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The role of technology in stalking and coercive control amongst young people

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Key Points:

- Information communication technology is widely used by young people
- Technology facilitated coercive control and stalking behaviour can cause serious immediate and legacy harms to young people
- Legal, technological and educational responses involving state agencies, private organisations and citizenry are all required to prevent and mitigate the harm caused by technology facilitated coercive control and stalking

Introduction

The UK represents one of the world's 'leading digital nations' (Department for Media, Culture and Sport 2022) with almost all (99%) children, young people and adults aged between 3 and 44 being recent internet users (Office of National Statistics 2021; Ofcom 2022a). Whilst households with internet access reached saturation a number of years ago (Livingstone and Smith 2014), individual ownership of multiple Internet enabled digital devices, such as mobiles phones, personal computers, security systems, lighting, heating and home assistants, continues to grow, further facilitating interconnectivity that transcends physical boundaries. Notably, the uptake and use of such technologies is particularly pronounced among young people.

Information and communication technology (ICT) has become an integral part of the daily life of a significant proportion of young people across the globe. According to the United Nations specialised agency for ICT, The International Telecommunication Union (ITU), 71% of young people aged between 15 and 24 were using the internet in 2020 (ITU 2022). By comparison 57% of other age groups across the world were using the internet, meaning that young people were 1.24 times more likely to go online than other age groups (Ibid.).

The pervasiveness of ICT and degree to which it is embedded in the day-to-day lives of many young people presents both opportunities and challenges. Undoubtedly, the importance of ICT for personal, educational and work-related purposes intensified during the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, internet and social media use doubled among 12-16 year-olds in the UK throughout the pandemic, with young people not only using websites and applications, such as YouTube, Snapchat and TikTok, to view content but also increasingly to create, upload and share their own material (Brudvig and van der Wilk 2022; Ofcom 2022b). The ubiquity of ICT enables young people to eschew the limitations of space and time and has the potential to positively impact their lives in multiple ways (Livingstone and Helsper 2010). For example, through the internet, young people can connect with their peers, develop and maintain relationships, access communities of like-minded individuals and/ or those with shared interests, reduce social isolation and loneliness, and increase access to knowledge and information, whilst breaking down barriers and traditional social

divides. Thus, it is clear that the affordances of ICT mean that it will continue to have a significant role in the lives of young people.

Yet at the same time as offering a range of potential benefits, increased adoption of and engagement with ICT increases young people's exposure to a host of cyber risks. Such risks may relate to potentially harmful content, contacts, conducts or contracts (Livingstone and Stoilova 2021) that can negatively impact a young person's safety, health and wellbeing. Consequently, academics from across a range of disciplines have sought to explore the risks posed by ICT to young people, with a view to enhancing safeguards for those online. A particular focus of this work has been aggressive or sexual harms including hate speech, cyberbullying, sexual messaging and pornography (see, for example, Tynes 2005; Flood 2009; Crofts et al 2015; Hamm et al 2015). In addition, academics have begun to explore how ICT may be a conduit for a range of other abusive behaviours.

This chapter introduces readers to the role of technology in facilitating and enhancing stalking and coercive and controlling practices. We begin by exploring young people's engagement with ICT and how this enhances the capabilities of individuals to engage in, and be a victim of, stalking and coercive and controlling behaviours. The chapter illustrates how the unique characteristics of information communication technologies – namely storage, synchronicity, replicability, and mobility (Baym 2015) – can be weaponised to control, intimidate, isolate, shame, and surveille (Stark 2007). Drawing on studies centred on survivor and practitioner testimony, we illustrate how emerging technologies enhance the capability of individuals to engage in synchronous and asychronous contact both during a relationship or after a relationship has ended. Emails, text messaging, phone calls and social media posts feature as means through which individuals may be harassed, intimidated and threatened by current or former partners, whilst geolocation technologies, such as the mapping of posts on Facebook, have been augmented by recent innovations, such as Apple's AirTags, to enable perpetrators to appear omnipresent regardless of their location. Discussion develops to critically consider the implications of technology facilitated stalking and coercive and controlling behaviour for policy and practice. Legal, technological and educational responses to prevent and mitigate harm are given consideration, as is the role of state agencies, private organisations and citizenry. In particular, we examine the responses of criminal justice agencies and domestic abuse advocates and assess the regulation and governance of online abuse by telecommunications businesses and social media organisations, making recommendations for the better governance of developing technologies in order to protect young people.

The Role And Function Of ICT In Stalking And Coercive Control

Young people have been quick and prominent adopters of the use of technology as a communications tool. By 2020, 99.5% of men and women aged between 16 and 24 in the UK had used the Internet in the last three months (ONS 2021). This widespread use of ICT to communicate with friends, family and others whilst increasing interconnectivity also reduces the amount of control individuals have over personal data and presents a challenge to privacy. For example, disclosing personal information

on social media platforms has become normalised. In addition, smart phones, by default, store Global Positioning System (GPS) locations and the coordinates of photos (Hamid and Maple 2013), while many people also voluntarily share their physical location through the 'check-in' function on social media sites such as Facebook.

