ICTs and Opportunities of Empowerment in a Context of State-Sanctioned Homophobia. 
The case of the LGBTQI community in Kampala

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Abstract: After decades of growing acceptance of LGBTQI human rights in the West, Uganda began an African backlash in 2009, when it introduced an Anti-Homosexuality Bill. Even if the Bill was eventually defeated, it signaled the beginning of a new era of state-sponsored homophobia and wide-spread societal discrimination. State-sponsored persecution has however not silenced the Ugandan LGBTQI community and the following contribution (ongoing research) explores the Ugandan LGBTQI community’s remarkable resilience and quest for social change and in particular their use of ICTs for empowerment. Based on a pilot study conducted in Kampala November 2016, and ongoing online observations, tentative results are that the community organizes their communication practices around a division between intra-group organization and support (so-called deep information), and broadcasting and human-rights advocacy (surface information), due to perceived risks as well as opportunities of different communication modes and platforms.

Keywords: Empowerment, Homophobia, ICTs, LGBTQIs, Uganda,

1. Introduction

This ongoing research explores ICTs and empowerment within the LGBTQI (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-, Trans-, Queer and Intersexual) community in the Ugandan capital Kampala in their fight for basic human rights in an era of renewed state-sponsored homophobia. The research is placed in the field of communication for social change (Tufte, 2017) and uses empowerment as its theoretical tool.

After decades of human rights gains for sexual minorities, there are worrying sign of a backlash in for example Russia and former USSR nations, Indonesia as well as several sub-Saharan nations. Instead of further expanding human rights protections of a historically extremely vulnerable group, some countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are opting for introducing or strengthening existing homophobic legislation or start implementing old colonial laws to legitimize persecution of domestic LGBTQIs. African nations attempt to remove Vitit Muntarbhorn in 2016, the at the time newly appointed UN Human Rights Council independent expert on the Protection against Violence and Discrimination based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, 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.
Although this reversal of past decades of human right gains are present in multiple contexts, Uganda is of particular interests. Uganda gained international notoriety in 2009 for introducing one of the world’s harshest Anti-Homosexuality Bills. The proposed Bill sought to strengthen already harsh laws by introducing the death penalty, life in prison, as well as introduce new laws against abetting and promoting homosexuality. Although the Bill was successfully challenged in the Constitutional Court in 2014, the lives of sexual minorities, have not resulted in an improved human rights situation. Human right abuse in the shape of extra-judicial violence and social discrimination, denial of due legal process in connection with abuse, denial of employment and housing, continue undiminished. Parts of the Ugandan tabloid media has actively engaged in increasing the community’s vulnerability by outings of LGBTQIs, which includes publicizing pictures of alleged homosexuals, directions to work, and homes addresses as well as instigation to violence through calling for their public hanging. Mainstream media have refrained from such outings, but pursues various degrees of silencing practices, i.e. excluding sexual minorities from coverage even when they are directly affected and key stakeholders.

As Uganda begun to intensify repression ten years back, it provides researchers an opportunity to study, not only the acute phase of repression in 2009, but the formation and strategies of a countermovement, actors’ responses to the years of systematic state-endorsed homophobia, as well as a return to low-grade systematic repression of sexual minorities.

In this context, with a long and deep-rooted history of state sanctioned persecution of sexual minorities and a media sphere reflective of institutional homophobia; ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) could constitute an important tool for empowering the LGBTQI community. Indeed, ICTs have been hailed for improving access to information and providing space for communication as well as organization of collective action and social change. We believe that the Kampala LGBTQI community (henceforth the community) presents us with an unprecedented opportunity to empirically explore whether ICTs could contribute to empowerment and if so, in what ways.

Our study focuses on active appropriation of the community of ICTs as an important tool for empowerment. Furthermore, as we are also motivated by a humble wish to contribute to not only the strive of the community for their basic human rights. We also hope that by exploring the ways LGBTQI's in Kampala use ICTs, human rights activist in countries showing signs of a similar backlash, can gain knowledge and perhaps find inspiration. Sharing experiences South to South may be of an even greater importance in the case of LGBTQI rights. In a time of global backlash, international human rights organizations’ support to smaller partner organizations in the global South, has unintentionally made them more vulnerable to accusation of being Western imperialist cronies. This development suggests that domestic human rights organizations are better served by further developing their own home-grown resistance, as opposed to embracing imported scripts on how to conduct their strive for basic human rights.

