Stalking

Stalking is a term used to describe a continuum of harassing behaviors perpetrated via unwanted mediated communications, in-person interactions, and/or unwanted pursuing behaviors, which are willful, persistent, malicious, and imply a threat to the well-being of the person who is being stalked. Many definitions of stalking also include obsessive behaviors, and others distinguish stalking behaviors based on the level of fear or concern experienced by the victim. The advent and growth of social networking Websites, where users can articulate and provide access to their off-line social networks, along with lax privacy settings and a lack of education about their proper utilization, offers stalkers unprecedented access to their victims via the Internet.

Overview and History of Stalking

While stalking behaviors have been recorded as far back as ancient times, stalking is a construct that did not emerge until the end of the 20th century. Behaviors that are today identified as stalking behaviors were known prior to the 1980s as harassment, threats, annoyance, other obsessive behaviors, or domestic violence. Stalking was seen as a "women's issue" and was highly associated with domestic violence and battering. Even today, the majority of stalking victims are female, and the majority of stalkers are male. In fact, what are now considered stalking behaviors were often associated in classical times and throughout literature with appropriate and desirable romantic overtures. Many of these stories feature men sneaking around outside women's windows and vying for their attention, and people sending uninterested lovers daily letters and poems for years until the objects of their desire finally concede.

In the early 1980s, a study documented a social problem: the persistent pursuit of women by ex-partners. The behavior at that time was called harassment, obsession, or psychological rape. At first the media took cues from the literature, portraying the harassers as lovesick, nonviolent men, and assigned some measure of responsibility to the victim. By the late 1980s, however, several undesirable behaviors were molded into a single construct termed *stalking.*

This turning point came in 1989 with the death of a popular, high-profile young actress named Rebecca Shaeffer, who starred in the television program *My Sister Sam.* Shaeffer was pursued and eventually fatally shot outside her apartment by an obsessed fan. Her story received continued national attention and helped to define the term *stalking* as a construct encompassing more than lovesick young men following love interests.

The media began to portray stalking as dangerous, malicious behavior, and along with researchers, began to draw parallels between high-profile cases like Shaeffer's and other cases involving noncelebrities. Perceptions of stalking have since been studied, and although

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the most common stalker profile is an ex-intimate or relational partner, research suggests that most people perceive stalking by a stranger to be more dangerous than stalking by acquaintances.

Stalking Law

After the death of Shaeffer, California passed the first antistalking legislation. Other states

followed this example, and there are now stalking laws in all 50 states and at the federal level. Congress made interstate stalking a federal criminal offense in 1996 and later added the criteria of stalking via electronic communications. In 2006, an amendment expanded federal stalking legislation to include behavior that caused substantial emotional distress to the victim and surveillance of a victim via global positioning system (GPS).

In 1993, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), part of the U.S. Department of Justice, developed a model antistalking code that would help states draft and adopt antistalking measures. In 2007, the National Center for Victims of Crime revisited the stalking code to include new research on stalking that provides more accurate definitions and to enact new provisions for stalking via new media such as social network sites. Stalking legislation continues to adapt as stalking becomes better understood through research and as it changes with the advent of new technologies that facilitate stalking behaviors.

Cyberstalking

There is some debate as to whether cyberstalking, or stalking utilizing new media technologies, is simply a novel way for stalkers to follow, monitor, and terrorize their victims or instead the emergence of an entirely new behavior that should be investigated separately from stalking. While studies of this new stalking phenomenon are relatively limited, most suggest that cyberstalking, which may include the use of tools such as e-mail, instant messaging, and online social networks, is simply a new form of "off-line" stalking.

