

THE NEW

HUNTING GROUND

THE RISE OF DIGITAL DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The proliferation of cheap, high-tech tracking devices and intrusive software are leaving women vulnerable to an alarming new level of cyber stalking and harassment, writes Robert Hardy

She was careful he didn't follow them after they met for handovers of their daughter, which took place in a shopping centre. Then, after one visit in February 2014, he returned Annie along with the doll.

A week later, the three of them were at the doctors,

where Annie had an appointment, when her ex told Wood that he knew the address of the women's shelter. Fearful he might harm them, Kristy went straight to a police station. "I was in a panic and broke down crying," she says. "I was thinking, 'How did he find out? Did he follow me?' But because I didn't have any proof of stalking, there was not much the police could do."

Frightened that he might come after herself and Annie, they moved in with friends, but when they saw him a week later, he revealed he had tracked them down again. "He was hunting us. I felt panicked and powerless," she says.

Wood wracked her brain as to how he was finding them. She had changed the SIM card in her mobile phone and turned off its location devices, but still he was monitoring her. Finally, she thought it could be something to do with the doll.

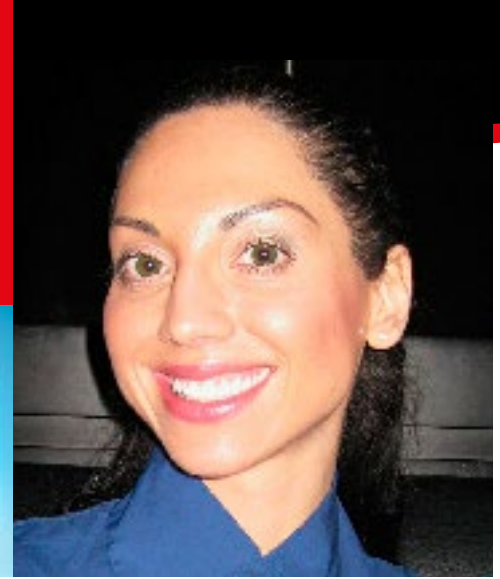
Then, in March 2014, she revealed her suspicions to friends. Together, they put the doll on the table and turned it over. On its back, next to its motor and batteries, she noticed a Velcro opening that had been sewn shut with a needle and thread. Inside, she found a strange device taped to the doll's motor. She took it to the police, who confirmed that it was a GPS tracker, but said that >

Kristy Wood* disliked the doll the moment she saw her two-year-old daughter holding it. The life-like toy pulled faces, made babbling noises and had big, creepy eyes that opened and closed, and had been designed for young girls wanting to play at being mothers. The \$29 "nurturing doll" was dressed in a pink beanie and striped pants.

Wood, 31, a librarian in Brisbane, recalls taking an aversion to the doll, after her former partner insisted their daughter take it home after an access visit. "He said that she shouldn't go anywhere without it, even though Annie didn't really like the doll," she says. "He was quite insistent."

At the time, Wood and her daughter were living in a Brisbane women's shelter. She had fled her partner after three years of sexual and psychological abuse, including controlling behaviour such as reading her emails and trying to hack her Twitter and Facebook accounts. After she left him in October 2013, he continued to stalk her, blitzing her with threatening text messages and asking repeatedly for the address of the shelter, which is kept secret to protect residents.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY DAN SAELINGER/TRUNKARCHIVE.COM/
SNAPPER MEDIA. *NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED



prosecuting him for stalking her would be hard because the doll belonged to Annie. "I was shocked," says Wood now. "It was his way of saying: 'You can run, but I will always find you.'"

Such cases are a growing threat in Australia. Perpetrators are increasingly using technology, such as hidden GPS devices, to monitor and track victims 24 hours a day, the vast majority of whom are women. As our reliance on the online world grows, so does the potential for abuse – and police and the courts are struggling to keep pace.

Victims say the damage to their lives can be as significant as physical violence and being watched at all times leaves them feeling fearful and powerless.

A 2015 study of Australian domestic violence experts found 98 per cent of them had clients who had experienced "technology-facilitated" stalking and abuse. More than one third of these workers reported that clients had been tracked with GPS devices – primarily spyware apps on their smartphones – and nearly three-quarters of the workers surveyed said clients' phones were checked without their consent. Exes also used banking and online data to monitor victims, tracking their location through ATM and EFTPOS records, according to the Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria study.

All women now face the spectre of being victims of high-tech abuse, says Heather Douglas, a professor of law at the University of Queensland.

"I've even had women who have broken up with a partner and gone on dating websites, only to find their ex-partner masquerading on the sites, trying to trick them. The sky is the limit."

Professor Douglas says high-tech stalking has grown significantly since we have become more reliant on online technology to run our lives. "Everyone carries a smartphone and that creates all sorts of potential for increasing the web of control over people's lives," she says. "We are in the dark in terms of our knowledge and understanding of the

potential of technology. There is more of this going on than we realise."

A simple online search reveals hundreds of computer spyware programs billed as "100 per cent invisible and undetected" for as little as \$16 a month. Basic GPS trackers cost less than a film ticket. Each year, companies such as Spousebusters sell hundreds of GPS devices, hidden cameras, listening bugs and spyware programs.

These devices are being marketed as ideal tools for worried mothers, vigilant bosses or wary partners. And yet this technology is being used by men intent on punishing and humiliating current and former wives and girlfriends.

MobiStealth phone spyware was used by convicted murderer Simon Gittany to read girlfriend Lisa Harnum's texts, before he threw her from the balcony of their 15th floor Sydney apartment in 2011.

