How Should American Society Effectively Address Victims and Perpetrators of Cyberstalking

Within an Intimate Relationship?

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Cyberstalking

According to a survey in 2017 conducted by the Pew Research Center, 41% of the participants experienced some form of online harassment, of this 7% experienced Cyberstalking (Duggan, 2020). Before the advent of the internet, the traditional perception of stalking involved a perpetrator obsessing over a victim typically within the same geographical location. Many instances of stalking involve the victim and perpetrator having a prior relationship. With advances in technology, the traditional perception of stalking evolved to incorporate these technologies and a new form of stalking emerged referred to as Cyberstalking. Technologies originally intended to monitor children's online activity, find lost electronic devices, and social media platforms to connect with others, are being repurposed for malicious intent. The issue of Cyberstalking is a relatively new phenomenon, with a significant amount of discussion over how to appropriately address the perpetrators and victims of this issue. Computer scientists attempt to address the issue by implementing new technologies to report perpetrators and protect victims' privacy. Psychologists attempt to understand the psychological state of mind of both victims and perpetrators, while Political scientists attempt to bring the perpetrators to justice and provide safety for the victim. Each of these disciplines provides a viable solution, however, no single solution can provide a definitive answer to the question, "How should American society effectively address victims and perpetrators of cyberstalking within an intimate relationship?" This is why an Interdisciplinary approach is necessary. By examining the insights provided by Computer Scientists, Psychologists, and Political Scientists, this paper will attempt to determine the best approach to address perpetrators and victims of cyberstalking.

To understand the issue, it is important to first examine the issue through the perspective of the perpetrator. Psychologists can provide valuable insight into the thought process of a

perpetrator. According to Kircaburun, Jonason, & Griffiths, 2018, perpetrators demonstrated traits associated with obsession, manipulation, a sense of self-entitlement, and impulsiveness (Kircaburun, Jonason, & Griffiths, 2018). One partner may develop a strong sense of self-entitlement feeling as though they deserve more attention from their partner. This person progresses towards developing an obsession over their partner and attempts to take impulsive actions to manipulate them. The perpetrator's actions have a greater potential to escalate due to the ease of modern technology and the multitude of platforms with accessibility. Computer scientists would agree that technology was originally developed to have a positive impact on society. According to the work of Kaur, Dhir, Tandon, Alzeiby, & Abohassan, social media platforms, smart devices, and prolonged internet use increase the potential for perpetrators to stalk their victims (Kaur, Dhir, Tandon, Alzeiby, & Abohassan 2021). Social media platforms could be easily accessible to all users including perpetrators if not configured appropriately. The requirements to create a profile could easily be falsified to create fake users. Smart devices have become a common household item that can track a user's location wherever they go. The Internet itself inherently grants users a feeling of anonymity. While in the physical world, a person has distinguishing features that uniquely identify an individual. The internet can mask these identifiers, making distinguishing a person's real identity difficult. The anonymity provided by the internet poses a challenge to policymakers within the political science field. The criminalization of online speech is difficult due to the rights granted by the First Amendment (Smith, 2018). The right to freedom of speech grants a certain amount of protection to perpetrators, in the event they are reported to authorities. These conditions act as a motivating factor for perpetrators to cyberstalk their victims.

Next, we need to understand and examine the issue from the perspective of the victim's perspective. Victims of cyberstalking experience many hardships that are unique to each victim. It is important to identify common trends among victims to provide them with the most effective means of treatment. Psychologists agree that victims of cyberstalking experience a certain extent of emotional trauma. A study conducted by the University of Torino discovered that participants who experienced some form of cyberstalking displayed feelings of paranoia, anxiety, betrayal, and other mental health concerns (Acquadro Maran & Begotti, 2019. This shows cyberstalking will have some amount of impact on a victim's mental health and could extend to others who are close or related to the victim. There have been reported instances where the perpetrator posted intimate pictures and hacked the accounts of the victims (Kaur, Dhir, Tandon, Alzeiby, & Abohassan, 2021). These criminalized behaviors have lasting effects on victims.

Computer scientists have noted that a trend of complacency has occurred. Due to the high number of online media and smart devices within the average household, users tend to reuse login information. Through attempting to secure users through complex security systems, this same complexity fatigues the average user leading to poor security practices. Combined with the perpetrator being within proximity to the victim, it does not take a high amount of technical skill to hack the victim's account as depicted by major media outlets. As noted by Political scientists, the laws created are equally as complex. In the case of Moriwak v Rynearson, which determined a preexisting Illinois cyberstalking statute as unconstitutional, due to the vague interpretation of what qualifies for non-obscene and non-threatening content (Smith, 2018). This case demonstrates the complexity of applying laws over online content when each person's interpretation of offensive material varies drastically. What one person may find offensive another may view the same with humor. Each discipline provides its respective insight into a

possible solution. However, disciplinary disagreement arises with each discipline having a different perception of the root cause.

The major point of conflict arising between psychologists, computer scientists, and political scientists stems from the question this paper proposes to answer. Each discipline provides its insight into the best course of action addressing perpetrators and victims of cyberstalking. Psychologists would focus their attention on understanding the mental state of perpetrators and victims. Computer scientists believe that technology is the solution to stop cyberstalking since crime occurs in the digital domain. Lastly, members within the field of Political Science believe that establishing laws and regulations are the best method to address the issue of cyberstalking. By understanding each discipline's solution, one could gain a better understanding of why this issue remains unsolved.

