

Acting beyond the traditional path

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*Esau Mathope
Behind the Mask, South Africa
esau@mask.org.za*

ICT for marginalised people

In Africa, explicit hostility towards gay and lesbian people is borne out by the fact that society is heterosexist. It is not that only gay and lesbian people face repressive forms of marginalisation; the pattern of dominance is perverse and manifests itself through different forms. There is genital mutilation which is dressed as a ‘cultural practice’, pathological misunderstanding of feminists who are viewed as a direct attack on the institutions of marriage and family, as well as ethnic groups who are seen as being encroachers, who have to be pushed.

The struggle for civil liberties and societal acceptance for gay and lesbian people in the African continent is still in its infancy. There is a general lack of debate and dialogue is almost impossible, as religious, cultural and political factors are fronted as the premises on which homosexuality ought to be defined as a deficiency, not an orientation.

With the advent of e-mail and the Internet, a new wave of communication methods has opened up. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are increasingly serving as willing carriers of sectoral news and information previously closed to the outside world. Online publishing has cut out the logistics involved in traditional printing press operations.

Deprivations faced

The print and publication industry on the continent, and to a larger extent in South Africa as well, hasn’t yet opened itself up in a free market style to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender and intersex (LGBTI) communities. Where some publications are produced for this market, they are usually aimed at the top end of the market. In South Africa, few publications blatantly cater for the white community covering topics like

holidays, new cars, up market property and fashion.

The voiceless African gay and lesbian people on the continent have little in the form of expression, movement, or protest that is feasible under the conditions in which they live. As a gay or lesbian person, deprived of many things that most Africans are deprived of, access to the Internet is also a humungous task.

Behind the Mask

Behind the Mask (BtM) pioneered Africa’s premier gay and lesbian web portal. Founded by Bart Luirink, based in Johannesburg and a network of correspondents across the continent, BtM aims to use journalistic activism to mainstream lesbian, gay, bi, trans and intersex (LGBTI) interests and to change negative attitudes towards homosexuality and same sex traditions in Africa. One of our major victories has been our visibility. We have been able to unearth a community, albeit online most of the time, of gay men and lesbian women who are professionals, proud to be who they are and identifying themselves as gays and lesbians and based in African cities across the continent.

Before our arrival, researchers, embassies, donors and empathetic supporters based outside the continent handled gay and lesbian news and information on the continent. Today, BtM has built an extensive network of human rights advocates, activists and has provided a platform for exchange and debate for LGBTI groups, activists, individuals and other stakeholders who are pursuing a common developmental agenda. Through this, an alert system, operating through e-mail, has been established, that helps in cases of distress, arrest, torture or other forms of human rights abuse, attributed to sexual orientation.

Association for Progressive Communication (APC)

Association for Progressive Communication is an international network of civil society organisations dedicated to empowering and supporting groups and individuals working for peace, human rights, development and protection of the environment, through the strategic use of ICT, including the Internet. Its vision is a world in which all people have easy, equal and affordable access to the creative potential of ICT to improve their lives and create more democratic and egalitarian societies.

APC has a virtual office with staff members spread around the world. 37 members world-wide work together to provide online organising and collaboration tools and skills for civil society.

Since 2000, APC has been focusing on Internet Rights for Civil Society, building APC Information Communities and building APC membership. As a part of the Internet Rights for Civil Society programme, APC has enrolled in the ICT Global Policy Monitor. This project, with a focus on Internet governance, is one of the projects that Hivos supports.

www.apc.org/english/index.shtml

Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET)

WOUGNET was initiated in May 2000 by several women's organisations to promote the use of ICT as a tool to share information and address gender issues collectively. In Uganda, the barriers for women to access and use ICT are much larger as compared to men. Despite the efforts made by government and different organisations, challenges remain in terms of lack of capacity to explore and utilise ICT's accessibility, affordability, illiteracy, language barriers, and limited ICT infrastructure especially in the rural areas.

WOUGNET addresses the identified constraints to enable women to benefit more from the use of ICTs. Presently, the membership of the network consists of 80 women's organisations and individuals. Its goals are to strengthen the use of ICTs among women and women organisations, to build capacities in ICT application, as well as to expand activities to reach out to rural women. Main strategies are providing opportunities for sharing knowledge, giving technical support, ensuring gender related issues in government and institutions' ICT policies and implementing special projects for rural women.

During the past years, member organisations received technical support in order to make better use of ICTs. WOUGNET assessed the impact of ICTs on social change for women, trained women entrepreneurs and women in the health sector in the application of ICT, disseminated relevant information on the website and mailing list, created a pool of web designers and Tech Tip volunteers, and spearheaded ICT policy advocacy initiatives. WOUGNET website profiles Ugandan women organisations and their activities. It was awarded the African Information Society Initiative (AIS) Media Award.

Hivos supports WOUGNET because it addresses the need for increased access to and use of information by women through modern communication technologies.

www.wougn.net.org

In the absence of established gay and lesbian organisations in the continent, we have used our contacts in different cities to harness the spirit of activism by organising individuals, who can organise themselves and represent their own issues in their own terms in their own countries. One of the dangers of the kind of work we do is the temptation to 'form' structures in other countries. We have had to acknowledge that South Africa is structurally different.

ICT has enabled us to move beyond conferences or workshops and engage on a one on one basis with our contributors and correspondents, most of whom are neither trained journalists nor writers. The training that is given covers a complicated field of activism, advocacy, lobbying, reporting, and networking. Mainstream international, continental and national human rights organisations have come to rely on BtM as a source of credible news and reports on human rights abuses. Personal meetings rarely ever take place at BtM offices.

The movement, the activities and the information have given voice to one of the most muted societies in African continent. It has now emerged that gay and lesbian people face the same prejudices all over the world and that their aspirations and dreams are the same. Those domiciled in European and American cities are beginning to write and say that, in their time, lack of ICTs as a medium of expression, made it impossible for them to express their sexuality.

Information for human rights

By being at the coalface of such a complex issue, BtM had to grow to become a professional organisation. Currently with a team of about seven, consisting of a director, an administrator, an online editor, a webmaster and three editorial assistants, the organisation has its website running without interruption since May 2000 when it became an independent non-profit entity. With a staff complement with no formal background in journalism and with most staff members in their early and late 20s, Internet, e-mail, discussion groups, news server lists, etc. have served to enhance their skills and expertise. BtM also had its downs with ICT, with some of our projects hijacked or stalled because of the geographical distance between our constituencies and us.

BtM is involved in a project called 'The Link', which aims to robustly penetrate the African continent and develop forums of debate and dialogue as well as encourage other civil society organisations to upscale their involvement in LGBTI issues. 'The Link' aims to have a database of contacts, categorised by classified and public access sections, from which expertise and information can be drawn, in cases where BtM has outstretched itself or when they are too technical or legalistic for a journalist to handle.

We are also a big supporter of a new initiative called 'All Africa Rights Initiative'. This grew out of the necessity to represent African gay and lesbian aspirations in own terms. The previous continental gay and lesbian initiatives have branches of organisations like the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGHRC) and International Gay and Lesbian Association (ILGA). Just as there is a call for an African Renaissance, so is the time for African LGBTI activists to stand up and speak for themselves. ■