

THE CONVERSATION

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A woman has recently been jailed for stalking singer Harry Styles. Charles Sykes/Associated Press

Where is the legal line between celebrity worship and stalking?

Published: May 2, 2024 11.54am BST

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Falling under the spell of a celebrity crush is a common part of adolescence. But in the age of social media and unprecedented access to our idols, admiration can morph into harm.

In April, a woman was jailed for stalking singer Harry Styles, after sending him 8,000 cards in less than a month. Her case vividly illustrates the alarming consequences of overstepping boundaries between fans and celebrities. Journalist Emily Maitlis, The Crown actor Claire Foy and TV presenter Jeremy Vine have all experienced similar stalking incidents.

As audience members, we connect to media figures in different ways. We might empathise with a cherished character's experiences, or feel a sense of closeness with TV hosts who become a familiar presence in our lives. These connections, known as parasocial relationships, thrive on perceived intimacy, but lack reciprocity.

Audience involvement is a spectrum. At the less intrusive end is participation in fandom activities, such as collecting merchandise and engaging with online fan communities.

But social media's curated posts, livestreams, and the ability to directly interact with celebrities through messages and comments, have intensified the parasocial relationship. It's not surprising that many fans feel a heightened level of intimacy, with deeper emotional attachment.

Even then, stalking does not emerge merely out of a gradual escalation of these parasocial relationships. People (possibly battling mental health challenges) may harbour various motivations, potentially culminating in toxic obsession.

These motivations can range from a desire for vengeance and retribution against the target, to loneliness and resentment, or a quest for control. Some may hold delusions such as erotomania: believing someone loves them and will eventually reciprocate. In the case of Maitlis's stalker, his "unrequited love" for the journalist led him to repeatedly breach a restraining order.

The law on privacy and stalking

Legal boundaries separate genuine appreciation from repetitive, oppressive conduct that jeopardises someone's wellbeing. Despite being public figures, celebrities – like everyone – deserve a level of privacy.

Picture your life as a house, with each room symbolising different facets: thoughts, emotions and personal endeavours. Around it is a protective zone of privacy, shielding specific aspects of your life from unwanted intrusion by strangers, acquaintances or the government.

According to the European Court of Human Rights, the scope of this privacy zone extends beyond the strict confines of our homes. It also protects our personal growth and ability to nurture relationships. This is what is known as the "right to lead a private social life".

When stalking rises to the level of inducing fear of violence or has a substantial adverse effect on someone's regular activities (such as forcing someone to make significant changes to their lifestyle), the law steps in to protect victims.

There are various legal tools to maintain the integrity of these restricted areas, including civil remedies and criminal offences. Some may be racially or religiously aggravated, attracting more severe penalties.

Stalkers frequently exhibit a consistent pattern of fixated, obsessive, unwanted and repeated actions (which can be remembered as the acronym FOUR). Such behaviour can violate both a person's "inner circle" privacy zone and also the outer sphere of their private social life.



Claire Foy in a red, cape-like dress smiles over her shoulder while a crowd of fans take photos and ask for autographs

Claire Foy signs autographs for fans. Ettore Ferrari/EPA-EFE

Secretly monitoring someone's activities or lingering around their home without valid cause gravely endangers the core privacy zone. Foy's stalker, who had become "infatuated" with the actor, received a stalking protection order after appearing uninvited at her doorstep. He left her "scared" of her doorbell ringing and feeling "helpless" in her own home.

Sending unsolicited gifts is also associated with stalking, as shown by Styles's relentless pursuer, who sent countless unsettling letters and hand-delivered two to the singer's address, causing "serious alarm or distress".

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Family members, coworkers or neighbours of the main victim may also experience direct intrusion themselves. For example, Maitlis's stalker showed "breathtaking persistence" in contacting his victim and her mother, while Foy's stalker had emailed the actor's sister and texted her ex-boyfriend.

This conduct breaches that outer circle of privacy and interferes with the right to a private social life. It can severely impair someone's ability to freely establish normal social networks, ultimately isolating them and disrupting their support systems.

Technology has facilitated the proliferation of such behaviour via cyberstalking. For example, Vine's stalker "weaponised the internet", sending relentless emails identifying the presenter's home address and making him fear for his family's safety.

In 2022, a 28-year-old man was sentenced to prison for orchestrating a chilling stalking spree via social media. Targeting more than 100 victims, he issued harrowing threats of severe sexual violence. His proactive pursuit of personal details left victims petrified in their own homes.

Such digital variations of traditional stalking might also be dealt with in law through communications offences, including the newly enacted "threatening communications" offence. Above all, acknowledging that celebrities are humans with a right to privacy reminds us of the importance of respect for boundaries, distinguishing between harmless admiration and harmful fixation.