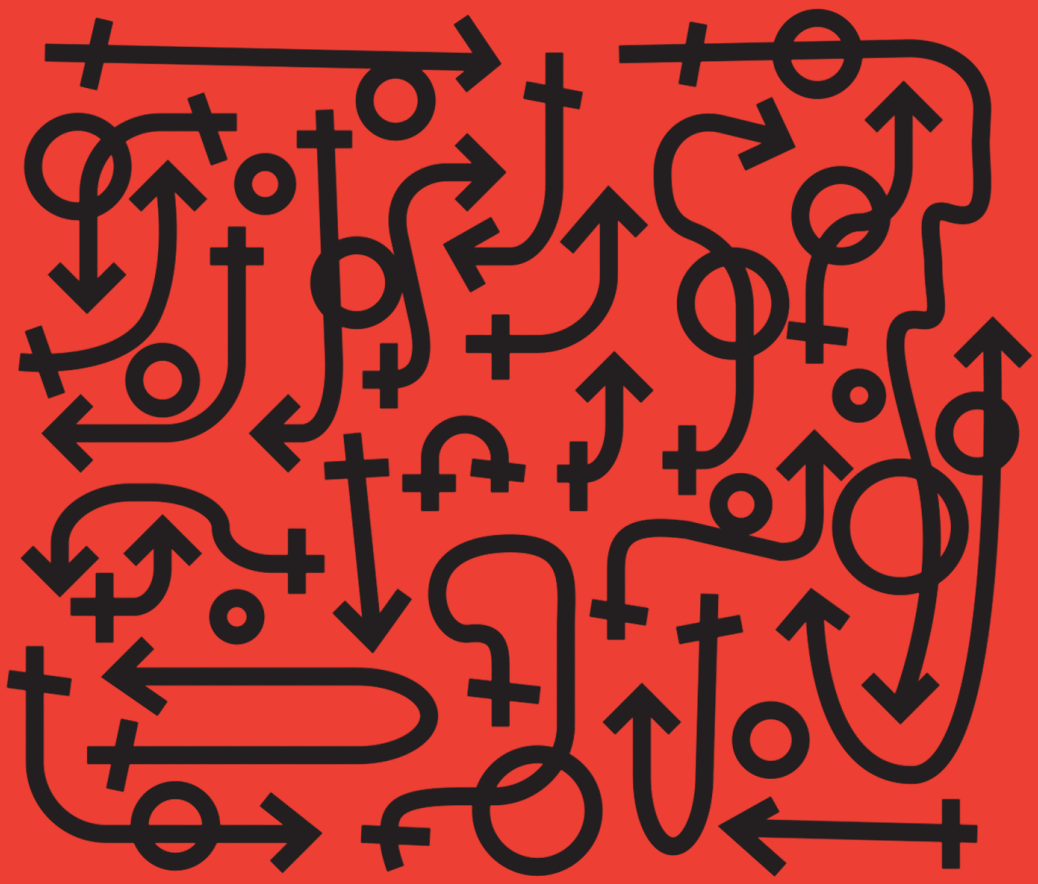
GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2015

Sexual rights and the internet



Association for Progressive Communications (APC)
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Global Information Society Watch 2015
Sexual rights and the internet

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Kanaga's choices: Queer and transgender identity in the digital age

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Kanaga is a 27-year-old software engineer from Chennai, one of the IT boom cities of southern India, where she works as a consultant for a major multinational corporation. She met her fiancé Raghav online, via a mutual Facebook friend. Raghav lives in Delhi, at the other end of India, but over an intense four-month period they chatted every night, online or on the phone, and met twice. Then, in January this year, Kanaga flew north to Delhi for a formal Hindu engagement ceremony.

The ceremony was unusual. This was not only because the betrothed have made a love match in a society in which marriages are still overwhelmingly arranged by families. It was also because both the bride-to-be and groom-to-be are transgender. Kanaga, assigned the male gender at birth, was draped in a celebratory saree generously stitched with gold, and was wearing colourful costume jewellery. Raghav, assigned female at birth, had his short hair in a fringe, and was wearing a simple cotton men's kurta over black pyjama pants.

The ceremony was at the home of one of Raghav's friends. Only a few carefully selected people were present, as neither Kanaga nor Raghav are out to their families yet. But the couple has a plan, Kanaga explained to me when I met her in Chennai in early 2015: "We want to get married, as a boy and a girl. I'm going to be the boy, and Raghav the girl. In India marriage is a complicated thing. So we need to satisfy parents, and then start life together, and think about how we are going to transition into our true genders."

If she were from an older generation or from a poorer social class, Kanaga's destiny might well have been that of generations of effeminate Indian men before her: she would probably have been cast out of her family – or would have fled it – and joined the parallel society of *hijras,* or eunuchs, who undergo ritual castration and earn their living begging or doing sex work, and live with other members of this "caste" in relationships that are often feudal and oppressive. Her journey has been different because of two factors: she is educated and self-sufficient, and she is active online. Both have opened her horizons. But both present a whole new set of challenges too.

