

## Editorial Introduction

Digital media and devices are increasingly used by domestic and family violence perpetrators to coerce, control and entrap victim/survivors targets. Behaviours facilitated through technology are not divorced from but inextricably connected to other forms of harm. This brief provides definitions and frameworks to understand technology-facilitated domestic and family violence (TFDFV) and an overview of patterns and trends in perpetration and impacts on victim/survivors. In the interest of preventing violence and safeguarding and empowering those subjected to abuse, this is a crucial field of enquiry.

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## About the Author

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## Technology, domestic and family violence: perpetration, experiences and responses

Dr Bridget Harris

### Identifying and defining TFDFV

TFDFV involves perpetrators using technology to abuse and stalk victim/survivors (Fraser, Olsen, Lee, Southworth & Tucker, 2010; Mason & Magnet, 2012). Most commonly, targets are current or former intimate partners. A victim/survivor's children, subsequent romantic partners, friends and family members can also be subjected to TFDFV. Perpetrators use physical devices (such as phones, computers, GPS trackers), virtual or electronic accounts (including email accounts, social media profiles, online customer accounts, or institutional education or employment accounts), and software or platforms (like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube). TFDFV can be achieved by force, coercion, deception or stealth (Dragiewicz et al., 2018; Dragiewicz et al., 2019; Harris & Woodlock, 2019, and forthcoming).

TFDFV is an umbrella term, encompassing a range of behaviours, including the use of technology to enact other forms of abuse (such as sexual abuse and financial abuse) and to facilitate traditional (in-person) stalking (see also Barter et al., 2017; Marganski & Melander, 2013). Additionally, TFDFV can include but is not limited to:

- The sending or posting of abusive acts or communications using technology which are intended to harass or defame the victim/survivor;
- Causing an unauthorised function or impairing an authorised function on a device owned by a victim/survivor;
- Publishing a victim/survivor's private and identifying information (doxing) or sexualised content without consent;
- Impersonation of a victim/survivor or another person in an attempt to intimidate, harass, defraud or steal a victim/survivor's identity;
- Using technology to monitor the activities, movements or communications of a victim/survivor (Douglas, Harris & Dragiewicz, 2019; Harris, 2018).

Some of the acts facilitated using technology in an abusive relationship may be present (and innocuous in) non-abusive relationships. Using technology to check a partner's location, for example, can be problematised or normalised, depending on the environment in which it occurs. Encouraging children to turn on video phone functions might be seen as enabling parental connection. Yet when the request is made by a perpetrator, to family members who have relocated for their protection, it has dangerous undertones (Dragiewicz et al., 2019; Harris & Woodlock, forthcoming). The methods that they use to exert control, and, to intimidate, can have individualised meanings and manifestations, because of a victim/survivor's history, perceptions and experiences. Sexualised slurs sent through text message, or references to family members or events, for instance, can trigger or distress a victim/survivor who has experienced sexual assault or trauma in the past (Harris & Woodlock, forthcoming; Woodlock, 2013).

Unpacking what constitutes TDFV can help victim/survivors, support workers and criminal justice agents understand, identify and combat the phenomena (Harris & Woodlock, forthcoming). In naming and outlining behaviours, education, training and prevention campaigns can be developed; legislation initiated; and policy and practice (such as pertaining to risk assessment) crafted. However, TDFV is not unchanging. New technologies emerge and so do new techniques of perpetration (Harris, 2018).

## Digital coercive control

The concept of *digital coercive control* (Harris & Woodlock, 2019, see also Dragiewicz et al., 2018) provides a theoretical and practical framework to examine TDFV. This phrase specifies the relevant method (digital), intent (coercive behaviour) and impact (control). Drawing on Stark's (2007) model of 'coercive control', it highlights dynamics and patterns of behaviour as opposed to individual incidents, including those not typically regarded as 'serious' by criminal justice agents. Here, TDFV is situated within a wider setting of intersectional, structural inequalities. It recognises that violence is gendered, with women overwhelmingly represented as victim/survivors and men as perpetrators, who use coercive control in efforts to maintain and reinforce their status and power (Stark, 2007). TDFV is not separate from, but inextricably connected to 'offline' abuse. It is, quite simply, another element of domestic and family violence and is bonded to the broader cultural values and practices that gender violence (Woodlock, 2017).

Stark's (2007) model incorporates technology, though it is not without limitations (like applicability to Indigenous women's and LGBTIQ experiences, see Douglas, Harris & Dragiewicz, 2019; Harris & Woodlock, forthcoming; Stark & Hester, 2019). Importantly, Stark (2007) incorporates the 'spatially diffuse' tactics and techniques of male violence against women, such as isolation, intimidation, threats, shaming, gaslighting, surveillance, stalking and degradation (Stark, 2007). TDFV is absolutely

spaceless, transcending geography (Harris, 2016). Technologies enable immediate and constant contact, creating a sense of perpetrator omnipotence and omnipresence (Stark, 2012; Woodlock, 2013). Consequently, TDFV can deter women from seeking assistance and can elevate danger (Hand, Chung & Peters 2009). This is exacerbated when abusers use technology to overtly or covertly monitor and regulate women, creating a condition of 'entrapment' (see Harris & Woodlock, 2019; Stark, 2008).

