

## DIGITAL COERCIVE CONTROL: INSIGHTS FROM TWO LANDMARK DOMESTIC VIOLENCE STUDIES

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*This paper examines the use of digital technologies by domestic violence perpetrators, which we believe constitutes 'digital coercive control'. We draw on two Australian research projects and emerging research to provide definitional, conceptual and theoretical frames for harmful and invasive behaviours enacted through technology. Additionally, we highlight how such abuse intersects with other forms of violence but has unique and distinct features, including spacelessness. Spatiality is central in our examination, and we consider the spaceless yet geographically situated experiences of and risk faced by victim/survivors in regional, rural and remote locations. In the interests of empowering and protecting women, we also problematize victim-blaming and burdens of 'safety work' frequently imposed on women encountering digital coercive control.*

Key Words: domestic violence, technology, coercive control, spatiality

### *Introduction*

In recent years, technology has been used by domestic violence (DV) perpetrators to abuse and stalk victim/survivors. However, despite the prevalence and impact of DV enacted through technology, there has been scant academic review of what we have also termed 'digital coercive control' (DCC). In this article, we seek to address this knowledge deficit, informed by existing literature and our pioneering studies. Woodlock's 2013 SmartSafe study offered the first Australian review of technology-facilitated DV from the perspectives of victim/survivors and support practitioners; Harris's 2014 work on Landscapes (with George, hereafter referred to as Landscapes) produced the only investigation to date that has explored such violence and advocacy in a geographic context, noting how rurality affects experiences of DCC (George and Harris 2014). We emphasize that DCC must be understood as gendered violence and have observed technology-facilitated abuse and stalking enacted alongside other forms of abuse (physical, sexual, psychological, emotional or financial abuse) and/or 'traditional' (in person) stalking. DCC is unique because of its *spacelessness*, but we contend that it is shaped by both *place* and *space*.

Considering the forms, channels and contexts of DCC, we begin by proposing definitional and theoretical frameworks to be adopted in academic inquiries and potentially by state and non-state agencies. This is essential as a lack of understanding and consensus around identifying such violence currently hampers progress in either field. We then examine the aspects of DCC that are different from other forms of abuse and traditional stalking. Space is central in our examination, and we consider the 'spaceless'

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yet geographically situated experiences of victim/survivors. Drawing on evidence from our research projects<sup>1</sup> as well as existing studies, we explore how DCC poses risks to women and children's safety which tend to be exacerbated in regional, rural and remote locations.<sup>2</sup> We then confront the emergence of a distinct form of technology-related victim-blaming which is associated with the burden of 'safety work' (Kelly in Vera-Gray 2016) required by victim/survivors of DCC. Seeking to gain insight into victim/survivor and societal perceptions, we also discuss normalization of DCC. Finally, we identify emerging issues and future directions for research. We maintain that, in the interests of preventing violence and protecting and empowering survivors, these topics warrant greater attention.

### *Our studies*

The SmartSafe research was undertaken as a response to the concerns of DV support practitioners and victim/survivors around the way that technology was increasingly being used by perpetrators of DV. SmartSafe was a scoping study, as there was no pre-existing evidence in Australia that detailed whether technology abuse was a widespread issue in DV and how technology was being used, and the impact on victim/survivors. The study used a mixed-methods approach, which included focus groups with DV sector professionals (including police, lawyers and DV support practitioners) and two online surveys, one with 152 DV support practitioners and the other with 46 victim/survivors. Almost all (98 per cent) of DV support practitioners who participated in the survey had assisted clients whose perpetrator used technology as part of their abusing tactics. Participants were concerned that such harms were not taken seriously by police and that there was not enough support for both practitioners and clients around this issue. Victim/survivors expressed much distress at the harm of this abuse on their lives and wellbeing, with many commenting on the mental health impacts of DCC.

In Landscapes, in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 female victim/survivors, 19 lawyers, 24 DV workers and 3 magistrates. Court observations were also undertaken (which studied the physical site and operations therein). Last, extensive verbal and written consultation was carried out with an array of government and non-government agencies and experts involved with responding to DV.<sup>3</sup> A grounded theory methodology was employed to analyse the data. The study did not focus on DCC, but on how women in non-urban areas experience and respond to DV. The prevalence of DCC was unexpected; *all* those in this study (30) experienced abuse through technology, and a significant proportion experienced stalking via technology. Importantly, this research provided insights into the impacts of spaceless violence on women in particular places and spaces.

### *Frames in the field so far*

With little data garnered to date, it is difficult to obtain a comprehensive picture of DCC or to conduct comparative studies. Complicating the issue, thus far no universal

<sup>1</sup>Pseudonyms have been employed for participants.

<sup>2</sup>We will use the term 'rural' to encompass non-metropolitan zones.

<sup>3</sup>Family violence (as opposed to DV) is the legal term used in this jurisdiction and so was the term used in the study.

definition has been established in the Australian or international domain. However, seminal DCC studies have been produced in the American (Southworth *et al.* 2005; Fraser *et al.* 2010; Dimond *et al.* 2011; Mason and Magnet 2012) and Australian settings (Hand *et al.* 2009). Campaigns powered by advocates and collectives (like Take Back the Tech, projects such as Safety Net and organizations such as Australia's WESNET) have disseminated key information to victim/survivors and DV support practitioners, and developed strategies to detect and respond to this phenomenon. Yet, ultimately, our knowledge (and knowledge-sharing) of DCC and initiatives to combat it is fragmented at best.

