

More people falling victim to cyber-stalking

Posted: May 16, 2011 9:59 PM

- By: Katrina Schaefer
- By: Tara Twietmeyer

PHOENIX - **You leave behind a piece of your digital identity every time you use the Internet**, so what happens if you find yourself wanting to erase yourself from the web?

For one Arizona woman, her digital identity led to vicious cyberstalking.

“Cecelia” escaped 15 years of domestic violence. She started a Facebook account to keep in touch with her children who live in a different part of the state, but her ex-husband and others found her. They used it as a way to attack her.

“My ex-husband used it as a way to antagonize me and haunt me,” said Cecelia. “They were telling me to stay away from my daughter, that they were going to get me. It’s killing me. I wouldn’t even care, I’d let it be water off my back if it wasn’t involving my children.”

It isn’t just the victims of cyberstalking who might feel the need to hide part of their digital identity. Other Internet users might regret embarrassing photos, minor indiscretions, or even a past they don’t want to remember.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO COVER UP YOUR DIGITAL FOOTPRINT

Frank Ahearn has been called a skip tracer, private investigator and even a guardian angel.

“People are starting to realize, with an over abundance of information, it’s starting to affect their lives in different ways,” Ahearn said.

The well-known privacy consultant helps people, like Cecelia, use social media to disappear.

The idea is to make sure no one can connect you to your old life or have any physical evidence connection you to your new one.

For serious cases, Ahearn suggests setting up multiple fake Facebook pages, websites, or even businesses under your name or a variation of your name. Create bogus information that someone searching for you would follow. That way, when someone is looking for you, they won’t be able to track down the real you.

“You can’t erase the past, sometimes you can deviate it,” said Ahearn. “So on your new Facebook account, you could have 25 friends or employees, but they’re all fake people and pictures of you in Boston that have all been Photoshopped.”



Ahearn says you can also push down an unflattering photo so it won't appear at the top of a Google search.

Again, you do this by creating multiple websites or online identities. Add photos of other people and tag yourself in those pictures. That way, the real unflattering photo won't be the one that shows up at the top of a Google search.

This creates confusion, or deviation, through a fake digital identity.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Cecelia hasn't been able to completely erase her ex-husband from her personal or digital life. She said, "When I see him on Facebook it makes me pray that, you know how you pray for your enemies, so, I pray that he meets God soon. Or finds God, I don't care."

But her situation isn't rare. Betty McEntire with The Arizona Coalition Against Domestic Violence said she has seen an increase in victims who are tracked down by their abusers through the Internet.

McEntire said the Internet is the newest form of control that abusers are using to target their victims.

"When you have technology and the access to the Internet in such a widespread format, it makes it easy for people to do behaviors that they would have had to think a little bit harder about," McEntire said.

The U.S. Department of Justice recently released findings of a year-long stalking victimization study and found more than 3 million people in the nation are victims of some sort of stalking. One in four of those victims report being cyberstalked.

The stalking also includes receiving unwanted phone calls or presents, being followed or spied on, or having that person show up unannounced.

THE NEXT STEP AND HOW TO GET HELP

The Arizona State Legislature will consider **Senate Bill 1155** again next session to help protect victims like Cecelia.

If passed, it would make it illegal to use electronic or digital devices to threaten, intimidate, or stalk others.

In the meantime, McEntire said every Internet user needs to be aware of the information they are putting out online.

"Whether it's the Internet or the store, or what have you, ask questions, McEntire said. "How will my information be used?"

Experts said it's important to check to check privacy setting on your social networking site, and even Google often, to make sure nothing too concerning develops.

Read more about Senate Bill 1155.

Are you a victim? Find out how to get help by contacting [The Arizona Coalition Against Domestic Violence](#) .