Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice

Abstract | Technology is increasingly used by perpetrators of domestic violence to control, coerce, abuse, harass and stalk victim–survivors. Though 'spaceless'—not bound by geography—there are particular ways that place and space shape the impacts of and risks associated with this violence.

This paper examines the impact of technology-facilitated violence on victim–survivors of intimate partner violence in regional, rural or remote areas of Australia (New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland) who are socially or geographically isolated.

Spaceless violence: Women's experiences of technology-facilitated domestic violence in regional, rural and remote areas

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Digital media and devices are increasingly used by perpetrators of interpersonal and domestic violence to enact harm, coerce and control. The ways that technology is used by perpetrators, victim–survivors, support services and justice agencies have received growing attention in recent years. Work has been produced by advocates and academics in the United States (see Dimond, Fiesler & Bruckman 2011; Fraser et al. 2010; Mason & Magnet 2012; Southworth et al. 2005) and in Australia (Hand, Chung & Peters 2009; Woodlock 2017). There has been no examination of differences in the way harms manifest and are responded to in urban and non-urban (regional, rural and remote) landscapes (Harris 2016). This is a significant deficit, given the barriers encountered by victim–survivors beyond the cityscape when seeking assistance and responding to violence (Neilson & Renou 2015; Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland 2015; State of Victoria 2016).

The relationship between spaceless violence, place and space was the focus of this study, which grew out of our previous work in this field. Woodlock's (2013) SmartSafe project was one of the first studies internationally to survey victim–survivors and support workers about technology-facilitated abuse in intimate relationships. She found perpetrators used technology to control, intimidate and isolate women. George and Harris's (2014) study on rural victim–survivor experiences was the first to consider socio-spatial impacts of spaceless violence, finding that technology-facilitated abuse and stalking had particular implications for the wellbeing of and risk to women in non-urban areas. They noted too that rurality shaped experiences of abuse and opportunities for connecting with supports and practitioners (Harris 2016).

Seeking to provide insight into the role of technology beyond the cityscape, this study engaged with female victim–survivors subjected to spaceless technology-facilitated abuse in the context of domestic violence in regional, rural and remote areas of eastern Australia (New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland). Alongside our examination of how technology could be used by perpetrators, we also explored potential applications that could protect and empower women experiencing domestic violence.

Naming and framing violence

In Australia and internationally, a range of terms are used to identify and refer to violence enacted by men against women (see, for instance, DeKeseredy, Dragiewicz & Schwartz 2017; Dragiewicz et al. 2018). Certain words refer to the parties involved (eg 'intimate partner violence', as opposed to that occurring within a broader family system; 'family violence') or view the abuse through a gendered lens ('violence against women' or 'woman abuse'). While appreciating that there are other persons and networks that engage in and can be impacted by harm, our work centred on harms inflicted by current or former intimate partners and we use the term 'domestic violence' in this paper. We adopt an intersectional lens and recognise that anyone can be a victim–survivor or perpetrator of violence (and that more attention on LGBTIQ experiences is needed), but emphasise that victim–survivors are overwhelmingly women and perpetrators mostly men.

Locating violence

The private and hidden nature of domestic violence contributes to under-reporting, under-recording and difficulties in measuring abuse and related offences (Ferrante et al. 1996; Harris 2016). Features of rurality such as geographic and social isolation can further limit data availability (George & Harris 2014; Wendt 2009). Complicating the issue, there are a variety of measurement systems used and regionality, rurality and remoteness are not uniformly defined. Consequently, and because non-urban places are not homogeneous, we cannot say categorically that violence is higher outside of the cityscape. Yet Australian academic and grey literature has found that rates of domestic violence are higher in some regional, rural and remote locations (Crime Research Centre 1998; Grech & Burgess 2011; Women's Health Grampians 2012). Indeed, some studies have indicated that, overall, where comparable figures are available, rates of victimisation are higher in regional, rural and remote areas than in metropolitan locations (Dillon 2015; Dillon, Hussain & Loxton 2015; WESNET 2000).

Non-urban women are located greater distances from channels of assistance (formal and informal supports and emergency services) than urban women. Public transport networks, where they exist, can be fragmented and limited. At best, ride-sharing and other private transport options are likely absent or expensive and abusers may limit access to vehicles (see also Coorey 1988; George & Harris 2014; Meyer & Stambe 2020; Wendt 2009). Social isolation is another impediment which can arise from constructs of gender which women have referred to as 'traditional' or 'conservative'. Ideologies and community structures can, in these settings, support the subjugation of women and facilitate violence against women (as noted in Alston 1997; Bagshaw et al. 2000; Harris 2016; Hogg & Carrington 2006; Meyer & Stambe 2020).

