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## Technology Facilitated Coercive Control

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### Introduction

Criminologists have always been interested in crimes that involve physical violence. However, like other forms of human behavior, the meaning of violence is largely context dependent and changes over time (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2009; Dragiewicz & Lindgren, 2009; Myhill, 2017). For example, in the United States, men's violence against their wives and girlfriends was effectively decriminalized until the 1970s. Emerging from consciousness raising practices as part of the women's movement, the battered women's movement redefined men's violence against their female partners as unacceptable and criminal (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). At that time, the focus was on naming the cultural values and structural factors that contribute to violence against women, providing emergency shelter to women, and ensuring that severe physical violence against women was taken as seriously as violence committed by strangers (Schechter, 1982).

From the earliest publications, feminist scholars emphasized that domestic violence is comprised of multiple forms of violence and abuse that are enabled by gendered structural inequality (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Martin, 1976). However, for a host of pragmatic and structural reasons such as funding opportunities and access to hospital and crime data, most domestic violence research has historically focused on physical forms of violence. As a result, the non-physical forms of abuse and control that form the foundation of domestic violence have received less attention. One of the consequences of the persistent focus on individual incidents of physical violence is that

it has allowed criminologists and the general public to avoid grappling with the underlying cultural, structural, and relationship dynamics that produce and support domestic violence. Ultimately, without addressing these dynamics there is little hope of reducing the prevalence of domestic violence or significantly improving responses to it.

One area that merits greater consideration is the use of digital media in the course of abusive relationships, which we term technology facilitated coercive control (TFCC) (Dragiewicz, Burgess, Matamoros-Fernández, Salter, Suzor, Woodlock & Harris, in press). This is relevant to a handbook on violence because TFCC is used by perpetrators to commit physical violence as well as to entrap their targets in abusive relationships. Intimate relationships are a primary context for violence. TFCC is defined as the use of digital media technologies to coercively control current or former intimate partners. TFCC incorporates the “technological and relational aspects of abuse in the specific context of coercive and controlling intimate relationships” (Dragiewicz et al., 2018). Examples of TFCC include: using social media to harass, using GPS data to stalk, recording audio and visual content covertly or overtly, making threats via SMS, monitoring emails, accessing online accounts without permission, impersonating a current or former partner online, publishing private information online without permission (doxing), and creating or posting sexualized images or video without the consent of the person depicted in order to establish coercive control (Dragiewicz et al., in press; Southworth, Finn, Dawson, Fraser & Tucker, 2007; Woodlock, 2017).

The concept of TFCC is grounded in the understanding that the social problem of domestic violence is a pattern of abusive, coercive, and controlling behaviors that occur in the context of profound and persistent familial, cultural, and structural gender

inequality (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Stark's (2007) book provides a comprehensive articulation of the concept of coercive control that stresses the pattern of non-physical and physical forms of abuse and control that are central to understanding the social problem known as domestic violence. Stark's articulation of coercive control is based on evidence about men's violence against women in heterosexual relationships. However, because patriarchal gender norms inform all relationships, regardless of the type of couple involved, future work could examine the relevant research on abuse in LGBTQ relationships to apply the coercive control frame to different types of queer couples.

As our everyday lives increasingly incorporate digital media, offline cultural norms and practices migrate online. Established social norms shape the development of technologies via tech companies' organizational culture and design priorities. For example, Silicon Valley sexism results in hiring practices and organizational cultures that sideline or ignore women's technology needs (Wachter-Boettcher, 2017). Existing forms of social inequality like sexism, racism, and homophobia also shape the ways that people use these technologies once they are deployed (Jane, 2017). At the same time, new media offer novel capacities which have consequences for social life. In digital media studies this is called the "social shaping" perspective (Baym, 2010). The social shaping frame suggests that "we need to consider how societal circumstances give rise to technologies, what specific possibilities and constraints technologies offer, and actual practices of use as those possibilities and constraints are taken up, rejected, and reworked in everyday life" (Baym, 2010, p. 52). The anxieties that emerge around the creation and adoption of new media can serve to make visible cultural norms that are

taken for granted (Baym, 2010). This affords an opportunity to address the cultural contributing factors to social problems like domestic violence.

