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TECHNOLOGY AND DOMESTIC ABUSE

Technology and abuse as concurrent phenomena have increased exponentially over the last two decades, largely due to the increase in easily accessible forms of technology, including cellular telephones (calling, texting, imaging, and tracking capabilities) and Internet technologies (e-mail, instant messaging, public message forums; identity theft of financial, personal, and private information; and tracking of browsing histories) used to facilitate domestic abuse.

In the past 20 years, technology has served as both bane and boon to victims of domestic abuse. In the 1990s, society commenced widespread use of the Internet and digital mobile telephones. With more than 80 percent of Americans using the Internet in 2011 and 96 percent of U.S. citizens using cellular phones (CTIA, 2011), new media forms have been used to exacerbate and abet perpetrators who can now abuse through a variety of methods.

In the realm of Internet behaviors, cyberbullying has been studied extensively in terms of peer relationships. However, the use of technological resources to psychologically abuse a domestic victim has not received comparable attention from domestic abuse researchers. Cyberstalking, also primarily studied in nondomestic contexts, is typically perpetrated against ex-intimates. To increase coercive control and harassment over victims, abusers can increase the immediacy of their abusive behavior through e-mail, instant messaging, chat room conversations, and by constant monitoring of webpage histories or using keyloggers (keystroke tracking software). While in or out of domestic relationships with their victim, abusive partners can send harmful e-mail messages to a victim and access passwords in order to send e-mail messages on behalf of victims (e.g., inappropriate messages to their colleagues, family, and friends sent from the victim's e-mail accounts). Social networking sites such as Facebook, organizational intranets, YouTube, and LinkedIn can be used to publically humiliate victims.

Cellular telephones are another primary technology used by domestic abusers. The most common form of abuse committed in this context is that of texting intimates—to maintain a constant psychological presence in their lives; to send hurtful messages, images, or videos; and to habitually interrupt the day-to-day life of the victim. In addition to simply calling or leaving voice messages for their victims, abusers also use cellular telephones in domestic abuse by tracking via global positioning systems; monitoring by accessing the call histories of particular accounts;

relabeling, changing, and deleting victims' saved contact information; and altering account access and calling plans without their knowledge.

Recent studies of technological domestic abuse perpetration indicate not only that victims consistently report experiencing this means of abuse, but also that current instruments used to assess abusive behaviors have not adapted to include technological methods of abuse. Initial work in this area supports the idea of technology use as a generational phenomenon, with higher prevalence of abuse-via-technology being reported more by younger victims than by their older counterparts—a finding not maintained outside this context, in cases of abuse without technological means.

To date, Internet services and cellular telephones are the primary methods of abuse-via-technology. Further technological innovations have merged the power of these tools, with recent abilities to access the Internet from a cellular telephone, or smartphone. Most domestic abuse research on this phenomenon has focused on teenage relationships. The use of technology for abusive means in adult partner and family relationships has yet to be thoroughly examined.

See also: Stalking; Types of Domestic Abuse

Further Reading

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