Frameworks and methodology

A feminist, intersectional approach guided this research. Historically, a feminist perspective has been excluded from social and legal understandings of domestic violence (Hunter 2006), although it has been recently adopted in Australia (State of Victoria 2016). This lens emphasises the input and experiences of victim–survivors and maintains that domestic violence must be understood as gendered and sexed and sustained by cultural and societal discrimination against women (Dobash & Dobash 1980; Laing, Humphreys & Cavanagh 2013; Pizzey 1979). An intersectional lens (see Crenshaw 2010) must be prioritised, as the violence women experience and opportunities for help-seeking are influenced by intersecting forms of oppression, such as disability (Woodlock, Western & Bailey 2014), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity (Al-Yaman, Van Doeland & Wallis 2006) and cultural and linguistic diversity (Vaughan et al. 2016).

Sandberg (2013) argues that rural women should be included in intersectional studies of violence against women, but 'rurality' should not be viewed as a form of intersecting oppression, such as race and class, as women are not oppressed by rurality. She suggests instead that rurality imposes 'particular kinds of vulnerability to individuals' (Sandberg 2013: 361). Importantly, while 'difference' is explored, these differences are by no means homogeneous categories or communities. Regionality in Australia is frequently measured using factors such as distance to service centres and population size. However, rurality is more than geographic, demographic and economic. There is a human factor with ideological and symbolic meanings and categorisations ascribed by those who live in non-urban places (Harris & Harkness 2016). Thus, in selecting our locations we considered all of these elements, being guided by common measures such as the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia Plus (ARIA+) and the Australian Statistical Geography Standard as well as by services and victim–survivors self-identifying as rural.

The project was granted ethics approval from Queensland University of Technology's Human Research Ethics Committee (QUT Ethics Approval Number 1800000036). Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted with victim–survivors to allow for in-depth exploration of their experiences. Participants were located and selected based on their connection to domestic violence support services. This ensured that the women were able to discuss the project, risks and procedures with support workers prior to engaging with the researchers. There are limitations to this approach, as not all victim–survivors access support services. Additionally, the recruitment process relied on support services, which are overburdened and under-resourced. Numerous agencies offered assistance but were not always able to be involved, due to workload pressures. There were challenges in recruitment, but data saturation was achieved through the interviews and focus groups we conducted with 13 victim–survivors.

Interviews and focus groups took place either at support service offices or over the phone and were recorded and transcribed. Interviews were conducted over the phone only if the service had verified that this was a safe form of communication. We then reached out to the potential participant and confirmed this before progressing with the research. The women were provided with an honorarium and services were given a donation in recognition of their time and effort. Specific recruitment sites have not been named, some identifying features have been changed and pseudonyms have been used to refer to participants, to ensure victim–survivor anonymity is upheld.

Thematic analysis was used to categorise the findings, with the coding guided by our research question: how is digital technology impacting women's experiences of domestic and family violence in rural, regional and remote Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland? NVivo was used to code the interviews, first descriptively, then using interpretive coding. Double-coding provided oversight in this process (see King & Horrocks 2010; Saldaña 2012).

Results

Sample demographics

The average age of participants was 33—older than participants in much of the literature on electronic dating violence, which focuses on school and university cohorts. We contend that this focus has contributed to a false assumption that digital harms are experienced only by young people (Harris & Woodlock 2019; Woodlock 2013). The majority (*n*=9) of participants identified as Australian and, of this group, one identified as Aboriginal. Of those born overseas (*n*=4), two were from New Zealand, one was South American and one Asian.

Perpetrators and use of technology

Participants indicated that perpetrators used technology as part of their control and intimidation tactics. All the women identified a male perpetrator (a former intimate partner). Participants reported that digital violence continued (and often escalated) post separation and some said it involved others in the perpetrator's offline (real world) or online networks, who were commissioned or elected to engage in abuse. Children were impacted by, subjected to and also coopted into perpetration—issues which have been largely undocumented in the literature. All victim–survivors had experienced multiple forms of offline abuse (such as psychological, financial, sexual and physical abuse and in-person stalking) alongside online abuse. Additionally, technology could be used to facilitate, extend or exacerbate offline abuse. Some behaviours identified by victim–survivors in our study (and by the support workers they engaged) were readily identified or problematised, such as the use of technology to:

- send or post abusive messages or communications;
- stalk (to monitor the activities, movements or communications of) a victim–survivor;
- dox (publish private and identifying information);
- publish sexual content without consent;
- impersonate or steal another person's identity;
- gain unauthorised access or restrict access to a device, digital account or profile;
- interfere with a victim–survivor's device; or
- make and/or share audio or visual recordings of a survivor (whether recorded overtly or covertly).

