

Social-media spying is turning us into a stalking society

Level 3 • Advanced

1 Warmer

Which of these social-media platforms do you use? Which one is the best? Why?

1. WhatsApp
2. Twitter
3. Facebook
4. Instagram
5. Tumblr
6. Snapchat
7. other

2 Key words

Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text.

stalking
surveillance

covert
harass

browsing
scrutiny

nefarious
espionage

ex
bugging

1. Your _____ is the person that you used to be married to or have a romantic relationship with.
2. _____ is the activity of looking at websites on the internet in no particular order.
3. _____ is the crime of watching and following someone in a threatening way.
4. A _____ activity is secret.
5. _____ is the use of hidden electronic equipment to listen secretly to what someone is saying.
6. A _____ activity is evil or dishonest.
7. _____ is the process of carefully watching a person or place that may be involved in a criminal activity.
8. If you _____ someone, you keep annoying or upsetting them by criticizing them, attacking them or treating them in a way that is offensive to them.
9. _____ is the careful examination of someone or something.
10. _____ is the use of secret methods to discover an enemy's political, military or industrial secrets.

3 Find the information

Find the following information in the text as quickly as possible.

1. When did Facebook introduce its 'timeline' feature?
2. How much will a spy camera disguised as a USB charger cost you?
3. Why were bugging and GPS-tracking only used by governments and private investigators in the past?
4. When did Facebook introduce its 'take a break' function?
5. How much will a hidden car-tracking device cost you?
6. Which four technologies does the text say are now being used for private stalking?

Social-media spying is turning us into a stalking society

Level 3 • Advanced

Social-media spying is turning us into a stalking society

The gap between harmless social-media following and criminal behaviour isn't as large as we like to believe: Facebook, Twitter and others must act on misuse and abuse

Keza MacDonald

13 February, 2018

- 1 Have you ever opened an ex's Instagram profile in a moment of weakness and looked sadly at photos of them looking happy with someone else? How about meeting someone promising and then browsing their recent Facebook posts to get to know them better? Or, in the first weeks of a new relationship, have you found yourself reading publicly posted words and photos for hidden meaning when they haven't texted back? I'll admit it: I have, in my early 20s, after three beers. I think anyone who has ever been caught in the web of social media would be lying if they said they had never done a bit of harmless "research".
- 2 Social media has normalized the kind of behaviour that would have been called stalking in any previous era. Think about the lengths you'd have to go to to stare at your ex with someone else in the 90s; you'd have to actually follow them around or break in to their house to steal photographs. It is easy to imagine how, for a dangerous minority of people, it could be an easy step from "normal" social-media stalking to, say, downloading a covert phone app that listens to their conversations or tracks their movements. There has been a spike in technology-related stalking activities reported to the National Stalking Helpline – hardly surprising when it's so easy to buy and use the kind of technology that would previously have only been found in one of James Bond's cars.
- 3 Bugging and GPS-tracking used to be so expensive that they were only used by governments and private investigators but a quick Amazon search offers up a hidden car-tracking device for \$27. In the related items: a spy cam disguised as a USB charger, \$52. These items are marketed as a "real-time teen-driving coach", nanny cams or parental-control software but there is nothing to stop them being used for nefarious purposes. Meanwhile, law enforcement struggles to keep up: victims of stalking or online harassment are frequently told simply to stop going online, which for a 19-year-old in 2018 is like being told not to breathe air. As the National Stalking Helpline's manager, Clare Elcombe Webber, points out, it feels like there are near-infinite technologies to help stalkers but few to help victims.
- 4 It is comforting to suppose that there is a massive difference between harmless social-media stalking and the kind that crosses over into criminal behaviour but the gap between the two is not as big as we like to think. Twitter, Facebook and Instagram have normalized the idea of having access to people whenever we want and slowly eroded the concept of personal privacy. People have become comfortable with the idea of being tracked by governments and companies through their phones, only complaining when they realize the full extent of the surveillance. In using these services, even if we lock down every privacy setting we're given (and many people don't), we give people unnatural access to our lives.
- 5 Social-media companies don't tend to think too hard about what happens when things go bad. When Facebook unveiled its "timeline" feature in 2011, it cheerfully framed the idea of making your entire Facebook history browsable by any new acquaintance as "chronicling your life story", illustrating the concept with a video tracking a happy couple from meeting to marrying. My immediate thought was: what happens if they get divorced? Facebook offered no solution for this besides painstakingly deleting old posts, one by one. It introduced a "take a break" function in 2015 to deal with the problem it had created around failed relationships. Similarly, it seems that social-media companies somehow did not foresee that they were providing excellent tools for stalkers.
- 6 In accepting someone as a friend or follower, even on private profiles, you are usually giving them access to everything you've ever posted. What if that person later turns out to be dangerous? Even if we waited to approve Instagram followers until we felt we knew them well in real life, you can never be sure. Ask anyone who has ever dated someone who later went on to stalk them.
- 7 Is Twitter responsible for the use of its platform to harass? Is Instagram responsible when someone uses it to stalk an ex? Should the developers of spyware also be criminally liable

Social-media spying is turning us into a stalking society

Level 3 • Advanced

when someone uses it to illegally monitor a spouse? These are all questions that need to be re-examined. Doubtless, governments, which are currently subjecting the tech companies to scrutiny, will pursue that. But they should be alive to the role they have played in bringing us to this point. The technologies now being used for private stalking – GPS tracking, keylogging, microphone-hijacking and spy cameras – were often themselves developed and deployed by governments for espionage or public surveillance.