The field of psychology focuses on the inner workings of the human mind. To help a victim, the field of psychology is believed to provide the victim with emotional support. Since the victim has experienced psychological trauma, it is important for them to establish an emotional support group. This could be accomplished by seeking formal and informal outlets for help. Through formal methods, victims could be reassured that the assistance they are receiving is from a trained professional. They can receive diagnostic evaluations and devise a treatment plan to assist victims. Informal outlets can be just as important for the recovery of victims. A study conducted by Erica R. Fissel on victims of cyberstalking discovered that participants preferred to seek informal methods of help, as opposed to seeking professional (Fissel, 2021). Victims may become hesitant in forming new relationships and prefer confiding in others they know they could trust. Regardless of the path a victim takes, it is encouraged to seek both formal

and informal outlets because they work in conjunction to build a healthy path to recovery. However, not all cases are the same and some may observe issues with this discipline's insight.

There may be cases of cyberstalking where the victim may not have access to professionals due to high costs or fear retaliation from the perpetrator could impede the process to seek help. Political Scientists would argue that this solution would not effectively address the perpetrator. Until the perpetrator violates an established law, they are entitled by law to their freedom of speech and would potentially continue pursuing their victim. Computer scientists would add that the internet has become the backbone of American society and with a culture of oversharing. Victims may find it difficult to confide in close ones out of fear of damaging their public reputation. Computer Scientists on the other hand suggest a more technical approach to the issue.

Through implementing technologies that would mitigate the risk of cyberstalking incidents. One method being proposed by computer scientists is the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Through the use of AI, the online habits of persistent cyberstalking perpetrators could be collected and used to recognize patterns and stop potential perpetrators (Kaur, Dhir, Tandon, Alzeiby, & Abohassan, 2021). Admittedly AI is still being researched and this remains a proof of concept. However, it does demonstrate potential and recent progression in the field of AI is rapidly being made. Other solutions involve updating existing technologies to detect and counter malicious use, while not compromising its intended purpose. Recently, the Apple AirTag has been making media headlines, with a woman in Texas discovering one placed on her car (Sims, 2023). Originally intended for finding and recovering lost possessions, are being used to covertly track individuals. To combat this Apple updated their devices to notify users if an unrecognized AirTag is in the vicinity for an extended period. Lastly, the most important method

recommended by many within the computer science community is ensuring that users are properly educated. Through educating users on the potential for being victimized and reinforcing safe online habits, the risk of being victimized is limited.

The issue with these approaches is the fact that computer scientists are unable to predict whether a new product will have unintended usages. Psychologists and political scientists bring up valid arguments, by introducing new tools to combat cyberstalking, and the resulting outcome may backfire and exasperate the issue. A psychologist may argue that perpetrators would simply develop new methods to satisfy their needs. As previously mentioned, the development of the internet brought perpetrators a new domain to operate within, demonstrating the ability to adapt to new situations. Political scientists would argue that new technologies would complicate the legal system, requiring the need for preexisting laws to be re-evaluated. From the perspective of a political scientist, the solution varies drastically.

Political scientists believe the answer relies upon bringing justice to the perpetrator to assist victims. Through setting examples, political scientists hope to deter potential perpetrators in the future. In the case of The United States vs. Shawn Sayer, starting in 2008 Shawn Sayer began setting up multiple online accounts posing as the victim and posting intimate pictures along with the victim's address (US v. Sayer, 2014). Sayer would be found guilty of cyberstalking and sentenced to sixty months in prison in 2014. Political scientists view the solution lies in the establishment of laws and enforcement of repercussions for violating those laws. Through publicly punishing and removing the perpetrator from society, the victim remains safe, and the perpetrator is made an example to the public. Through government support, victims would be able to live in a safe society knowing that violation of the law will result in

punishment. Admittedly a noble cause, however, issues are present in how political scientists attempt to present a solution to the issue.

In reference to the Shawn Mayer case, the incident began in 2008 with the final sentencing occurring in 2014 (US v. Sayer, 2014). Observers would note that it took the legal system 6 years to resolve the issue. Although the issue was being addressed, there remains a substantial period of uncertainty for the victim. Psychologists would argue that adding this element of uncertainty would still have a detrimental effect on the victim. It also does not guarantee that the perpetrator, once released, will continue to commit the same act. Computer scientists would argue that technological development outpaces the laws implemented to regulate them and are often the result of an incident occurring warranting a criminal trial. In an attempt to implement a solution to the issue, each discipline comes into conflict with one another. However, they are united by the fact that each solution is in the best interest of the victim.

The solution to the question, "How should American society effectively address victims and perpetrators of cyberstalking within an intimate relationship?", may result from finding common ground among the multiple disciplines. Each discipline understands that the victim is the one in need of assistance and that cyberstalking as a whole is morally wrong. Combining insight from relevant disciplines creates a suitable answer to mitigating the effects of cyberstalking on victims. Having computer scientists working in collaboration with psychologists. New technologies could be specifically designed to help victims, as opposed to being an afterthought. They could assist in the development of AI to recognize patterns with victims as opposed to focusing on perpetrators. Computer scientists could work with political scientists to better regulate new technologies. Through collaboration political scientists would

have a better understanding of technologies, and computer scientists would be able to identify areas of concern for policymakers.

In summation, the issue of cyberstalking is complex. As technology continues to progress to improve society's quality of life, some within society will continue to find new ways to use this technology with malicious intent. The optimal way to prevent further cases of cyberstalking would be to simply disallow access to the internet. However, society has become so dependent on the internet to function properly, that this option would not be feasibly possible. The only option that remains is to mitigate the risk of victimization from cyberstalking. Through insight from computer scientists, the tools would be provided for victims to seek support and fight back against perpetrators. Insights provided by Psychologists would provide a means for a victim to overcome the trauma and rehabilitate or predict potential perpetrators. While political scientists could implement laws protecting victims and prosecuting offenders. Only through true integration of the various disciplines will the issue of cyberstalking be appropriately addressed.

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