These technological functions mean that surveillance is both 'enabled and encouraged', as public or semi-public messages and information can be recorded and archived (Tokunaga 2011) for a variety of purposes. ICT's ability to bridge physical distance and facilitate anonymity encourages more harmful behaviours compared to in-person communication (Stonard 2020). Youths as young as thirteen years old acknowledge that ICT enable them to easily monitor their partner's online activity (Stonard 2020) and check their 'online status' via social media (March et al 2022), although this is often viewed as relatively harmless behaviour. However, young people's increased engagement with social media has been associated with cyberstalking perpetration (Marcum, Higgins and Nicholson 2017). Other serious and controlling behaviours linked to cyberstalking can include checking a partner's emails or logging into their accounts, communicating or creating a fake account and posing as their partner, monitoring their partner by location settings (March et al 2022) or engaging in sexting (Mori et al 2020; Reyns 2019). In short, as this section illustrates, ICT can play an important role in acts of stalking and coercive control, functioning in a number of ways.

It is difficult to dispute that the distinct characteristics of ICT - namely, storage, synchronicity, replicability and mobility (Baym 2015) - have significantly enhanced the scope for stalking and coercive control within relationships. Technology facilitated abuse often occurs in tandem and is interrelated with in-person abuse (Barter et al 2017; Duerksen and Woodin 2019; Gilbar et al 2022; Marganski and Melander 2018; Stonard 2020), although the behaviours are similar in both forms of offending (Fiolet et al 2021). It has been argued that ICT has simply provided 'old abuse with new tools' (Cuomo and Dolci 2021) because of the ease with which partners and ex-partners can be contacted and monitored. This perspective is echoed in interviews with domestic abuse service providers where it is noted that: 'The technology abuse, it's really just another…form of control…' (Fiolet et al 2021, 3).

A number of recent studies highlight how the use of ICT in acts of abuse amongst adults (Dragiewicz, et al 2021; Messing, et al 2020; Woodlock and Harris 2022; Woodlock, Western and Harris 2020) and young people is commonplace (Barter et al 2017; Burke et al 2011; Marganski and Melander 2018). For example, Smith-Dardon et al (2017) found that a third of an American sample of 727 middle and high school children engaged in electronic aggression (i.e. cyberstalking, harassment and coercive sexting) in a romantic relationship. Similarly, in an Australian sample of 527 women and men between 16 and 25 years old, over half of the participants had experienced one or more technology facilitated behaviours, including humiliation, monitoring and control, threats, and sexual coercion, in the last 12 months (Brown, Sanci and Hegarty 2021). Collectively, such work illustrates how technology is a tool which extends the reach and repertoire of coercive and controlling behaviours in relationships (Harris and Vitis 2020; Stark 2007; Woodlock and Harris 2022).

A large proportion of research on ICT facilitated IPV concerns female victims. Research has shown that women and girls consistently report higher cyberstalking victimisation rates than men or boys (Ahlgrim and Terrance 2021) and the impact on women and girls tends to more serious. As such, coercive and controlling behaviour facilitated by technology exacerbates gendered violence (Harris and Vitis 2022).

Woodlock (2017) explored the nature of stalking involving mobile technology and its effect on IPV survivors. Utilising the SmartSafe study[1] conducted by the Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria (DVRCV) in Australia, data was drawn from two online surveys, focus groups and interviews with 152 domestic abuse workers and 46 victims/survivors. Woodlock (2017) applied the findings to Stark's (2007) framework of coercive control identifying three broad themes that reflect the cyberstalking perpetrators' goals: omnipresence, isolation, humiliation and punishment – within an overarching aim of control and intimidation – which we explore in detail below.

First, ICT amplifies the effects of stalking on IPV victims and survivors through the 'the omnipresent' perpetrator (Stark 2007). The very nature of ICT guarantees increased access to the victim, as a consequence of the lack of spatial and temporal barriers (Woodlock 2017; Yardley 2021). Perpetrators have the ability to contact or monitor victims at all hours of the day (Boethius, Åkerstrom and Hydén 2022; Cuomo and Dolci 2021; Dragiewicz et al 2021; Stonard 2020). A victim of ICT facilitated domestic abuse verbalises the idea of perpetrator omnipresence as 'I'm always in your inbox…' (Melander 2010, 265). A compound effect of the technological nature of the abuse is that harassment can be multimodal because it can occur virtually anywhere simultaneously on multiple devices, applications and platforms (Cuomo and Dolci 2021).

Perpetrator omnipresence typically transpires in three consecutive stages: overt, covert and retributive (Yardley 2021). Overt omnipresence occurs when the use of monitoring and control are not hidden, but they appear to be 'normal' behaviours used by perpetrators. This can be achieved through numerous text messages or phone calls (Woodlock 2017). Covert omnipresence follows when the behaviours are more secretive, and the victim does not know or does not have proof that they are being monitored. The behaviours associated with this type of omnipresence can be difficult to prevent because of their covert nature (Cuomo and Dolci 2021; Dragiewicz et al 2019).