Overwhelmingly, beyond works on online misogyny, the literature centres on 'electronic dating violence' among high school and university (college) groups in the Global North (e.g. Dick *et al.* 2014; Lucero *et al.* 2014; Borrajo *et al.* 2015; Wolford-Clevenger *et al.* 2016) or 'social media surveillance' (e.g. Muise *et al.* 2009; Lyndon *et al.* 2011). In the main, studies do not distinguish between technology-facilitated aggression or violence between friends and intimate partners (Bennett *et al.* 2011). Some suggest that technology is a new medium for 'old' practices; while others wonder whether it facilitates actions that would not be perpetrated 'offline'.

Existing scholarship has generally focused on the medium (technology) and the acts enacted rather than the actors (unknown or known contacts) or arena (the context in which violence occurs). It is possible that those subjected to forms of technology-facilitated intercession, harassment and surveillance do not experience other forms of harm. However, scholars have noted the co-occurrence of other forms of abuse and/or traditional stalking (Draucker and Marstolf 2010; Fraser *et al.* 2010; Melander 2010; Dimond *et al.* 2011; Cutbush *et al.* 2012; Zweig *et al.* 2013; Marganski and Melander 2015; Temple *et al.* 2016; Barter *et al.* 2017). In fact, in Landscapes, all victim/survivors experienced 'technology-facilitated abuse' (and a significant number, 'technology-facilitated stalking') alongside other forms of abuse and/or traditional stalking (George and Harris 2014; Harris 2016).

### *Gender and DCC*

The field is pre-occupied with a 'gender blindness', we believe, such that differences between male–female victimization and offending are not fully examined and, consequently, there appears to be little distinction made between sex-attributed behaviours. This generally occurs when technology-facilitated violence is decontextualized and can be exacerbated by the use of a flawed measurement scale, such as "false positives" [for violence] when "non-physical" items are included and joking and horseplay are not screened out' (Douglas *et al.* forthcoming; see also DeKeseredy and Schwartz 1998; Dragiewicz 2009; Reed *et al.* 2010; Hamby and Turner 2013). However, there is evidence that both the type and impact of perpetration are gendered. Failure to acknowledge nuances and divergences in the data results in a distorted image of spaceless violence (Dragiewicz *et al.* 2018).

The behaviours we discuss are by no means unique to male–female intimate partner relationships. Our work has centred on female victim/survivors and, overwhelmingly, male perpetrators. Thus, while we note the need to explore technology-facilitated violence in various contexts (such as in LGBTIQ—lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex

and queer—relationships), our focus is on DCC; and how such practices occur in the broader parameters of intimate partnerships and DV more generally, and violence against women specifically.

### *Terminology debates*

We turn now to the definitions that were used in our projects. In SmartSafe, the term ‘technology-facilitated stalking’ was utilized and referred to the use of technology to facilitate stalking and other forms of abuse (Woodlock 2017). The terminology adopted in the Landscapes research was more specific, and sought to differentiate between the behaviours that emerged and, guided by legislation around abuse and stalking, distinguished between ‘technology-facilitated abuse’ and ‘technology-facilitated stalking’.

Vera-Gray (2017) argues that the term ‘technology-facilitated’ redirects attention to the medium of technology as the problem, rather than the wider context of gender inequality that facilitates abuse against women in digital spaces. While she focuses on more generalized digital misogyny exercised by unknown male subjects, her point is important to consider when exploring and conceptualizing DCC. Although we have utilized the terms technology-facilitated abuse, stalking and violence, to encapsulate the two, we echo Vera-Gray’s concerns and emphasize the need to focus on the actions of perpetrators, design and administration of digital media, and ideologies and cultures in communities that facilitate harm inflicted using technology.

In electing the terminology and definitions to adopt, we consulted with advocates in both the SmartSafe and Landscapes projects. The term ‘technology-facilitated’ was chosen as technology was perceived to facilitate the abuse, but was not (wholly) the ‘problem’. Focus was then shifted away from technology to abuse that is *assisted* by technology and the specific impacts and responses that are needed when digital tools are used by perpetrators. However, as evidenced by our above review of previous studies, we do share Vera-Gray’s position that the terminology around digital abuse is problematic, and incomplete. As this is an emerging area with little research conducted with victim/survivors, caution is needed when theorizing definitions. We also acknowledge that our previous lenses share some limitations with the reviewed studies, as our definitions were not gendered, decontextualized the abuse and did not account for intent or impact.

### *Digital coercive control*

We propose that the phrase DCC (Dragiewicz *et al.* [2018] suggest ‘technology-facilitated coercive control’) is assumed in reference to the use of devices and digital media to stalk, harass, threaten and abuse partners or ex-partners (and children). This phrase specifies the method (digital), intent (coercive behaviour) and impact (control of an ex/partner) and—because the concept of ‘coercive control’ is central—situates harm within a wider setting of sex-based inequality. Additionally, it encompasses tactics and behaviours not typically regarded as ‘serious’ forms of violence (Stark 2007). Our research (George and Harris 2014) has documented that, when seeking a formal response to violence, victim/survivors frequently encounter perceptions that violence facilitated by technology is ‘less than’ and distinct from other forms of abuse and stalking.

