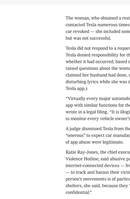

The New York Times

Your Car Is Tracking You. Abusive Partners May Be, Too.

Apps that remotely track and control cars are being weaponized by abusive partners. Car manufacturers have been slow to respond, according to victims and experts.

Illustration by Jeff Östberg

By Kashmir Hill

Dec. 31, 2023

After almost 10 years of marriage, Christine Dowdall wanted out. Her husband was no longer the charming man she had fallen in love with. He had become narcissistic, abusive and unfaithful, she said. After one of their fights turned violent in September 2022, Ms. Dowdall, a real estate agent, fled their home in Covington, La., driving her Mercedes-Benz C300 sedan to her daughter's house near Shreveport, five hours away. She filed a domestic abuse report with the police two days later.

Her husband, a Drug Enforcement Administration agent, didn't want to let her go. He called her repeatedly, she said, first pleading with her to return, and then threatening her. She stopped responding to him, she said, even though he texted and called her hundreds of times.

Ms. Dowdall, 59, started occasionally seeing a strange new message on the display in her Mercedes, about a location-based service called "mbrace." The second time it happened, she took a photograph and searched for the name online.

"I realized, oh my God, that's him tracking me," Ms. Dowdall said.

"Mbrace" was part of "Mercedes me" — a suite of connected services for the car, accessible via a smartphone app. Ms. Dowdall had only ever used the Mercedes Me app to make auto loan payments. She hadn't realized that the service could also be used to track the car's location. One night, when she visited a male friend's home, her husband sent the man a message with a thumbs-up emoji. A nearby camera captured his car driving in the area, according to the detective who worked on her case.

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Ms. Dowdall called Mercedes customer service repeatedly to try to remove her husband's digital access to the car, but the loan and title were in his name, a decision the couple had made because he had a better credit score than hers. Even though she was making the payments, had a restraining order against her husband and had been granted sole use of the car during divorce proceedings, Mercedes representatives told her that her husband was the customer so he would be able to keep his access. There was no button she could press to take away the app's connection to the vehicle.

“This is not the first time that I've heard something like this,” one of the representatives told Ms. Dowdall.

A spokeswoman for Mercedes-Benz said the company did not comment on “individual customer matters.”

Christine Dowdall said she called Mercedes customer service repeatedly to try to remove her husband's digital access to the car, but the loan and title were in his name. Emil T. Lippe for The New York Times

A car, to its driver, can feel like a sanctuary. A place to sing favorite songs off key, to cry, to vent or to drive somewhere no one knows you're going.

But in truth, there are few places in our lives less private.

Modern cars have been called "smartphones with wheels" because they are internet-connected and have myriad methods of data collection, from cameras and seat weight sensors to records of how hard you brake and corner. Most drivers don't realize how much information their cars are collecting and who has access to it, said Jen Caltrider, a privacy researcher at Mozilla who reviewed the privacy policies of more than 25 car brands and found surprising disclosures, such as Nissan saying it might collect information about "sexual activity."

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"People think their car is private," Ms. Caltrider said. "With a computer, you know where the camera is and you can put tape over it. Once you've bought a car and you find it is bad at privacy, what are you supposed to do?"

Privacy advocates are concerned by how car companies are using and sharing consumers' data — with insurance companies, for example — and drivers' inability to turn the data collection off. California's privacy regulator is investigating the auto industry.

For car owners, the upside of this data-palooza has come in the form of smartphone apps that allow them to check a car's location when, say, they forget where it is parked; to lock and unlock the vehicle remotely; and to turn it on or off. Some apps can even remotely set the car's climate controls, make the horn honk or turn on its lights. After setting up the app, the car's owner can grant access to a limited number of other drivers.

Domestic violence experts say that these convenience features are being weaponized in abusive relationships, and that car makers have not been willing to assist victims. This is particularly complicated when the victim is a co-owner of the car, or not named on the title.

Detective Kelly Downey of the Bossier Parish Sheriff's Office, who investigated Ms. Dowdall's husband for stalking, also reached out to Mercedes more than a dozen times to no avail, she said. She had previously dealt with another case of harassment via a connected car app — a woman whose husband would turn on her Lexus while it sat in the garage in the middle of the night. In that case, too, Detective Downey was unable to get the car company to turn off the husband's access; the victim sold her car.

