Tech vs Abuse:

Design Challenges

May 2019

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Introduction

‘Tech vs Abuse 2.0’ is a collaborative research project undertaken by Think Social Tech, Snook, and SafeLives, commissioned by Comic Relief, in partnership with Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, and the Clothworkers Foundation.

The sector-focused discovery research set out to explore common priorities, problems, and opportunities to better support those affected by abuse today. This involved interviewing practitioners and co-designing the fund with organisations in the domestic and sexual abuse sector with a keen interest in developing and delivering digital services. Its aim was to find out how the landscape has developed since undertaking the **original research in 2016** (by Snook, Chayn, and SafeLives), and what those organisations felt were the priorities for using technology more effectively in the context of delivering support to victims and survivors.

Based upon the Tech vs Abuse 2.0 findings, the research team - in consultation with the research participants and the funders - have created four key design challenges. These have been prioritised based on the research with practitioners in the sector, a review of the extensive research done in 2016, and by reflecting on what has changed since then. The challenges have evolved slightly from **the 5 that were set out in Tech Vs Abuse 1.0**.

What's changed?

First and foremost, we recognise the need to adopt a definition of 'domestic abuse' as:

> "Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. The abuse can encompass, but is not limited to psychological, physical, sexual, financial, emotional."

This is definition is more inclusive than the focus on 'women and girls' in 2016. It also enables those developing and designing tech to account for the different needs people have, according to their backgrounds and the type(s) of abuse they have experienced, whether this is psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional abuse. The Design Challenges and supplementary resources below take this into account.

We recognised from the research that, rather than focus on a 15 minute window, people were looking for information in snatched moments of time, sometimes over a prolonged period. Therefore we have taken out the 15 minute window and replaced it with 'Finding the right information at the right time'.

The research also discovered that the needs to secure evidence of abuse and hold information safely, and the needs for more information about how to stay safe online and safeguard against Tech Abuse, are now being addressed. There have also been broader developments in online safety education and awareness-raising campaigns, such as **5Rights**, **Facebook's Digital Literacy Library** and **Safer Internet Day**. This led us to decide that the 2016 Design Challenge of 'Safer Digital Footprint' was being covered more generally in society and does not require further digital innovation. We have removed this as a specific design challenge.

Accessing legal and financial information has been recognised as a crucial element at all stages of the journey or experience of abuse. We have therefore taken this out as a separate design challenge, and hope to see it addressed more broadly across all of the challenge areas, particularly in terms of finding the right information.

Application of the challenges

We intend that the 4 design challenges guide organisations and funders about the 2019 priorities for the development of targeted digital services.

We believe that, if these challenges are addressed effectively and safely, they could contribute to improving the situation for victims and survivors of abuse. We also believe that these challenges are intertwined with one another and overlap. Those addressing them would need to identify the core user need that they are trying to address. Solutions could involve developing new technology (from sophisticated chatbots to a simple app), repurposing existing technology (such as social media and messaging services) or mobilising data and analytics creatively to help people access effective information and support more easily. Each challenge should be considered in the light of the supplementary resources generated through this research, detailed below.

A full write-up of the findings from this research can be found in the 'Tech vs Abuse 2.0: Research Findings' report. To download the full report, and for information about the funding available, please visit **www.techvsabuse.info**.
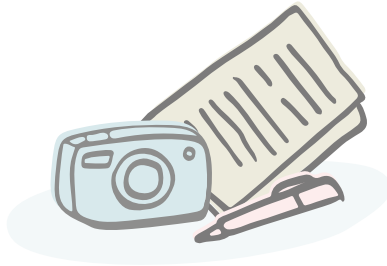
Design Challenges

Challenge 1 :

Realising it's abuse

The Opportunity:

Many people struggle to recognise abuse in their own relationship, as well as in other people's relationships. They might start to realise it's abuse but not know what to do next, or lack the confidence to take action.

The Goal:

People have a better understanding of what a healthy relationship looks like, realising when they are experiencing abuse in their relationship and/or when they are abusive towards others. Friends, family, co-workers and professionals they interact with are also better able to identify this and know how best to support them.

Key Quotes:

"You can't keep the cause of the problem out of the equation - there will always be a new cycle of victims."

"We want to expand our digital offer for family and friends as we have to target our face-to-face work for survivors."

"The value would be targeting those who know there is something wrong to manage their behaviour in the short term - to keep their partner safer tonight. Not to promise a solution, but to start them on a journey for behaviour change."

Challenge 2 :

Finding the right information at the right time

The Opportunity:

When people search for information they rarely use technical terms like 'domestic abuse', may have limited time alone, or be in crisis. What they find tends not to be that helpful or relevant.