However, we maintain that DCC is an ‘extension of violence that is already being perpetrated in the relationship’ (Lyndon *et al.* 2011: 3178).

Stark (2007: 208) acknowledges the ‘spatially diffuse’ techniques, strategies and channels (such as isolation, intimidation, threats, shaming, gaslighting, surveillance, stalking and degradation) used by perpetrators which extend into ‘the familiar world ‘outside’’, past the private domains oft associated with DV (see also Harris 2018: 52; Bancroft 2003). Certainly, the *spacelessness* of DCC transcends any fixed borders. Stark (2007) asserts that coercive control is a gendered theory: men seek to enhance their own status by exploiting women’s inequality. Likewise, Hester (2010) argues that coercive control is a result of gender inequality, which simultaneously reinforces and maintains inequality. In this regard, we emphasize the limitations of the ‘gender blind’ literature, which overlooks this dimension and, in so doing, the nature of victimization and perpetration.

Moving beyond an ‘incident’-centric model, Stark (2007) foregrounds the intent, impacts, dynamics and nature of DV. He explains that coercive control is exercised with little respite and that a victim/survivor’s worldview narrows in an attempt to, as Williamson (2010: 1412) writes, ‘negotiate the unreality of coercive control’. It is through living in this ‘unreality’ that, Kelly (2003) argues, a woman’s ‘space for action’ is restricted, as she adapts her behaviour in an attempt to avoid abuse. We draw on this concept to understand how victim/survivor choices, actions and self-belief are impacted by DCC, but extend it in examining the literal lived spaces that may be used to limit a woman’s freedom. The place and space in which women reside can be exploited by perpetrators in their regimes of coercive control, as particularly seen in the Landscapes research, where rurality compounded women’s isolation, heightened risk associated with physical violence and created additional barriers to help-seeking.

### *Spatiality*

Historically, the home was characterized as a space of sanctity; diametrically opposed to the stereotypical sites of crimes in public places, committed by dangerous strangers. Yet Engels, in his 1884 Marxist analysis of communities, offers a critical view of the domestic domain. He contends that the socioeconomic transition from collective to individual resource ownership relied on the formation of ‘the family’, based on patriarchal lineages through which property could be transferred. In the shift towards capitalism—as patriarchal power relations developed—women were, he suggests, oppressed in the private realm and excluded from the means of production (and so had limited social and economic capital in the public realm). His frame is not without flaws, but feminists have drawn on such ideas (and concepts around other inequalities and marginalization) in examining the public–private dichotomy, how gender and inequality manifest in these zones and how private fields become sites where violence against women might be enacted (Horsfall 1991; Radford and Stanko 1996; Stark 2007). Many victim/survivors we consulted reported ‘lifetime’ or ‘long-term’ experiences of ‘private’ violence, which contributed to the normalization of these harms. Bella, for instance, told us that her ‘whole life has been domestic violence’ and she ‘kept it hidden’ as she ‘thought everybody was experiencing it ... thought that was what happened in families’. For these women, their homes were not safe spaces; ‘he has so much power, control



over everything’, Samantha from the Landscapes study explained. In Landscapes, we surmised that many women saw ‘a direct correlation between constructs of gender, the subjugation of women and the perpetration and normalisation of violence against women’ (George and Harris 2014: 43).

Undoubtedly, the constructs of privacy ‘permit, encourage, and reinforce violence against women’ (Schneider 1994: 36). Legislation and policy was, traditionally, limited or lacking, which signalled government reluctance to intervene in ‘domestic’ matters. Reflecting on the Australian experience, Finnane (1994: 104, 106) agrees that state agencies have ‘contributed to the definition of a sometimes hazy boundary between public and private’. The ‘veil of privacy’ that shrouded ‘the domestic’ sphere was, Fineman (1994: xiii) asserts, lifted by second-wave feminist reviews of the family and family law. The tireless work of activists, advocates and academics has contributed to greater recognition of associated harm and risk and the framing of DV as a ‘public’ problem (Harris 2016). However, ‘public’ formal responses to ‘private’ violence can be confronting for victim/survivors. As Dawn told us, ‘[t]he public thing in court is hard because you feel ashamed. You keep it hidden for years and then going from that to going public is hard’. Certainly, the public/private dichotomy cannot be overlooked when studying experiences and regulation of violence against women.

To extend our understanding of victimization, risk and responses to violence, we need to position DV within a spatial framework that considers place, space and spacelessness (Harris 2018). Using de Certeau’s work, we propose that *place* ‘implies an indication of stability’, a particular geographic location or structure (de Certeau’s 1984: 117). *Space* is ‘practiced place’ (de Certeau 1984: 124), which is ‘temporally created, forged and changed by the actors and actions that pass through a location’, and incorporates ‘fora where philosophies, power and control are expressed and resisted’; and so ‘any study of space involves a study of both the practical and ideological components of an area’ (Harris 2016: 70). Non-metropolitan zones, therefore, need to be considered in physical terms, as places but also as spaces, where constructs of gender and social and cultural values and barriers facing victim/survivors shape the perceptions and regulation of violence. Consequently, ‘the ways in which perpetrators use technology to extend harm, isolation and control are heightened’ in regional, rural and remote areas (Harris 2018: 53).

