Networks of Care: Tech Abuse Advocates’ Digital Security Practices

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Outline

• Background & motivation
• Methods
• Findings
• Discussion & recommendations
Research on technology-enabled abuse

- Defining technology-enabled abuse
- Proposing solutions and recommendations
- Skipped step? Studying responses on the ground
  - Influence of critical and feminist security studies
Defining technology-enabled abuse

- Use of technologies or systems to scare, harass, coerce or stalk someone
- Move from domestic violence to coercive control
- Forms of tech abuse: ownership-based access, account/device compromise, harassment, malicious exposure, gaslighting
- Freed et al: UI-bound adversary → many conventional security techniques inadequate
- Many survivors live with abuse for many years
- Abuse is intersectional: research focused on gender risks marginalising people further
Exploring solutions and recommendations

- Recommendations for survivors → safety work
- Technical recommendations: threat modelling, co-design
  - Trauma-informed design
  - Solutionism
- Developing services
  - Community-based participatory action research
    - Guides for securing devices
    - Seeking relief and accountability through civil and criminal legal systems is often ineffectual and can even be retraumatising
Security and care

• Critical security studies: security as practice

• Feminist security studies
  • Personal vs political
  • Activism vs research
  • Care practices: emotional and practical labour invested in dealing with the breakdown of social relations
  • Akiwowo: digital self care
  • Saidiya Hartman: "care is the antidote to violence"
  • Critical approaches to care: gendered labour, power dynamics
Qualitative interviews

- 26 semi-structured qualitative interviews
- Advocates from gender-based violence (GBV) sector (domestic violence, family violence, human trafficking and sexual violence) as well as digital privacy and hacking collective
- Participants who support groups (e.g., sex workers or LGBTQ+ groups) traditionally excluded from GBV
- Feminist theories of expertise
  - Citation politics
  - Data walkthrough workshops
- Positionality
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Support practices

1. Establishing trust & belief
2. Safety planning
3. Demystification & empowerment
4. Supporting evidence collection
5. Referrals
Intertwined emotional & technical support

• Intertwined technical & emotional support
• Eva Galperin (Electronic Frontier Foundation): “for a lot of people, technical knowledge and you know computer security is essentially magic […] so it's very easy to use the appearance of that knowledge to make yourself seem omniscient and omnipotent and often that alone is enough to manipulate the victim.”
Networks of care

Advocates develop and maintain complex relationships with survivors, law enforcement, digital privacy and technology experts in order to create more supportive and caring environments for survivors.

Susan Hickey: "I really like when car companies will say yeah, sure I'll come and I'll look at your car [...] Maybe they're not going to see everything. But I think it just provides a survivor that support that's so important to know that there are people that care."
Recommendations for change

• Safety by design
• Logic of consent instead of data collection/engagement: “the upload button on websites needs to be the same size/prominence as the report button”
• Preventative messaging/ethical nudging
• Natalie Dolci called for “a relational dynamic between victim service organizations where we can say, hey, these are the concerns we’ve seen this past quarter on your platform”
Discussion

• Redefining technical expertise
  • Advocates who support victim-survivors of technology-facilitated abuse are (often un-acknowledged) cybersecurity workers and experts.

• Networked care as central to security
  • Advocates reconfigure cybersecurity as a form of care sensitive to the experience of trauma

Once we recognise and understand these networks of care, we can build on and extend them though employing participatory methods and expanding threat modelling to account for harms like coercive control and structural forms of discrimination.
Any questions?

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