For example, in a 2007 study, Lorraine Sheridan and Tim Grant analyzed questionnaires given to more than 1,000 stalking victims with different levels of cyber involvement, including "purely online," "crossover" (being stalked first online and then later off-line), "proximal with online" (experiencing mostly off-line stalking supplemented by forms of Internet communication), and "purely off-line." The researchers found that cyberstalking does not differ fundamentally from traditional stalking in terms of the process, responses to being stalked, and effects on victims and third parties. This suggests that cyberstalking is a matter of degree of contact rather than a distinct form of behavior. Interestingly, although the vast majority of respondents to Sheridan and Grant's survey reported being stalked primarily off-line, a sizable increase was found in victims who received e-mail from their stalker compared to the results of an earlier study. It was concluded that the proliferation and range of stalking technologies available over time should be taken into account in future inquiry, given a likely rise in their utilization.

[Full Size]

This conclusion parallels predictions made in seminal work on cyberstalking by Brian Spitzberg and colleagues.

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They pointed to the rapid diffusion of the Internet and increasing evidence for its compulsive use (Internet addiction or dependency) as reasons to expect an increase in stalking through new "technologies of interpersonal terrorism." The relative anonymity available to Internet users, along with the easily accessible wealth of information, facilitates stalking behaviors at an unprecedented level—particularly through online social networks.

Stalking via Online Social Networks

The rise of online social networking sites since the late 2000s has generated fresh concerns about

cyberstalking. These immensely popular destinations, which include Facebook and MySpace, rank among the most visited on the Internet, with hundreds of millions of users. In encouraging users to share personal information, online social networks also give stalkers unprecedented access to their victims. Users of social networking sites frequently post photos and information such as their relationship status, place of employment, hometown, e-mail address, and phone number. A more recent feature is status updates, which sometimes give information about a user's exact whereabouts. Although this type of information has been available through the Internet in the past via sources such as personal home pages and search engines like Google, it has never in history been collected in a centralized location accessible to almost anyone at the click of a mouse button.

One specific and notable controversy concerning stalking on online social networks was the addition of the "news feed" and "mini feed" features to Facebook in 2006. The news feed automatically "pushes" information about members of a user's social network to them as soon as they log on, allowing them to see what others have been up to, while the mini feed appears on a user's profile and tracks their activity on the site. The addition of these features angered many longtime users of Facebook, prompting them to call the site "Stalkerbook" due to a perceived invasion of privacy. In response to these concerns, Facebook has since implemented strict privacy controls. Users can now choose who is able to view particular information on their profile by limiting access to members of certain networks, friends, or even more specific subgroups and by deleting information from their mini feed. Notable from a stalking standpoint, they can also completely block users from seeing them on the site, such as ex-relational partners. However, these features assume a level of awareness among users. Furthermore, they do nothing to stop unknown stalkers who may be present in a user's network or stalkers who fake their identities for access.

The Future of Stalking and Social Networks

Online social networking sites and other communication technologies are likely to continue to evolve in ways that both encourage and impede stalking. Popular social media applications like Twitter, for example, now encourage users to "follow" others, again giving access to where they are and what they are doing. Cameras and microphones on mobile devices have further opened up people to potential stalkers, as exemplified by the site Chatroulette!, which randomly allows people to connect with one another audio-visually. As technologies for social networking continue to advance, stalking and related concerns are likely to follow, prompting measures to help combat these behaviors.

Although stalking tends to be defined narrowly in the literature, and cyberstalking through social networking sites is seen as just one manifestation of stalking, perception of stalking may vary from person to person. Users of Facebook commonly admit to "Facebook stalking" others, but the vast majority of these cases are not accompanied by threats or harassment. They simply involve using social networking technology to view information about others that they have chosen to share. Future work on this topic can attempt to address the subjective aspect of stalking in order to arrive at a more nuanced definition of this phenomenon as it continues to evolve in the information age.

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Deviant Communities

Facebook

MySpace

Networks, Privacy in.

Further Readings

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National Center for Victims of Crime. The Model Stalking Code Revisited: Responding to the New Realities of Stalking. Washington, DC: National Center for Victims of Crime, 2007.
Sheridan, L. P. T. Grant "Is Cyberstalking Different?" *Psychology, Crime, and Law,* v.13/6 (2007).
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