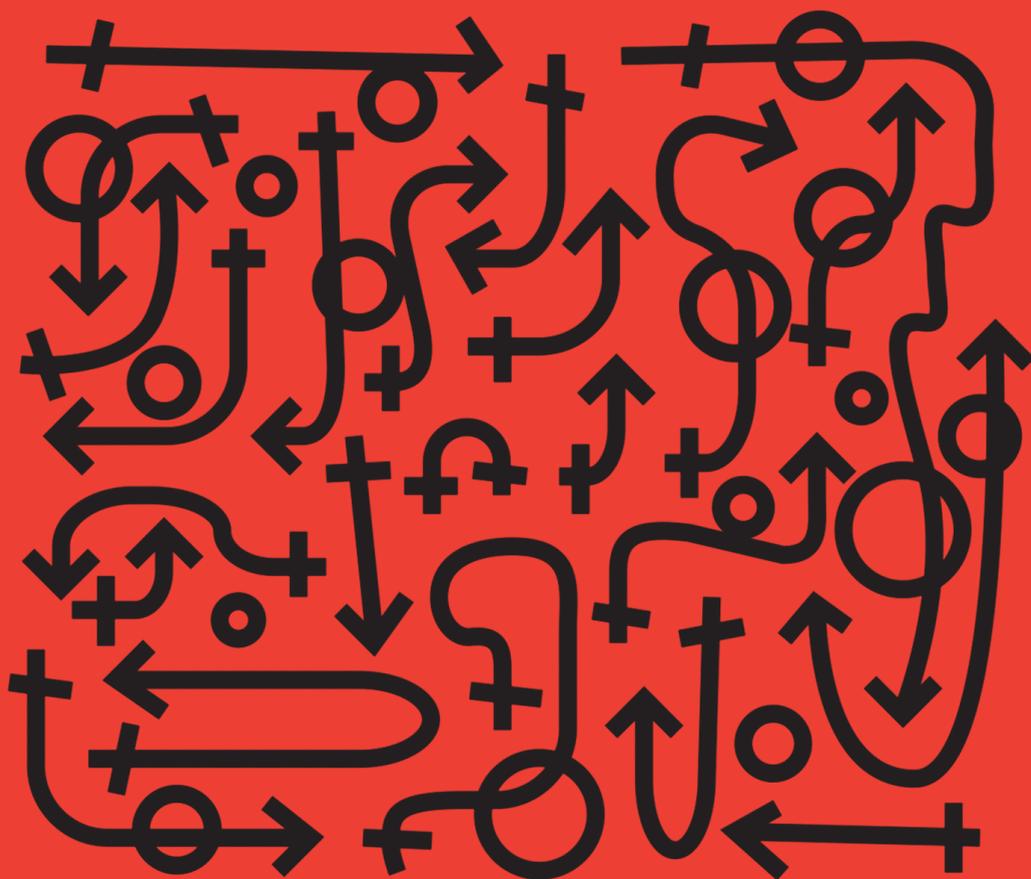


GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2015

Sexual rights and the internet



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND HUMANIST INSTITUTE FOR COOPERATION WITH DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (Hivos)

Global Information Society Watch 2015

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AUSTRALIA

THE INTERNET – 21ST CENTURY DRAG QUEEN



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Introduction

Offensive as it is to many Australians, it seems for the rest of the world our identity has been built on legends of the tough macho bloke who conquered a hostile land. Our films, though, tell the story of an evolving acceptance of diversity. In just a decade the iconic film *Crocodile Dundee*, portraying a reptile-wrestling bloke, was followed by *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, starring drag queens. Portraying the clash of two communities who did not understand each other, Priscilla stretched the boundaries of Australian masculinity. The film had a broad resonance that surprised many. As Terence Stamp who starred in the film declared, “It added drag queen to the pantheon of Australian icons.” First a cult film, now a cultural touchstone, *Priscilla* is 21 this year – and shares its birthday with the introduction of the internet in Australia.

Before the internet, transgender expression fell into two main domains in Australia: private and theatrical. The lineage of questioning gender norms publicly can be traced back to the mid-1960s and the opening of Les Girls, a Sydney theatre venue and Australian first, dedicated to glamorous drag shows. Les Girls is still open, still attracting the curious.