Participants reported that technological abuse occurred in relationships and that it continued and often escalated post separation. These harms could be enacted using physical devices (phones, computers, tablets, GPS trackers), virtual or electronic accounts (such as social media profiles, email accounts, consumer accounts or institutional or employment portals) or software or platforms. We found that access to these channels may be achieved through force, coercion, deception or stealth.

Impacts on victim–survivors

Our participants emphasised that the technology-facilitated abuse to which they were subjected profoundly affected their wellbeing. Fears about technology-facilitated abuse loomed large. Participants felt a sense of unease about what perpetrators were or could be doing using devices and digital media. The spacelessness of technological abuse meant the women worried that they could encounter harm anytime and anywhere they used technologies and made perpetrators seem omnipresent and omnipotent. Consequently, victim–survivors felt that technological abuse (and perpetrators, by extension) were inescapable. Women's self-esteem and confidence were destabilised and their ability to exercise their freedoms and opportunities to use technology (for instance, to seek assistance or for leisure, education or employment) were hindered.

Many participants were concerned that the perpetrator was using surveillance and tracking strategies and channels that were undetected. They described feeling burdened by the need to constantly check for and try to prevent perpetrator access to them. Health impacts were extensive too. Women identified myriad ways that their mental health was affected, noting it could cause or contribute to feelings of paranoia, depression or anxiety. Technological abuse could also lead to trauma and a proclivity to self-harm. Furthermore, participants outlined physical effects such as stress-induced seizures.

Spacelessness and place

Technological abuse is spaceless, but it was evident that place matters in shaping and understanding experiences of and responses to harm. Victim–survivors in non-urban areas described geographic and social isolation as significant barriers to help-seeking and exiting violent relationships. For those who were located great distances from domestic violence services, friends and families, it was hard to make contact, particularly when they were under the watchful eye of perpetrators. In small, close-knit and conservative communities, and where the perpetrator was well known, liked or in a position of power, disclosing domestic violence face-to-face could also be confronting and challenging. Technology, in these circumstances, could help overcome geographic and social isolation, by providing pathways to information and support. However, when technology was weaponised, the women did not always feel safe or comfortable using digital channels.

Criminal justice responses

Victim–survivors in our study had positive experiences with support services. While this speaks to the expertise and training of support workers, this is not a surprising finding given we recruited participants through domestic violence agencies. Interactions with police were more mixed, tending towards being more negative overall. These women found courts to be distressing places because they were required to 'go public' with accounts of what is often said to be 'private violence', but also because court hearings required contact with perpetrators. Unfortunately, many participants felt that police and magistrates frequently did not recognise technological abuse as constituting domestic violence or take seriously the danger it posed or the effect it had on them. Consequently, victim–survivors believed that technological abuse was sometimes dismissed, minimised or overlooked.

Discussion

Age and intersectionality

Much literature has centred on youth reports of online harassment and harms within dating relationships. While this is a key cohort for education and prevention initiatives, our research has contributed to a growing body of work highlighting that older age groups are by no means immune to technological abuse (Woodlock 2013). We contend that criminal justice responses to domestic violence must recognise that technology is commonly part of a victim–survivor's experience of domestic violence, regardless of their demographic characteristics. The diversity of our cohort points to the need for intersectional approaches to technological abuse, culturally safe services and, ultimately, adequate resourcing of specialist agencies assisting First Nations and culturally and linguistically diverse victim–survivors.

Offline and online peer support networks

Intimate partners were identified as primary perpetrators in this study, but our finding that perpetrators' offline and online social networks provided assistance and intel to them warrants further attention. As others have argued (DeKeseredy 1990; DeKeseredy & Schwartz 1993), such networks are not forged in a vacuum but are reliant on and reinforced by patriarchal ideologies and structural imbalances. Their work has established that abusive men may have like-minded allies who formulate, share and reinforce ideologies and values, and provide resources and guidance that endorse, enable, excuse or defend abuse. We must recognise what these structures might look like in rural places.