This research project critically engages with the idea that ICTs enables and facilitate empowerment of marginalized groups in repressive contexts. We approach ICTs as part of a larger communication ecology, which in the Kampala context includes (among others) an important oral tradition, unfavorable representation in traditional media, state-sanctioned discrimination as well as religious re-colonialization by American conservative churches.
Our aim is to nuance, sophisticate and ultimately expand the analysis of communication and social change for disempowered groups in situations of state-sanctioned oppression. We wish to move the academic field of communication and social change beyond a techno-optimist or techno-deterministic dichotomy. This we achieve by proposing an analytical lens around empowerment (rather than development, see Svensson, 2018), in which ICTs are intertwined with a larger communication ecology (Treré & Mattoni, 2015), and where communicative practices are a product of the users understanding of ICTs in relation to the existing context’s opportunities and challenges. The analytical framework is further elaborated on in the theory section.

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 activities?
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?

As this is an ongoing project we can only present preliminary results and tentative conclusions here. But before that, we will attend to previous research on Ugandan LGBTQIs before the theoretical framework and methodological considerations.

2. Previous Research

Although, state-sanctioned homophobia dates back to British colonial rule, it was the infamous Anti-Homosexuality Bill of 2009, that appear to have sparked the last few years academic output. Most studies are thus dated from 2010 and onwards. Previous research has approached the field from a range of disciplines and with different focuses such as; the historical roots of current state-sanctioned homophobia (Englander, 2011) and contemporary triggers of post-colonial Uganda’s state-sponsored homophobia (Cheney, 2012; Boyd, 2013; Strand, 2013; Wahab, 2016), as well as analysis of the Ugandan constitution and legal status of discrimination (Tamale, 2009; Englander, 2011). This also resonates in reports from NGOs such as Amnesty and Human Rights Watch. To date, 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 review indicates a clear academic neglect of the LGBTQI community’s agency and active resistance despite hardship. There are however a few noteworthy exceptions. Strand (2011) explored the community’s attempts to sensitize the Ugandan citizenry and mobilize against the Anti-Homosexuality Bill in 2009 and 2010. Her research found that the community representatives only rarely were awarded space to promote human rights or raise attention to their community’s plights or be given the opportunity to provide a first-person narrative on their concerns. Local human rights defenders attempts to call attention to human rights concerns with the Bill in 2009, were only acknowledged after being endorsed by international partners (Strand, 2011). In an attempt to further understand the difficulties of conducting human rights advocacy in Uganda,
Strand (2012) has also studied deeply rooted and even institutionalized silencing practices of Ugandan media. Strand (2013) has also analyzed the influence of international donors on sexual minority rights in Uganda through an analysis of US embassy material leaked by WikiLeaks.

The literature review demonstrates that the agency of the LGBTQI community itself, is a neglected area, which probably is a reflection of the community’s shadow existence and the daunting task of gaining access to the field. Having gained access (see section on method), this project will thus contribute with on the community from within.

3. Theory

ICTs have been hailed for improving access to information and providing space for communication as well as organization of collective action and social change. The fields of Information and Communication Technology for/and Development (ICT4D or just ICTD) have been home to many discussions concerning ICTs in the global South. However in this project we prefer the concepts of social change and empowerment over development. Development has had a kind of West-is-the-best connotation to it (Servaes & Lie, 2015), assuming that so-called modern societies in the industrial globalised North are the model towards which more rural and traditional societies in the global South should develop towards (Nederveen Pietersee 2010: 21,23).

