

A few months ago, there was an uproar when some misinformed moaner noted that if you went to your Facebook page, clicked on the search box and then hit the down arrow, up popped a list of the five people who searched for your name most often. Wait! Before you panic and check, the arrow is no longer there, but Facebook pros insist that such a list never existed, and the five names displayed were the system's smooth attempt to guess at who you might have been looking for when you began to type a name.

All sorts of theories were floating around as to what this list of five names really meant. Different people swore the names stood for different things and none were ever confirmed. But perhaps the most surprising thing of all was the noise and universal fury over the fact that our right to stalk anonymously had been snatched out of our hands.

In a chain of comments on New York gossip site *Gawker*, one offended user wrote, "This sucks. The whole point of Facebook is to anonymously stalk people. Way to ruin it, Zuckerberg!"

For many of us, a world without Facebook is one we just can't get our heads around. How did we ever live without it? The site, for anyone who still doesn't know (have you been living under a rock?), was founded in February 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, a student at Harvard University. Initially, you could only join if you were at Harvard, but

eventually, membership was extended to other Ivy League colleges, high school students and eventually, anyone over 13.

Right now, Facebook has over 100 million active users and more are joining every day. Well, why wouldn't they? Facebook lets us keep in touch with everyone we've ever met. We can comment on our second cousin's cat. We can blow our best friend's mum a kiss, (we know that lots of parents join to spy on us), scrawl memories on our childhood sweetheart's imaginary walls and send them gifts without worrying that they'll get lost in the mail, somewhere in the real world. Thanks to Facebook and other sites like it, we are a generation who know more about our friends, partners, colleagues and general acquaintances than any generation before us.

The Facebook laws

There's an unwritten rule that goes with Facebook. It seems to be a widely accepted fact that just because you know everything about somebody, mentioning these things in person, or to anyone else who might use the information for evil outside the realms of cyberspace is totally unacceptable. And a sense of common courtesy kicks in too.

Says Simon Cansfield, a student at Liverpool University in the UK, "If I write on someone's wall, I'd expect them to write on mine too. If I ask them a question on their photo or something, I would want them to write me a reply."

"If you write a message to someone on Facebook and they don't reply, it's like leaving the phone ringing for days and days and days until it's answered," writes his girlfriend, via Facebook message.

Are you being stalked?

Some might find it slightly scary to know that everyone in their friend list, should they so desire, (the blocking feature can work wonders, you know), can find out exactly what they're doing. MissGolightly (screenname), a student at New York University writes in a Facebook discussion forum on website *Gawker*, "I'm kind of scared to leave my dorm room to get lunch. What if I lie about my status and my stalkers see me and know the truth?! The shame will last until I leave college next Monday!"

Susan Lipkins is a psychologist, living in Port Washington, New York. In a recent article for *USA Today*, she writes, "All this online snooping is tantamount to voyeurism. Social networking sites train people to be voyeurs and to check their own social status and that of others as well."

Well, of course, she's right, but surely we like that. Otherwise, we wouldn't sign ourselves up in the first place. For lots of us, especially those who have moved to the UAE to study from abroad, Facebook is the best, if not the only way, to keep in touch with the people back home, and to update them all on our relationships. It might be quite weird, especially to older people who have never experienced the necessities of

Facebook admin, but everyone knows that only when you change your profile to "In a relationship", is it actually confirmed. And only when you announce it online, can your friends officially congratulate you.

All this voyeurism leads us to thinking – with the world looking in, stalking, judging, watching – can anyone actually pretend to be anything *but* themselves these days? Some people like to assume false identities, but how much can you actually say or do without revealing at least a part of who you really are? Surely, the point of Facebook is to build a trusted network of friends; people who can act as a support group if you ever need them?

Cynthia Redgrave, a student at New York University found this out the hard way. She posted on *Gawker*,

"I broke up with my boyfriend but I knew my ex-boyfriend would write me a sarcastic note or something about it, so I didn't change my status for ages. The bad thing was that because I didn't let anyone on Facebook know, none of my friends knew what I was going through and I felt really alone for ages. In the end, I wished I'd just changed it sooner."

When it comes to our obsession with the world's largest social network – enabling anyone, anywhere, loved, hated or simply forgotten – to swoop back into our lives and re-light all sorts of fires, one *Gawker* user may have got it right: "Facebook: Making the World Creepier since 2004." ☹