There is an emerging body of criminological research on digital media and gendered violence and abuse. Scholars have begun to examine how “traditional” crimes like sexual harassment, blackmail, and stalking, function online (McGuire & Dowling, 2013). They have also begun to document new types of crime made possible by digital media (McGuire & Dowling, 2013). TFCC provides a case in point. It includes contemporary iterations of “traditional” forms of domestic violence such as physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, but digital media shape the form these take and enable new abusive strategies and opportunities for responding. For example, stalking becomes easier for abusers when they can use widely-available GPS tracking technology to stalk and monitor victims in real time.

To date, research on digitally mediated abuse of women and girls has focused on the risks resulting from unauthorized creation and distribution of sexual images, harassment and abuse on social media, and efforts to resist gendered forms of abuse on and offline. Unfortunately, much of this scholarship relies on methodologies that can create a misleading picture of the dynamics of abuse. For example, focusing on specific behaviors like “sexting” rather than the relational and cultural contexts in which they occur results in a problematic conflation of behaviors that may have very different meanings and implications for the parties involved. Foregrounding such technology-related behaviors can contribute to misleading framings of their meaning. For example, the distinction between consensual or non-consensual creation and distribution of sexual images is significant. As with other sexual interactions, context determines the

meaning of the behavior. Likewise, scholars who have not embraced digital media to the same extent as young people may pathologize healthy or innocuous relationship communication behaviors. For example, while adults might think the amount of texting or snapchatting young people do is excessive, the number of texts exchanged in a day is not an adequate indication of the meaning of the activity. Indeed, one study of college students defined “repeatedly contacted you to see where you were/who you were with” as a form of non-physical “cyber dating abuse” (Dick et al., 2014, p. e11564). However, couples share location data and check in throughout the day via digital media in many non-abusive relationships. By using measures that produce systematic over-reporting or miscategorization of innocuous or even healthy relationship behaviors as abusive, emerging research on online harassment and abuse risks creating misleading impressions about the nature of the phenomenon. This is a problem because incorrect assumptions about the nature of the phenomenon will result in inappropriate or harmful recommendations for prevention and intervention. For example, claims about sex differences in poorly conceptualized “online abuse” are likely to be inappropriately applied to TFCC in ways that will be used to trivialize serious domestic violence and ultimately undermine efforts to prevent and intervene in TFCC.

Very little empirical research has deliberately examined TFCC. To date, the bulk of existing research has been conducted by advocacy groups. Generally, this research focuses on gathering information about practitioners’ knowledge and perspectives on TFCC (see for example Woodlock, 2015). Significant anecdotal data has also been collected on TFCC in the course of research on other topics. These foundational studies provide preliminary evidence about the nature and consequences of TFCC.

## **What practitioners know about technology facilitated coercive control**

Community-based research conducted by domestic violence organizations in Australia has found that TFCC is widespread and has extensive effects on women and children (Woodlock, 2015; Woodlock, 2017). In Victoria, Australia, a survey of 152 domestic violence practitioners and 46 victims of TFCC found that perpetrators are using technology to control, track and intimidate victims. DV practitioners reported that perpetrators were tracking their clients with GPS (either via smartphone apps or with specific GPS devices), harassing them via social media, particularly Facebook, and sending abusive text messages (Woodlock, 2017). Victims commented that they felt they were "...constantly under surveillance" and that even though they had separated from the perpetrator, constant text messages made them feel that they would "...never be free of him" (Woodlock, 2017, p. 593). Victims also noted that they had experienced other forms of abuse alongside TFCC, with 82 percent experiencing emotional abuse and 58 percent sexual violence (Woodlock, 2017, p. 590).

Building on this research, Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria (DVRCV), Women's Legal Services New South Wales (WLSNSW) and Women's Services Network (WESNET) conducted an Australian-wide survey 546 DV practitioners (Woodlock, 2015; Woodlock, McKenzie, Western & Harris, in press). Almost all survey respondents (98 percent) reported that they had worked with clients who had experienced TFCC. The types of technology and digital media most commonly used by perpetrators were text messaging, Facebook, and GPS tracking. Nearly half of the practitioners surveyed had clients who had reported perpetrators threatening to

distribute or post private photos/videos of them. Domestic violence practitioners felt that these threats were used as a way to control women, such as preventing them from leaving the relationship or from taking out a protective order (Woodlock, McKenzie, Western & Harris, in press).

