

THE CONVERSATION

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Online harassment is a form of violence

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Domestic violence needn't be only physical, but can extend to online harassment and control. Arne Halvorsen/Flickr, CC BY-NC

Many of us have a traditional and corporeal perspective on violence. We perceive it as physical threat: the stranger following you home on a dark night; an unprovoked assault in a bar or on an empty train; or the alcohol fuelled brawl that breaks out in the Valley in Brisbane on a Friday night.

We may even think about domestic or family violence, particularly now that popular discourse increasingly recognises domestic violence as a national emergency of “epidemic” proportions.

But relatively little attention has been paid to what we call “technology violence” and the extent to which new communication and surveillance technologies are increasingly misused to stalk, intimidate, harass, humiliate and coerce intimate partners, particularly girls and women.

If you spend time online you might be aware of trolling, and other means of harassment. People are quite familiar with the notion of cyberbullying and its flip side, cybersafety. There has also been increasing discussion of the way that women in particular are treated online.

In cases where these practices are used to control or intimidate women, then we use the term “technology violence”. We prefer this term over “harassment” or “abuse” to highlight the ways technology is used within relationships to assert control and power over another person.

Online lives

Consider what might be a typical day for a 21st century citizen in a developed country. It might start with being woken by an alarm set on a smart phone and commuting to work in a vehicle laden with technology. Perhaps they find the way to a meeting using a GPS device, check and update their Facebook status or Tweet something.

Maybe they use an app to transfer money to pay a utility bill, or see that their credit card statement has arrived via email and briefly check before paying it. They might paywave their morning coffee, check the news on their phone, lodge their tax electronically with bank details preloaded by the tax office. Finally they may come home and watch a TV show on their smart TV that downloaded while they were at work.

Now imagine if their most intimate relationship has fallen apart and they have a tech savvy current or former partner. Or if that partner has tech savvy friends. Or imagine that they have somehow offended someone online who wants to pursue them in real life.

Suddenly bank accounts might have money missing or are suddenly unable to be accessed. ATM access could be abruptly denied. Credit ratings can tank so they can't get home insurance or buy a new car. Emails might arrive containing disturbing images, or emails simply aren't arriving from select friends or acquaintances.

False information appears on websites about them. Perhaps even intimate and revealing texts and images of them are uploaded to revenge porn websites. Certain friends can't reach them on the telephone. Bills go unpaid. A GPS tracker is somewhere installed on the car they share with their partner.

The feeling haunts them that their partner knows things about them that they might not have told them. The feeling that their life is unravelling around them and is beyond their control.

GPS and other monitoring and recording devices can also be used to control and monitor someone's behaviour. A recent case in Western Australia where a police officer installed a tracking device on the car of his mate's girlfriend is an illuminating example.

What is 'violence'?

Technology violence might be a somewhat awkward term, but it is worth pausing to consider what it is and its significance. At its centre is the idea that power and control drive people's behaviour within relationships, including within intimate relationships. Power and control extend beyond the physical world to the online world and frequently produce real world effects.

As our social world is increasingly mediated through communication technologies, relationships, identities, sexual and social selves are also increasingly played out online.

As a result domestic violence prevention and other social services are increasingly concerned about the misuse of technology in violent relationships and are calling for education

intervention and prevention programs in this emerging area.

Legislation is rarely at the forefront of radical thinking, but domestic violence legislation in recent years has extended the definition of violence from purely physical abuse to emotional and psychological violence.

According to the Domestic and Family Violence Protection Act 2012:

Domestic violence means behaviour by a person (the first person) towards another person (the second person) with whom the first person is in a relevant relationship that—

- *a) is physically or sexually abusive; or*
- *b) is emotionally or psychologically abusive; or*
- *c) is economically abusive; or*
- *d) is threatening; or*
- *e) is coercive; or*
- *f) in any other way controls or dominates the second person and causes the second person to fear for the second person's safety or wellbeing or that of someone else.*

We think the definition can likewise be extended to the technological realm. While the Queensland Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence has recommended expanding technology to support victims of domestic violence in rural areas, it has not adequately acknowledged that in some respects, technology is part of the problem.

Dealing with technology violence

Safety campaigns need to be updated to include information on the myriad of complex and emerging technologies which enable the perpetration of violence in social and intimate contexts.

Ultimately technology violence is different only in its method from other more traditional forms of violence. Intimate violence is not just about a black eye, a hole in the wall, a threatening glare. It is also a seized phone, a disabled account, a misrepresentation or a keystroke tracker.

All violence is about a person or person(s) having power and control over another. The uses and misuses of technology are part of this daily power struggle, especially for girls and women. The solutions aren't easy.

One approach is education and empowerment. If you understand technology and are in control of your online life, then violence is less likely to happen. But there are always new technologies and ways of social interaction that need new methods.

And what if you aren't engaged with the education system or lack belief (or have been made

to lack belief) in your own technological abilities? One option is Luddism, eschewing technology for the “simple life”.

The other option is what we are exploring in our research, how we can live good and fulfilling online lives as full citizens without being fearful or threatened. A comprehensive understanding of technology violence in contemporary social life must include a review of the use and misuse of internet-enabled technologies between intimate partners.

Effective intervention needs to address these concerns in socio-political contexts and in electronic, as well as physical, spaces. The interconnection between “private” problems and wider political and social structures can and should be used to address the systematic nature of domestic violence in contemporary Australian culture.

Education programs need to move beyond a simplistic “skills” development model to consider the connections between gender, technology, power and technologies of power in the 21st century.

Jenny Ostini will be on hand for an author Q&A between 3 and 4pm AEST on Thursday April 9. Post your questions in the comments section below.