When approached in this manner, the critique of development should come as no surprise. Nederveen Pietersee (2010) argues that ICTs for development is primarily driven by market logic, market deepening (p. 166), a technological fetishism (p. 168) and serves as a rationale for trade and investment liberalization (p. 172). Hann and Hart (2011) have argued similarly that the ultimate drive for development in post-colonial times is a world in which the rich countries help poorer (often former colonies) in order to improve their economic prospects. Development has even been considered hypocritical in times when debt repayments have drained the income of countries in the global South, undermining governments’ ability to protect their citizens at the same time as aid levels have shrunk to the point of being merely symbolic (Hann & Hart, 2011: 116).

It becomes apparent that development has not been used as a critical concept, here understood as questioning and challenging existing power relations. Empowerment, on the contrary, directly concerns unequal power relations (Kabeer, 1999: 437). However, empowerment is not an easy concept to adopt. A shared definition is absent (Choudhury, 2009: 343). It has been considered fuzzy (Kabeer, 1999: 436) and elusive (Hill Collins, 2000: 19). It is under-defined and overused in academic, policy and public discourse (Kleine, 2013: 31).

In this project empowerment is defined as those without power taking control over their life situation, destiny and environment. And we suggest to study empowerment out of four interrelated levels (see Svensson, 2018 for the full account):

a) The intersectional level concerns the roots of powerlessness in terms of intersecting structures of power such as, ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality. How are the powerless (here LGBTQIs in Kampala) situated in such larger structures of power? Such an analysis should involve the standpoints of those under study in order for them to define their own realities on their own terms.
b) The contextual level concerns the particular contexts of the community and how actions are situated in these contexts. For example, how do their contexts provide both opportunities and constraints (in terms of institutions, local community, local culture, economic and family arrangements et cetera)? Which configuration of resources, institutional arrangements and historical precedents exist?

c) The agency level concerns the capabilities of the community, their abilities to make choices and thus control their life situation, destiny and environment. What capabilities, resources, agencies, skills, choices and achievements can be discerned? How critically conscious are the LGBTQIs of their situation? Do they have capability to imagine that change is possible? And does such critical consciousness lead to action/change?

d) The technological level concerns the affordances of the communication platforms used by the community. What access to communication platforms do they have? How are their communication/media literacy? How do they use these platforms? What affordances do they perceive these platforms to have, and do they find new affordances?

It is also important to underline that ICTs are also only one part of an overall communication ecology of a given community (Treré & Mattoni, 2015). Communication should be understood in a holistic and ecological manner (Tufte, 2017: 21), and therefore not be studied in isolation. Understanding ICTs as part of a communication ecology will overcome the kind of communicative reductionism, one-platform bias, presentism as well as fetishisation of technological novelty that has been prevalent in when studying communication for social change (see Treré & Mattoni, 2015). A communicative ecology lens also allows for a restoration of the communicative complexity in the study of actors struggling for empowerment and social change, because it brings a holistic perspective beyond specific media instances (ibid.). In the Ugandan context the communication ecology includes state-sanctioned discrimination, religious re-colonialization by American conservative churches and unfavorable representation in traditional media, as well as an important oral tradition

4. Method

As described above, ICTs need to be analyzed and understood as part of a wider communication ecology departing form the users’ unique perspective of his/her environment’s constraints and opportunities, as well as understanding of ICTs vis-à-vis the context. Instead of analyzing whether ICTs are being used efficiently, in the sense that actors take full advantage of the affordances awarded by various platforms, we focus on what people actually do with them. We are keenly interested in the community’s situated communication practices and will thus engage in an actor-centred analysis of the range of networked communicative practices which are bound to reflect the contexts’ very tangible constraints. An actor-centred analysis implies that actors in the community are our analytical entry point. The actors we have identified, and been introduced to are: SMUG, Icebreaker, FARUG, QueerYouthUganda, Spectrum and Kuchu Times.