Carlotta, one of the original Les Girls but now an elderly recluse, grew up as Richard Byron, yet identified as female from a very young age. She struggled to make her identity known in a time and society where being different meant being ostracised. Carlotta, the first person known to have undergone gender reassignment in Australia, laments: “Today I think [people] don’t realise how lucky they are. How they have so much freedom. They’re not being chased down the street by cops. These days they don’t have a clue what we went through. They don’t know how many people worked hard behind the scenes to give them the freedom they have got today.”¹

In 1974 homosexuality was still regarded as a mental illness, illegal in all but one Australian state.

A member of a live audience for a TV current affairs programme² interviewing a gay activist threw dung at him. Others jeered, calling him a “poofter” (derogatory Australian colloquialism for a gay man) and asking homophobic questions. Compare this to June 2015, when a national current affairs programme³ panel openly discussed transgender, sexuality and diversity. Panellists included a transgender woman, gay men and women, and the counterpoint religious right representative.

1978 saw violent clashes between police and marchers in the first ever Gay Pride protest march in Sydney. A decade later police led the Mardi Gras parade, saluting the sexually diverse community, honouring the ‘78ers as they have become known, and celebrating drag queen iconoclasts. Today the annual Mardi Gras is a popular family event and a celebration of sexuality, not simply “gay” pride.

Drag queens and their spectrum of sexualities continue to break out of the gender binary and remain prominent in reflecting and questioning shifting attitudes through theatrics. Drag queens rallied the sexually diverse troops in the 1970s, boldly celebrated in the 1980s as AIDS claimed lives, and cheered Priscilla into being when film investors were reluctant in the early 1990s. In the pre-internet era, drag queens kept sexual diversity in the public domain. Eventually, transgenders emerged from secretive bars, spilling onto the streets, never to be shut away again. Today those questioning their gender identity can head to the internet, the 21st century’s drag queen.

Opening conversations, closing the gap

The tectonic shift in Australian attitudes stands as inspiration for nations where conversations on sexual diversity are repressed. Societies can change, majority attitudes are eventually isolated, becoming minority views.

In contemporary Australia transgender identity has become a prominent media topic. Even so, transgender advocates believe that, compared to the acceptance of homosexuality, we are 30 years behind.

The internet’s role in promoting sexual health is rarely appreciated. Digital natives do not register this but “gender benders” over 60 are very clear on

1 Busby, C. (2014, 16 June). Carlotta: The legend of Les Girls. *Gay News Network*. gaynewsnetwork.com.au/news/national/carlotta-the-legend-of-les-girls-14140.html

2 Monday Conference: Homosexual Rights - And Wrongs.

3 Q&A – current flagship ABC TV current affairs programme incorporating Skype questions and tweets.

the topic. The internet has helped to break down painful isolation, offering hope and practical information. Lillian, a transgender woman and one-time dancer, declares: “I have no doubt that the internet has saved lives, stopped kids from committing suicide. It’s possible to find help to come out and that is crucial. I had to disappear from my life to develop a new identity. I left my beautiful mother when I was 30 and never saw her again. It pains me to imagine what she went through, but it was impossible to be me and be part of the family.”⁴

Robyn Thorne, who underwent gender reassignment surgery in 2014 at age 72, has used the internet to speak of the lack of support and reference material to help him understand his feelings in 1940s suburban Australia. “I had no idea what was going on; I didn’t know why it [his desire to be female] was there. There was no literature available at the time, there was no internet to look it up on.”⁵ Robyn waited until retirement to make the transition she⁶ had longed for since infancy.

Unfortunately, while Australian society is moving towards tolerance, bullying and “mateship”, a creed of male friendship that often excludes women, both persist. This behaviour is on display from the theatre of our parliament to social media on schoolchildren’s phones. Our first female prime minister, Julia Gillard, has written about being bullied while in office. Her famous “misogyny speech”⁷ in parliament directed at now prime minister Tony Abbott tackled sexism head on and went viral on YouTube. These behaviours stand as indicators of broader entrenched attitudes in a society. School bullying is a current focus area for parents, support campaigns and educators.

In public discourse, we often take pride in “key Australian values” – the freedoms of speech, religion and expression, democracy, egalitarianism, peacefulness, a “fair go” (equal opportunity) for all and support for the underdog. The reality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer, intersex and asexual (LGBTQQIA)⁸ people is one indicator that Australia has yet to fully embrace these values. Living with underlying apprehension, fear of violence and discrimination – intended or other-

wise – continues to place the LGBTQQIA community under extreme and inhumane daily pressure. In spite of the growth in acceptance, heterosexual bias plays out structurally in law, institutionally in the provision of services, and interpersonally in the expression of homophobia and transphobia.

