

Technology and Violence against Women

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As Microsoft founder Bill Gates said, “No one gets a vote on whether technology will change their lives.” Like it or not, technological advances such as the internet and cell phones have fundamentally altered how we work and live.

Unfortunately, many abusers and stalkers have also adopted these advances as high-tech tools to assert their power and control.¹ For example, an abuser may use global positioning devices to track their partner’s movements. Or an abuser may install software enabling him to track the keystrokes of anyone who uses that computer to gain access to his partner’s email account.

Thus, individuals experiencing violence, abuse and stalking must understand how to use new technologies as safely as possible to protect themselves from abusers who can access their personal information with increasing ease. Service providers must incorporate these concerns into internal policies on technology usage by clients and employees and clients’ individual safety plans.

Risks of Specific Technologies for Individuals Experiencing Violence and Abuse

Survivors of abuse report the use of “many forms of technology - old and new - to control, coerce, and intimidate them during and after relationships.”² This article will focus on select problems associated with cell phones and computers. In order to empower victims and not abusers, this discussion does not contain exhaustive details about technology safety for victims.³ Moreover, the information in this article must be reconsidered in light of problems associated with emerging and new technologies.⁴

Cell Phones

Abusers use cell phones as a monitoring device by barraging victims with calls, text messages and voicemails.⁵ Moreover, abusers use the data generated by cell phone use to track a victim’s call history, which can heighten a victim’s isolation and compromise her safety. For example, an abuser in Rhode Island “assaulted his wife after finding the shelter telephone number in her cell phone call history; as a result she did not attempt to leave her husband for another year.”⁶

Computers and the Internet

Computers provide abusers with access to reams of data they can exploit to control victims because computer usage leaves a vast “digital footprint” that is traceable. It is virtually impossible to completely erase such information.⁷ Indeed, the Safety Net Project notes that “abusers continue to identify and adapt

new computer software and hardware tools that allow them to further stalk and harass their victims.”⁸

With the over 74% of Americans reporting regular use of the internet,⁹ the internet has emerged as another means of tracking victims and thwarting their escape from abuse. For example, abusers may use spyware software to intensely monitor a victim’s computer usage. The Safety Net Program offered the following example:

A Michigan man was charged with installing a commercially available spy software program on the computer of his estranged wife at her separate residence. Without her knowledge, the program sent him regular emails reporting all of her computer activity, including all emails sent and received; all instant messages sent and received; and all Internet sites visited.¹⁰

Technology can enable increased harassment of victims. In a 2004 study, 10 to 15% of students surveyed reported receiving persistent emails or instant messages of a harassing nature.¹¹ From January 1996 through August 2000, 42.8% of the cases investigated by the Computer Investigation & Technology Unit (CITU) of the New York City Police Department (NYPD) involved “aggravated harassment by means of a computer or the Internet.”¹² Email alone was used to harass victims in approximately 79% of those cases.¹³

Technology and Service Providers

Although technology has enhanced service providers’ ability to reach out to victims and educate those at risk for abuse, violence or stalking, agencies serving victims of violence must take steps to ensure that they use various technologies securely.

Service providers should train staff on the risks associated with the use of specific technologies to avoid breaches of client security. For example, agencies should ensure that the headings of faxes do not inadvertently disclose the confidential location of an agency or shelter. That information could be discovered during the course of divorce proceedings and compromise the victim’s security.¹⁴ The National Network to End Domestic Violence has created a [Data Security Checklist](#) to protect client safety and the confidentiality of their data.

Staff should also be trained on technology use to create more comprehensive safety plans for victims. Technology use should be included in safety planning, so that an abuser does not uncover evidence of plans to leave. The National Network to End Domestic Violence has created a guide to [technology safety planning](#) with survivors that is available in eight languages.

Using Technology to Empower Victims and Survivors

Service providers and individuals experiencing violence and abuse can harness technological advances to enhance their safety. This knowledge can also empower victims to take control back in their lives.

In the U.S., initiatives to donate cell phones for domestic violence victims have grown in number over the last decade. The partnership between the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence and The Wireless Foundation has provided de-activated cell phones for emergency use by victims.¹⁵ These phones enable domestic violence victims to have a safe mode of communication unknown to their batterer, which is an important component when planning to leave the violent situation.

Programs to train victims on safe technology provide another example. The Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence developed the Technology Safety Program to “help victims of domestic violence increase their knowledge of how to use technology safely and help minimize the risks that technology can pose when one is in an abusive relationship.”¹⁶ A recent study based in part on participant responses has found the program to be a success, with 86% of participants reporting high satisfaction.¹⁷ In addition, many participants expressed interest in sharing this knowledge with women in similar situations.¹⁸

Conclusion

As technology increasingly extends its reach into daily life, service providers and victims must remain aware of how new technologies could be used by abusers. At the same time, they must also utilize that technology to reach victims and facilitate their safety.