This is an exploratory study which includes a pilot on the ground conducted in November 2016 including five interviews, as well as “hanging around” (in an ethnographic understanding) which concretely resulted in a study visit to Icebreakers HIV prevention center in Kampala and observation at the weekly bar night. To this pilot, we are in the process of conducting online
studies of the actors mentioned above. We are conducting observations of their webpages and their social media presences. Despite the fact that state-sanctioned homophobia permeates many parts of the Ugandan society, this exploratory pilot study reveals that community has shown a remarkable resilience. After a brief period 2009-2010 when meeting in public was simply too dangerous, the community has re-established public meeting spots (such as the weekly bar-night) and in 2012, the community organized its first Gay Pride event in Entebbe (a nearby recreational town by Lake Victoria) and has attempted to make this a yearly event.

Hence, our methodological toolbox constitutes a mix of different ethnographically inspired methods. To study how the community’s use ICTs in combination with other media and communication platforms and modes of communication (research question 1), requires both interviews and observations. To study how the community understands ICTs affordances (research question 2), requires interviews (online as well as offline). And to study what communication practices are born out of the perceived affordances (research question 3), requires observation and participation in the community, online as well as offline. The online study is ongoing and we plan to return to Kampala autumn 2018 for more on the ground ethnography.

Concerning the interviews, we have asked participants to describe their communicative practices with a particular focus on ICTs. We have for example asked our participants to guide us through the rationale behind their ICT mediated communicative practices and strategies. The interviews have been informal but guided around the four different levels of empowerment.

5. Preliminary Results & Tentative Conclusions

Our research design is dependent on access to the field. Due to the restrictive context, the community has developed a healthy degree of suspicion to new-comers, and are thus reluctant to interact with unknown individuals online. Access to participants are dependent on direct personal contacts or securing full endorsement and introduction by another trusted source within the network. It became clear to us that off-line encounters could at times only be secured through mutual friends on Facebook who could vouch for the newcomer being genuinely “gay” or sympathetic to the community’s concerns. For example, internet-mediated requests for meetings that had not been preceded by an introduction, preferably offline, would simply be ignored. Here the weekly bar night proved important for being introduced to key people in the LGBTQI advocacy groups included in this study. Hence to have and maintain a LGBTQI network is important to be included and partake in the social events and services offered by these actors. Also interesting is how the offline often precedes the online.

That the internet is deeply entangled into our everyday life is known as well as the hybridity between online and offline systems and practices. Within this community this becomes particularly evident. Maybe this is due to the importance of oral communication in Ugandan culture together LGBTQIs being particularly aware of risks of surveillance using ICTs.

This also highlights the importance of approaching ICTs as multi-layered sites where communicative practices are directly influenced by here the restrictive context in Uganda. 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*. To access these communication flows required an invitation (and being vetted (most often) offline). So far – having observed Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and websites of the identified key actors – this surface information tends to be focused on general human rights advocacy. Interestingly, information about events (such as 8th of March gatherings or workshops) are broadcasted only *after* the events having taken place, and not prior the events (as would have been expected to attract participation). According to our participants this is due to them being acutely aware of them being monitored online and the risk of attacks if broadcasted to the general public. It is in the back-region’s communication channels more sensitive information is communicated. Here WhatsApp groups and the dating app Grindr seem to be where so-called deep information flows. No doubt is the community using different communication channels differently to navigate their specific situation.

Another interesting observation is the term *Kuchu* which is Swahili slang for queer (in lack of a better translation). It seems it has been (and is) used in Uganda to secretly identify each other and easily talk in public about issues affecting them without giving out sensitive information. Furthermore, women, men, transgender as well as intersexual are included in the term, which make Kuchu a more inclusive term than gay for example.

In conclusion, concerning research question 1 – how the community use ICTs in combination with other media and communication platforms and modes of communication – we witness and intricate communication repertoire in which ICTs are used combination with other communication modes in order mobilize and coordinate their lives as well as advocate for LGBTQI rights. This seems to organized around a division between intra group organization and support (so-called deep information), and broadcasting and human-rights advocacy (surface information). This is most likely due to how the community understands different affordances as well as risks of different communication platforms (i.e. research question 2). This is a community that is well aware of risks of surveillance using ICTs and thus different communication practices are born out of how they perceive different platforms and modes of communication given the communication ecology and the context of state-sanctioned homophobia in which they find themselves (i.e. research question 3).

**References**


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