SmartSafe and the Abuse of Technology
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For women escaping violence, mobile technology can be an aid to safety and it can keep them connected to their community. But they need to be aware of the risks and safeguards if they are to avoid the technology also being used as a tool of abuse.

Dr Delanie Woodlock and Dr Amy Webster interviewed workers and women in refuges as part of SmartSafe, a Domestic Violence Resource Centre (DVRCV) research project looking into the problem.

DVRCV has been using technology to address violence against women for many years now, and our websites have been effective in providing victim/survivors with information and advice. However, we have become increasingly aware of the ways in which perpetrators may exploit the data trails left by technology, and we have advocated for the safe use of technology by victim/survivors. With the SmartSafe project, we are looking at the way mobile technology such as smartphones may be used by perpetrators to stalk and abuse women in the context of domestic violence. The aim is to ensure that women can use such technology safely.

The solution is not to stop women from accessing technology because perpetrators may use it as a tool of abuse. It’s about striking a balance by informing the sector and empowering women to increase their safety.

As part of SmartSafe, we first met with legal workers to find out about the issues they encounter through the justice system. We then conducted a survey with domestic violence sector workers, and with women who have experienced stalking and abuse via mobile technologies. We had a strong response from the sector, with 152 responses to our workers’ survey, and 48 responses to our survey for victim/survivors. We also met with workers in four refuges to hear about their firsthand experiences.

Our research shows that technology-facilitated abuse is happening here, it is on the rise, and there are gaps in how the system responds and supports women.

Workers reported that technology played a significant role in stalking and that women were not necessarily aware that these activities are in fact a form of stalking.

Technology use included text and email messages, Facebook posts, and GPS location tracking devices being hidden in bags, prams or cars. While GPS tracking is occurring, we found that the everyday reality of technology misuse was more about bombardment with texts or threats of humiliation that foster a sense of the perpetrator’s continual presence in the woman’s life.

The use of technology to stalk, harass and control is well recognised in the United States and United Kingdom. The SafetyNet project in the United States and Women’s Aid in the United Kingdom (UK) have been addressing the problem for some time.
When we started talking to refuges and direct service practitioners here, it became clear that there was a gap in the academic research. Technology misuse and abuse is happening here. It just hasn’t been previously identified, or responded to.

Workers in Refuges
During visits to refuges, workers were open about what they had seen or experienced with technology-facilitated abuse or stalking. Workers weren’t always sure how best to help or respond to women.

There are two important issues to note with technology-facilitated abuse or stalking in the context of women in a refuge.

We know that women who are in the process of leaving a violent partner are at greater risk of harm, including homicide, and this may be the point at which the partner will use technology to stalk them.

For some women, however, stalking behaviours that use technology are part of the ‘everyday’ behaviour they experience in their abusive relationship, and this may ‘come with them’ to the refuge. This places their safety in the refuge in jeopardy, as well as that of the other women and the workers.

Every refuge we visited knew of cases of GPS stalking. The abusive partner may have put a phone-finder app on the woman’s smartphone that enabled him to find the phone – and her – at the refuge. Withdrawing money from an ATM near a refuge also poses risks. Some men were believed to circle around the neighbourhood where the ATM was located, so workers were having to drive women to ATMs some distance from the refuge.

In some cases, GPS tracking units were placed in cars – under a seat, for example. Workers also told us that they themselves had inadvertently revealed the address of refuges they were working in when they ‘checked-in’ to Facebook with their GPS location shown. One ex-partner contacted a woman in a refuge and told her he knew she was in a certain suburb because he had been able to access her car’s eTag account which revealed that she had been on a certain tollway at a particular time. Perhaps he was in the ‘general area’ and would be unable to physically turn up at the refuge. Or perhaps he could recognise her car in the refuge’s driveway.

One woman received messages from her ex-partner that his family had found the refuge and they were waiting outside – and they were. Workers were unsure how he had found the refuge and suspected that he had tracked her phone.

Omnipresence and Humiliation
Refuge workers reported little evidence of high-tech stalking using spyware. Instead, everyday technology such as text messages, phone calls and social networking posts were being used to abuse and harass women. Under the guise of ‘normal’ interactions, these forms of technology were giving perpetrators more opportunities for abuse.

Women reported that text messages would alternate from ‘I love you, I’m so sorry, please forgive me, I feel terrible’ to those with threatening, violent and abusive content.
Whether it’s a bombardment of texts or only a few – perhaps worded to create fear – this harassment creates a sense of the perpetrator’s ‘omnipresence’ in a woman’s life, eroding her belief in having any boundaries of safety or privacy. Technology is also being used to humiliate and threaten.

We heard widespread reports of perpetrators threatening to post private, sexually explicit videos on Facebook pages – either his or hers. Whether the video had been filmed under coercion or with consent, threats to publicly post it aimed to humiliate the woman in front of her whole community, including her children, her children’s friends, her family and her colleagues. Often the perpetrator carried through with his threats.

Through Facebook, perpetrators now have a platform to reach every aspect of a woman’s life, globally, and in an instant.

Although we have seen these controlling and belittling behaviours in domestic violence situations before, technology is a platform that has profound consequences on the impact and spread of this abuse.

Boundary Violations
Technology is transforming the nature of relationships. Refuge workers were concerned that abusive behaviour was increasingly being seen as ‘normal’ relationship behaviour. They would be alarmed, for example, if a woman was getting 50 texts a day, or multiple or long phone calls, from a perpetrator. Yet the woman would regard this as normal behaviour. We’re seeing a shift in what are considered as healthy relationship boundaries and the demarcation between what’s okay and what’s not.

In our SmartSafe research, the average age of the women we spoke to was about 35, and all of them reported technology-facilitated abuse using Facebook and smartphones. This suggests that the abuse of technology is a problem for older women, as well for younger women.

We know from other studies, particularly in the UK, that many young people consider the exchange of hundreds of texts a day as completely normal. The new culture around free messaging services, and instant responses, sets up a dynamic in friendships or intimate relationships. Social participation for young people revolves around the use of smartphones and social networking platforms such as Facebook.

Adding to this is the increasing sexualisation of young people - including high-levels of exposure to pornography and sexual acts depicted in marketing and the media, and pressure to engage in ‘sexting’. For young people, who may be negotiating their first intimate relationships, this context creates a perfect storm for boundary violations and abuse. If this behaviour is normalised within a relationship, it can be very hard for younger women in particular to recognise when a relationship has become abusive.

Young people tend to struggle with this on their own because much is at stake in terms of their reputation and social participation. Research shows that they are desperate to talk about these issues, but they don’t talk about them with each other because they don’t want to be the odd one out. The need to instigate these conversations with young women is clear.
Our SmartSafe research has revealed the ways in which mobile technologies are presenting perpetrators with further opportunities to stalk and abuse women in the context of domestic violence. And it has also revealed some of the ways that these mobile technologies are shifting our conceptions of what are healthy boundaries are in a relationship. While there are clear concerns about mobile technologies and the abuse of women, the risks posed by these technologies can be minimised with more community education and professional training in this area.

DVRCV’s SmartSafe research is funded by Victoria Legal Aid. The full findings will be available in mid-2013. Email smartsafe@dvrcv.org.au

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Elements of SmartSafe
- meet legal workers
- reference group
- survey of women victims/survivors
- survey of workers
- interview women in refuges and workers
- research paper
- resource development
- identify further research