Opportunities of Empowerment in Contexts of State-Sanctioned Homophobia

The role of ICTs in the communication ecology of LGBTQIs in the Ugandan Capital Region

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About this study

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Ugandan capital region
The anti-homosexuality bill

2009 → one of the world’s harshest anti-homosexuality bills

Death penalty for homosexual acts + jail for the promotion of homosexuality

Criticism (intl. + domestic) kept the bill dormant until 2013, when its proponents managed to have it passed

Legally challenged 2014

Human rights abuse such violence, social discrimination, denial of due legal process in connection with abuse, denial of employment and housing continue
Ugandan tabloid media has actively engaged in increasing the community’s vulnerability by so called outing of “homos”, which includes publicizing pictures, directions to work, and homes addresses as well as instigation to violence through calling for their public hanging.

Mainstream media have refrained from outings, but pursues various degrees of silencing practices, excluding sexual minorities from coverage.
A larger trend?

An emerging trend of reversing rights across the African continent (and elsewhere)

African nations attempt to remove Vitit Muntarbhorn, the appointed UN Human Rights Council independent expert on the Protection against Violence and Discrimination based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, in November 2016 is a case in point

The resistance is rationalized by framing sexual minority rights as western imperialism and a frontal attack on African governments’ right to self-determination in domestic matters
In a context of state sanctioned persecution of sexual minorities; **ICTs** (Information and Communication Technologies) could be an important tool for **empowering** this **marginalized group**?

ICTs have been hailed for improving access to information and providing space for communication as well as organization of collective action and social change.
ICTs & Empowerment?

ICT4D/ ICTD (ICTs for/ and development).

Development is however a contested concept and the field has, until lately, been dominated by economic understandings of development and general techno-deterministic assumptions (see Hann & Hart, 2011; Donner, 2008; Svensson & Wamala-Larsson, 2015)

We therefore deliberately construct around the notion empowerment
The introduction and increasing affordability of ICTs do provide marginalized groups a space for self-representation and influence; but ... empowerment is by no means not given.

Empowerment is dependent on the context and opportunities it provides, the actors themselves as well as the affordances provided by ICTs to challenge the sources of disempowerment.

**three** theoretical lenses
1) *opportunity structures* (contextual level - see Hitschelt)
2) *capability* and *agency* (individual/ group level, see Sen, Freire)
3) *affordances* (technological level, see Gibson)
We approach ICTs as part of a larger *communication ecology* (Treré & Mattoni, 2016)

Can not study ICTs in isolation, the necessity of approaching ICTs as deeply nested within communication ecologies and that ICT practices are a result of the perceived benefits given contextual opportunities and constraints.

In the Ugandan context includes state-sanctioned discrimination, religious re-colonialization by American conservative churches and unfavorable representation in traditional media, as well as an important oral tradition.
This research seeks to analyze the role of ICTs (social media), in empowering the LGBTQI community in the Ugandan Capital region.

the Ugandan LGBTQI community presents us with an unprecedented opportunity to empirically explore whether and, if so how, ICTs contribute to empowerment.

Our research questions are:

1) How does the community use ICTs in combination with other media and communication platforms and modes of communication, to sensitize, mobilize and coordinate their advocacy for human / LGBTQI rights?
2) How does the community understand ICTs affordances?
3) What communication practices are born out of the perceived affordances given the communication ecology and context of state-sanctioned homophobia in Uganda?
Aims

Aim is to **nuance, sophisticate** and **expand** the analysis of ICTs and empowerment of marginalized groups in restrictive settings, and thus firmly move the academic field of communication for social change **beyond** a techno-deterministic / nothing changes dichotomy

Beyond our academic ambitions, we are motivated by a humble wish to contribute to the community struggles for human rights

This research is in line with Swedish international aid policies.

*Sweden has actively maintained its position as defender of LGBT rights (Government 2003). Sweden’s international Policy on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of 2006, clearly states that Sweden, will continue to raise awareness on sexual minorities and to draw attention “to discrimination against LGBT persons as constituting violations of their human rights” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2006). The Government of Sweden reiterated this position in its 2017 Swedish Foreign Service action plan for feminist foreign policy (Government, 2017)
The Study

Pilot interview studies (# 5) and participant observations (one week) conducted 2016

Identified spaces and events important to study through participant observation such as the weekly bar night (the yearly memorial service for murdered human rights activist David Kato and the Pride festival in Entebbe since 2012)

Online observations of SMUG, Icebreaker, FARUG, QueerYouthUganda, Spectrum and Kuchu Times and their social media presences

Kuchu = Swahili slang for queer (in lack of a better translation)
Used in Uganda to secretly identify each other and easily talk in public about issues affecting them without giving out sensitive information. Women, men as well as transgenders are Kuchus = more inclusive
The research field is dominated by legal analyses and cross-disciplinary attempts to understand the causalities behind recent expansion of criminalization of sexual minorities. The influence of international and domestic religious elites and their rational for fueling homophobia has been particularly highlighted. The LGBTQI community itself have often been relegated to a status of passive recipients and as victims of human rights abuse.

The literature review demonstrates that the agency of the LGBTQI community itself, is a neglected area.

There are however a few noteworthy exceptions, see→
Preliminary results

Off-line encounters could at times only be secured through mutual friends on Facebook who could vouch for the newcomer being genuinely sympathetic to the community’s concerns → network and being connected important

Request for meetings that had not been preceded by an introduction would simply be ignored. Here the weekly bar night proved important for being introduced to key people in the LGBTQI advocacy groups → the offline precedes the online

According to our participants, the community rely on what could be seen as ‘front stage’ ICTs such as Facebook and organizations’ websites which disseminate “surface information” (expression used by one participant), i.e. non-sensitive and non-confrontational communication. This was combined with more hidden communication network, intended to maintain the safety of the sender and the integrity of the content, which one participant labeled as “deep information” back-region’s communication network - WhatsApp groups where “deep” information flows.

→ use different communication platforms differently to navigate their environment
Preliminary conclusions

1) We can see how the community ICTs in combination with other communication modes to mobilize and coordinate their lives as well as advocate for human / LGBTQI rights

2) Difference between modes of communication → intra group organization and support (deep information), broadcasting, human-rights advocacy (surface information)

3) The community’s understands their affordances as well as surveillance possibilities surveillance affordances on ICTs and therefore use different platforms for different purposes

4) Intricate communication practices born out of this that are context and community specific
Thank You for Listening!

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