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Under an electronic eye, 24/7

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Special to the Star-Telegram

Stacy Peterson may be the world's first known victim of geoslavery, ending in tragedy.

This mystery has been treated as a case of a missing person and possible murder, but the implications are far greater, especially for women. Spousal abuse and murder are sadly common, but Peterson's husband -- former Bolingbrook, Ill., police Sgt. Drew Peterson -- was tracking Stacy's cellphone coordinates, and that makes all the difference.

In cases of spousal abuse, people tend to ask: Why didn't she just leave him? Often the answer is psychological dependence or fear of harm to a child. The answer this time, it seems, is that she couldn't leave because he was tracking her every move.

Electronic tracking is powerful. Victims are left with few choices: kill, be killed or disappear completely. Drew claims that Stacy disappeared, but that option is extremely difficult when electronic tracking is in force.

Even if he's telling the truth, it is tragic when a mother has to leave her children rather than make a quiet, orderly exit with them in tow.

Geoslavery is a new form of human bondage based on cellphone or GPS tracking. Four years ago in *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine*, Pete Fisher and I defined geoslavery as "a practice in which one entity, the master, coercively or surreptitiously monitors and exerts control over the physical location of another individual, the slave."

According to news reports, Drew Peterson obsessively monitored his wife's movements prior to her disappearance. She complained to family and friends that he was controlling her. She even changed her cellphone number in a futile attempt to end his control.

GPS tracking has been promoted ostensibly for kid-tracking. In 2003, however, we warned that "it is quite possible for an abusive husband ... to purchase an inexpensive device or service that will enable him to follow his wife's every step, monitor her daily travels, report her whereabouts, identify whether she visits a specified friend, and time her stay on any given visit. If she still loves him after all this, she cannot purchase his birthday gift without revealing which shop or shops she visited."

"Inherent in this concept," we wrote, "is the potential for a master to routinely control time, location, speed and direction for each and every movement of the slave or, indeed, of many slaves simultaneously."

Stacy's case fits this description to a T. News reports allege that Drew may have been monitoring her friends as well, because of the special access that police officers have to such information.

This year in the *Geographical Review*, Pete and I warned that human tracking will become commonplace, mainly because of reduction in price. As recently as 10 years ago, the cost of round-the-clock surveillance was about \$350,000 per watched person per year -- an exorbitant price tag justified only for high-value targets in matters of national security or corporate espionage. Now the cost is less than \$500 per watched person per year.

Stacy's case also fits our prediction of ubiquitous surveillance. When confronted with the allegation that Drew was tracking Stacy's friends, his lawyer defended his actions in a frightening way. It was common practice, he said. All the other cops were tracking their friends and acquaintances, too.

Stacy's tragic case is a warning to us all. Human tracking is dangerous, and society has been careless with our coordinates.

My coordinates are my own. Your coordinates are your own. We must insist that legislatures, cellphone companies and government agencies protect them to the utmost.

Start with Stacy's phone company and the Bolingbrook Police Department, but don't stop until state and federal laws protect us nationwide.

If we had started earlier, Stacy Peterson might have been able to slip away safely at some unseen moment with her children at her side.