Domestic violence practitioners observed that technology was enabling perpetrators to create a sense of omnipresence. Perpetrators used technology in a variety of ways to invade every aspect of women's lives, such as monitoring or harassing them, and they could do this at any time of the day or night, and from a distance. Their responses also suggested technology was being used to isolate women, controlling her use of technology (such as her phone and internet use) and by using tactics to ostracize her from social networks. These tactics were particularly effective with women who were already socially isolated – such as women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds and women with disabilities. Practitioners also reported that perpetrators were using technology in specific ways to abuse Aboriginal and Indigenous women. The importance placed on community and connection within Aboriginal and Indigenous cultures made it easier for perpetrators to publicly humiliate Aboriginal and Indigenous women via social media such as Facebook (Woodlock, 2015; Woodlock, McKenzie, Western & Harris, in press)

### **How technology shapes abuse**

Technology provides a means for perpetrators of domestic violence to enact coercive control which transcends fixed borders and boundaries. Victims are exposed to TFCC any time they access a device, digital media or profile and the uptake and



reliance on technologies can mean abuse and monitoring is hard to "escape." Indeed, as Dimond, Fielser and Bruckman (2011) caution, TFCC can act as a deterrent to women seeking to exit violent relationships. Yet while TFCC is spaceless, the place and space a victim occupies will shape their experience of abuse and stalking. Those who are socially or geographically isolated often rely on technology to communicate with informal and formal channels. Victims of TFCC can elect or feel pressured to disengage from devices or digital media, losing access to support and assistance.

The invasiveness and omnipresence of TFCC is compounded when members of a perpetrator's network participate in the abuse. This may not be done willingly or consciously. In situations where custody is shared, for example, children's possessions can be altered so as to record or track their mothers. Other persons may not be actively commissioned but decide to participate in campaigns mounted by abusers on social media. These attacks may target victims' accounts of abuse, sexuality, or ability to mother. Perpetrators can also overtly recruit others - friends or family members - to engage in TFCC; to harass or monitor victims via technology (George & Harris, 2014; Harris, in press). Abusers' peer-support networks can be derived from perpetrators' "real world" relationships or online networks, such as gaming communities (DeKeseredy, Dragiewicz & Schwartz, 2017; Harris, in press). More research is needed to better understand the nature and extent not only of spaceless violence, but spaceless features of perpetration.

### **Challenges for responding to technology facilitated coercive control**

Domestic violence is already a challenging issue for justice systems. TFCC presents additional difficulties. One barrier to effective legal responses is the rapid pace of technological change. Ongoing innovations mean that applications and devices that can be used by abusers are constantly changing, numerous, and cheap. Consequently, in many jurisdictions some types of TFCC are effectively decriminalized simply because the law has not caught up to the technology. Jurisdictional issues pose another obstacle for legal responses to TFCC. Because criminal and civil law are jurisdiction-dependent, it may not be clear who is responsible for responding to crimes that cross national or state boundaries. In addition, justice systems may lack the will, resources, or knowledge required to effectively investigate TFCC.

Researchers have documented police non-response to TFCC (George and Harris, 2014). The efficacy of police responses to domestic violence varies widely across jurisdictions due to local policy and practice. While some locations have effective responses, in other areas police continue to fail to answer domestic violence calls in a timely fashion. Anonymity of offenders poses another challenge to responding to TFCC. Depending on the platform, it may be very difficult to ascertain the identity of online perpetrators. Mobile phone numbers can be spoofed to disguise the source of the call, and proxy abusers may post content or texts on behalf of the abuser, complicating the dynamics of investigation. In jurisdictions where officers are already reluctant to investigate domestic violence calls, some officers may believe that the anonymity offered by digital devices and media and make it too difficult to verify the identity of the sender, or that the burden of proof cannot be sufficiently challenged, relieving them of responsibility to proceed with a case.

Of course, there are ways to investigate technology-facilitated crimes that allow for verification of offender identity, but the additional effort and resources required may dissuade officers from doing so, especially if they perceive that local prosecutors and courts are unlikely to act on the additional evidence. A lack of training and technical expertise undoubtedly contributes to this problem alongside the persistent minimization of domestic violence. Geography too, can shape experiences of policing. Regional, rural and remote locations have less access to specialist domestic violence officers than metropolitan locations and typically, less resourcing that could support investigation of TFCC (Harris, 2016).

Minimization of non-physical abuse is another barrier to effective responses to TFCC. Where police fail to grasp the seriousness of such violence, officers often fail to collect evidence that would allow a case to move forward (Robinson, Myhill & Wire, 2018). If officers do not proactively prosecute protective order violations or non-physical forms of abuse, it may also be difficult to achieve an appropriate response to TFCC. Each individual incident, for example each text message may not rise to the level of crime when considered in isolation. Best practices in the policing and investigation of domestic violence call for recognition of the course of conduct involved in abuse. However, in some jurisdictions, police officers may not receive adequate training to investigate TFCC.