Sistergirls and Brotherboys

The internet offers numerous resources on sexuality specific to Australians. Citizens scanning the cultural landscape for handles that reflect the identities they are building may, like the passengers on the bus Priscilla, still find themselves in hostile geography – but there is online respite. Websites and multimedia resources target specific age groups and look at the breadth of the gender spectrum, providing role models, information and access to direct support. A large community of gender questioning and same-sex attracted people are online and actually reply to their Facebook messages. In contrast, there is critique that broadcast and print media content is too focused on physical change through hormonal medication and surgery. Less interventionist ideas including living in the body you have, dressing as you please and greater tolerance of self-identification would take the focus away from genitalia and physical alteration.

Digital inclusion, though, is not universal. Three percent of Australia’s 23 million identify as indigenous – Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders. Twenty-five percent live in remote communities where tele-connectivity and internet access are limited or non-existent. The reasons for this include zero connectivity available, lack of electrical generators to run computers, low levels of technical skills and literacy, higher costs of equipment and maintenance due to distance and lack of competition, a lack of understanding about the potential benefits of the internet, and poverty, which puts ongoing costs out of reach.⁹ These barriers will be familiar to people living in developing countries, but are perhaps unexpected in Australia.

A recent Human Rights Commission report¹⁰ raises the intersecting points of racial discrimination and marginalisation for LGBTQQIA Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Indigenous gender querying people face complex social, cultural and support barriers in their explorations. The report tackles the unique challenges faced by this community, concluding

4 Interview with the author, 31 May 2015.

5 Hannaford, C. (2014, 14 November). Transgender woman Robyn Thorne talks about the hardships of transitioning from male to female. *Canberra Times*. www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/canberra-life/transgender-woman-robyn-thorne-talks-about-the-hardships-of-transitioning-from-male-to-female-20141114-11gb83.html

6 Etiquette calls for referring to transgender people by the gender they identify with. For clarity in this instance, I have changed gender only when referring to Robyn later in life.

7 Transcript of Julia Gillard’s speech, 10 October 2012. smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/transcript-of-julia-gillard-s-speech-20121009-27c36.html

8 This is the most recent inclusive terminology used in Australian sexual identity discussion. The acronym has become unwieldy and a new term is coming into use: SOGI – sexual orientation, gender identity and intersex. It is not yet widely recognised.

9 Korff, J. (2015, 12 January). Internet access in Aboriginal communities. *Creative Spirits*. www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/economy/internet-access-in-aboriginal-communities

10 Australian Human Rights Commission. (2015). *Resilient Individuals: Sexual Orientation Gender Identity & Intersex Rights*. <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sexual-orientation-sex-gender-identity/publications/resilient-individuals-sexual>

that they cannot be adequately or appropriately addressed by standard government services.

For Australia's first people, culture, spirituality and ancestry are divided into men's and women's business. Western definitions of *transgender* or *gay* do not fit neatly and are rejected as post-colonial terms. The lived reality and culture of gender questioning and same-sex attracted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have given rise to the terms "Sistergirls" and "Brotherboys". Dreamtime stories, handed down for generations, tell of gender transformation in an easy and natural way.¹¹ It has always been there.

In a contemporary way of telling dreamtime stories, Brotherboys and Sistergirls are organising, populating the internet with websites, forming support groups and telling positive stories.

Kai Clancy of the Wakka Wakka and Wulli Wulli nations uses YouTube to share his female to male transition. He is both inspiring and informative about his physical and psychological changes over time as he takes "T" (testosterone injections), gradually growing facial hair, deepening his voice, eating more, building muscle and eventually having "top surgery" to masculinise his chest.¹² The AUD 8,000 (USD 6,000) needed for the operation was raised via Pozible.¹³ Kai was always unhappy as a girl: "When a trans-guy popped up on my newsfeed it finally made sense."¹⁴

A 52-year-old Wiradjuri man named Dean¹⁵ had no idea he could change his gender and had lived for many years in a lesbian relationship, feeling like a man trapped in a woman's body. After discovering gender transitioning on the internet, Dean became Australia's first indigenous person to officially change his gender and marry his partner as man and woman.