Retributive omnipresence represents the stage in which a survivor leaves a relationship and the perpetrator switches strategy to remain in control. Coercive control, including stalking, through ICT usually escalates or begins at separation of a relationship (Dragiewicz et al 2019; Dragiewicz et al 2021; Woodlock and Harris 2022). Perpetrators thus extend the reach of coercive control after the relationship has ended (Dragiewicz et al 2021). The perpetrator may draw on information that was accessed during the overt and covert phases of omnipresence. Some of this information may have been retrieved by unauthorised access to personal information or accounts

[1] It is worth noting the major limitations of this study, namely the limited sampling strategy and small sample size.

(Dragiewicz et al 2019; Stonard, 2020). Retributive omnipresence is strongly linked to isolation and humiliation as the perpetrator aims to tarnish the survivor's image (Yardley 2021).

Second, isolation is another key aim of perpetrators of coercive and controlling practices through ICT. In the context of stalking, this can be achieved through technology-facilitated direct and indirect harassment of the victim's loved ones (Woodlock 2017). The purpose is to ostracise the victim, by distancing or removing them from their social network (Boethius, Åkerstrom and Hydén 2022; Cuomo & Dolci 2021; Douglas, Harris and Dragiewicz 2019; Dragiewicz et al 2019; Woodlock, Western and Harris 2020).

Third, humiliation and punishment can take a variety of forms, for example, exposing personal information (i.e. doxing) (Freed et al 2018), through the non-consensual use of sexual content (Boethius, Åkerstrom and Hydén 2022; Cuomo and Dolci 2021) and sexting (Woodlock 2017). Threatening to use sexual images obtained through sexting is an increasingly frequent occurrence among young adults (Branch et al 2017; Mori et al 2020). The threats may materialise through the release of sexual images or videos on Facebook (Woodlock 2017) or through text messages (Branch et al 2017) in order to publicly humiliate and punish the victims (Woodlock 2017).

As reflected in the perpetrator goals, coercive control and stalking both occur and thrive in a 'spacelessness' that is enabled by ICT (Harris and Vitis 2020; Woodlock and Harris 2022). Coercive and controlling behaviours often used to occur in physical 'private spaces' prior to technological advances (Harris and Woodlock 2019). As such, ICT has enhanced the efficacy of these behaviours in incomparable ways and become integral to many perpetrators' schemes (Dragiewicz et al 2021). Technology enables these behaviours to be economical, convenient and efficient for perpetrators (Cuomo and Dolci 2021), as they can more easily undertake, hide and cover their activities using ICT devices (Stonard 2020).

Types Of Technology Used For Coercive Control And Stalking Behaviours

As we detail below, a variety of technology is used for stalking depending on the purpose of the activity (e.g., harassment, communication, monitoring). This includes, but is not limited to, smart phones with applications, computers and, to a lesser extent, GPS devices and smart systems with video and/or audio (e.g., baby monitors, security systems) (Rogers et al 2022). Stalking using ICT is generally unsophisticated in nature, relying heavily on readily available software and applications (Freed et al 2018).

Mobile phones or smartphones are most frequently used in the perpetration of technology-based coercive and controlling behaviours (Boethius et al 2022; Freed et al 2018), primarily for text messaging (Woodlock 2017; Woodlock et al 2020; Douglas et al 2019) or sending e-mails (Boethius et al 2022; Woodlock 2017; Woodlock et al 2020). However, research has shown that social media facilitated stalking is becoming more commonplace (Woodlock 2017; Douglas et al 2017; Boethius et al 2022), particularly via Facebook (Woodlock, 2020). Social media platforms are attractive

because they can offer the perpetrator anonymity (Kaur et al 2021) and blur the lines between personal communication and public information (Dragiewicz et al 2018).

Data suggests that the use of GPS in stalking and controlling behaviours is less common than assumed, but its use is likely to be underestimated because victims are often unaware that they are being/ have been tracked and therefore unable to report it (Dragiewicz et al 2018; Woodlock 2017; Woodlock et al 2020). The GPS function in mobile/smart phones can extend to a number of applications that track individuals' movements (Hamid and Maple 2013). Dual use applications, such as Find My Friends or Find My App, are designed for legitimate use (Freed et al 2018). However, many dual use applications are used for surveillance of intimate partners, an issue which is exacerbated by companies often condoning such nefarious activities (Chatterjee et al 2018). An example of a dual use application which has emerged recently is Apple's AirTag. The AirTag is a small tracker device linked to an Apple product's 'Find My' application (i.e., iPhone, iPad and iPod) that helps the user locate any item to which the tracker is attached. In response to concerns of person tracking, further security settings have been added so that if an AirTag is placed on another person, this person will receive a notification that this has occurred (https://www.apple.com/uk/airtag/). Nevertheless, there is a time lag of several hours before the person gets a notification that a foreign AirTag is attached to them. In addition, many people have reported being unable to hear the notification that warns them that someone else's AirTag is on their person or vehicle (Fry 2022).