## Perpetrator strategies

Navarro (2015) distinguishes between 'low-tech' and 'high-tech' approaches utilised by offenders to execute cyberabuse and cyberstalking. Low-tech strategies do not require advanced technological knowledge or resources, whereas high-tech strategies can draw on specialised techniques and digital media (like spyware, which tracks device activities), or keystroke loggers, which document typed keys). Victim/survivors may believe abusers rely on high-tech means, but, their information and access may be easily obtained (like through a 'find my friend' app, which does not shield intentions to locate another person, see Dragiewicz et al 2019; Harris & Woodlock, forthcoming).

Access to devices and intimate knowledge of a person can enable perpetrators to open a device or guess account or security information, with very little skill (Dragiewicz et al., 2019) Worryingly, high-tech tools and software can be easily acquired through basic internet searches and may be aided by male-peer

support structures (see DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1993), which, in patriarchal societies, develop, share, and reinforce ideologies and values which justify, legitimise and normalise violence. Peer support networks can be found both 'offline' and 'online' and are certainly fostered by technology (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2016; Harris, forthcoming; Salter, 2017). Thus, perpetrators can establish contact with individual and groups – through websites, apps and gaming networks – that provide information, assistance, and encouragement to facilitate high-tech abuse. While abuse may be covert, it may also be overt, with perpetrators revealing (at least some) practices in efforts to intimidate or deter women from disclosing violence, seeking assistance or ending relationships (Dragiewicz et al., 2019). Moreover, perpetrators may use the visibility afforded by social media platforms to attack, shame and intimidate women before an audience (Harris & Woodlock, 2019 and forthcoming).

## Negative impacts

The already tenuous idea that violence can be 'escaped' is weakened by the spacelessness of TFDFV (Hand, Chung & Peters, 2009; Harris, 2016; 2018). Technology's ability to transcend borders and boundaries and deliver immediate, constant and sometimes anonymised or clandestine contact and surveillance creates a pervasive and oppressive condition of 'unfreedom' (Harris & Woodlock, 2019; Stark, 2007, 2012).

Additionally, digital media provide new channels for persons enacting violence to invade victim/survivors' lives, and to escalate and amplify their abusive behaviours (Dimond, Fiesler & Bruckman 2011; Southworth et al., 2005). This means that, as the uptake of digital media and devices increases, so too does their potentially harmful presence in intimate relationships. We use (and typically rely heavily) on technologies in educational, employment, social and civil engagement. These platforms serve as a literal lifeline for some, such as people with a disability (Woodlock et al., 2014; Woodlock McKenzie, Western & Harris, 2019), or those geographically or socially isolated (George & Harris, 2014; Harris, 2016). Technology can provide essential contact with informal and formal supports and frontline responders in times of disaster (like flood, fires, droughts, see Parkinson, 2011) and crisis (such as pandemics: COVID-19).

Consequently, restriction to, abuse or co-option of technology can infringe on a person's livelihood, wellbeing and safety. Frustratingly, victim/survivors are tasked with the heavy – seemingly constant – burden of safety planning and often expected to change their use of technology, or disengage from using technology entirely (Harris, 2018; Harris & Woodlock, 2019).

TFDFV has short and long-term impacts on a victim/survivor's physical, psychological and emotional health (George & Harris, 2014; Harris & Woodlock, forthcoming). There are also potentially fatal consequences of violence. Over one third of all homicide and related offences occur in the context of family and domestic violence (ABS, 2018),

which equates to approximately one woman killed each week of the year in these settings (Australian Domestic and Family Violence Review Network, 2018). Abusive and obsessive contact and stalking via 4 technology has been identified as an emerging trend across domestic and family violence homicide and filicide cases (Death and Family Violence Review and Advisory Board, 2017; Dwyer & Miller, 2014). Recently, the NSW Death Review Team (2017, 134) found abusers stalked victims in 39% of cases, prior to the final assault, noting over 50% of cases "included the abuser using technology to stalk the victim, such as persistent text messaging, checking the domestic violence victim's phone, and engaging with the victim on social media / dating sites under a false identity".

## Conclusion

TFDFV needs to be recognised in the context and dynamics of an abusive relationship, but has distinct features, impacts and manifestations that cannot be overlooked. Gaining insight into these behaviours is vital in addressing and ultimately combatting domestic and family violence. While attention here has been on technology's negative features, it is also engaged by victim/survivors, services and criminal justice agents and can aid in prevention, advocacy, regulation and empowerment. Victim/survivors and advocates have shown innovation and ingenuity in employing digital media to access or deploy information, guidance and representation. Prevention and education programs have been developed and delivered using technology. There are



challenges – the ‘digital divide’, for instance – yet technology, potentially, can overcome social and geographic isolation, barriers to disclosing violence and help-seeking, disaster and crisis responses (such as COVID-19) and limited organisational resources and capacity (Harris, Dragiewicz & Woodlock, forthcoming).

In Australia, we are fortunate to have a pioneering non-government organisation, WESNET and a leading government, organisation, eSafety, effecting change and enhancing responses to TFDFV. These are fields worthy of funding and attention. Criminal justice agents have adopted technology in training,

investigation and regulation of domestic and family violence generally and TFDFV, specifically (Harris 2018). Technology poses dangers but can be harnessed by those combating domestic and family violence.

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