Dean had formerly learnt the "women's business" aspects of his spirituality and culture, no longer appropriate once he changed gender. The Wiradjuri elders accepted the change, but had to navigate this unprecedented terrain, developing a contemporary cultural response. Dean's *women's knowledge* and *spirit* were sent away in a smoking ceremony. Working with tribal elders, Dean gradually gained the knowledge required by Wiradjuri men. Dean contends that it is possible to be transgender and remain deeply embedded in the indigenous culture that is vital to Aboriginality.

There are many stories to tell, but not all are good. The rate of youth suicide in indigenous communities is extremely high and among these numbers are Sistergirls and Brotherboys, who lack information, support and role models. When there is internet access, it is not via a phone but found in an internet café, which presents other barriers. These include content filters, access logs and a lack of privacy.

Starlady is a white transgender youth worker based in Alice Springs in the centre of Australia. Affectionately known as "Queen of the Desert", she has spent years working in remote Aboriginal communities running workshops. Starting out with sessions on "deadly"¹⁶ hairdressing, her workshop content broadened to psychological well-being and later, to meet demand, began to address LGBTQQIA issues.

Highly visible wherever she travelled in the Northern Territory, Starlady was approached by young people grappling with their sexuality and their family members, desperate for information and support. "It's obvious that not talking causes harm," she says.¹⁷ Evident from her online and on-air presence, Starlady clearly has the sensitivity to talk in an appropriate and understanding way about sexuality, and respectfully stands aside from making any cultural interpretation, which in Australian Aboriginal terms remains private (men's or women's) business.¹⁸

The educational materials for schools used in the Northern Territory barely mention homosexuality and do not address other sexual identities. The education system and services tend to be managed by people who actively block discussions on sexuality. Starlady says, "The conversation is just not happening. I advocate to the education services to encourage the conversation but there's a massive gap between families and communities wanting information and the bureaucratic Northern Territory style of service provision." Sadly, Australia's indigenous population face many "gaps"; not only in the Northern Territory, and not only in the delivery of education.

Conclusion

In spite of all the current difficulties, the gender querying conversation has come a long way in Australian society. This is particularly the case in the last five years, according to Sophie Hyde, director of the 2014 film *52 Tuesdays*.

11 For more information see Costello, M., & Nannup, R. (1999). *Report of the First National Indigenous Sistergirl Forum*. www.afao.org.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/4649/Indig_sistergirl.pdf

12 [youtube.com/watch?v=pvveWY-oifE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvveWY-oifE)

13 pozible.com/project/186873

14 Interview with the author, 4 June 2015.

15 Living Black – Brotherboys. www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/video/451014723969/Living-Black-Brotherboys

16 Rad, cool or hip.

17 Interview with the author, 20 June 2015.

18 This is evident in Starlady's Facebook timeline, various co-hosted TV and radio programs and a TED Talk.

This low-budget Australian film has won an impressive array of global awards.¹⁹ An intimate story, the film is about a gender transition from female to male. As “James” is transitioning, teenage daughter “Billie” is simultaneously exploring her own sexual dimensions away from the gaze of the preoccupied adults in her life. Billie is not shocked by the announcement of her mother’s planned transition, playing a curious supportive daughter and friend as James emerges. The film has surprised audiences with its naturalness. It marks maturity in the use of film as a contributor to the unfolding narrative in Australia about transgender identities. A worldwide, online participatory project ran in parallel to the production. The “My 52 Tuesdays” app²⁰ invited people to write down and then photograph their answer to a different personal question posed each week on Tuesday. Participants could share as much or as little as they wanted to with others by adjusting preferences.

It is currently argued that Australia has the most far-reaching data retention requirements among advanced industrialised democracies. The Telecommunications (Interception and Access) Amendment (Data Retention) Bill Act 39 of 13 April 2015 was passed by both houses of Parliament.²¹

Telecommunications service providers are legally required to collect and retain phone call, email and originating IP address web data for all Australians, for two years. Enforcement agencies with powers to access that data face a very low level of independent scrutiny. Many fear that such large databases will be hacked into by criminal elements and abused by security agencies. An online campaign, “Citizens not Suspects”, failed to stop the passage of the bill. While data retention powers are publicly linked to counterterrorism, they also have a chilling effect on the private exploration of sexuality using the internet.

In *52 Tuesdays* Billie’s own interest in film leads to the documentation of her erotic awakening involving intimacy with a boy and girl her own age. Desire and responsibility collide. The internet looms large as a dark force as the adults become aware of the existence of the footage that could so easily be posted online. Liberating as it has been for

many, *52 Tuesdays* posits the internet’s potential to impact negatively on a young life.

