Smart homes could worsen domestic abuse—but the same technology may also make us safer

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Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

Digital technology is increasingly used in domestic and family violence, and the so-called "smart home" could make it worse.

Recent case studies and research show that almost any technology can be

used for abusive purposes, from social media to GPS-trackers.

The smart home, complete with its network of sensors, smart locks and internet-connected cameras, will complicate the situation further and especially increase the potential for surveillance-based abuse.

In the context of domestic and family violence, smart homes have a Jekyll and Hyde quality: a smart home could become a vector for technology-facilitated aggression, but it could also be part of the solution.

What is technology-facilitated abuse?

Technology-facilitated abuse is the use of tools such as social media, mobile phones and tracking devices to stalk, monitor, threaten and abuse . For the abuser, it is typically inexpensive and easy to carry out.

This is now a common form of domestic and family violence. In a 2015 survey of 546 domestic violence workers, 98% said they had clients who had experienced technology-facilitated abuse.

In an ongoing Queensland-based study, many women who had experienced domestic and family violence and engaged with the legal system reported that they underwent technology-facilitated abuse during the relationship, or after it had ended.

Reports of abuse included a partner:

- hacking into email and social media accounts monitoring internet use and disabling internet connections
- using GPS devices in cars and smartphones to track movement and location
- recording conversations and monitoring text messages through

covert use of apps
- posting abusive messages and images via text and social media.

Such abuse can make the victim feel like the abuser is everywhere, even when separated, and can make them fear for their safety.

Most importantly, technology-facilitated stalking is dangerous. Research shows that in cases involving domestic violence, stalking is a risk factor for homicide or serious harm.

Ingrid and Susan

The experiences of two Australian women, Ingrid and Susan, show how technology can be used as part of domestic violence. The interviews were part of a three year longitudinal study of women's engagement with law as a response to domestic violence.

Ingrid separated from her violent partner, Scott, and moved to a women's shelter with her daughter, Emily. She kept the address of the shelter secret from Scott so she and her daughter would be safe. Yet somehow, Scott discovered the address.

Distressed, Ingrid left the shelter to stay with friends. Again, Scott managed to discover where she was. She decided he must have been tracking her. But how?

Then she remembered Scott had given Emily a doll. He had insisted that Emily keep it with her. She opened up the back of the doll and found a GPS device.

Susan explained how her partner installed cameras throughout the house. One day as she came out of the bathroom, naked, the camera moved towards her, following her.

She realised he was able to access the cameras remotely and "spy" on her. Susan separated from her partner and now lives with her parents. There are cameras installed at her parents' home too, but she feels that they keep her safe.

Smart home: new forms of surveillance and control

The smart homes of the future will be dense with sensors and digital home assistants that open doors, track temperature and even order groceries.

But the data collected by smart home devices will also tell us a lot about the residents' behaviours and patterns. So while the smart television can listen and respond to a user's verbal commands or physical gestures, it will also be able to identify who is sitting on the couch.

Data from these sensor collection points, particularly when aggregated, could become a home-made surveillance infrastructure for perpetrators of domestic violence.

A motivated abuser will be able to use these data for forms of intimate surveillance and the construction of what can feel like a coercively controlled "prison of the soul".

Can the smart home be a safe space?

Susan's experience shows that technology (cameras, in her case) used for abuse can also be used to protect. Could the same apply to the smart home?

Smart home sensor data that can identify the intimate behaviours of victims could also be used to identify the perpetrator's patterns of abuse,

violence and control.

This raises a whole new set of questions: can we use smart home data to better identify and report abusers, while protecting victims of domestic and family violence? Should the smart TV inform law enforcement of verbal or physical violence? Can a smart door securely lock at the nearby presence of a perpetator's mobile phone?

If the smart home is to be a safer space, then we need to consider challenging questions about individual privacy and autonomy, as well as the shifting nature of the home and its role in family and domestic violence.

The case studies mentioned use pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants and others involved.

The eSafety Commissioner *and the* Women's Services Network (WESNET) *have guides to assist women who are victims of technology-facilitated-abuse. These issues will also be discussed at* an upcoming event *at the University of Queensland.*

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