- 8 Even if we are now accustomed to trading our privacy for the limited joys and usefulness of social-media platforms and potentially nefarious

toys such as drones, the platforms themselves must take responsibility. Since 2016, fuelled by the revelations about the spread of fake news and the disastrous effect social media is having on our politics and public discourse, a “techlash” has been building. The tech industry’s short-sightedness when it comes to the social and moral implications of its products is largely behind it. To stem it, tech companies will have to incorporate more humanity and foresight into their visions for the future.

© Guardian News and Media 2018

First published in *The Guardian*, 13/02/18

4 Comprehension check

Choose the best answer according to the text.

- What is the general idea of the text?
 - that people use social media too much
 - that social media has normalized behaviour that would have been criminal in the past
 - that government surveillance and private stalking are the same thing
- How could people stalk someone in the 1990s?
 - by downloading a covert phone app that listened to their conversations
 - They weren’t able to.
 - by actually following them around or breaking into their home
- What was the problem with Facebook’s ‘timeline’ feature, according to the author?
 - It didn’t take failed relationships into account.
 - It was impossible to delete old posts.
 - It was possible to browse someone’s entire life story.
- What is a ‘techlash’?
 - the spread of fake news
 - the effect social media is having on politics and social discourse
 - a reaction against the major tech companies, driven by concerns about privacy, political manipulation, etc

Social-media spying is turning us into a stalking society

Level 3 • Advanced

5 Find the word

Find the following words and phrases in the text.

1. a noun meaning *a sudden and sharp increase in something* (para 2)
2. a two-word noun phrase meaning *a camera that is hidden in the home to monitor and record the activities of childcarers* (para 3)
3. a verb meaning *gradually reduce the strength or importance of something* (para 4)
4. a two-word phrasal verb meaning *limit use of a computer network to only the users who have permission to use it* (para 4)
5. a verb meaning *announce something officially that was previously a secret* (para 5)
6. an adverb meaning *very carefully and taking a long time* (para 5)
7. a noun meaning *an aircraft that does not have a pilot but is controlled from the ground* (para 8)
8. a verb meaning *stop something from spreading or increasing, especially something bad* (para 8)

6 Phrasal verbs

Match the verbs in the left-hand column with their meanings in the right-hand column.

- | | |
|--------------------|---|
| 1. break in | a. tell someone something |
| 2. keep up | b. become something else |
| 3. point out | c. be discovered to be something |
| 4. cross over into | d. enter a building by force, especially to steal something |
| 5. turn out | e. provide something that is intended to impress or satisfy someone |
| 6. offer up | f. move at the same speed as someone or something |

7 Word-building

Complete the sentences with the correct form of the word in brackets at the end of each sentence.

1. Victims of online _____ are often simply told to stop going online. [HARASS]
2. Many people fail to lock down their _____ settings. [PRIVATE]
3. Social media is having a _____ effect on politics and public discourse. [DISASTER]
4. The tech industry is suffering from extreme short-_____. [SIGHT]
5. Some of the technology was only previously used by governments and private _____. [INVESTIGATE]
6. Should the developers of spyware be _____ liable if their products are used for illegal purposes? [CRIME]

8 Discussion

Discuss the following statements.

- Security cameras are an invasion of privacy and should be banned.
- It should be illegal for companies to track people through their mobile phone and computer use for marketing purposes.
- Stalking is a serious offence and stalkers should always be sent to prison.

Social-media spying is turning us into a stalking society

Level 3 • Advanced

KEY

2 Key words

1. ex
2. browsing
3. stalking
4. covert
5. bugging
6. nefarious
7. surveillance
8. harass
9. scrutiny
10. espionage

3 Find the information

1. in 2011
2. \$52
3. because they were very expensive
4. in 2015
5. \$27
6. GPS tracking, keylogging, microphone-hijacking, spy cameras

4 Comprehension check

1. b
2. c
3. a
4. c

5 Find the word

1. spike
2. nanny cam
3. erode
4. lock down
5. unveil
6. painstakingly
7. drone
8. stem

6 Phrasal verbs

1. d
2. f
3. a
4. b
5. c
6. e

7 Word-building

1. harassment
2. privacy
3. disastrous
4. sightedness
5. investigators
6. criminally