Spyware applications that gather information from a computer system without the user's permission is another tool of concern, as it has the capability to drastically enhance stalking and coercive behaviours. Intimate partners appear to be one of the key target groups for spyware products (Hamid and Maple 2013). The most popular products capture phone calls, SMS messages, internet browsing, GPS location, photos, and videos, and content from applications, such as WhatsApp and Facebook. Premium versions of, for example, MSpy, can block calls and websites, gain keylogging capability to retrieve passwords or inputted text. Regardless of the intended purpose, this type of product reflects an invasive level of data-monitoring, namely surveillance (Harkin et al 2020).

Freed et al (2018) found in their study that the use of Spyware is actually quite rare. However, much like GPS tracking, it is difficult to prove its use due to the difficulties in detecting such software, even when victims suspected it is being used. Moreover, removal of such technologies can also be problematic as such actions would be known to the perpetrator and can lead to an escalation of abuse. Surveillance tools, including Spyware (Harkin et al 2020), are generally easily and cheaply obtained due to commoditisation of these products (Freed et al 2017. Disconcertingly, marketing information focuses on the user of the product (not the consequences of the receiver), and legal disclaimers put responsibility on the user rather than the company (Harkin et al 2020).

What Is The Impact Of ICT Facilitated Stalking And Coercive Control?

The impact of ICT facilitated coercive and controlling behaviours on victims is often overlooked in research. A scoping review[2i] of 22 empirical qualitative and quantitative studies on technology facilitated abuse within intimate relationships, including participant samples of various ages, concluded that there are four principal ways in which the impact of offending on victims can be categorised; the often-overlapping categories are social, mental health, financial and omnipresence (Rogers et al 2022), which are closely linked to the perpetrator goals (Woodlock 2017) discussed earlier in this chapter.

A high proportion of adult victims report detrimental effects of coercive control and stalking on their mental health and overall wellbeing (Woodlock 2017; Dragiewich et al 2019; Fiolet et al 2021; Truman 2011; Stanley et al 2017). As previously noted, technology facilitated domestic abuse can exacerbate a victim's experience, and for some, result in additional trauma (Dragiewicz et al 2019). Some victims report symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) following cyberstalking or abuse incidents (Mumford et al 2022). Additionally, low moods and depressive symptoms that lead to a pessimistic world view are also common. Following these primary emotional responses are often secondary emotional responses, such as anger and aggression (Worsley et al 2017).

The feeling that the perpetrator is omnipresent ensures that there is a constant impact on the victim's wellbeing and sense of safety (Fiolet et al 2021; Woodlock, Western and Harris 2020; Woodlock 2017). In addition, the isolation that may result from the victim needing to move or change employment and/ or social networks to evade the perpetrator can further impact their wellbeing (Woodlock 2017) whilst also having financial consequences (Dragiewicz et al 2019). Even though victims may detach themselves from or leave the perpetrator, they often feel the need to monitor or 'check-in' on them through internet devices which adds to the victim's emotional burden (Dragiewicz et al 2019).

In both young and old victims, invasion of privacy and the curtailment of technology can be seen as damaging and infringing on victims' basic dignity and freedom (Dragiewicz et al 2019; Stonard 2020). Victims may also feel as though they are never free from the perpetrator's influence (Woodlock 2017) and that they lack control over their lives (Stonard 2020). These significant impacts are aggravated by concerns around the lasting effects of internet communications between victims and perpetrators because any such communication leaves a digital trace which is nearly permanent (Stonard, 2020). As such, not only the perpetrator but also the digital traces of ICT facilitated abuse are omnipresent (Rodgers et al 2020).

Victims of all ages engage in a number of behaviours to cope with their experiences. Coping strategies include avoiding or ignoring the perpetrator by restricting social media activity (see Rogers et al 2022), confronting the perpetrator (which can make stalking worse), acquiring social support or using cognitive reframing (e.g., changing their view of the experience or trying to understand the perpetrator) (Worsley et al

[2] The scoping review included research from countries with shared cultural values – the UK, Ireland, USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

2017). Victims may also distance themselves from technology to prevent contact, although abuse often escalates if the victim disengages with ICT (Cuomo and Dolci 2021; Dragiewicz et al 2019; Dragiewicz et al 2021). Young people find it especially helpful to block, change accounts or passwords to try to avoid the perpetrator (Stonard 2020).

When it comes to seeking help to cope with the experiences of ICT-related stalking and coercive control, many victims do not seek help (Mumford et al 2022). Numerous studies have reported that most help-seeking is from informal sources, such as friends and family, rather than contacting formal services or support groups (Begotti, Ghigo and Maran 2022; Fissel 2021; Woodlock 2017; Worsley et al 2017). Recent quantitative research on 1,215 young Americans shows that technological support is the most common type of help-seeking for this age-group (Mumford et al 2022). Teenagers have also reported using social media to 'vent' or communicate with friends as a more public way of coping. This provides a means to 'emotionally offload' which helps them cope with their experiences (Stonard 2020).

