

Technology's Dark Side

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In a world in which you can't rely on much, you can depend on batterers to go to any length and use any tool to stalk and terrorize their victims. In just the past few months, a stunning number of women and children in the Washington-Baltimore area have been killed by batterers.

Last month a Virginia mother who had predicted that her husband would kill her had that prediction come true. A couple of weeks earlier, a Maryland woman and her parents were killed two years after the woman had filed for divorce and right before a custody hearing – a horrifying example of the increased risk of homicide at and after separation.

Every year in the United States, more than 1,200 women and children are killed by their abusers, and those abusers are getting more sophisticated. In our digital age, abusers have learned to use technology to further harm and control their victims.

A cell phone, for example, can be a lifesaver, but it also can become a means of control. Abuse victims need to understand that batterers can monitor their calls by checking monthly bills or by checking logs on the phones themselves.

Phone-donation programs, such as Verizon Wireless's HopeLine program, are giving abuse survivors access to cell phones. The Verizon program has collected and recycled more than a million cell phones since 1995. This has helped make it possible for many shelters to provide abuse victims with free wireless, digital phones, complete with airtime and wireless voice mail. Having a personal phone with no strings attached – and with password-protected voice mail – provides victims with a private means of communication.

Also in the batterers' arsenal are global positioning system (GPS) devices, which no longer are just gadgets for wealthy motorists. Batterers have been known to install GPS devices under the hood, seat or bumper of a car so they can keep track of their victim's location. An abuse victim who suspects that she is being followed with what seems like unnerving precision should have the police or a trusted mechanic check the car.

The home computer also is a potential weapon against an unsuspecting victim. While the Web offers many wonderful resources for victims to research shelters, restraining orders and escape plans, the safest place to do that research is outside the home, using a computer at a library or a community center. Because of sophisticated new hardware and software, an abuser may have the ability to see everything a victim does on a home computer.

In this digital age, courts and government offices all over the country also have created a new threat to abuse victims. They publish their records on the Web, often without taking privacy or safety into enough consideration. Most do not provide abuse victims with sufficient notice that this information is going public, nor do they obtain permission to publish the information or provide ways for citizens to request that their records not be put on the Web.

In Texas, a domestic violence survivor whose ex-husband soon will be released from jail discovered that information about her house – including a photo and map – had been posted online by the county property tax assessor. When the victim approached the tax office to have the information removed, she was told that only law enforcement and court officers had the privilege to opt out from online publication. But safety shouldn't be a privilege.

In Montgomery County, Pa., the court publishes the names and addresses of victims (and their children) who obtain protective orders. It's difficult to make a case for posting this information on the Web, where content is archived and available in perpetuity, when the information is available at county courthouses across the country.

I work with local hot lines, domestic violence coalitions and law enforcement officials to help them understand how abuse has gone high-tech – and how batterers will use any tool they can get their hands on.

Unfortunately, I have a lot of job security. One in four women will be battered in her lifetime, and technology is becoming an integral part of battering tactics. However, technology is not the problem – abusers are. To counter batterers, victims of domestic violence must learn to harness technology to help them live free of violence. Their lives may depend on it.

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