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Federal Regulator Questions Carmakers About Unwanted Tracking via Their Apps

The Federal Communications Commission is concerned about abusive partners using connected car apps to harass and track their victims.

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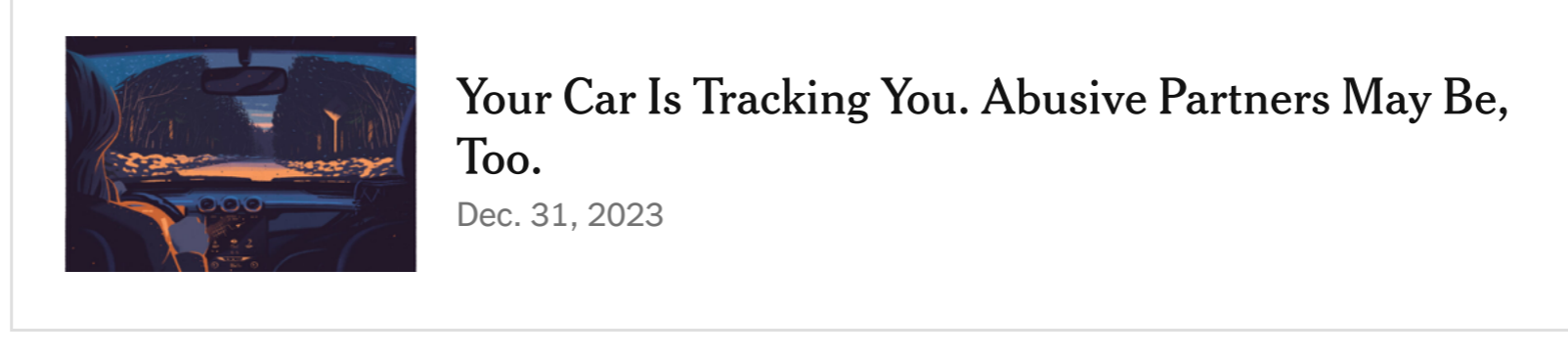
The Federal Communications Commission sent letters to nine of the largest automakers, asking for more information about their connected car apps and whether the companies had processes in place to assist abuse victims. Mike Blake/Reuters

By Kashmir Hill

Jan. 11, 2024

Many modern cars are internet-connected and have apps that allow an owner to see a car's location, turn it on remotely, honk its horn and even adjust the temperature. These apps for car control and tracking are designed for convenience, but a New York Times article last month detailed how they have been [weaponized](#) in abusive relationships, allowing for unwanted stalking and harassment.

Domestic violence survivors and experts said car companies had not been responsive when asked to cut off abusers' digital access to cars. Customer service agents at the car companies were unable to help when the abuser was the owner or co-owner of the vehicle, even when the victim had a restraining order or a legal judgment awarding her sole use of the car during divorce proceedings.



On Thursday, the [Federal Communications Commission](#) sent letters to nine of the largest automakers, including General Motors, Toyota, Ford Motor and Tesla, asking for more information about their connected car apps and whether the companies had processes in place to assist abuse victims.

"No survivor of domestic violence and abuse should have to choose between giving up their car and allowing themselves to be stalked and harmed by those who can access its data and connectivity," Jessica Rosenworcel, the F.C.C. chairwoman, said in a statement. "We must do everything we can to help survivors stay safe. We need to work with auto and wireless industry leaders to find solutions."

Chairwoman Rosenworcel wrote in the letters that the F.C.C. was responsible for enforcing the Safe Connections Act, a relatively new law that requires phone companies to separate a victim's phone from a family plan shared with an abuser. To the extent that cars have become "smartphones on wheels," automakers "may be 'covered providers'" under the act, she wrote.

The agency also sent letters to the three largest wireless communications providers — Verizon, AT&T and T-Mobile — about the role they play in providing connectivity to cars and whether they are complying with the law.

Thomas Kadri, a law professor at the University of Georgia who was an adviser on the Safe Connections Act, found it surprising that the law might apply to car manufacturers. But he said he hoped the letters would cause automakers to consider how connected car apps might be used for stalking and harassment.

"It's not a niche or rare issue at the scale they are operating at," he said.

The F.C.C. asked for responses to the letters by the end of the month.

Kashmir Hill writes about technology and how it is changing people's everyday lives with a particular focus on privacy. She has been covering technology for more than a decade. [More about Kashmir Hill](#)

A version of this article appears in print on Jan. 12, 2024, Section B, Page 5 of the New York edition with the headline: Carmakers Are Questioned About Tracking via Apps. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

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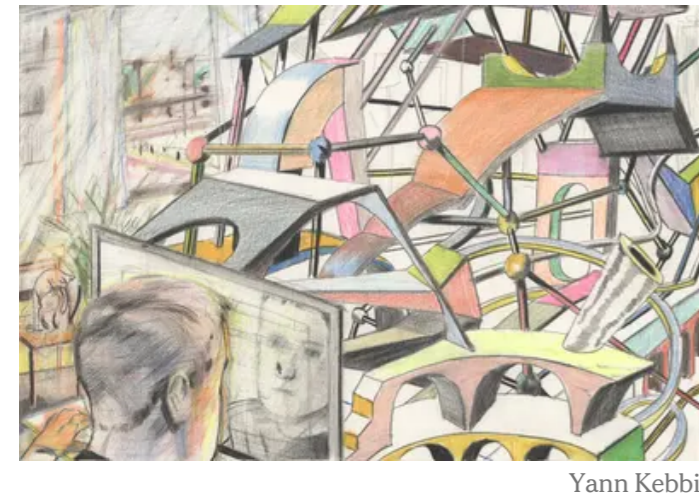


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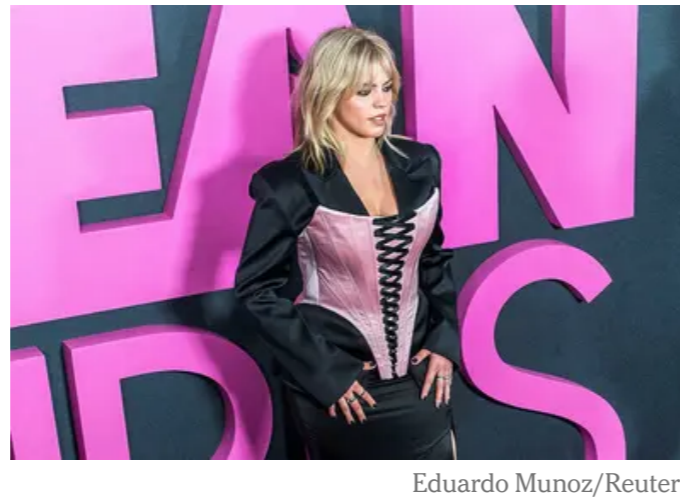
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