Victims can be both empowered (Douglas, Harris and Dragiewicz 2019) and disempowered (Stonard 2020) by technology. Reflective of this dualism, ICT facilitated coercive control and stalking have been framed as a 'double-edged sword' (Boethius, Åkerstrom and Hydén 2022). Some victims have reported on the positive role of technology in helping them cope with their experiences (Douglas, Harris and Dragiewicz 2019; Stonard 2020), whilst others highlight how they have harnessed it (Woodlock and Harris 2022) to offer 'technology-facilitated resistance' to abusive behaviours (Rogers et al 2022). Both young and old adults use ICT to 'defend' and protect themselves, including finding support, obtaining evidence against the perpetrator and to avenge the perpetrator (Boethius, Åkerstrom and Hydén 2022; Douglas, Harris and Dragiewicz 2019; Stonard 2020).

Responding To Coercive Control And Stalking Behaviour

As discussion so far illustrates, ICT now plays a fundamental role in coercive control and stalking behaviour and can cause serious immediate and legacy harms to young people. Economic, convenient and efficient, technology facilitated coercive control and stalking has facilitated and accelerated incidents of abuse by extending the spatial and temporal control of offenders (Cuomi and Dolci 2021). As Vitis and Segrave (2017, 5) note, 'technology is altering, intensifying and facilitating gendered violence'. Consequently, technology facilitated coercive control and stalking, although not a new form of abuse, is a developing challenge for criminal justice professionals, domestic abuse workers and other groups and organisations. Furthering our understanding of technology facilitated coercive control and stalking experienced by young people is essential if effective legal, policy and practice responses to such abuse are to be instituted (McGlynn et al 2021). Discussion now turns to critically consider responses to date and the potential avenues for further preventing and mitigating the harm experienced by young people through coercive control and stalking behaviours.

In the UK, acts of technology facilitated coercive control are prosecuted under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 whilst technology facilitated stalking may incorporate a

range of offences that fall under Protection from Harassment Act 1997, the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, the Sexual Offences Act 2003, and the Malicious Communications Act 1988. As discussed in earlier sections of this chapter and noted by DeKeseredy (2021), online victimisation is often intertwined with offline victimisation, as victims of domestic abuse can experience multiple forms of victimisation. This polyvictimisation (Mitchell et al 2018), in which technology enables *both* online and offline coercive and stalking behaviours, presents new challenges for justice systems, as they seek to respond effectively to the various ways in which abuse and violence may be enacted.

Professional and academic understanding of the role of technology, the organisational dynamics of offending behaviour, and how and where services need to adapt their approach to help and support young people experiencing technology facilitated coercive control and stalking behaviour is still in its infancy (Douglas, Harris and Dragiewicz 2019; Havard 2020). Raising awareness and understanding of, and improving responses to, such incidents among criminal justice professionals through training is, however, clearly an important mechanism through which harm may be more effectively prevented and mitigated. This is essential, as evidence (Woodlock et al 2020) indicates that criminal justice professionals neither have a full understanding of the impact of technology facilitated coercive and stalking behaviour nor are they always equipped with the technological knowledge and expertise to support victims and prevent or minimise future harm. For example, survivors of technology facilitated coercive control who participated in Dragiewicz et al's (2019) study into domestic violence and communication technology found that often when survivors reported incidents of technology facilitated coercive control (TFCC) police officers stated that there was nothing they could do to help. Problematically, both the police and courts may fail to recognise that an offence has taken place or appropriately identify and respond to potential risks and harms relating to TFCC and stalking behaviour (Woodlock et al 2020). Moreover, police officers may not be equipped with the training and technical competencies to check and secure digital devices, such as laptops and mobiles phones, provide guidance on how to collect evidence or see if an individual is being monitored (Dragiewicz et al 2019). Similarly, it is reported that courts did not ask questions regarding TFCC as there appeared to be 'uncertainty about what evidence would be useful in court, how much evidence should be collected for use in court, and how to present it to the court in a way that would be useful.' (Dragiewicz et al 2019, 31).

The lack of appropriate criminal justice responses may well be because technology facilitated stalking and coercive behaviour is not yet seen as a serious part of IPV by (all) criminal justice practitioners (Woodlock 2013; Powell and Henry 2018; Dragiewicz et al 2019). Woodlock et al (2020, 375) note that digital behaviours may be interpreted by criminal justice professionals as a 'minor annoyance' and consequently 'using this as evidence of harassment or abuse was not necessarily a straightforward process because some community services, courts, and police failed to recognise the significant impacts and risks created by Digital Coercive Control.' Indeed, both police officers and courts are reported as prioritising physical forms of

abuse over other types of harmful action, such as TFCC and stalking behaviour, which are not seen as being particularly ‘dangerous’ (Dragiewicz et al 2019).