In non-urban settings, where gender roles can be more traditional, with smaller and sometimes conservative communities, some participants contended that their abuser had established a reputation as a 'good guy' and found allies that assisted him and endorsed, excused, denied or minimised his actions (George & Harris 2014; National Rural Crime Network 2019; Neilson & Renou 2015). We heard of various associations that perpetrators drew on in their communities, through their leisure activities, religious affiliations and work affiliations (such as with police officers). Social media proved to be one area where abuser allies (from both real world and online networks) assisted perpetrators in their attacks on women. The women in our study were all too aware that these networks provided intel about their movements, activities and communication, which helped abusers stalk them, both online and offline. Complicating the issue, children were manipulated and coopted into engaging in the technological abuse of their mothers, as well as being directly targeted by perpetrators.

There has been no real examination to date of how online peer support networks might function (and even flourish) in the context of domestic violence. In our study it seemed that digital allies were largely drawn from a perpetrator's social media contacts, the social media contacts of victim–survivors and other real-world associations. We suggest that future studies seek to gain further insight into how networks may be forged online where there is no offline relationship with the perpetrator. In rural areas, where a perpetrator's real-world network can be limited in size, technology-facilitated contacts can potentially expand their reach and the number of people causing harm.

Digital coercive control

Technological abuse may present in different ways, but essentially perpetrators use digital media and devices to coerce and control their targets. This study revealed a range of perpetrator behaviours and strategies, but we stress that this should not be regarded as a complete list of harms and vulnerabilities. As new technologies emerge, so too will other types of intrusion and harm. Victim–survivors emphasised how individualised and targeted attacks were and said that some examples they recounted may appear innocuous to an outsider but read as disconcerting or threatening to them because of their past experiences or perceptions. The instances of technological abuse women recounted were not isolated but part of a campaign of abuse which evoked fear and eroded their freedoms.

Given the context in which abuse is enacted, we propose that technological abuse be classified as 'digital coercive control', a term that emphasises the method used by perpetrators (digital), their intent (coercion), the effect on a victim–survivor (control) as well as the setting in which it is enacted (the gender inequality that these men seek to maintain and reinforce; see Harris & Woodlock 2019). Here, we draw on Stark's (2007: 208) concept of 'coercive control' to classify the 'spatially diffuse' channels, strategies and techniques (such as isolation, intimidation, threats, shaming, gaslighting, surveillance, stalking and degradation). The term encapsulates some behaviours that are obviously serious as well as some that are often overlooked. These relate to the patterns and dynamics of behaviour and the frequency with which women are subjected to harm.

Classifying technological abuse as digital coercive control means we capture behaviours which might be normalised or accepted by others, or which may also occur in non-abusive relationships (see Dragiewicz et al. 2019). Women described how perpetrators would, for instance, send messages at particular times, use particular words or make references that they knew would trigger trauma or evoke fear or distress. Additionally, actions that may be viewed as unremarkable in a non-abusive relationship could be viewed as dangerous or problematic to a particular woman due to her history of abuse. For example, encouraging children to turn on video functions of devices might be common for some families, but where a woman has relocated this can represent an attempt to locate her new address.

Weaponising and harnessing technology in rural Australia

Digital coercive control is not a separate form of abuse but part of the domestic violence to which victim–survivors are subjected. Technology is, in essence, another tool of perpetrators seeking to coerce, control and restrict their targets. However, there are unique manifestations and effects of digital coercive control that should be recognised (Harris & Woodlock 2019). As well as enabling new forms of intrusions and attacks, technology can enable financial, sexual and psychological abuse and erode the already tenuous boundary between offline and online harm. This means that domestic violence is by no means confined to a particular place but can infiltrate every part of a victim–survivor's life. We maintain that a spatial framework is key in examining digital coercive control. It is important to recognise the effects of spacelessness but also that the place (geographic location) and space (geographic and ideological features of locations, such as conservative values) will shape both experiences of and responses to harm.

The spacelessness of digital coercive control has devastating and dangerous effects on a victim–survivor's health, wellbeing and sense of security. As Hand, Chung and Peters (2009: 3) note, 'the concept of "feeling safe" from an abuser no longer has the same geographic and spatial boundaries as it once did' (see also Harris 2018; Mason & Magnet 2012). This can deter women from disclosing violence or seeking help (Dimond, Fiesler & Bruckman 2011; Fraser et al. 2010; George & Harris 2014). There are particular consequences for regional, rural and remote women who are geographically and socially isolated, and these are not distinct but intertwined concepts. Numerous women referred to their houses as isolated; some suggested that perpetrators intentionally sought geographically isolated properties during the relationship, to weaken social networks, extend their control and 'hide' violence. In small areas with close-knit communities, abusers took advantage of how geography works to limit social networks.