When it comes to sexual orientation and gender identity, the world is changing faster than anyone could have imagined: not only because of the global rights movement, or because of the advances in biomedical technology which make gender transition increasingly accessible, but because of the digital and information revolutions too. Researching a book about this, I have met young people in countries all over the world who are finding community – and new identity, and a sense of personal autonomy – online, and then needing to square it with the often-more-challenging environments of their offline lives.

Mona, from Cairo, has three Facebook profiles: a straight heterosexual male one for her family and school friends who only know her as Abdul; a straight female one through which she can explore being a woman; and a transgender one, through which she can interact with the online community she has found of people like her. She found a black market source online for estrogen and began taking it. Her changing appearance was beginning to attract negative responses on the streets of the city, however, and some elders in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community prevailed upon her to limit her transgender explorations to her room and her webcam.

Charlotte, a young transgender woman from Ann Arbor, Michigan, came to terms with her female self by using female avatars in MMO (massively multiplayer online) role-playing games. Liam, an 18-year-old freshman at the University of Michigan, researched transgenderism by watching YouTube videos online since the age of 12, and now assiduously posts bulletins of his own transition online. In China, tens of thousands of young people have signed up to matrimonial websites which link gay men and lesbians so that they can meet potential opposite-sex marital partners and provide their families with heirs: they are only children, of course, due to China's one-child policy. Meanwhile, they find their same-sex romantic or sexual partners

on huge hookup sites like Blued.[1] In the West, the cultural significance of gay bars has declined dramatically, as people hook up, instead, in the virtual space that is both safer and more convenient.

But the web, of course, presents new security challenges, even as it creates a sense of online community, particularly for isolated people, or people who need to conceal some part of their identity. In Syria, the Assad government stands accused of monitoring the gay websites and routinely uses the intelligence it gathers in its interrogations of suspected insurgents; Israel similarly attempts to blackmail gay Palestinians into being collaborators even as it claims to be an oasis of tolerance in a tough neighbourhood. In Egypt, the el Sisi regime has used hook-up apps to entrap homosexuals and charge them with debauchery in trials that seem designed to show supporters of the ousted Muslim Brotherhood that the military government has a moral code.

The bigger threats are the personal ones. Taylor, a young Nigerian man from the city of Ibadan, was forced into a brutal programme of deliverance at his family's church when his sexuality was disclosed after he mistakenly confused his cell phones: he had one with a "straight" profile on the 2Go mobile app, and one with his gay profile. Michael, a teenager who had to flee his home in western Uganda at the age of 15 when he was discovered with another boy, used Facebook to find other gay people: this is how he met the older man who took him in, but it was also how he was entrapped by a gang that kidnapped, tortured and extorted him. Michael fled to Kenya, where he is now a refugee. A significant amount of the tiny monthly grant he gets from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees goes towards purchasing data access for his phone. By being online he can remain connected to the gay individuals in the United States who provide him with moral and political – and sometimes financial – support.

Beyonce is a teenager from a provincial Egyptian town. When his parents discovered his double life, his punishments included having his head shaven and being dragged through town behind a horse cart before being locked in his room for a month and beaten every day. He kept himself alive by posting "It Gets Better" videos on YouTube advising other youth in a similar situation. Elena Klimova, a young journalist on the far side of the Urals, has set up a social media platform called Deti-404[2] which does the same thing for Russian youth whom LGBT organisations can no longer reach because of the country's anti-gay propaganda legislation. The authorities have been attempting to shut her down: Klimova runs pages on Facebook and its Russian equivalent, VKontakte, and was fined 50,000 roubles (USD760) in July 2015 for distributing "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors". [3]

Kanaga is a little older than Mona and Beyonce, than Michael and Taylor or Charlotte and Liam. The arrival of Yahoo chat rooms – the first wave of massive digital social networking – coincided exactly with her coming into adolescence in the early noughties, and for this reason she provides a particularly illuminating case study of the way digital technology has, in a generation, changed the lives of LGBT people with access to it.

In 2006, in her final year of high school, Kanaga went to an internet café in her provincial hometown, to print out some documents from a friend. There were no computers in her home, despite the fact that her father was a fairly well-off clothing manufacturer. But she was taking computer science at school, and she was intrigued, and so paid to go online, and – because Yahoo was the homepage – she signed up, and found herself in a chat room before she knew it.

She was then of course – as she is now – a male in the "real" world, despite how she feels inside. But she made the impetuous decision to give herself a female ID rather than a male one. "It was great," she remembers. "If you go into a chat room with a girl's ID, *everyone* pings you!" She saved up to be able to do this about once a month, and lived for these visits to the café, where she started surfing, too, and found a site which she remembers being called "Nearly-She", targeted at cross-dressing men.