Hyde believes “we don’t talk about sex enough, we don’t see it in any media as much as we ought to given its importance to our lives.”²² She harboured a concern that *52 Tuesdays* would be X-rated and that access would be restricted for a key audience: young adults. Australia’s rating system is notoriously tougher on sex than it is on violence. “Nudity isn’t sex. Sex isn’t porn,” says Hyde. Counterproductively, the film’s M+15 rating does limit access for young adolescents, right at the start of puberty, when exposure could be of enormous benefit.

It would not be right, I am told, to examine the intersection of transgender and the internet without mentioning online dating. Stigma about dating transgendered people often blocks personal approaches. Whatever is being sought – romance, love, sex – dating sites are an essential medium for many. Straight men are the most regular dates for transgendered women. Face-to-face meetings often fail because the straight guy has been overexposed to “tranny porn”, expecting stiletto heels and silicone breasts, not people just being themselves, in comfortable clothes.

It is difficult to isolate the role of the internet in building equality and driving societal acceptance of sexual diversity. Less challenging is evidencing the positive effect the internet has on mitigating sexual identity crises and suffering due to lack of access to information. Everyone has the right to know and one obvious challenge for Australia is to build digital opportunities for all citizens, wherever they live. Another is to protect privacy in a time of data retention. While our current conservative government is focused on building fear and playing Big Brother with our information, neither seems likely in the near future.

Action steps

The following advocacy steps are suggested for Australia:

- Question Australian censorship regulations that allow extreme violence but limit access to information on human sexuality, especially for pubescent Australians.
- Campaign for digital inclusion and a national broadband network that is affordable and accessible to Australians living in remote communities.
- Ensure that “closing the gap” between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians includes access to appropriate information and support on sexual health and diversity.
- Challenge the approach to data retention that erodes privacy, makes citizens suspects and builds a police state.

19 Best Director, World Cinema Dramatic – Sundance Film Festival 2014. Crystal Bear – Berlinale 2014. Elese-Siegessäule Readers’ Jury Award – Berlinale 2014. Best Original Screenplay – AWGIE Awards 2014. Special Jury Prize, Freddy Awards – Rio International Film Festival 2014. Best Feature Audience Award – Melbourne Queer Film Festival 2014. Best First Feature – Inside Out Toronto LGBT Film Festival 2014. Best Film – Divergenti Festival (Festival del Cinema Trans) 2014. Spirit of Gaze – GAZE International LGBT Film Festival 2014. Eye of Youth, Audience Award – Seoul International Youth Film Festival 2014. Best Director & Best Screenplay – LesGaiCineMas Madrid International LGBT Film Festival. Youth Jury Award – Cork Film Festival 2014. Jury Award, International Youth Film – ExGround Youth Days Film Festival 2014. Best Film (Jury Award) & Best Film (Audience Award) – CAN [BE] GAY Festival de Cine LGBTIQ de Canarias 2015. Best Feature – South Australian Screen Awards 2014.

20 mys2tuesdays.com

21 www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_Legislation/Bills_Search_Results/Result?bid=r5375

22 Interview with the author, 17 May 2015.

Sexual rights and the internet

The theme for this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) is sexual rights and the online world. The eight thematic reports introduce the theme from different perspectives, including the global policy landscape for sexual rights and the internet, the privatisation of spaces for free expression and engagement, the need to create a feminist internet, how to think about children and their vulnerabilities online, and consent and pornography online.

These thematic reports frame the 57 country reports that follow. The topics of the country reports are diverse, ranging from the challenges and possibilities that the internet offers lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) communities, to the active role of religious, cultural and patriarchal establishments in suppressing sexual rights, such as same-sex marriage and the right to legal abortion, to the rights of sex workers, violence against women online, and sex education in schools. Each country report includes a list of action steps for future advocacy.

The timing of this publication is critical: many across the globe are denied their sexual rights, some facing direct persecution for their sexuality (in several countries, homosexuality is a crime). While these reports seem to indicate that the internet does help in the expression and defence of sexual rights, they also show that in some contexts this potential is under threat – whether through the active use of the internet by conservative and reactionary groups, or through threats of harassment and violence.

The reports suggest that a radical revisiting of policy, legislation and practice is needed in many contexts to protect and promote the possibilities of the internet for ensuring that sexual rights are realised all over the world.

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH

2015 Report

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