‘In an ideal world there would be’, Buttle (2006: 6) writes, ‘a gold standard definition of rural that could be applied across international jurisdictions, which would describe all the complexity of rural life’. Yet, as Donnermeyer (2015) emphasises, there is no uniform or clear categorization of rurality, on a domestic or international level. Physical measures have been used but ‘offer limited insight into understandings of place as it is recognised by individuals and organisations’ (Harris and Harkness 2016: 6). In this vein, Scott and Hogg (2015: 172) maintain that rurality must be framed as more than geography or environment because ‘it comprises also mental spaces or “symbolic landscapes” which condition everyday thought and action’. de Certeau’s (1984) frame of spatiality is useful here because to understand rurality we must look beyond mere physical geography (place). ‘Rurality’ is, in essence, created by acts, actors and actions which temporally create and change spaces.

As Hogg (2016) explains, in popular conception, rurality is comprised of ‘some mix of geographic, demographic and economic (land use) elements’ which are diametrically contrasted to the characteristics of cities and, in this sense, is ‘a state of mind’. Rurality is not only physical but ideological; representing imagined cultural values and attributes

as well as socio-demographic and economic characteristics. In relation to DV, the notion of the ‘rural idyll’—the fallacy that rural places are free of crime and conflict, and have high levels of internal trust, social capital and collective efficacy—must be confronted. Importantly, we emphasize that there are stark distinctions between the features or characteristics (both real and imagined) of different rural locations and we must be cautious not to homogenize these features or oversimplify these differences. ‘Rurality is’, as Hogg and Carrington (2006: 7) maintain, ‘considerably more unstable, diverse, contested and fragmented than is often assumed’. While we refer to the rural literature as a body of work and rurality in Australia, we are conscious of the multiplicity of these spaces.

Internationally, studies indicate that rural women are particularly ‘vulnerable’ to partner violence (Brownridge 2009; see also DeKeseredy’s body of work including OR such as DeKeseredy *et al.* 2017; and with Schwartz 1998, 2009). Sandberg (2013) argues that rural women should be included in intersectional studies of violence against women; however, ‘rurality’ should not be viewed as a form of intersecting oppression, such as ethnicity and class, as women are not oppressed by ‘rurality’. Instead, she suggests that rurality imposes ‘particular kinds of vulnerability to individuals’ (361). The distance between residences and the lack of informal and formal supports (including police and medical assistance) are generally greater in rural areas than in urban, which reduces access to assistance and exacerbates risk (Harris 2016).

Opportunities to exit violent relationships are hindered by infrastructure and socioeconomic disadvantage in rural areas. Specifically, there can be limited access to cars, public transportation and private transport (taxis and app-based ride sharing; Shepherd 2001; Peek-Asa *et al.* 2011; Harris 2016; 2018) and poor road conditions (Sandberg 2013). The women and workers consulted in Landscapes noted instances where abusers actively sought to increase the women’s geographic isolation, mirroring the findings of a 1992 study in which victim/survivors reported that ‘no one can hear your screams’ at secluded residences (National Committee on Violence Against Women 1992: 22–23). Seclusion (and attempts to extend this seclusion) has particular consequences for women with disabilities. Where access to technologies and vehicles is controlled by the perpetrator, it had, practitioners in Landscapes said, ‘[t]o a certain extent ... given him control’ over the woman’s movements and indeed her life.

Those living in small communities are more visible to support systems and perpetrators, impinging on a victim/survivor’s sense of security and privacy, and frequently resulting in stigmatization when help-seeking (DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2009; Grama 2000). In Landscapes, Keri, a well-known and respected Indigenous woman, worried that she would be regarded as ‘a failure’ and that ‘everyone would know’ if she disclosed her experience of violence to police. Teresa agreed that ‘[e]veryone knows everyone’s business’ and so, ‘to go to the hospital and say what was happening was too hard’. Perpetrators are commonly known by the police and victim/survivors can be dissuaded from pursuing orders of protection due to these personal relationships (Woodlock *et al.* 2013). Kelly was advised by officers to ‘go home and cook a nice meal, his favourite meal’ for her abuser, a ‘pillar of society’, ‘and everything will be okay’. A worker recounted an instance when officers told a woman who reported her abuser (a man ‘known [to police] through his sporting activity’) that she was ‘making it [the allegations of violence] up and that he was a good guy who wouldn’t do that’. Social isolation can also occur because of what victim/survivors in Landscapes described as ‘conservative’ values—patriarchal power relations that ‘support the subjugation of women and

more explicitly support violence against women' (Harris 2016: 77). Tina, for instance, reported that her abuser couched his controlling behaviours as 'taking care' of her in an 'old fashioned' manner. Such 'conservative' values are not unique to rural areas but can assume distinct meanings and features due to labour and leisure histories in these landscapes (Hogg and Carrington 2006).

Lanier and Maume (2009) assert that DV is notably different in rural areas compared with urban places and scholars have found higher levels of intimate partner stalking (Logan *et al.* 2007), threats with and use of weapons (Logan *et al.* 2003), torture (Websdale and Johnson 1998) and domestic homicides (Gallup-Black 2005) in rural areas. Websdale (1998: 10) contends that 'rural culture' can promote 'an acceptance of firearms for hunting and self-protection' which 'may include a code among certain men that accepts the casual use of firearms to intimidate wives and intimate partners'. Similarly, Hall-Sanchez (2014) observes a link between rural hunting culture and violence against women, which she associates with male peer support structures. We found in Landscapes that firearms were seen to pose both covert and overt threats to women. On the former, knowing that abusers had access to weapons made their threats—to women, children and to self-harm if women sought to leave or seek assistance—feel tangible and discouraged formal and informal responses to violence. On the latter, the perpetrator's access to firearms increased the dangers women and their children faced. While gun ownership could be restricted through intervention orders, guns were common in the sites of this study. There was an awareness that, even if an abuser's own weapon was not available, he had access to other weapons through his network.

