

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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Steering committee

Anriette Esterhuysen (APC)

Will Janssen (Hivos)

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Jac sm Kee (APC)

Nadine Moawad (APC)

Project coordinator

Roxana Bassi (APC)

Editor

Alan Finlay

Assistant editor, publication production

Lori Nordstrom (APC)

Proofreading

Valerie Dee

Stephanie Wildes

Graphic design

Monocromo

info@monocromo.com.uy

Phone: +598 2400 1685

Cover illustration

Matias Bervejillo

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Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos)

Hivos

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Preface

When the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) first raised the issue of internet content regulation and how it impacts on sexuality, in internet governance and policy spaces, we focused on building understanding that sexuality is a critical component of freedom of expression. APC, along with Hivos and our respective partners, challenged the assumption that sex was always about porn, and that porn was always bad. We began digging deeper into what was understood as pornographic content in internet policy, legislation and use, and how this term was being used as a blunt instrument and moral trump card for demanding regulation of the internet. What we found was that the sophisticated analysis of the nuanced relationship between sexuality, sexual and reproductive health, sexual expression, discrimination and rights, already present in the sexual rights, women's rights and feminist movements that APC and Hivos had been working with, was completely absent in internet policy and internet rights discourse.

The connection between the internet and sexuality, sexual expression, sexual identity, sex education and sexual and reproductive health has only recently received the recognition it deserves. In the early days of the internet, sexual content was viewed largely with alarm. While the internet's potential for free flow of information and worldwide connections between people, ideas and institutions was celebrated, the rapid increase in the use of the internet for exchanging pornographic content provoked anxiety among some of the early developers and adopters. In APC's own history, in 1998 when APC members were still all internet service providers, some members of the network felt that the APC member in Russia should be expelled from the network because its web hosting services were being used by a group of female sex workers to advertise their services, and that APC's member in Australia should be sanctioned for some of its users hosting images of nude women on the webspace that was part of a subscription package that users paid for. APC members opted then already to not make "intermediaries" liable and the majority voted against these members being sanctioned. Nevertheless, this incident demonstrates the polarising effect that sexuality can have even in a like-minded network of social justice and peace advocates like APC.

A decade later, we see a very different landscape. While some of the tensions still exist, there is increasing recognition of the value of the internet for the advancement of sexual rights. In particular, there is understanding of how the internet can ensure that muted voices are heard, that connections can be made with relative safety thanks to the capacity to determine the lines between what

is private and what is public online, and that the internet still provides an open space for imagining and constructing alternative ways of relating, living and being.

This recognition is, in part, due to the increasing engagement by sexual rights and women's rights advocates and people of diverse sexualities and gender identities in internet rights discussions and spaces. And in part, due to the increasing awareness among internet rights advocates of the different entry points that different groups have in exercising their human rights online, and how this intimately reflects their existing rights offline. It also speaks to the evolution and maturing of human rights advocacy in relation to the internet. Where once freedom of expression dominated the conversation, the full spectrum of human rights is now being included, interrogated, and articulated through the priorities and perspectives of a diversity of actors.

This edition of GISWatch aims to add to the conversation, by providing insights and case studies by activists, thinkers and advocates from a range of movements and contexts. From how the internet has augmented sex education, to the contentious relationship between young people and sexuality online. From the real violence and discrimination that takes place through the interlinked interactions between online and offline, to the multiple ways in which creativity, activism and collective mobilising have expanded the space for women and people of diverse sexualities and gender identities to live with their rights intact. From the emerging threats of privatisation of online social networking, of surveillance, and of commodification of people as sources of personal data gathered and valued for its market value, to the exploration of autonomous infrastructure and alternative economies.

We want to mention the invaluable contribution to this report of the APC Women's Rights Programme team, and of the APC Sexual Rights Project's partners all over the world.

We hope that this edition will provide a space that can contribute towards an expansive internet that is able to hold a cacophony of voices and perspectives, with the human rights of all people threaded throughout.

Anriette Esterhuysen
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, APC

Will Janssen
DIRECTOR, OPEN SOCIETY PROGRAMME, HIVOS

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.

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2015 Report

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