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"Automobile manufacturers have to create a way for us to stop it," Detective Downey said. "Technology may be our godsend, but it's also very scary because it could hurt you."

Mercedes also failed to respond to a search warrant, Detective Downey said. She instead found evidence that the husband was using the Mercedes Me app by obtaining records of his internet activity.

Unable to get help from Mercedes, Ms. Dowdall took her car to an independent mechanic this year and paid $400 to disable the remote tracking. This also disabled the car's navigation system and its S.O.S. button, a tool to get help in an emergency.

"I didn't care. I just didn't want him to know where I was," said Ms. Dowdall, whose husband died by suicide last month. "Car manufacturers should give the ability to turn this tracking off."

Eva Galperin, an expert on tech-enabled domestic abuse at the digital rights group Electronic Frontier Foundation, said that she has seen another case of an abuser using a car app to track a victim's movements, and that the victim didn't realize it because she "isn't the one who has set it up."

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"As far as I know, there are not any guides for how to lock your partner out of your car after you break up," Ms. Galperin said.

Controlling partners have tracked their victims' cars in the past using GPS devices and Apple AirTags, Ms. Galperin said, but connected car apps offer new opportunities for harassment.

In a lawsuit, a woman said her husband used his remote access to the Tesla Model X that they co-owned to harass her after they separated. Erin Brethauer and Tim Hussin for The New York Times

A San Francisco man used his remote access to the Tesla Model X sport utility vehicle he co-owned with his wife to harass her after they separated, according to a lawsuit she filed anonymously in San Francisco Superior Court in 2020. (Reuters previously reported on the case.)

According to a legal complaint against her husband and Tesla, the car's lights and horns were activated in a parking garage. On hot days, she would arrive at her car and discover the heat was running so that it was uncomfortably hot, while on cold days, she would find that the air-conditioner had been activated from afar. Her husband, she said in court documents, used the location-finding feature on the Tesla to identify her new residence, which she had hoped to keep secret from him.

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The woman, who obtained a restraining order against her husband, contacted Tesla numerous times to get her husband's access to the car revoked — she included some of the emails in legal filings — but was not successful.

Tesla did not respond to a request for comment. In legal filings, Tesla denied responsibility for the harassment; questioned whether it had occurred, based on the husband's denials; and raised questions about the woman's reliability. (Some of what she claimed her husband had done, such as turning on songs with disturbing lyrics while she was driving, could not be done via the Tesla app.)

"Virtually every major automobile manufacturer offers a mobile app with similar functions for their customers," Tesla's lawyers wrote in a legal filing. "It is illogical and impractical to expect Tesla to monitor every vehicle owner's mobile app for misuse."

A judge dismissed Tesla from the case, stating that it would be "onerous" to expect car manufacturers to determine which claims of app abuse were legitimate.

Katie Ray-Jones, the chief executive of the National Domestic Violence Hotline, said abusive partners used a wide variety of internet-connected devices — from laptops to smart home products — to track and harass their victims. Technology that keep tabs on a person's movements is of particular concern to domestic violence shelters, she said, because they "try to keep the shelter location confidential."

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As a preventative measure, Ms. Ray-Jones encourages people in relationships to have equal access to technologies used to control their homes and belongings.

"If there's an app that is controlling your automobile, you both need to have access to that," she said.

Adam Dodge, a former family law attorney turned digital safety trainer, called car app stalking "a blind spot for victims and automakers."

"Most victims I've talked to are wholly unaware that the car they rely on is app-connected in the first place," he said. "They can't address threats they don't know are there."

As a possible solution to the problem, he and other domestic violence experts pointed to the Safe Connections Act, a recent federal law that allows victims of domestic abuse to easily sever their phone from accounts shared with their abusers. A similar law should extend to cars, Mr. Dodge said, allowing people with protective orders from a court to easily cut off an abuser's digital access to their car.

"Having access to a car for a victim is a lifeline," he said. "No victim should have to make the choice between being stalked by the car or having no car. But that's the crossroads many of them find themselves at."

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

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