The failure of criminal justice agencies to recognise or respond to acts of technology facilitated coercive and stalking behaviour can compound the harm experienced by survivors of abuse. Drawing on Smith and Freyd’s (2014) concept of ‘institutional betrayal’, wherein acts of courage are met with disbelief or downplayed, Woodlock et al (2022) suggest that victims may experience further trauma from the criminal justice system’s ‘institutional response’ when reporting incidents of domestic abuse. Previous studies of TFCC (Woodlock 2013) and cyberstalking and law enforcement (Millman et al 2017) reported that police officers would minimise or dismiss the harm caused or blame victims for their victimisation. Officers would often focus on the online behaviour of victims and their perceived unwillingness to change their internet activities or close online accounts. Such acts of institutional betrayal not only relate to police officers but were also evident in the courtroom where judges and barristers focused their attention on physical forms of violence (Dragiewicz et al 2019). Woodlock and colleague’s (2022, 13) interviews with 20 female survivors highlight how ‘institutional processes that minimized or dismissed the harms of TFCC as a nonphysical form of abuse’ compounded ‘the grief and loss associated with TFCC and leaving an abusive relationship.’

Thus, the training of criminal justice practitioners to understand the role and impact of technology facilitated abuse and how best to respond to such crimes experienced by young people is essential. This will better enable practitioners to intervene with measures that reduce the potential for harm to occur whilst also supporting evidence collection and ensuring that any harm and its impact is appropriately recognised and responded to at all stages of the criminal justice process. The desire for training is evident in Powell and Henry’s (2018, 304) interviews with police officers and other practitioners who note that there is:

> [A] need to extend the training and resources for police to respond more effectively to victims of TFSV [technology-facilitated sexual violence]. In particular, some police stakeholders expressed the desirability of resourcing for intelligence practitioners, trained to conduct online research identifying and documenting malicious online behaviours that are domestic violence or stalking related. Our stakeholders also commonly identified a need for training local police to respond less dismissively when victims present with a report of technology-facilitated abuse, stalking or harassment.

In turn, if officers and other criminal justice professional adopt trauma informed responses, they may be better positioned to understand that technology facilitated stalking and coercive behaviour, which they perceive as innocuous, has serious implication for survivors and respond accordingly.

The need for raising awareness and training extends beyond the criminal justice system to other sectors, most significantly domestic abuse help and support workers, who may increasingly encounter technology facilitated coercive control and stalking behaviour among young people. As Cuomo and Dolci (2022, 3) note: ‘While not

universally reflective of all domestic violence agencies or individual advocates, scholars have noted that the domestic violence field is generally “behind the curve” when it comes to technology.’ However, evidence indicates that practitioners have become acutely aware of the role of technology in coercive and controlling and stalking behaviours during the COVID pandemic, recognising the need for services to provide technological advice (Woodlock 2017) whilst also utilising online tools as part of their advocacy work (Hodes 2021; Wood 2021). Despite this, it appears that domestic abuse practitioners, like police officers, as generalists, are often not well equipped to help victims disengage with technology (Harris and Woodlock 2022a). Problematically, where technological knowledge and skills do exist they are unequally distributed across the support service. Consequently, staff who are recognised as being comfortable with technology may become overloaded with referrals from less confident and competent colleagues, whilst this expertise may not be retained if a staff member moves to a new role in different area or to a new job (Cuomo and Dolci 2022). Ensuring that a range of services are able to effectively support young people experiencing technology related coercive and stalking behaviours is therefore a priority.

Developing trauma informed and survivor centred community-based resources that utilise technical expertise has proven successful in empowering ‘survivors with the skills and knowledge to more safely use and engage with technology in their everyday lives and relationships’ (Cuomo and Dolci 2022, 3). Cuomo and Dolci (2022) report on a Seattle-based Technology-Enabled Coercive Control (TECC) Clinic wherein a volunteer technical specialist, who has received training in understanding coercive and controlling behaviour, is paired with a survivor experiencing TECC. The study’s findings indicate that such an approach can assist in filling the knowledge gap of advocates and support the integration of technology considerations as a regular part of safety planning alongside trauma informed specialised consultation resources. By instituting technology related considerations, as part of standard safety planning, individuals are better equipped to prevent and respond to TECC and mitigate the harm that can result from digital security breaches and invasions of privacy.

However, as Woodlock et al (2020, 368) note: ‘A major dilemma faced by practitioners is how to promote and facilitate client safety from DCC while still enabling safe use of technology so clients can remain connected to family, friends, and community.’ Studies have consistently demonstrated that technology related safety planning focuses on responsibilising individuals (Millman et al 2017 Burke et al 2011; Harris and Woodlock 2019). Advice from criminal justice practitioners or other non-governmental agencies is often focused on victims changing their online behaviours – the accounts, passwords and settings they use, the social media and other sites they frequent and the information they give out – or better still limiting/ stopping their use of digital technology. In short, ‘the focus is generally on the need for women to stop using technology.’ (Harris and Woodlock 2019, 539). In addition, police may place the burden on victims to collect evidence of coercive and stalking behaviour by saving text messages and emails and taking screenshots. (Dragiewicz et al 2019).