Rurality can constrain women's 'space for action', yet discussions about the relevance of place and space are often missing from DV research. Some claim that this is indicative of an urban bias in criminological studies (Websdale 1998; DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2009). Place and space are important in understanding DV; however, DCC is characterized by *spacelessness*, in transcending borders and boundaries in new ways. Victim/survivors are vulnerable to DCC anywhere they use technology; 'I don't feel safe anywhere, I feel like he is able to contact me at anytime, at anyplace', one woman consulted for SmartSafe lamented. Perpetrators have 'almost constant access' to a victim/survivor's life through these channels (Woodlock 2013: 16). 'Women feel bombarded and hounded by the abuse on their phones, they are constantly abused and harassed', a DV support practitioner declared in SmartSafe; they are 'being "tethered" by the use of technology'. Digital communication can be instantaneous and, our research indicates, frequently high in volume in DCC cases. In Landscapes, Jemma said that her abuser would 'text her constantly'; Yvonne received 'forty-two text messages in two hours. They were disgusting'; Georgia had '480 abusive SMS and Facebook messages'; Rohini was sent 'thirty texts a day from him [the perpetrator]', including while they were at court for a DV matter.

As Dimond *et al.* (2011: 413–414) explain, DCC can 'pose not only a greater danger, but also provides a deterrent for some women who are considering leaving'. It also jeopardizes how 'they are able to protect themselves' (Mason and Magnet 2012: 107). Mary, a participant in Landscapes, knew that her abuser was reviewing her mobile text messages and likely her broader use of technology, so 'had to be very careful about what I was doing and deleting everything'. When she 'used the internet to help me figure out how to get out safely', she was religiously 'delet[ing] my browsing history'. Victim/survivors in rural areas worry that they will be easily located by perpetrators



even without technology. ‘It is easy to find women in the country’, especially when children are involved, Kalia said, because ‘[y]ou just go to all the schools and wait and eventually you will find the one the kids are at’ (Landscapes). We heard of both ‘low’ and ‘high’ technologies and techniques being used by perpetrators to stalk women. Sometimes this was hidden until it was discovered by women, workers or police. At other times, the perpetrator delighted in communicating that the victim/survivor was ‘under surveillance’. Teresa had physically relocated and was sent Facebook messages from her former partner ‘saying “I know where you are”’. It was also evident that it was not only abusers but those in their network who engaged in monitoring. Rohini received ‘threats, him writing messages saying “I know where you were last night, I had photos taken, you weren’t with the kids”’. Other women were told that they had been watched at times when they knew their abuser was at work or otherwise occupied.

The use of technology to track women’s movements and communications makes this task easier as it can be accomplished from any distance. In this sense, abusers can overcome distance, yet for victim/survivors in rural locations, distance is a looming danger. The time first responders take to reach women exacerbates the risks, so what might be a serious assault in an urban location can become a homicide in a non-urban location (Websdale 1998). In evaluating the hazards associated with spaceless violence, we find that those that exist in particular landscapes cannot be overlooked (Harris 2018). DCC transcends geography and so is not bound to the ‘private’ domain. The already tenuous notion that violence can be ‘escaped’ is further weakened because the ‘concept of “feeling safe” from an abuser no longer has the same geographic and spatial boundaries it once did’ (Hand *et al.* 2009: part 3). The spaceless feature of technology, the heavy presence of technology in women’s lives and surveillance practices create a sense of the perpetrator’s ‘omnipotence and omnipresence’ (Stark 2012: 25). This is compounded when abusers use technology to covertly or overtly monitor and control women, creating a ‘condition of unfreedom ... *entrapment*’ (Stark 2007: 205). In so doing, they micro-regulate women’s everyday behaviour (in private and public places) and restrict their access to supports, via spaceless means.

DCC can be undetected and hidden; however, spaceless violence can also be highly visible. As Vickery and Everbach (2018: 10) explain, the ‘persistent, searchable, and scaleable affordances of social media render interactions more visible’. A DV practitioner in SmartSafe claimed: ‘There is an ease now with technology in which perpetrators can abuse women publically, or even the threat of it is enough to keep women in terror’. Attacks on and attempts to shame victim/survivors online can serve to bring abuse into public spaces with relative permanency, extending and exacerbating the impact on the victim (Kings-Ries 2011; Lucero *et al.* 2014). We need, therefore, to challenge assumptions that DCC—and DV, more broadly—is ‘private’. A victim/survivor in SmartSafe illustrated how this can impact not only the victim, but also her friends and family when abuse is brought into the public sphere:

He knew all my secrets and things that I was ashamed of. And he put it out there on Facebook for everyone to see, including my children. Most of my friends knew he was abusive and that we had separated and tried to defend me, but the impact on me was huge.