¹ Comprehensive data on the extent of such usage is not currently available. Cindy Southworth et al., “A High-Tech Twist on Abuse: Technology, Intimate Partner Stalking, and Advocacy,” Safety Net: National Safe & Strategic Technology Project at the National Network to End Domestic Violence Fund 4, 5 (2005),

http://nnedv.org/docs/SafetyNet/NNEDV_HighTechTwist_PaperAndApxA_English08.pdf.

² Cindy Southworth et al., “A High-Tech Twist on Abuse: Technology, Intimate Partner Stalking, and Advocacy,” Safety Net: National Safe & Strategic Technology Project at the National Network to End Domestic Violence Fund 5 (2005),

http://nnedv.org/docs/SafetyNet/NNEDV_HighTechTwist_PaperAndApxA_English08.pdf.

³ The [National Safe & Strategic Technology Project](#) at the [National Network to End Domestic Violence](#) will provide more detailed information on this topic to domestic violence advocates.

⁴ See Ann L. Krantz, Minnesota Center Against Violence and Abuse, “Changing Practice: How Domestic Violence Advocates Use Internet and Wireless Communication Technologies” (2002), <http://www.mincava.umn.edu/documents/2casestudies/2casestudies.html>.

⁵ Mayo Clinic, Domestic Violence toward Women: Recognize the Patterns and Seek Help, <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/domestic-violence/WO00044> (last accessed Mar. 3, 2009).

⁶ Cindy Southworth et al., “A High-Tech Twist on Abuse: Technology, Intimate Partner Stalking, and Advocacy,” Safety Net: National Safe & Strategic Technology Project at the National Network to End Domestic Violence Fund 6 (2005) (citation omitted), http://nnedv.org/docs/SafetyNet/NNEDV_HighTechTwist_PaperAndApxA_English08.pdf.

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- ⁷ Illinois Coalition Against Domestic Violence, “The Safe and Strategic Use of Technology by Domestic Violence Victims,” ICADV Newsletter, Fall 2004, <http://www.ilcadv.org/newsletter/Fall2004.htm#ComputerSafety>.
- ⁸ Cindy Southworth et al., “A High-Tech Twist on Abuse: Technology, Intimate Partner Stalking, and Advocacy,” Safety Net: National Safe & Strategic Technology Project at the National Network to End Domestic Violence Fund 7 (2005), http://nnedv.org/docs/SafetyNet/NNEDV_HighTechTwist_PaperAndApxA_English08.pdf.
- ⁹ Dec. 2008, http://www.pewinternet.org/trends/Internet_Activities_Jan_07_2009.htm (last accessed Mar. 3, 2009).
- ¹⁰ National Network to End Domestic Violence, “Comments on the Federal Trade Commission’s Spyware Workshop” 3 (undated), <http://www.ftc.gov/os/comments/spyware/040521natlnetwrktoenddomesticviol.pdf>.
- ¹¹ Jerry Finn, *A Survey of Online Harassment at a University Campus*, 4 Journal of Interpersonal Violence 468 (2004), available at <http://jiv.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/19/4/468>.
- ¹² Robert D’Ovidio and James Doyle, *A Study on Cyberstalking, Understanding Investigative Hurdles*, FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin 10, 12 (2003) (citation omitted), <http://www.fbi.gov/publications/leb/2003/mar03leb.pdf>.
- ¹³ Robert D’Ovidio and James Doyle, *A Study on Cyberstalking, Understanding Investigative Hurdles*, FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin 10, 12 (2003) (citation omitted), <http://www.fbi.gov/publications/leb/2003/mar03leb.pdf>.
- ¹⁴ A more detailed version of this example was discussed at the 2007 New Laws training in Bloomington, Minnesota, conducted by the Battered Women’s Legal Advocacy Project.
- ¹⁵ National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, “Donate a Phone,” http://www.ncadv.org/takeaction/DonateaPhone_129.html (last accessed Mar. 3, 2009).
- ¹⁶ University of Washington, “Program Successfully Teaches Domestic Violence Victims Safe Use of Technology,” Mar. 3, 2009, http://www.eurekaalert.org/pub_releases/2009-03/uow-pst030309.php (last accessed Mar. 3, 2009).
- ¹⁷ University of Washington, “Program Successfully Teaches Domestic Violence Victims Safe Use of Technology,” Mar. 3, 2009, http://www.eurekaalert.org/pub_releases/2009-03/uow-pst030309.php (last accessed Mar. 3, 2009).
- ¹⁸ University of Washington, “Program Successfully Teaches Domestic Violence Victims Safe Use of Technology,” Mar. 3, 2009, http://www.eurekaalert.org/pub_releases/2009-03/uow-pst030309.php (last accessed Mar. 3, 2009).