

Technology, tool used by victims, abusers in domestic violence

BY SHANNON PROUDFOOT, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE JULY 31, 2009



Technology has moved to the front lines in the fight against domestic violence. Advocacy organizations are using increasingly sophisticated high-tech solutions in their efforts to keep victims safe, even as they struggle to keep pace with abusers using technology to control and threaten their victims.

Photograph by: Steve Makris, Edmonton Journal

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Advocacy organizations are using increasingly sophisticated high-tech solutions in their efforts to keep victims safe, even as they struggle to keep pace with abusers using technology to control and threaten their victims.

"Worldwide, it's an epidemic," says Alexis A. Moore, an abuse survivor and founder of the California-based victim advocacy group Survivors in Action.

"Perpetrators are changing their information and their manoeuvres. Their road map changes by the hour, where our training and education and awareness programs happen on a yearly basis, if that. Laws take years to develop."

GPS devices on vehicles or cellphones can be used to track a victim's movement without their knowledge and abusers can hack into their victim's online accounts to track e-mails or instant-messages, says Cynthia Fraser, a technology safety specialist with the Washington-based National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV).

Advocates first started hearing about high-tech abuse a decade ago, she says, but it's becoming a bigger problem because the technology is so widely and cheaply available. Even abusers who are not tech-savvy can learn how to stalk their partner with the help of the Internet, Fraser says.

The consequences of leaving a digital trail can be deadly. Fraser recalls one case where an abused

woman wrote an e-mail about her plans to leave but didn't empty her computer trash bin after deleting the message. Her abuser found the message and killed her.

Fraser works with Safety Net, a project that focuses on technology and domestic abuse, and she's conducted training in Canada with law enforcement, Crown attorneys and shelter workers. Like other advocates, she's careful about how much detail she provides on this type of abuse and efforts to counter it because she doesn't want to "educate abusers."

"Technology has just added another layer to the complexities of women's safety," says Erin Lee-Todd, executive director of Lanark County Interval House, a shelter near Ottawa. "We just have to move with the times."

In Canada, most shelter websites prominently display warnings to victims that their online activities may be monitored, and many have escape buttons that switch to an innocuous website if someone walks into the room. Telecommunications companies have donated new cellphones and airtime to victims who fear their abusers may be tracking their communication or whereabouts with their regular phone.

E-Services, an online counselling program that allows shelters to provide live chat help to clients, is currently being rolled out across Canada by Sheltersnet, a Toronto-based organization that provides online resources to shelters and abuse victims.

Like those of many advocacy groups, the E-Services website has detailed instructions for clearing browser histories to help victims cover their online tracks, says project manager Tammy Falovo. But the widespread availability of spyware programs that can grab regular screen shots or log every keystroke on a computer and send the information to an abuser means that's no longer enough, she says.

"What we try to do is remind people that no medium is 100 per cent safe," Falovo says.

Many organizations now advise victims to seek help only on computers located in a safe place such as a public library or workplace, and to create a safe e-mail address they only use on computers the abuser has no access to.

The goal is to educate abused women and their children about the high-tech risks without frightening them even more, says Lee-Todd. But while the methods of abuse and stalking may be changing, she says the underlying motivation remains the same.

"The issues are still about power and control, and they're still rooted in that," she says. "Technology has afforded the opportunity to do that more strategically and often in a more sophisticated way."

For Moore, even a professional background as a high-tech investigator didn't protect her when she left an abusive partner several years ago. He began a campaign of "cyberstalking" that involved cancelling her credit cards, emptying her bank account and destroying her credit rating, she says, and like most intimate partners, he knew all the personal information and passwords that allowed him to do so.

Now a cyberstalking expert and founder of the California-based victim advocacy group Survivors in Action, Moore says some abusers will open e-mail accounts and impersonate their victims to seek information or send out naked photos — real or faked — to embarrass them.

"You can't believe what some of them do," she says.

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