Some perpetrators sought to discredit women and gather allies, accusing the survivors of being 'crazy' and, when doing so, relied on and exploited their reputations as 'good guys' or 'heroes'. They mounted these campaigns both offline and online and others affirmed their allegiance on social media and by participating in technology-facilitated abuse and stalking. In these circumstances, 'traditional' and rural constructs of masculinities and 'boys clubs' functioned to silence and exclude women. This was heightened for victim–survivors in our study who identified as Indigenous, culturally or linguistically diverse, or criminalised women, who spoke about feeling particularly visible in small communities while also being isolated.

Women in our study spoke about how the impacts of digital coercive control, the way that perpetrators used technology and the barriers to help seeking encountered in regional, rural and remote places limited their autonomy and 'space for action' (Farhall, Harris & Woodlock 2020). 'Space for action' refers to how perpetrators of domestic violence narrow women's life choices, constraining their freedom (Kelly 2003). Technology was a vital channel for victim–survivors seeking support and assistance, but when perpetrators controlled access to technology and used technology to enact digital violence women's space for action (using technology) was jeopardised. Knowing that perpetrators and their allies were using technology to track and monitor them post separation made some women feel it was not safe to use.

Risk and responses

It is important to recognise that it is not only barriers to help-seeking but also the risk to victim–survivors which is elevated in rural areas. In addition to higher levels of domestic violence, rural locations have been documented in international literature as having higher rates of domestic homicide (Harris 2016). This can likely be attributed largely to the greater distances to emergency supports and frontline responders in non-urban areas. We emphasise that recognised homicide flags—stalking, coercive control, obsessive behaviours, threats to kill and self-harm—were present in the digital coercive control reported by our cohort. Additionally, other homicide flags (such as strangulation) were reported by many victim–survivors. Yet these women felt that police and magistrates frequently minimised or overlooked the digital coercive control they experienced and how it could signify risk to their lives.

Conclusion and future directions

There is, we believe, an urgent need to enhance justice practitioners' understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence, how digital coercive control manifests, that it is typically now part of women's experience of abuse, and the effects of these harms. Given women's perceptions of police and magistrates were mixed, at best, and the dangers rural women face, we stress that there is an opportunity to bolster police and judicial training in this area. Digital coercive control can give police intelligence on and evidence of the abuse experienced by and risk to victim–survivors, their children, friends and family, online and offline. It must not be viewed in isolation or overlooked, including in investigation and risk assessment processes and in reviewing digital breaches of protection orders.

Technology can be weaponised but also harnessed. Victim–survivors can find information about domestic violence services using technology, and remote and anonymous portals could be attractive to non-urban women. Responding to violence is confronting for women in rural and remote communities, who are more likely to be known to those they contact when seeking help and disclosing violence. Given our cohort had strong relationships with real world services, we cannot comment on those who only engaged with virtual portals, but it is an area of enquiry to pursue. To advance this, non-government agencies require further and ongoing government funding.

There are, admittedly, limitations to what technology currently provides. Criminal justice services, for instance, operate predominantly 'in person'. However, technology can provide pathways and capabilities for women to exit violent relationships, gain independence and extend their space for action. Compared to urban areas, rural areas have fewer opportunities for employment, education, and civic or social engagement. These avenues might be accessed using digital media. Addressing the digital divide in rural areas and empowering women to safely use technology is an essential goal to pursue and would benefit women experiencing violence. This requires investment by social media companies, industry and government.

The use of technology by perpetrators of domestic violence is now commonplace, but responses have yet to catch up with this new form of abuse, which has a significant impact on victim–survivors. This study focused on the challenges for 13 women experiencing what we have termed digital coercive control in rural, regional and remote Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. The participants detailed the way that technology was incorporated into perpetrators' control and intimidation tactics, often extending and exacerbating the abuse these women experienced. When women separated from the perpetrator, his use of technology often escalated. As opportunities to engage in physical abuse were limited, technology enabled the perpetrator to still reach into the victim's private sphere. While digital coercive control is spaceless, the space in which the woman and the perpetrator are physically located matters. The participants in this research emphasised that rural, remote and regional locations shaped both the manifestations and impacts of abuse, as well as the barriers they experienced when seeking help.

Acknowledgements

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URLs correct as at June 2021

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