

Cyberstalking in West Virginia: 'Digital evidence doesn't lie'

Use of technology by abusers, stalkers offers more ways to control victims, but also for police to stop them

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Tuesday, March 3, 2009*

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Just a few years ago, police and domestic violence workers didn't spend much time thinking about the ways technology could be used against women in abusive and controlling relationships.

Now, cyberstalking is a harsh reality for those women, but the technology that makes it possible also can make it easier to catch stalkers in the act.

Stalking through technology "really shows the length a batterer will go to, to gain control of their victim," said Angie Rosser, communications coordinator for the West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence. "It's a whole new level of harassing and abusing a victim."

Installing global positioning satellite devices into vehicles, using spyware programs that can read every keystroke on a computer or befriending their partners' co-workers or friends online to check up on their behavior are just some of the ways predators work to control their victims.

"It's hard to say if technology makes it easier for offenders to gain control over their victims," said Cindy Southworth, technology project director for the National Network to End Domestic Violence. "Abusers will misuse every tool they can to abuse their victims, technology or not."

When stalkers use technology to control someone, though, they leave a witness, Southworth said.

Most domestic violence and sexual abuse happens with no witnesses, but "when someone uses technology, it creates digital evidence," she said. "Digital evidence doesn't lie."

When victims press charges against a stalker or controlling spouse, having digital evidence, such as hidden spyware programs on their home computers or GPS locators in their phones placed there by the offender can help law enforcement.

"I always tell cops to be creative about what they charge people with," Southworth said. "If they are doing a dastardly thing, there will always be a law on the books. It might not fit one law specifically, but it can definitely fit another."

Last year, the stalking laws in West Virginia were amended to include cyberstalking, Rosser said.

"Five or 10 years ago, we didn't think about these things, but now we need to educate people about a whole new level of safety planning," she said. "We have to be creative. Advances in technology have given the abuser a whole new arsenal of tools to harass and monitor their victims."

Places like the WVCADV do a great job of educating victims in this state on how to get help and use technology to their advantage, Southworth said.

By developing a strong network of shared resources and support, the group provides safe space and quality service for victims of domestic violence, and works for systemic change to assure families' options for building lives free from violence, according to its Web site.

"We work really hard to catch up with technology and what risks are out there for victims," Rosser said. "We try to be a leader in the state and recognize that our understanding of domestic violence is constantly evolving."

Many shelters in the state are partners with Verizon's HopeLine, which donates new phones with airtime to shelters for women in abusive and controlling relationships to get help without having the fear of being monitored.

Many advocacy groups also encourage people who feel they might be victims of cyberstalking to seek help, but to use secure computers and phones, such as ones at a library or a pay phone, that can't be monitored by the abuser.

However, people who are predisposed to be controlling will do so regardless of what tools they have at their fingertips, Southworth said.

"You could take all of the technology tools away," she said, "and the abuse and control would still be there for these people."

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