For young people experiencing coercive control and/ or stalking behaviours, ICT can act as a key conduit for help and support from both formal organisations and informal networks, particularly when they may be geographically isolated from physical forms of help and support (Harris and Woodlock 2022b). Indeed, it has been noted by Woodlock and colleagues (2020) that safety may not always be increased by 'switching off' digital devices. Drawing on survey data from 546 Australian domestic abuse practitioners, they noted how victims would often be put under pressure by police, courts and other help and support services to disengage, replace or alter the settings of internet enabled devices, and close social media accounts and other platforms such as banks and utilities that may be accessed online. Disconcertingly, practitioners in this study highlighted that such measures do not always work to increase the safety of women instead leading to heightened feelings of fear and vulnerability, direct in person contact from the perpetrator or an escalation in retaliation. In addition, these measures may create a 'sense of unpredictability' as they are no longer have information regarding the perpetrator's state of mind (Ibid. 375). This is significant given that evidence (Weisz, Tolman, and Saunders 2000) indicates that the most accurate prediction of the likelihood of perpetrator violence in the future will come from a victim's judgement. Thus, when supporting young people, it is important that criminal justice professional and domestic abuse workers and advocates avoid simply telling young people to stop using technology as this is neither likely to increase their safety or present a reasonable course of action for individuals for whom computers, mobile phones and other forms of communication are an integral part of their lives.

Alongside improving the legal responses and protections for victims of technology facilitated coercive control and stalking, preventing and mitigating harm can be achieved through a more considered approach to the ways in which ICT is designed and operated. Indeed, it has been recognised that criminal law may not always be the 'first or best way to respond to the range of technology-facilitated harms that victims experience' (Powell and Henry 2018, 304). Telecommunications companies and social media platforms can also do much more to protect young people from coercive, stalking and other abusive behaviours. Quite rightly, platforms are under increasing social pressure to prevent harm and abuse experienced by young people (Dragiewicz et al 2018).

As Dragiewicz et al. (2018) note, online communications are shaped by both the design of platforms and the ways in which they governed. Online communications and the potential for coercive, controlling and stalking behaviours are shaped by the platform architecture and algorithms. User features 'are oriented towards the maximisation of content sharing and user interaction, encouraging the publication of private details within a medium with instantaneous and international reach.' (Salter 2016, 2725). Thus, it is essential that social media and other telecommunications companies think carefully about how they construct back-end frameworks and front-end user interfaces, how they may intentionally or unintentionally facilitate abuse facilitate abuse or enable those experiencing coercive and stalking behaviour to prevent or mitigate harm by 'blocking users', reporting abuse, or engaging in other creative means through which counter abuse (Dragiewicz et al 2018).

By recognising that they are not merely ‘passive facilitators of communications’ (Dragiewicz et al 2018, 615) social media companies and other telecommunications businesses can actively play a role in limiting and preventing coercive practices and stalking behaviours that are experienced by young people. This may be achieved through ensuring that users have access to user friendly options and technologies that prevent or limit unwanted intrusions, secure their profiles, accounts and other data, and block, filter and alert companies to unwanted intrusions, content and activities. Effective mechanisms through which users are able to report abuse and unwanted behaviour that are supported by trained and responsive support staff are also essential. At present, telecommunications businesses and social media companies wield ‘disproportionate power’ in how they review and respond to reported content and behaviour, whilst their rules and requirements are often enforced in an inconsistent and contradictory manner (Dragiewicz et al 2018). In order to overcome such challenges and better serve the needs of those experiencing coercive control, stalking and other abusive behaviours through the platforms:

> Telecommunications firms will need to spend considerable time with their diverse stakeholders to understand the range of human rights issues and develop mechanisms to track this impact over time. This is not a straightforward or simple task, but it is a necessary precondition to developing effective responses to GBV and other abuses online. (Suzor et al 2018, 94)

Allied to engaging young people in developing ‘technological fixes’ to mitigate and prevent abuse, ICT may be made safer by addressing the ways in which young people interact with and through technology. As Klein (2012, 127) notes, ‘Ending abuse is not only about specialized services delivered by trained professionals. It is perhaps more importantly about ‘humdrum’ cultural change in which everyone does things a little differently every day’. Working with young people to help them consider their relationship with technology, expectations around privacy, and each other, and how this can result in coercive or stalking behaviours would be an important step in such change.

One would hope that businesses under pressure to better protect young people and others will prioritise the development of effective mechanisms that are responsive to the needs of those who may experience coercive control and stalking that is routed through information communication technology. However, given that such measures may run counter to the commercial imperatives of businesses, states must be willing to instigate the development regulatory frameworks that compel telecommunications and social media organisations to reduce opportunities for information communication technologies to be used as a conduit for abuse and harm.

Gaps In The Empirical Literature

Some of the current gaps in the literature on ICT facilitated stalking and coercive control include the lack of research around gender and ethnic diversity of victims (Rodgers et al 2022), characteristics and behaviours of perpetrators and witnesses (Bailey, Henry and Flynn 2021), and the overall impact of technology-facilitated

stalking and coercive control behaviours (Rodgers et al 2022). Research on technology-facilitated abuse tends to focus on women victims and in studies which included men and women victims the results have not distinguished between the two sexes (Henry, Flynn and Powell 2020). Research on LGBTQI+ individuals' victimisation is also needed, particularly with a focus on qualitative methods (Bailey, Henry and Flynn 2021). While there is no shortage of quantitative studies per se, especially on young people, there is a lack of quantitative research on the prevalence of technology-facilitated abuse in the general population (Bailey, Henry and Flynn 2021).