Many women don't know they are being stalked and might only discover it by accident. Susan Taylor*, 33, was initially pleased when her partner installed security cameras in their

Brisbane home, because he said he wanted to watch their newborn son while at work. He put cameras in their lounge, kitchen and bedroom, above their baby's cot, which he controlled remotely via an app. Taylor was breastfeeding in 2013 when she noticed the angle of the cot camera had been moved, in such a way that it could monitor her showering and getting dressed.

"I called him and said, 'Stop moving the cameras'. He swore he wasn't doing it and I believed him at the time, but now I'm not so sure," she says. "Looking

back, I think it was another way for him to have control over our relationship."

After also suffering physical and psychological abuse, she finally left him in December 2013 and moved with her son to her parents' home. Her former partner then started abusing her on Facebook and sending threatening text messages, up to 50 a day. "Burn in hell, I will see you there," he wrote. He also used messaging app Viber to write offensive things about her to her family and friends, and threatened to publish videos of them having sex online.

Taylor obtained an apprehended domestic violence order prohibiting him from publishing the videos and denigrating her on social media. But still she felt under constant surveillance and threat of harm. "He started sending our son home with a toy car or a Minions talking keyring, and I was so paranoid he was tracking me that I would douse them with boiling water to fry the electrics," she says.

Helen Campbell, executive officer of the Women's Legal Service NSW, says while high-tech stalking cases do not necessarily feature physical abuse, it is incredibly harmful for the victims. "Every move you make is being watched. It's one thing for someone to be lurking in your shrubs or peeping in your windows, but electronic devices enable that 24-7," she says. "Stress levels go through the roof. You have to be hyper-vigilant all the time. It can lead to you thinking you are going mad and losing contact with family and friends."

"Technology abuse is still about control, it is still 'you are a possession and you have hurt me,'" says Karen Marsh, who works on men's behaviour change programs for the Uniting Care Community, on the Sunshine Coast. That need for total control can have ▷

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disastrous repercussions, not only for women but their family and friends.

Angela Evans* has lost years of contact with her son because of her ex-husband. During their marriage, he monitored her emails, phone and texts – intent on controlling her finances and relationships with others.

After they separated in early 2011, he set up dozens of email addresses with variations of Angela's name to send abusive messages to their two children, pretending they were from her. He also used technology, which enabled him to imitate her mobile number to text their daughter, calling her a slut. Angela's daughter thought the messages were from her mother and briefly obtained an apprehended violence order against her.

"I think he is jealous," says Angela, who lives on the Gold Coast. "If he can't have me, he doesn't want me to have my children and he doesn't want anyone else to have me either. He has pushed me to the point where I have seriously thought about taking my life."

She has since reconciled with her daughter, but not her son, who lives with his father. She also had initial problems reporting the stalking to police. One male officer told her to "pull yourself together" and to stop using her phone. "I said to him: 'You are kidding, aren't you? I am the woman who has been isolated and you are telling me to become more isolated. Doesn't that make me more vulnerable?'"

Her case has now been referred to a female officer who Evans says has been supportive and understanding. Her ex-husband's behaviour is being investigated by a police cyber crime unit.

Those working on the frontline of domestic violence say there is an alarming gap between high-tech criminal behaviour and the protection that police and the law offer victims, leaving many women at the mercy of their digital predators.

Almost two-thirds of Australian domestic violence experts surveyed in 2015 said police only "sometimes" take such abuse seriously and that their response depends on the officer. The



FIGHTING BACK WITH AN APP

A new piece of tech is now helping victims

The Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria's free SmartSafe+ mobile phone app helps empower women against high-tech stalkers. Ava Butler*, of Melbourne, has used the app to store evidence of abuse by her ex-husband, including screen shots of hacked Skype calls and copies of emails saying: "I am watching you. I know where you are." She says the evidence collated on the app has convinced family about the scale of the abuse. "It's been great to have the app when talking to lawyers and child protection authorities."

study found police might claim there isn't sufficient proof the perpetrator is responsible for the stalking, particularly when he claims his phone was lost or stolen. Some officers seemed to blame women, by telling them to stop using their phone or social media sites.

Practitioners attribute such failings to limited police resources, insufficient training and a tendency to prioritise cases of physical abuse.

"It has been difficult at times to convince law enforcement authorities to take action," says Helen Campbell. "The police have stepped up in terms of responding to domestic violence. However, there is an inadequate level of understanding that technology-facilitated stalking should be acted on in the same way as physical stalking.

Apprehended domestic violence orders can be used to prohibit high-tech stalkers from monitoring the victim's phone calls and emails, or keeping them under surveillance or publishing intimate images of them online.

Separate criminal laws regulate the recording of private conversations or using a device to track someone without their permission, while also prohibiting the sending of threatening messages or the publication of intimate images.

But the Women's Legal Service NSW says such laws are not used as often as

they should be. Campbell says there are gaps and uncertainties in the law, particularly concerning revenge porn or the type of evidence that can be tendered in court. Separately, many women fleeing domestic violence lack funds for legal representation, or struggle to obtain legal aid, she says.

Domestic violence services are instead training women to be proactive against high-tech stalkers, including advice about turning off location devices on their phone, being careful about sharing information online and checking their car and gifts from the perpetrator for hidden location devices or cameras.

Kristy Wood says the child's doll that was used to stalk her now sits in a box in her garage in Brisbane. "My daughter hasn't asked for it," she says. "I could probably burn it now."

She was initially told by police she couldn't get an apprehended domestic violence order against her ex-partner because there was no evidence of physical violence. "For the longest time they wouldn't take me seriously," she says. But she persisted until a court granted her a protection order. Finally, she feels some safety from high-tech stalking. Despite this, she says she will live with the threat of abuse for many years to come. "He still has visiting rights. I will never get away from him." □

If you or someone you know is experiencing domestic or family violence, call 1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732) or 000 in an emergency.