

TECHNICAL NOTE

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Survey of Stalking at WPI

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was to ascertain the amount of stalking taking place on the Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) campus in which computers play such a huge role in the lives of the students. Our results were then compared with those reported in a stalking study done at West Virginia University (WVU). Surprisingly (to us), a smaller percentage of both females and males were stalked at WPI. The use of the Internet did not play a major role in stalking as we had expected. Results reported in a TV news report and a newspaper article indicate, however, that much less stalking occurs among the general population than does at WVU and WPI.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, stalking, Internet

Fremouw et al. studied the prevalence of stalkers and stalking victims among students at West Virginia University (WVU) recruited from psychology courses (1). In one survey they compiled the percentage of students who were either victims of stalking or stalked others. Methods of coping with being stalked were ascertained using a second questionnaire, as well as an additional set of statistics concerning victims of stalking was compiled. The combined results from the two surveys were: 24.2% stalking victims, of which 30.7% were female and 16.7% were male. From the first survey, there were only 1% self-admitted stalkers, all male. In a follow-up study, Westrup et al. examined the psychological impact of stalking upon female undergraduate students (2).

After reading the results of the first of these papers, it was decided to conduct a similar survey at WPI, but with an emphasis on the use of e-mail and the Internet (e.g., personal information given on Web home pages) in the stalking of WPI students, faculty, and staff. It was expected that the computer would play a much greater role in these negative activities given WPI's preponderance of students majoring in technical fields and the availability of and emphasis on computers (see below), both for academic work and leisure time pursuits. Therefore, a comparison between results obtained at WVU and WPI was of interest and is the major thrust of this paper.

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Results of a Previous WPI Study

In the spring of 1997 a survey ("Student Computer Use: Impact on Campus Judicial Affairs"), written by one of us (JBR) and endorsed and in part funded by the Association of Students Judicial Affairs (ASJA), was sent to 400 member institutions of the ASJA. Fifty percent of the institutions responded. The results (3,4) of the study regarding the misuse of computers can be summarized as follows: 33% reported cases of stalking, 66% reported allegations of harassment, and 37% reported incidents of electronic hate speech.

Background on WPI

Of the 2671 full-time undergraduates, 94% major in the technical fields of engineering and science and math. Women comprise 22% of the student body.

In 1999 WPI ranked 19th among America's Most Wired Colleges (5). WPI's high ranking resulted from such facts as:

- An e-mail account is provided to each student on arrival
- Students can create their own homepage accessible from the WPI homepage
- Students have unlimited World Wide Web (WWW) access
- One can search for student/faculty addresses online
- A "Social Web" is accessible from the WPI homepage involving the colleges of the Worcester Consortium with a "match-making section for . . . individuals to meet compatible companions"
- Approximately 75% of the students own their own computers
- The ratio of dorm beds to Internet connections is 1:1—every dorm room is wired enough to support multiple computers
- 15% of the students have homepages, and
- 43% of the student clubs and organizations have homepages

Methods

The same survey was sent via e-mail to a randomly selected group of full-time undergraduate students (600) and faculty and staff (142). A copy of the survey will be provided by the authors upon request. The list of students was submitted to us by the Registrar's Office and the list of faculty and staff by the Human Resources Department. The male-to-female ratio surveyed was approximately 1:1.

A utility was created that removed the name and address from each response. This fact was included as part of the survey. After two weeks, the survey was sent again to the same individuals as in the first mailing, as a reminder to previous non-respondents.

TABLE 1—Data regarding numbers of surveys sent, returned, and victims/stalkers.

	Number of Surveys Sent	Number of Respondents	Male Respondents	Female Respondents
Students	600	172 (28.7%)	71 (41%)	101 (59%)
Were stalked			3 (2%)	21 (12%)
Were stalkers			5 (3%)	1 (0.6%)
Others			64 (37%)	80 (47%)
Faculty/Staff	142	13 (9.1%)	7 (54%)	6 (46%)
Were stalked			1 (8%)	1 (8%)
Were stalkers			0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Others			6 (46%)	5 (38%)

The Survey—After first being asked to identify their gender, a series of questions concerned their e-mail address/account. For example, are they a member of any mailing lists or read/post news groups and do they respond to people they don't know? The next series of questions was directed at individuals who maintain a homepage on the Internet, e.g., what personal information about themselves do they make available and do they provide resources (e-mail address or phone number) on their homepage that browsers could use to contact them? They were then asked about their experiences with chat rooms, e.g., have they ever offered or received personal information in these rooms (phone numbers, e-mail address, photos)? They were then asked about the regularity of their weekly schedules, routes, and do they normally travel with others?

They were then provided with the following definition of stalking under Massachusetts law: "A pattern of conduct directed at a specific person which is threatening, causes emotional distress, and places the victim in fear of harm (6)" and asked, if with this information, have they ever been stalked? If they have been stalked, they were asked about the methods employed by the stalker and if they knew where/how the stalker obtained information about them. Reminded of this definition of stalking, they were next asked if they have ever stalked someone, and if so, what methods did they employ and where/how they obtained information about the person. The responses to the initial battery of questions were then correlated with whether a respondent had been stalked, was a stalker, or was neither.