The monetization of online abuse via traffic-linked marketing is another barrier to effective responses to TFCC. Technology corporations that make money from traffic to their content are likely to be reluctant to stem the flow of abusive content since abusive content makes them money, perhaps driving even more traffic than the non-abusive

content (Salter, 2017). The lack of external standards for content moderation mean that corporations are left to monitor themselves (Dragiewicz et al., in press).

### **Promising uses of technology for addressing domestic violence**

Digital media have positive as well as negative uses for responding to TFCC. These channels are commonly used for delivering information about services and providing anti-violence education. In the United States, survivors, scholars, anti-violence advocates, lawyers, and policymakers have been sharing information on interdisciplinary, international email listservs and discussion groups like The Communities Against Violence Network (CAVNET) and FIVERS since the 1990s (Dubin, 2001; Waits, 2003). CAVNET ran an online discussion forum for survivors in the late 1990s and early 2000s on the voice and text chat platform Paltalk. CAVNET also hosted the global listserv on violence against Indigenous women, CAVNET-IW as a Yahoo Group from 2001-2015, with over 200 members sharing 8,036 posts. CAVNET-IW moderators Professor Sarah Deer and Lonna Stevens Hunter now administer a private Facebook group on Violence Against Native Women with more than 1600 members. Anti-violence organizations have organized multiple online clearinghouses such as the now defunct MINCAVA database hosted at the University of Minnesota's Minnesota Center Against Violence and Abuse (Witt & Edleson, 2011). The Battered Women's Justice Project (BWJP) hosts webinars that facilitate researcher, survivor, and practitioner knowledge translation. BWJP shares hundreds of recordings on the webinars on the video sharing platform Vimeo.

Platforms and apps also have myriad uses for survivors. For example, specialized platforms with design features that allow monitoring and prevent deletion of messages can be used as communication tool for child custody access and visitation (known as “parenting time” in Australia) in the context of domestic violence (see for example Our Children Australia, n.d.; Talking Parents, n.d.). Text, video, and images can be used as evidence to aid investigation and prosecution of domestic violence (Roberts & Kurkowski, 2017). Remote video testimony can assist survivors and witnesses in rural or remote areas to communicate with courts without requiring travel and direct exposure to their abuser. This is especially valuable in sites which are considered unsafe as a consequence of single entry / exit points, no separate waiting spaces and without guards (George and Harris 2014; Harris 2016). Virtual reality offers novel means to deliver training for police officers, provide court testimony, enhance crime scene recreation, and upskill other first responders. Artificial intelligence such as machine learning can be used to automate some functions associated with identifying abusive communication online (Reffin, 2016). Survivor peer support can be accomplished via closed Facebook groups. Social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram can also be used for organizing public awareness or protest campaigns (Dragiewicz & Burgess, 2016; Salter, 2017).

Beyond metropolitan areas, information communication technologies can be used to “administer justice from a distance and thus service rural and remote communities” (Cavill and Miller 1997, p. 9-10). Thus, “postcode (or zipcode) justice” - geographic discrepancies in justice resources and services which result in variation in justice system outcomes - might be overcome through these channels. Access to

specialist police, court translators and legal representation for example, is limited in regional, rural and remote locations, but could be provided through digital media and, can facilitate victim appearances at specialist courts (George and Harris 2014). In a study conducted in Queensland, Australia, Hay and Pearce (2014) found that farming women had higher personal and business use of technology than men. If this uptake of digital media occurs more widely, in non-urban areas, then it is certainly a field which warrants further attention and resource allocation. Technology can also provide a way for advocates to overcome geographic and economic barriers to capacity building. There is extensive time, cost and staffing loss, where workers have to travel to metropolitan areas for training which can be saved where training is delivered remotely (Harris 2016).

## **Conclusion**

TFCC is an important aspect of domestic violence and coercive control that merits further attention and requires additional critical research. As digital media are increasingly incorporated into every aspect of our personal lives, they present new opportunities for studying, preventing, perpetrating, investigating, and intervening in TFCC. Critical scholars of violence stand to make significant contributions to our understanding of this phenomenon. Drawing on insights from prior research on domestic violence, coercive control, and digital media, critical scholars can help build understanding of the ways TFCC extends and changes domestic violence and coercive control.