*Victim-blaming and safety work*

We found that the victim/survivors of DCC in our research were typically blamed for the abuse (both during the relationship and post separation), and this is not unusual according to other studies (see also [Sutherland et al. 2017](#)). Despite increased awareness of DV, there are persistent myths that shape understandings, particularly as to why women stay in relationships with men who are violent ([Wendt 2014](#)). With the emergence of DCC, the focus is generally on the need for women to stop using technology. A support practitioner from the SmartSafe study affirmed:

Women are told to shut down their social media accounts, change numbers, learn more about their safety settings on their phone. This amounts to an enormous responsibility on the woman to change *her* behaviour in order to avoid *his* abuse. When she is unable or unwilling to do this, the police say they can't help her. It seems to me that the rise of technology abuse has brought with it new forms of victim-blaming.

Similar statements were reported in [Millman et al. \(2017\)](#). The authors consulted police about cyberstalking investigations and noted that, where the perpetrator was an ex-partner, officers tended to blame the victim/survivor for the stalking, and to suggest that her vulnerability was increased by the amount of information she shared online and her reluctance to change her online behaviour. One of the key themes to emerge throughout the interviews was that police felt that the victim/survivors were 'unwilling to help themselves' ([Millman et al. 2017](#): 94).

On this issue, we highlight that victim/survivors are often reluctant to seek assistance as they are ashamed and afraid that they will not be believed ([Fanslow and Robinson 2010](#)). In the SmartSafe study, 56 per cent of victim/survivors did not seek help, with 85 per cent stating that they did not disclose their experience because they were embarrassed ([Woodlock 2013](#)). Such self-blame is common among victim/survivors of DV and acts as a significant barrier to help-seeking ([Rose et al. 2011](#)). This can be compounded in cases when women do seek aid yet are then held responsible for the abuse (and its continuation, as seen in the Smartsafe and Landscapes findings; see also [Fanslow and Robinson 2010](#)). Heather (in Landscapes), for example, was physically assaulted after her partner discovered that someone had contacted her, unsolicited, on social media. She reported the incident to police and recalled that:

the police woman said, 'You shouldn't talk to guys on Facebook'. It felt like she was saying, 'You deserve it' but she was wrong. I wonder what she would have said about all the other times he hit me, but I wasn't quick enough to say, 'So, the last three years he has grabbed me around the throat and there was no 'excuse'; was that okay?'... [she] sort of made me feel I was to blame.

DV practitioners in the SmartSafe study emphasized that DCC is used to isolate victim/survivors. Women were typically reluctant to withdraw from their online communities as they were a source of support and connection. A worker explained:

Women have told me that even though they are being harassed and stalked they are not willing to stop using communication technologies because it is the only way they can access their support people without feeling like they are endangering them.

Further highlighting the tendency to responsabilize women, [Burke et al. \(2011\)](#) claim that many prevention strategies concerning technology and violence are focused on

the actions of victim/survivors. In the Landscapes project, women were pressured into closing their online accounts, changing their phone numbers and withdrawing from online activities—that is, from sources of comfort and assistance. Yet digital communities can be vital for women who are geographically isolated and have limited opportunities for face-to-face contact. Interestingly, [Hay and Pearce \(2014\)](#) found that rural women in Queensland, Australia, made greater use of technology in both business and personal capacities than men. They assert that technology occupies an important role in women's lives, reducing their social isolation and helping women to overcome conservative gender roles and patriarchal structures in their communities.

DV support practitioners and victim/survivors in the SmartSafe study noted that, even if social media accounts are closed, the abuse can persist. A DV support practitioner wrote:

Often the police response is to suggest the victim/survivor changes her number, gets a new phone or blocks the perpetrator on social media, which are not always possible for the woman to do and don't always solve the issue.

A victim/survivor explained the extent and effect of her efforts to 'escape' violence:

My ex used to track me with GPS, I felt afraid to tell him to stop doing this. This made it so hard to leave him and I had to get a new phone etc., and lose all those contacts. He would send me up to 50 texts a day with horrible and graphic details of what he was going to do to me. He harassed my family to try to find me, but I have moved states (losing contact with most of my supports), to be free of him.

The above quote captures the fear many victim/survivors feel, particularly when attempting to exit a violent relationship, and when confronting a perpetrator about their use of technology, which may escalate the abuse or seemingly confirm that the woman has 'something to hide'. Therefore, it is important that safety planning for women experiencing DCC is informed by victim/survivor experiences and does not include blanket advice to simply 'get offline', as this may escalate the abuse and place women at heightened risk ([Woodlock et al. 2018](#)).

Several support practitioners in SmartSafe mentioned the pressure placed on victim/survivors by police to document instances of DCC and to upskill in relation to online safety and privacy. A worker wrote:

We [DV support practitioners] really need assistance for women to change numbers/shut down Facebook etc. While it seems unfair that it has to come to this, often there is little option. We need resources teaching women how to block people on Facebook, how to block numbers/deal with telecommunication companies etc.

This expectation on women to modify their online behaviour, change passwords, close accounts, collect evidence and learn about safety settings places the responsibility on victim/survivors and burdens them with 'safety work' (Kelly in [Vera-Gray 2016](#): xi), requiring that women invest their time and energy to protect themselves from male violence, which, in the case of DCC, entails that women become tech savvy.