The Goal:

People are able to find the right information at the right time. Using different platforms, they can access relevant, trustworthy, and safe sources. Key tools and resources are easy to find, simple to navigate, and quick to interact with. People of all ages, genders, cultural backgrounds, sexual orientations, and abilities can easily find resources relevant to them.

Key Quotes:

"Being able to find information easily and safely is the most crucial problem we need to address."

"We recently received some pro bono research into search engine optimisation about how people in the UK are searching for help on abuse. They found the searches were actually very simple. The most shocking finding was for scenario based searches ('what if my boyfriend pushes me?'; 'gaslighting'). The websites that came up were very bad quality (forums, Psychology Today), and not the charities you'd want to see them signposted to unless they used very specific language ('what is domestic abuse?')."

Challenge 3 :

Effective real-time information and support

The Opportunity:

Some people are living under constant surveillance, so need to be able to access information and support in short moments alone, often out-of-hours. It is challenging to find and access this without delay, and in a format that suits their circumstances. Many people face additional barriers to seeking support, including lacking the confidence to take the next step to access services.

The Goal:

People can find and access services for support (including referrals, if required) seamlessly and with minimal logistical and emotional burden, in a format that works in the moment, context, and time people have. Real-time support is available when it's most needed, including in the middle of the night or during the weekend. People of all ages, genders, cultural backgrounds, sexual orientations, and abilities can easily connect with services relevant to them.

Key Quotes:

"At the beginning, online information as quickly as possible is key. Calling a helpline or service is a huge barrier, even just finding somewhere private and safe to call from is really difficult - if you only have time in the toilets at work you can't just call there. We haven't met that need yet."

"General helplines have general advice - there's a lack of specialised advice, and a high need of it."

"There still needs to be much clearer financial and legal information - women think their children and house will be taken away, and it creates additional challenges in their head."

Challenge 4 :

Recovery

The Opportunity:

Survivors of abuse face many difficulties in rebuilding their lives, ranging from accessing housing and financial support, to overcoming trauma and avoiding re-victimisation. However, support services often end after crisis point due to limitations of funding and resources.

The Goal:

People have access to advice, information, resources and tools to help rebuild their lives, tailored to different situations. This includes support for mental health issues, confidence building, practical needs, families affected by abuse, and understanding healthy relationships.

Key Quotes:

"We've got 239 women on our waiting list for counselling, which is effectively up to 18 months. Online services could help sooner."

"We need to bridge that space between the initial crisis and after that - when you're rebuilding your life there just aren't many services left beyond that crisis point."

"Women are still very vulnerable to going back to their perpetrator - how can you prevent or support the safe return?"

Supplementary Resources from this Research

Tech Vs Abuse 2.0: Research findings report
A full write-up of the findings from the research on which the design challenges are based can be found in the 'Tech vs Abuse 2.0: Research Findings' report. To download the full report, and for information about the funding available, please visit **www.techvsabuse.info**.

Design Principles
The original research discovered many potential risks from both survivors and sector practitioners when using technology, but also found that, if designed and used safely, technology can give invaluable access to support, information and advice. For these reasons, Tech Vs Abuse 1.0 created a set of design principles for any technological solution designed for people affected by abuse. Following these will ensure any potential risks are directly considered and addressed throughout the design, development, and delivery of a digital product or service.

The design principles can be found on **www.techvsabuse.info/design-principles**. Note that Tech Vs Abuse 2.0 considers all people affected by abuse, whilst Tech Vs Abuse 1.0 considered women and girls only. We also want to point people to this more recent set of **Digital Design Principles** that have been developed specifically to guide development of better digital services for charities.

Market Scan
This research reviewed and built on the collection of digital tools that were created in Tech Vs Abuse 1.0. This market scan provides a list of the digital tools available to those experiencing abuse, as well as for professionals and others supporting them. It is presented as an Open Google spreadsheet which can be added to, and can be accessed by clicking **here**. It does not provide any analysis or peer review of the value of these tools, but is intended for further exploration and analysis by those developing similar or new digital solutions.

Needs Stage: Five Distinct Experiences of Abuse

Building on Tech Vs Abuse 1.0, five distinct stages of people's experiences in an abusive relationship were identified. Whilst abuse is not a linear experience, or one which will necessarily involve each of these stages, the research team identified distinct needs for each of these separate stages, as well as a different role for technology.

These stages are:

Unaware: experiencing abuse although yet to understand or recognise this.

Aware: recognises that a partner is abusive, but has not made any decisions about what to do next.

Staying: deciding to stay in the relationship and not intending to leave.

Leaving: deciding to end the relationship and actively working out the best way to do this, including thinking about alternative living arrangements (if relevant).

Recovering: has ended the relationship and is focusing on the future, but may still be in contact with their abuser, fearful of further harm, considering returning to their ex-partner, or potentially at risk of entering into another abusive relationship.