room with people you don't know, be careful. Keep in mind, these are strangers you're talking to. They may sound friendly, but online anyone can be anything they want. You shouldn't share confidences with them any more than you would with a stranger sitting next to you on the bus. If you do, you're putting yourself at risk.

Is it possible to keep kids safe online?

Yes, but it requires effort. Keeping them safe is a matter of communication, not technology. If you have open and ongoing communication with your kids, meaning you talk to them about their online and offline life on a regular basis, then you'll be okay. But parents need to understand that kids can always inadvertently get into trouble online, generally by accidentally tripping upon a site while searching for something else. Would your kid be okay locating a site that details how to build a bomb? Think about it and talk to them. Communication is the key.

What about filtering software?

Filtering software can certainly help parents enforce the rules. These various software packages will block access to a lot of sites, although parents need to recognize that it might block access to some good sites that parents don't object to. You need to find the one that meets your child's needs. Some block hate better than sex, some block violence better than drugs and some allow parents to decide what will be blocked.

Is it okay for kids to chat?

I believe it is, yes. But they need to learn the same precautions. Teach your children the same rules regarding privacy. They must know what is and what is not shared online. The safest bet will be for them to chat in monitored chat rooms, where live adult monitors are in the room watching and keeping an eye out for suspicious behavior. There are several sites that feature these, such as surfmonkey.com.

How do you know if you're being cyberstalked?

Cyberstalking can take many forms, but in general, if you're being harassed online more than once by the same person, you've got a cyberstalker, especially if you're getting a sense that whenever you get online you will have to confront or deal with this person and their abuses.

So what do you do if you're being cyberstalked?

First and foremost, start by ignoring the stalker. More often than not, the lack of response on your part will turn the stalker off and the behavior will end. Keep in mind that these perpetrators get satisfaction out of getting a reaction, no matter what that reaction is. They like knowing that they're reaching you. So the minute you reply, you feed the fire. The trick is to starve it instead. Keep this in mind when it comes to reading email sent by the stalker. Many Internet and email programs allow the sender to know if their email has been read. Don't give them the satisfaction to know you've read their messages. Delete them unread, period.

What if that's not enough and the behavior continues or worsens?

Then you need help from an organization such as CyberAngels. [Visit our website](#) and

send us an email, or write to us directly at Cyber911@cyberangels.org . Or see if your chat program features a CyberAngel channel. If it does, you can likely find one of our 1300 members there to help you. If you do send an email, we'll generally respond within hours with further instructions.

How do you handle these cases?

We first investigate the case and debrief the victim. We need to get a sense of what has happened and how serious the threat of danger is. The big question remains: Is there a risk of offline danger? The second we think there is, we insist the victim contact his or her local police department.