Much of what we know about technology-based abuse comes from English speaking countries, notably the US, the UK, Australia and Canada (Afrouz 2022; Rodgers et al 2022). Methodological gaps in the literature are clear in terms of research designs and sampling. The majority of studies use a cross-sectional research design, and to get a better understanding of how experiences of stalking and coercive control may change over time, longitudinal research designs are needed (Douglas et al 2019; Henry, Flynn and Powell 2020). Moreover, participant samples for mixed methods and qualitative studies are generally quite small, especially those around domestic abuse (Woodlock 2017; Stonard 2017). In order to better understand the full range of experiences of young people, we need to move away from the narrow confines of convenience sampling of university students (Douglas et al 2019; Henry, Flynn and Powell 2020).

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates the increased centrality of ICT in the lives of young people and how such technology may act as a conduit for stalking and coercive behaviours. Facilitating interconnectivity that transcends space and time, ICT has been heralded for its ability to overcome physical boundaries, expediate the sharing of knowledge and information, and enable individuals to connect and build communities. However, alongside the many benefits afforded by ICT, it also poses challenges in terms of the ease with which personal data many be shared and personal privacy diminished, and the harms that may occur as a consequence. Coercive control and stalking have emerged among a range of abusive behaviours that may be facilitated by ICT. Conducted primarily through smartphones and computers, but also GPS and other smart systems, the anonymity afforded by the internet, alongside its ability to transcend physical boundaries, means that such technologies are an economic, convenient and efficient conduits for such harms (Cuomo and Dolci 2021). Thriving in the 'spacelessness' that ICT facilitates, perpetrators are able to appear omnipresent and use technology to isolate, humiliate and punish. Evidence indicates that technology facilitated coercive control and stalking can have significant immediate and legacy impacts, causing social, mental, financial and omnipresent harms (Rogers et al 2022).

Understanding the organisational dynamics of technology facilitated coercive control and stalking behaviour, the impact of such crimes, and how best to prevent and mitigate harm is an ongoing endeavour. Whilst legal frameworks are in place to prosecute perpetrators of technology facilitated abuse committed against young people, a lack understanding of the impact of technology facilitated coercive and

stalking behaviour among criminal justice practitioners means they are do not always effectively respond to such crimes nor are they well placed to prevent or minimise future harm. Evidence indicates that police officers and court officials may fail to recognise abuse and potential risks, and if they do recognise such behaviour they may trivialise it. This can lead to victims feeling that they have been betrayed by an institution whose professionals exhibit disbelief or downplay the seriousness of technology facilitated coercive control or stalking behaviour compounding the harm they experience as a consequence of such crimes. As such, ensuring that criminal justice practitioners are adequately trained to understand and respond to technology facilitated abuse experienced by young people is essential.

Elsewhere, domestic violence support services need to ensure that technology related support and safety planning forms part of their response to harms experienced by young people as this has proven to be an effective approach to mitigating future harm (Cuomo and Dolci, 2022). In doing so, domestic violence practitioners, like their criminal justice counterparts, must ensure that they do not simply advocate that young people disengage with technology, but work with them to ensure that they optimise the technology related safeguards that are available to them. In turn, ensuring that user friendly options and technological safeguards, alongside transparent and responsive reporting are developed by telecommunication and social media business should be mandated and monitored by states. In order, to develop effective solutions to online abuse organisations must seek to engage with their users to better understand and respond to the challenges and harms that young people face. Finally exploring, understanding and, where necessary, addressing young people's expectations of and relationships with technology and each other can also serve to prevent abuse. Ultimately, it is only through a combination of law, technology, and education and guidance, involving young people, the telecommunications industry, social media organisations and criminal justice and domestic violence professionals, can coercive control, stalking and other abusive behaviour be effectively responded to.

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Discussion Questions

How does technology facilitate coercive control and stalking among young people?

How may we best prevent or mitigate technology facilitated coercive control or stalking among young people?

What role should social media organisations and the telecommunications industry play in stopping coercive control and stalking among young people occurring through their platforms?

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AirTag

Cyberstalking

Information Communication Technology

Institutional Betrayal

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Social Media

Glossary

AirTag - is a small tracking device produced by Apple and linked to their 'Find My' application for products such as the iPhone, iPad and iPod.

Cyberstalking – is the repeated use of electronic communications to threaten, harass or frighten someone.

Information Communication Technology – is technological infrastructure, tools and resources that are used to transmit, store, create, share or exchange information.

Institutional Betrayal - is a concept described by psychologist Jennifer Freyd and refers to wrongdoings perpetrated by an institution upon individuals dependent on that institution, including failure to prevent or respond supportively to wrongdoings by individuals committed within the context of the institution.

Polyvictimisation - the experience of multiple victimizations including, but not limited to, sexual abuse, physical abuse, bullying, and exposure to family violence.

Social Media – websites and applications that enable users to engage in social networking and create and share content.