## ***Directions for future research***

Empirical research on just about every aspect of TFCC is needed if we are to understand the dynamics of TFCC and its cultural and technological contributing factors well enough to intervene and prevent it. Scholars should use care to avoid reproducing well-documented poor-quality approaches in future research on TFCC. Consumers of research should adopt a critical lens in these early days of emerging knowledge and avoid rushing new laws or policies based on inadequate research. The non-physical aspects of TFCC make it challenging to quantify and particularly susceptible to poor measurement and misleading claims about the implications of research. This is one reason we have chosen to foreground the context of coercive control rather than focusing on checklists of decontextualized behaviors presumed to necessarily be abusive or harmless. As the Northwest Network, a leading anti-violence organization, regularly notes in their trainings, any behavior can be used by an abuser to establish and extend coercive control and any behavior can be used by victims to resist or survive abuse (Northwest Network, 2017).

Fortunately, poor measurement strategies for domestic violence and their harmful implications are well documented, allowing future researchers to avoid past mistakes. Scholars have exhaustively documented the ways that using decontextualized prevalence measures of behaviors without investigating the meaning, motive, or impact of the behaviors produces unintelligible results and are inadequate to helping us better understand the dynamics of abuse or guide policy (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2009; DeKeseredy, Dragiewicz & Schwartz, 2017; Dragiewicz, 2011; Reed, Raj, Miller & Silverman, 2010). Best practices for studying gendered violence and coercive control are widely available. These can assist scholars in creating meaningful

and accurate research to help us better understand TFCC in order to prevent it and intervene more effectively when it has occurred (Myhill, 2105, Myhill 2017; Walby & Myhill, 2001). Best practices for future research on TFCC include:

- Utilizing mixed methods (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2013);
- Asking about the context, meaning, motive, and impact of behaviors (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2013);
- Using gender-informed approaches that can capture and help explain profound sex differences in domestic violence (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2009; Dragiewicz, 2011);
- Contextualizing behaviors in the context of relationships, multiple forms of structural inequality, and the broader landscape of violence and oppression (Potter, 2008; Richie, 2012);
- Adopting ecological approaches that incorporate individual, interpersonal, community, and systemic factors that shape violence and responses to it (Dragiewicz, 2011; Dragiewicz 2018; Harris, in press; World Health Organization, 2005; Woodlock, 2017)
- Accounting for networked forms of abuse and collateral victims such as children, allies to victims, and bystanders (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2013; DeKeseredy, Dragiewicz & Schwartz, 2017; Harris, in press; Woodlock, 2017).
- Incorporating, building, and testing theory.

As in any emerging area of study, it is imperative to contextualize early findings in relation to the overall research landscape that includes information from multiple research methods and data sources. Consumers of data should be aware of the well-



documented differences between different types of surveys such as generic national crime surveys, dedicated domestic violence surveys, and violence against women surveys (Walby & Myhill, 2001). Each of these surveys uncover different behaviors, patterns and dynamics because they measure different phenomena in different contexts and often different segments of the population.

Future research on TFCC should foreground survivor perspectives on the meaning and impact of TFCC. Perpetrator accounts are another under-utilized source of evidence about TFCC. “What batterers say about violence can help us understand why they use violence as well as how they justify and continue that violence in the face of nominal cultural disapproval. Attention to batterer narratives reveals points of overlap between what is ostensibly deviant behavior and the hegemonic norms sustaining it” (Dragiewicz, 2011, p. 62). Research on abuse in diverse types of couples is also necessary since the dynamics and risks associated with TFCC may vary along with the identities of victims and offenders. Scholars could also do more to investigate the positive uses of technology to combat abuse. This would include drawing on anti-violence advocates’ current knowledge and grassroots practices, training needs, and challenges working with justice systems. Research should investigate TFCC in the context of hooking up and dating as they move increasingly online. Scholars could also investigate how police and courts understand and are responding to TFCC. Finally, it is increasingly clear that scholars and policymakers need to acknowledge and investigate the role that domestic violence and coercive control play in forms of “cybercrime” not traditionally considered domestic violence related, such as identity theft, public online abuse, and hacking.

Critical research on crime and violence is necessary to improve our knowledge of the contributing factors and dynamics of crime in order to reduce it. Although research is beginning to emerge on various forms of gendered abuse online, TFCC merits specialized research that draws on best practices for studying violence against women, domestic violence, and digital media. Research consumers should use care when proposing policy solutions based on the extant exploratory research, using multiple sources of data to contextualize early findings.

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