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Tor Is Being Used as a Safe Haven for Victims of Cyberstalking

Written by MEGHAN NEAL (/AUTHOR/MEGHANNEAL) May 9, 2014 // 05:00 AM EST

It's really easy these days to digitally stalk someone—maybe a former lover you're obsessed with or spouse you're suspicious is cheating. With a few bucks and 20 minutes to install a spyware app, cyberstalkers can track a target's physical location, and monitor who they're talking to, and what they're saying, completely undetected.

Increasingly, domestic abuse in the 21st century includes this digital aspect—stalkers hacking into phones, emails, social media accounts to snoop on private conversations or track someone's whereabouts and harass or threaten them. It's a serious problem, and one that hasn't gotten much attention in the press, or by law enforcement, until recently.

abuse goes digital. Shelters turn to counter-surveillance with Tor, he pointed out, that victims of cyberstalking have an unlikely advocate: the Tor network, the same anonymizing software that enables free speech, criminals, and traceless spying in the first place.

For several years, Tor, spearheaded by Tor Project executive director Andrew Lewman, has been tackling cyberstalking (<https://blog.torproject.org/category/tags/cyberstalking>), working with domestic violence groups to set up countersurveillance programs (<http://file:///Users/meghanneal/Downloads/2013-07-30-NNEDV-Presentation.pdf>) to help victims evade online surveillance, just as dissidents, whistleblowers, or cybercriminals use the onion router to mask their identity.

"Tor Browser and Tails [an incognito (<https://tails.boum.org/>) operating system (<https://tails.boum.org/>)] help keep victims anonymous, so they can browse without being watched, at least for a moment in time," Lewman told me in an email.

The onion router can hide a victim's identity long enough for them to research where to find help, and look up what data they can find about themselves without tipping off their stalker that they're online, he said.

"It's incredibly easy to use technology to control someone."

Ironically, the moment a victim reaches out for help is the most dangerous time; the risk of being harmed or even killed increases, said Lewman. "If the victim is gaining some control over their lives, this enrages and infuriates the abuser," he said. David Adams, co-executive director at the Emerge Center Against Domestic abuse, told Beta Boston (<http://betaboston.com/news/2014/05/07/as-domestic-abuse-goes-digital-shelters-turn-to-counter-surveillance-with-tor/>) that cyberstalking increases the risk that domestic violence will escalate to homicide.

What's more, it can put the people working to help the victim at risk and expose them to stalking and abuse too. "The more opportunistic abusers realize the trove of detailed data they have on other victims and share/sell/bribe/extort others with that info."

Yet most social workers and shelters still don't have the tech-savvy or resources to handle digital abuse. This is where Tor and Tails are trying to help. The Tor Project is working with Emerge (<http://www.emergecenter.org/>), the National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV) (<http://nnedv.org/>), and the Cambridge-based shelter Transition House

Tor (http://www.torproject.org/) to educate social workers and advocates about countersurveillance techniques.

Meanwhile, cyberstalkers have copious resources at hand. Spy software and apps are sold online, and legally—provided the user informs the person who's being tracked. One of the more terrifying examples is the mSpy monitoring app (<http://www.mspy.com/buynow.html?gclid=CPSVuPDYnL4CFRFk7Aodb24Aug>), which is officially marketed to parents to keep tabs on their children, or companies to keep watch of their employees, but is clearly popular for relationship spying.

"We do have quite a large proportion of our customers who use mSpy specifically to catch a cheating spouse," mSpy communications director Tatiana Ameri told Komo News (<http://www.komonews.com/news/tech/Stealthy-software-claims-it-can-find-truth-for-suspicious-loved-ones-225853551.html>) last year.

Maybe LOVEINT is ringing a bell right about now? It's the name of the NSA program that was exposed in September (http://motherboard.vice.com/en_uk/blog/the-best-excuses-nsa-employees-had-for-spying-on-their-love-interests) in which government agents used their access to surveillance tools to track and snoop on love interests.

But there's an important difference between spying and stalking. There's a whole online community devoted to the latter; they shares tips and tricks with each other using code words, Beta Boston reported (<http://betaboston.com/news/2014/05/07/as-domestic-abuse-goes-digital-shelters-turn-to-counter-surveillance-with-tor/>).

"Digital communities have sprung up where individuals teach each other how to compromise cell phones to track victim's whereabouts, listen to conversations in a room, take pictures, and read texts and email so that they can learn about their victim's behavior on a microscopic level," reads the report.

These forums "are everywhere," Lewman told me. "There isn't a single 'abuser 101' forum."

Mobile monitoring also doesn't take a lot of skill to pull off. At the World Bank hackathon last year, Lewman demonstrated (<https://svn.torproject.org/svn/projects/presentations/2013-01-27-WorldBank-fuerza-presentation.html>) how it can be done with \$5 Cell Spy Free software and 20 minutes to configure it on the phone. Once installed, the stalker had unfettered access to the phone owners' GPS location by longitude and latitude, location history, and access to all their apps and communications.

Abusers come from all walks of life, he said, but the situation gets even stickier when the stalker works in law enforcement, or for an intelligence agency and has access to surveillance technology and the skills to use it—or if the abuser has downloaded the Tor browser to cover their tracks.

"Technology is agnostic," said Lewman in response to this conundrum. "The fact that we're partnering with and working with victims, support orgs, and law enforcement is what we're doing to catch abusers using Tor."

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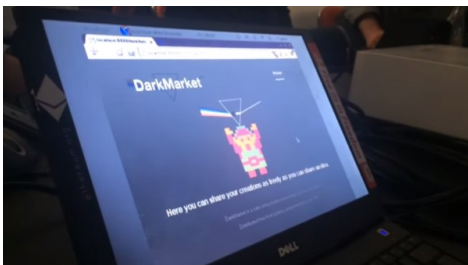
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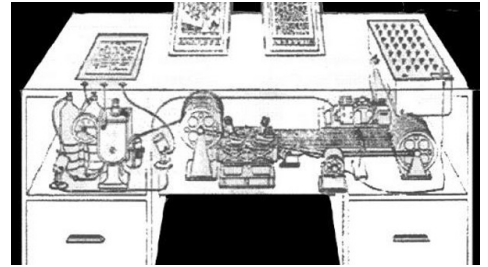
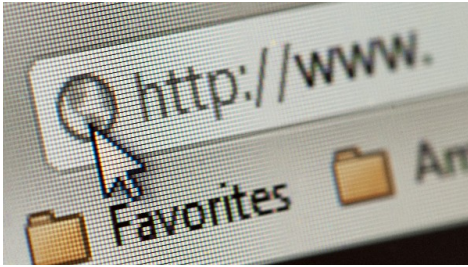

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