

Could smart speakers protect women against intimate partner violence?

December 18 2023



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

New research from Monash University examines the practical, ethical and political challenges of using smart home technologies to protect women from intimate partner violence in their own homes.

One in four Australian houses has at least one "smart speaker." This powerful "always on" [surveillance technology](#) offers an unprecedented opportunity to detect and predict events that take place in the home. Patents lodged by Google, and research carried out overseas, suggest that [smart speakers](#) could detect screams, shouting and other [audio signals](#) associated with intimate [partner violence](#).

The research paper, "Should we embrace 'Big Sister'? Smart speakers as a means to combat intimate partner violence," [published](#) in *Ethics and Information Technology*, clarifies what might be possible when it comes to existing or near-term technology as well as evaluating the moral urgency of tackling this issue against the ethical and political considerations of such technology.

The research explores issues around practical application of these smart technologies in detecting potential violence and abuse, barriers to access for victims, as well as the likely social consequences of adoption of such systems.

Co-author of the research, and Professor of Philosophy at Monash University, Robert Sparrow says that before we embrace Big Sister as a solution to intimate partner violence we should think carefully about the consequences of doing so.

"Developing smart speakers to detect intimate partner violence could represent a privatization of policy responses towards intimate partner violence. The insinuation could be that gendered violence is a problem in relationships between individuals that can be addressed in the home rather than a structural problem that reflects power relationships between the sexes in society more generally," Professor Sparrow said.

"Utilizing smart speakers in this way would risk rendering women more responsible for their own safety while simultaneously disempowering

them."

The research also points to barriers of such technologies in protecting women, given information technologies like smart speakers are already strongly "gendered" in ways that tend to make it less likely for women to be able to exercise authority over the settings of a [smart speaker](#) system.

The researchers point to evidence where smart speakers are often mobilized to extend the power of the man over the woman, which makes it unlikely that women will be able to adopt these systems to protect themselves from their abusive and violent partners.

Ultimately, the researchers conclude that using smart speakers is not a silver bullet to tackling intimate partner violence, it needs to exist alongside initiatives that address the socio-economic structures that drive violence against women.

"Intimate partner violence is an urgent social and political problem, and one that existing policy measures have failed to solve. The widespread presence of smart speakers in homes offers an unprecedented opportunity to combat intimate partner violence, but also risks privatizing policy responses and reducing the [political pressure](#) on governments to tackle this urgent social and political problem," the researchers said.

"If it is judged that the moral urgency of intimate partner violence justifies exploring what might be possible by developing this technology, it will be important that the voices of victim-survivors of [intimate partner violence](#), whose interests are supposed to be served by this technology and who have have expert knowledge of relevant considerations, are heard on the matter," Professor Sparrow said.

More information: Robert Sparrow et al, Should we embrace "Big

Sister"? Smart speakers as a means to combat intimate partner violence, *Ethics and Information Technology* (2023). DOI: [10.1007/s10676-023-09727-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-023-09727-5)

Provided by Monash University

Citation: Could smart speakers protect women against intimate partner violence? (2023, December 18) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-12-smart-speakers-women-intimate-partner.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.