

Seattle Times

January 22, 2005

Stalking No Less Scary When Virtual

By Charles Bermant

There is the idea that your e-mail address is part of your castle, that people should never cross that particular line unless they are invited. This naive concept was pretty much canceled out by spam, so we are resigned to the idea that something unwanted will always appear when you log on in the morning. You just deal with it.

But there is a clear difference between “I can help you refinance your home” and “I know where you live, who you are and I am watching.” The latter falls under the category of “cyberstalking,” a practice that can be as intrusive as its analog counterpart. A person who sends intrusive e-mails may not provide as immediate a threat as someone waiting in your vestibule, but it is as much of a violation.

“We have a right to be free from harassment,” said Joelle Ligon of Seattle, who was victimized for several years by a former boyfriend. “And there is a fundamental difference between spam and harassment. Spam is just trying to sell you something, while harassment is a hate crime directed at a specific person.”

Ligon knows her stuff. She spent years convincing others there was a problem and unsuccessfully attempted to trap her pursuer. But it paid off.

Her efforts resulted in the passage of last year’s anti-cyberstalking law in Washington. She has become an activist for the cause and was featured in last week’s People magazine.

She has blazed these trails so others are not similarly ensnared. These days, a stalking victim has some recourse and won’t spend years trying to convince others of the danger.

According to Jayne Hitchcock, a Maine-based activist who has written a book called “Net Crimes & Misdemeanors” and runs a free victim’s service, cyberstalking is easily defined: Repeated online communications after the sender has been told to cease and desist. Her prescription for dealing with this is also pretty simple and is outlined at www.haltabuse.org.

There are a few steps to take before getting Hitchcock’s help. The first is to be direct, a message that says simply, “Please stop sending me e-mail.” Don’t reply to any subsequent contact, no matter how annoying. Anyone in immediate physical danger needs to call the police immediately. Save all the offending messages as evidence.

Hitchcock said many stalkers have a previous connection with their victims, the most common being an ex-pal out for some kind of revenge. But many of these folks are strangers and are acting out the Internet version of road rage.

Someone doesn’t like what you posted on a BBS or just doesn’t like your login name. So the stalker chases you for weeks, posting your name on porn sites and your address on mailing-list requests. Hitchcock also suggests that people choose a gender-neutral log-on in all cases and keep two e-mail accounts, one for friends and important correspondents and a free Web mail account for public contact.

These are easy to change if the need arises. But some people just won’t be forced out of their virtual homes. For instance, Ligon’s log-on remains unambiguously feminine.

It takes guts to stand up to the creeps. And while some people minimize the effects of cyberstalking by saying it isn’t truly “real,” folks like Ligon and Hitchcock have made it safe for the rest of us.

If you have questions or suggestions for Charles Bermant, you can contact him by e-mail at cbermant@seattletimes.com. Type Inbox in the subject field. More columns at www.seattletimes.com/columnists.

Copyright © 2005 The Seattle Times Company.