She had, for years already, been secretly wearing women's clothes at home: her father made women's underwear, and her mother sold sarees. Without the website, she acknowledges, she might well have come to understand herself as a *hijra* because of these desires; with it, she found a temporary haven in the online world of cross-dressing men. So enraptured was she by this world that she flunked her final high school exams. When she did pass, and got into college to study first software

1 www.blued.cn

2 www.deti-404.com

3 Luhn, A. (2015, 29 July). LGBT website founder fined under Russia's gay propaganda laws. *The Guardian*. http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/29/lgbt-yelena-klimova-fined-russia-gay-propaganda-laws

engineering and then business administration, she carried on her secret online life. Through Orkut, the original Google social networking app, she began to make individual online friendships, including one with a cross-dresser who went every year to a religious festival at Kollam in the province of Kerala, where men were expected to show their devotion by dressing in sarees. She went to Kollam, but did not like it. The way she and the others looked, she says, was too "draggy", and she instinctively bridled against the hyperfemininity of both men in drag and *hijras:* "I'm not very glossy as a person."

Shortly after she moved to Chennai to take her first job, Kanaga found a message on her Facebook timeline from a friend and followed the thread: it led her to a rooftop room in one of North Chennai's sprawling working-class suburbs, called the Mermaid Studio. I had been to the Mermaid Studio myself on one of my visits to Chennai. Here the transgender activist Lalitha Yogi runs a lucrative enterprise. Cross-dressing men and transgender women come to see her, from all over India, to be dressed in female attire, to have their photographs taken, and to be helped to establish profiles in their female selves online: "At Mermaid they can be themselves," Lalitha Yogi told me, showing me her closets full of sarees and her drawers of jewellery, wigs and makeup. "They can explore their femininity and even engage with others, online, as female or trans. I help them set up fake profiles on Facebook, or on the trans sites, and we upload the pics."

Lalitha Yogi herself is never offline, both as an entrepreneur (she is also a sex worker) and as an activist. As an outreach worker for an AIDS awareness NGO in Chennai, she goes onto hook-up sites and initiates chats: she draws her interlocutors into discussions about their sexual practice and gives them safe-sex information if she thinks it is necessary.

"Lalitha played a very significant role in helping me realise I was transgender rather than a cross-dresser," Kanaga told me. "She charged me some bucks, quite a sum for me even now, 5000 rupees (USD 75), she dressed me up, and after we made a profile for me, we went to a fundraiser programme for transwomen in a community hall. It was the first time I'd been in public since Kollam, but at Kollam you are a male dressing as a female for religious reasons. Here I was going out as transgender! The day was so happy and so beautiful for me. We took pictures in road. Some gay men were also there, two guys interested in me, making one liners and pick-up lines."

Kanaga could not afford Lalitha Yogi more than once, but found another outlet through social media: an apartment where cross-dressers kept their things and which was open for use by members. She went for a while, but felt ostracised because of her effeminacy, which seemed to threaten the security of the other more normative men. She feels equally ill-at-ease among *hijras*, though, because she cannot relate to their exuberance or to their hyperfemininity.

Kanaga's sense of not fitting in anywhere points to the central challenge facing transgender people of Kanaga's class and generation in this first epoch of the digital age. If she were of an earlier generation, or if she were poorer and on the wrong side of the digital divide, she would have had two choices. Either she would have suppressed her female self and become a married man according to her family's wishes. Or she would have been forced to conform to the *hijra* codes, becoming a sex worker or beggar, and adhering to an aggressively feminine gender stereotype that is as uncomfortable for her as masculinity is.

Instead, she has individuated, in the way that people do in liberal societies where they have access to an ethos of personal autonomy, through her own singular journey online: a journey which has intersected with groups, of course, but on which she has plotted her own path, left her own traces. As an individual, too, she has become part of a global online community where people are free to be who they feel themselves to be. Such is the power of smartphone technology: Kanaga does not even have to close a door and open her laptop to enter this world – all she needs is a quiet corner with no one looking over her shoulder. Here she can read the Facebook posts of transwomen from America or Western Europe, or scroll through transgender peoples' albums on Instagram or data-dumps on Tumblr, and imagine how life might be for her. Here, too, she can "go stealth" and live as a woman, if she wants to, or explore what it means to be "trans", without having to put her actual body at risk.

Recently, I told Kanaga about another transgender woman at her company, who worked out of Bangalore. This person – let me call her Neela – had previously been at a rival company, which she had quit because she had decided to transition medically and socially, and she wanted a fresh start. She approached the new company – the company Kanaga now works for too – and negotiated a package that not only included sick leave for the surgery but a medical policy that would pay for the surgery, and for hormone treatments too.

This did not happen in the Bay Area, or in Northern Europe, but in India, in 2013. It is a sign of how dramatically mores are changing in this era – and the role, particularly, that the LGBT-friendly multinational tech companies are playing in the process. I told Kanaga about this, in an attempt to cheer her up, during an inevitable bout of depression, given her double life. She had, in fact, recently left her old job for a position at this company because she was beginning to find the teasing about her long hair and long fingernails intolerable. "That's amazing, Mark," she said, in response to Neela's story. "Something for me to look forward to one day. But what you must understand is that even if my company is ready for me to transition, *I'm* not ready for me to transition. Not because of me inside, but because of the society I live in."

When Kanaga goes offline, or closes the booklet outlining her multinational corporation's diversity and inclusion policies, she has to deal with the gossip around the water cooler. And in the street. And, most of all, from her family. She has to switch back into an identity that she has already shucked. It is like expecting a lizard to crawl back into last season's skin: it will never quite fit again.

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 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 (LBGTQ) 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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