



Snapchat's new map feature raises fears of stalking and bullying

Snap Maps lets users track each other's movements in real time, but child safety groups are cautioning young people against sharing their location

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Snapchat has introduced a map feature that lets users track other people's location in real time, raising concerns among safety and privacy advocates.

Snap Maps, launched this week, plots users and their snaps onto a map so friends and other Snapchatters can see where they are and what they are doing.

"We've built a whole new way to explore the world! See what's happening, find your friends, and get inspired to go on an adventure!" said the company in a blogpost announcing the

update.

When they first use the feature, users can select whether they want to make their location visible to all of their friends, a select group of connections or to no one at all, which Snapchat refers to as “ghost mode”.

The new feature has raised concerns among safety experts who fear it could be used to stalk or bully others.

“Given how specific this new feature is on Snapchat - giving your location to a precise pinpoint on a map - we would encourage users not to share their location, especially with people they don’t know in person,” said child safety group Childnet International in a blogpost.

“It is important to be careful about who you share your location with, as it can allow people to build up a picture of where you live, go to school and spend your time.”

“Parents need to sit down with their kids and get them to really consider which friends they are sharing with,” added Larry Magid, the CEO of ConnectSafely.org.

“Users should be aware of the feature and review it periodically - if a friend becomes an ex-friend, for example.”

Snapchat’s parent company Snap sees the new feature as a discoverability tool for the notoriously tricky-to-navigate messaging app.

“There’s definitely the aspect of where are my friends and what’s happening around them, but then there’s a greater aspect of what’s happening globally,” Snap product designer Jack Brody told Refinery29. “There’s something really powerful about seeing the diversity, but also the similarity of snaps around the world.”

If there’s a major event or breaking news taking place that lots of people are documenting on Snapchat, a patch of color will appear on the map identifying the hotspot.

The map also incorporates “actionmojis”, a new type of personalized avatar that Snapchat automatically creates by analyzing the user’s location, time of day or speed of travel. So some people will appear in an animated car, for example. The actionmojis appear on the map when a user shares their location and disappear when they’ve been offline for several hours.

“The safety of our community is very important to us,” said a Snapchat spokesman, who added that location-sharing is off by default and “completely optional”.

“Snapchatters can choose exactly who they want to share their location with, if at all, and can change that setting at any time. It’s also not possible to share your location with someone who isn’t already your friend on Snapchat, and the majority of interactions on Snapchat take place between close friends.”

Snapchat isn’t the first social media company to allow location tracking. Twitter lets people add their locations to tweets, while Facebook check-ins and the “share location” Messenger

function allow people to track their contacts. Apple also allows users to share their location on a map for a limited time period.

Snap Maps is based on technology acquired when Snap bought social mapping startup Zenly in late May. Zenly's app lets users see where their friends are in real time as well as send them messages.

To access the map, users open the app and pinch to zoom out on the screen. This then displays a map of the local area. Users can change whether or not they are visible to others within the app's settings.

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