This focus on safety work (while usually necessary to reduce the risk of further abuse of women and children) can divert energy and vision away from what [Woodlock \(2018\)](#) has termed 'freedom work' that is also vital. Freedom work is the labour required to create the conditions that enable women and children to be free from male violence, encapsulating the broader feminist project of violence prevention ([Woodlock 2018](#)).

This freedom work typically went hand-in-hand with safety work in the refuge movement in the 1970s but has increasingly been separated from DV practice, with funding cuts and service delivery agreements often deliberately designed to separate activism from frontline practice (Theobald *et al.* 2017).

While we acknowledge that victim/survivors may need to use self-protection strategies, the burden placed by government and non-government guides alike on women to not only withdraw from their online communities, but also to collect evidence ('In order to prove to police, and the courts, that [technology abuse] is happening, remember that you need to collect evidence'<sup>4</sup>), change accounts ('If you think your email is being monitored, consider creating an additional new email account on a safer computer'<sup>5</sup>) and create complicated passwords ('Create new passwords for all new accounts that will not be obvious to the abuser. Do not use birthdates, children's or pets' names, favourite foods, colours or singers'<sup>6</sup>) amounts to a unique form of safety work. For those already in a state of distress, the imperative to keep oneself 'digitally safe' represents another layer of responsibility to negotiate in order to minimize risk of harm.

Victim/survivors in our studies believed that criminal justice agents view DCC as less serious than other forms of abuse and traditional stalking (Harris 2018). We also found that breaches of intervention/protection orders via digital means were regarded as low-level risks (George and Harris 2014; Woodlock 2017). Yet studies on intimate partner stalking that were conducted before the rapid uptake of mobile and online technologies identified that stalking, particularly unwanted phone calls and surveillance, is a risk factor for domestic homicide (McFarlane *et al.* 2002). More recently, reviews of domestic homicides in Australia have found that in half of all cases in which the men were convicted of intimate partner homicide there was no report of physical or sexual violence leading up to the homicide (Johnson *et al.* 2017). We maintain that DCC is a form of harm that should be considered when seeking to locate the warning signs of fatal violence enacted against women and their children. Indeed, after investigating cases of DV homicide, a recent government guide on working with perpetrators recognized that obsessive thinking may be demonstrated through repeated text message contact, but that 'the seriousness of stalking, including technology-based stalking' as precipitating filicide has been overlooked (Dwyer and Miller 2014: 86). Similarly, the Queensland Domestic and Family Violence Death Review and Advisory Board (2017: 2) notes the use of digital media in patterns of abuse by DV perpetrators who committed homicide or suicide. The NSW Domestic Violence Death Review Team (2015: ix) also finds that technology-facilitated stalking is a pattern of behaviour linked to intimate partner homicide. There is thus an urgent need to examine DCC so that we can better understand how technology is used by perpetrators, threats to victim/survivor safety and how the criminal justice system can be strengthened and supported in order to prevent lethal violence.

### *Normalization and romanticization of violence*

In the interests of better understanding perceptions of DCC, it is worth reviewing how DCC might be normalized by victim/survivors. First, long-term or 'lifetime' experiences

<sup>4</sup><https://www.esafety.gov.au/women/take-control/esafety-planning/collecting-evidence>

<sup>5</sup>[http://nnedv.org/downloads/SafetyNet/OVW/NNEDV\\_TechSafetyQuickTipsChart\\_2011.pdf](http://nnedv.org/downloads/SafetyNet/OVW/NNEDV_TechSafetyQuickTipsChart_2011.pdf)

<sup>6</sup><https://www.esafety.gov.au/women/take-control/esafety-planning/esafety-checklist>

of violence—as children and/or adults in one or more interpersonal relationships or in family settings—can lead survivors to feel as though violence is expected or even warranted (George and Harris 2014). As Melander (2010), Zweig *et al.* (2013) and Barter *et al.* (2017) identify, there is an intersection between technology-facilitated violence and other forms of abuse and, as Marganski and Melander (2015) recognize, traditional stalking. Like other manifestations of coercive control, then, DCC might be accepted or unquestioned, and therefore not recognized as DV by victim/survivors or advocates (Woodlock 2013; 2017; see also Snook *et al.* 2017). On this issue, a support practitioner interviewed for SmartSafe commented that ‘[s]ome women are so used to this type of behaviour that they fail to see it as stalking’. Another practitioner remarked:

[I]t is the subtle forms of stalking that women are often less aware of and have become used to. The checking of phones or constant messaging for some women may have become part of daily life.

Yet DCC violence has emerged as one of many channels and usually prolonged attempts by perpetrators to manage, monitor, intimidate and harm victim/survivors.

Second, it is vital to consider how the identity, cultural and community associations of a survivor can influence their reading of abusive behaviours and stalking, particularly in contexts where such behaviours have not been adequately redressed or regulated by states or societies. In this vein, survivors with disabilities and Indigenous peoples (groups with higher reported and recorded rates of victimization compared to the general population) may normalize violence because of persistent exposure to systemic discrimination (Cunneen 2001; Al-Yaman *et al.* 2006; Immigrant Women’s Domestic Violence Service 2006; Jordan and Phillips 2013). There has, as yet, been little study of DCC in these settings.