Results

Numerical data concerning the number of individuals surveyed, the number that responded, the number of stalked victims, and the number of stalkers are given in Table 1. As shown in the table, 172 (28.7%) of the students (71 males and 101 females) responded to the survey. Three of the males and 21 of the females reported having been stalked (14% of the respondents). Five of the males and one female reported having been a stalker (4% of the respondents). Of these respondents, one male and one female reported having been both a stalking victim and a stalker.

Only 13 (9.1%) of the faculty/staff responded to the survey. Due to this low number, no further consideration will be given to these latter results.

Numerical data concerning how victims stated they were stalked and how they thought information about them was obtained are given in Table 2. As shown in the table, the use of e-mail to stalk victims ranked 5th, 14 (58%) in frequency of methods of stalking and no one was stalked through their Web page. Also, Web utilities ranked low, 3 (13%), in providing information to stalkers about victims.

Due to the low number of self-admitted stalkers (6), numerical data concerning how stalkers stated they stalked their victims and how they obtained information about them will not be given. However, it is of interest to point out that the percentages with stalkers were similar to those of victims given in Table 2, especially regarding the use of the Internet.

Data indicating some relevant characteristics giving student vulnerability to stalking are given in Table 3. A comparison of the two columns of data given in the table shows that the characteristics of

TABLE 2—How victims stated they were stalked and how victims thought information about them was obtained.

How Stalked	Number	Information Obtained	Number
Were followed	18 (75%)	Via friends and acquaintances	14 (58%)
Inquiry through friends	18 (75%)	Phone book	5 (21%)
Repeated phone calls	17 (71%)	Via Web utilities (e-mail, homepages)	3 (13%)
Physical contact	16 (67%)	Other	10 (42%)
Repeated e-mails	14 (58%)	Don't know	8 (33%)
Stalker left notes	10 (42%)		
Via postal mail	6 (25%)		
Through Web pages	0 (0%)		
Other	6 (25%)		

TABLE 3—Student vulnerability to stalking (24 stalking victims, 144 non-victims/non-stalkers).

Characteristic	Stalking Victims	Non-Victims/ Non-Stalkers
Member of mailing lists or read/post news groups	12 (50%)	100 (79%)
Respond to people they don't know	11 (46%)	80 (56%)
Maintain a homepage	5 (21%)	63 (44%)
Personal information available on homepage	5 (21%)	31 (22%)
Enter any Internet chat rooms	14 (58%)	73 (51%)
Offer or receive personal information in these rooms	9 (38%)	37 (26%)
Been contacted privately by people met in chat rooms outside the context of the chat room	5 (21%)	30 (21%)
Tend to follow a set schedule week to week	15 (63%)	103 (72%)
Tend to use the same routes from place to place	17 (71%)	115 (80%)
Normally travel with others	11 (46%)	96 (67%)

stalking victims versus non-victims/non-stalkers in making the victims more vulnerable to stalking is not the case. Stalking victims lead in the categories pertaining to chat rooms and they tended to travel alone more frequently. However, they were less likely to: (a) be members of mailing lists or read/post news groups, (b) respond to people they didn't know, (c) maintain a homepage, (d) tend to follow a set schedule week to week, and (e) use the same routes in traveling from place to place.

As a result of this study, a Web page and a pamphlet on stalking were created for use at WPI. Results from our work were included, as well as information on how to make oneself less vulnerable to stalking via e-mail, the Web, and travel across campus.

Discussion

We were surprised at the comparison between our results obtained at WPI and those obtained at WVU: more stalking was indicated as taking place at WVU (24.2%) than at WPI (14%). This occurred despite the fact that WVU was not listed within the top 200 America's Most Wired Colleges in 1999. Thus it appears as if having a highly wired campus and a high percentage of students majoring in technical fields, does not necessarily lead to more stalking as a result of more frequent use of e-mail and access to student Web homepage, either as a source of information or stalking contact. As shown by the data given in Table 2, the "old fashioned" methods of stalking (e.g., following the victim) are used with high frequencies. While e-mail was a frequently used method of stalking a victim (ranking 5th), the Web played almost no part in stalking activities on the WPI campus. The low use of computers for stalking on the WPI campus may be a function of the monitoring of WPI's computer network by the College Computation Center.

In Table 4 we compare the frequencies of stalking at WVU and WPI with that of the general public given in two additional sources (7,8). For example, at WVU one out of every three females are stalked, one out of five at WPI, and one out of twelve reported in the other two sources. The much higher level of stalking at the college level compared to within the over-all population, may well be

TABLE 4—Comparison of stalking rates obtained from various sources.

Source	Females	Males
Ref (1) - WVU	1/3	1/6
This paper - WPI	1/5	1/24
Ref (7)	1/12	No data given
Ref (8)	1/12	1/45

due to the close proximity of the students on a campus, the higher degree of dating that occurs within this age group, and the lower degree of computer usage among the general public.

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