Third, context must be considered when examining normalization, in relation not only to survivor experiences of DV and discrimination, but also of the digital realm itself. A wealth of studies highlights how, as the use of digital media and devices (mobile phones, tablets and computers) has increased, so has their presence in intimate relationships (Carpenter and Spottswood 2013; Trepte and Reinecke 2013; Fox *et al.* 2014). While there are benefits associated with this shift, scholars note that this technology, in providing new, instantaneous and constant channels for communication, interactions and visibility, has created certain challenges for users when seeking to maintain personal boundaries and independence and, negative experiences, whether characterized as ‘electronic intrusion’, abuse, violence, harassment and/or stalking (e.g. Reed *et al.* 2016). High rates of victimization have been noted in numerous inquiries pertaining to technology and violence (Temple *et al.* 2016; Wolford-Clevenger *et al.* 2016), which could speak to the rise and tolerance of behaviours that could be deemed harmful in the digital realm. While such spaceless acts should not be unquestioningly divorced from DV, it does give us pause to ask whether this is a new terrain in some respects or whether new norms are being forged, and what the consequences might be for those in intimate relationships. A DV practitioner in SmartSafe reflected:

I work with young people and it is not unusual for them to get 50 texts a day from all their friends and their boyfriend. It is hard for them to then know when it crosses the line into abusive behaviour as it seems this is average for them to get many text messages.

Internationally (though mainly in the Global North), studies have found alarming rates of controlling behaviour exercised through technology. Research has found that



between 22 and 93 per cent of (usually male and female) participants across multiple studies have experienced some form of cyber aggression (see Picard 2007; Melander 2010; Burke *et al.* 2011; Bennett *et al.* 2011; Zweig *et al.* 2013; Dick *et al.* 2014; Leisring and Giumetti 2014; Borrajo *et al.* 2015; Barter *et al.* 2017; Ybarra *et al.* 2017; ). These high rates of prevalence could indicate that such behaviour is somewhat tolerated or seen as standard. Indeed, focusing on young adolescents, Kings-Ries (2011: 155) maintains that teens are ‘experiencing power and control patterns in their relationships through technology’ and ‘tend to believe that what is happening to themselves or their peers is normal’ (see also Lucero *et al.* 2014), at least for a percentage of adolescents (Temple *et al.* 2016).

Overwhelmingly, the literature has focused on teenage and youth subjects, which has resulted in commentators assuming that the experience of such violence, and its normalization, is unique to or more common among youth. Yet this is a flawed assumption (George and Harris 2014). Certainly, few studies have focused on older age groups, so we have less insight into these older cohorts, but Cavezza and McEwan (2014), examining ex-partners engaging in cyberstalking, found that the average age of perpetrators was 37 years of age. Similarly, the average age of participants in the SmartSafe study was 35,

suggesting that, despite the widespread perception that technology-facilitated abuse is occurring amongst young people, our research shows that it is happening to older women too. (Woodlock 2013: 21)

The SmartSafe research also revealed that technology-facilitated abuse and stalking is often not identified as such, ‘[b]ecause repeated contact [for example] can so closely model what we see as “romantic” behaviour’ (Woodlock 2013: 20).

Ultimately, despite commentators insisting that technology-facilitated violence is becoming normalized, there is no unequivocal link between prevalence and tolerance levels. We do wonder whether there are different parameters as to what acts are deemed acceptable in online and offline spaces, but this could be influenced by an array of individual and societal factors and should not be regarded as universal or unquestioned (see Patton *et al.* 2014 and, on gender differences in discrimination and harassment, see Barak 2005). Additionally, what we could be seeing is a shift in perceptions of violence in both online and offline boundaries, and so, lastly, we affirm that our understanding of normalization must include consideration of any such shifts. We might consider also whether and how our societies are supportive of DV and DCC.

#### *Future directions*

DCC is a new field of inquiry and we need to better understand this phenomenon. The hallmark of DCC (its spacelessness) is a point of difference, but we simply do not know to what degree technology and the architecture of various platforms and mediums enable actors and actions. Do the distance over which victim/survivors can be harmed and the structure of various technologies and channels—the instantaneous nature and anonymity afforded, for example—not simply encourage or facilitate, but actually drive DCC? We also need to gain further insight into how DCC is similar to and different

from other forms of abuse and in-person stalking, and how these behaviours are intersecting with technology.

There needs to be a greater focus on DCC as spaceless, yet we urge scholars to recognize that place and space are not irrelevant in this arena. Where the victim, offender and criminal justice institution are all geographically based will shape experiences and responses to DCC and, arguably, may even shape the forms of male peer support networks that emerge, and the extent and features of perpetration (see also DeKeseredy *et al.* 2017; Salter 2017; Harris 2018). Changing environments are important, too: in various locations, significant government inquiries have potentially wrought change to the ways DCC is discussed, policed and prosecuted. Context might also explain why and how DCC can be normalized, romanticized and even performed.

Technology can have negative impacts, but there are also positive impacts and uses of technology. In subsequent projects, we have considered how technology has been used by victim/survivors, advocates and criminal justice agents in ways that have transformed experiences of and responses to DCC. Technology is increasingly used to seek or extend support, assistance and access to justice and to combat or regulate DCC and DV. Spaceless channels can be used to overcome the challenges victim/survivors face (such as geographic and social isolation). Practitioner training can be provided across various terrains with few resources and offers new opportunities to regulate DCC and connect victim/survivors with specialist support services or lawyers not available in their area of residence. We hope to see further studies on spacelessness and DV, and on DCC specifically, on the horizon.

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