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Advocacy Perspective

Sexuality, sex education and The HIVe in
support of advocacy around the world

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The HIVe

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Congratulations to this Special Issue of Digital Culture & Education (DCE) entitled 'Building The HIVe' for an innovative and unique approach to global HIV and AIDS advocacy, education and research. Building The HIVe clearly demonstrates the need for digital diversity related to sex education, HIV prevention, and support. It nurtures a strategic network and provides online spaces where ideas can be shared, developed and refined into good practises among researchers, community leaders, academics and policy makers. The HIVe is a digital culture that allows for the "community" to critically and creatively engage with HIV prevention as a solution (Singh & Walsh, this issue). It utilises technology to leverage glo-cal efforts to curb HIV and AIDS infection rates, along with supporting sexual minorities and persons living with and affected by HIV to participate meaningfullly. The advocacy challenge for The HIVe is to engage advocates and activitists of varying skills, knowledge and understanding to ensure the new knowledge produced rapidly influences the policy and programming on HIV, sexuality and sex education across communities worldwide. At the same time, while we are availing digital technology to strengthen knowledge sharing and exchange, we should all be mindful of how we can support each other to model the acceptance, tolerance and diversity we wish to see in a just world. For us, this means acknowledging that for more effective HIV prevention and education strategies, we now need to educate communities through developing new and innovative platforms for communication in English/dominant and marginalised vernacular languages.

Sexuality and The HIVe

The core elements of sexuality and sexual diversity are still ill-defined in most communities around the world. In global and country-level debates, we tend to assume that we all share the same knowledge. Yet, the current dialogue surrounding sexuality omits a crucial piece of the puzzle—the overwhelming stigma faced by most at-risk populations such as gay men, other men who have sex with men (MSM), and transgenders. This pervasive sociocultural barrier to healthy sexuality leaves high numbers of men and women vulnerable to the risks of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV.

   As advocates on the frontlines are only too aware, the singular narrative surrounding sexuality in most cultures has limited the scope with which to engage the global experience of sexual realities and risks. People who are from every corner of the earth engage in multiple sexual and gendered identities. These identities are now increasingly digitally mediated. How do we explain and educate others on sexual diversity in a digital era? What are the best tactics to disrupt stigma and discrimination which prevent us from talking about sexualities in the first place, especially in digital spaces? The HIVe offers an answer.

Stigma and The HIVe

Because stigma and criminalisation of sexual behaviours between gay men, other men that have sex with men (MSM) and transgenders exist in numerous countries around the world, it is difficult to mobilise and sustain community based groups to support each other through affinity. Too numerous to name, these groups are often marginalised or silenced because their rights-based perspectives can clash with normative public health thinking. These groups are often left out of decision making on policies and programmes. These political barriers hinder the ability to acknowledge, express and discuss sexualities along with gendered expressions in public and community health. Such closure curtails efforts to improve the quality of prevention, education and support services that can save lives and enhance health, human rights and equity for everyone.

Until recently, communities at risk of stigma and denial of sexual rights have been studied through a collection of structural and behavioural interventions whose underlying interconnections to sexuality in the digital world are yet unclear. For instance, we know that reducing HIV risk usually requires reducing stigma and discrimination against gay men, other MSM and transgenders from the wider society, but how do these groups' various sexual expressions rebound on the richness of society as a whole? On the one hand, there is overwhelming stigma against discussing what should be best left to the privacy of the bedroom. On the other hand, there is overwhelming sexualisation of the body and lifestyles expressed through digital media. Over the last decade, advocates have come to realise that while the explicit introduction of Internet-based health promotion and prevention interventions can greatly improve our understanding of networks and communities, closer attention to the complex dynamics of social and sexual practices is still challenging to integrate into scalable prevention and education models. Given these contradictions, whether a unifying theory is able to explain and integrate simultaneously several empirical patterns to optimise the design and impact of sex education, prevention and community mobilisation is a challenge rendered infinitely more complex in a digital era.

With digital technologies to queer norms, disrupt stigma, and discuss educational opportunities, The HIVe captures what has been the aim of advocacy all along: to reinvigorate the traditional approaches to HIV and AIDS education, prevention, care and support globally beyond strategic analysis and one-off capacity building efforts to actual daily work with frontline activists.

Sex education and The HIVe

A majority of individuals around the world are not able to learn holistically about sexual identities. By and large, 'education' is based on the limited discourse individuals and groups are given to work with because of the taboo nature of sexuality. In many countries throughout the world, because HIV education has been confined to heterosexual sex, individuals are not aware of the dangers related to anal penetration[1]. In Cameroon, it is often assumed women are selling sex if they are found with condoms in their purse[2]. In Paraguay, men walking with a certain gait are perceived as effeminate and often verbally assaulted by law enforcement[3]. In Bangladesh, police arrest transgender sex workers and then sexually assault them to teach them a lesson[4]. These conservative barriers demonstrate a clear lack of community engagement by public health and legal institutions to develop a holistic understanding of sexuality and how it relates to public health.

The insights and implications from the research produced by building The HIVe provide alternative ways of designing open access sex education. In a climate of anxiety and hostility about sexualities, The HIVe brings together different formats and styles of digital culture to learn from each other about sex and sexualities. As sex education and sexualities are increasingly politicised, such continuous digital community education is of signal importance for the advocacy of a thorough and holistic understanding of sexuality to improve health, well being and to reduce HIV risk. The papers in this Special Issue represent the rich and varied possibilities for developing tools and strategies to by advocates and activitists to address issues of gender and sexuality that engage communities in and through their work.

IDAHO and The HIVe

One successful advocacy initiative that engages communities around the world is the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHO), observed annually on May 17. Growing numbers of community groups observe IDAHO to address the very real stigma and discrimination surrounding sexuality. IDAHO has been a mobilising factor for sexual diversity and stigma advocacy organisations in over 90 countries for the past seven years. It utilises social media, online translation tools and global, regional and national reporting to reach thousands of activists in the world.

This year, the IDAHO focus is education. The guidance for the day, articulated in the IDAHO Lesson, draws upon the recent UNESCO International Guidance on Sexuality Education[5] (2009). This puts forth standards and recommendations for comprehensive sex education programs that include and ackowledge diverse sexualities along with risks of STIs and HIV. These standards are offered to countries around the world to finally get it right when it comes to educating adolescents and young adults on what sexuality is and how to engage in sex without risking their health.

In a world saturated by global sexual digital platforms, tools, and images available cheaply on mobile phones and on the web, is waiting until countries get it right to reduce HIV risk enough? Engaging the private companies that own these platforms, tools and images is crucial to education on risks associated with sex.

The HIVe and sexuality

At this intersection of sex, culture and digital technologies, we must now change our HIV and human rights advocacy perspective to encapsulate and integrate four basic concepts at the minimum: sex and gender, sexuality, sex education, and digital culture. The processes and modes of building The HIVe and IDAHO provide opportunities to interlink several initiatives and create a rich ecology that challenges and improves on existing sex education advocacy among the next generation of community leaders.

As The HIVe moves forward and gains legitimacy, it needs to consider how to adapt and engage its diverse audiences so that efforts to widen access are afforded every possible opportunity. Activists, practitioners and academics alike must be fully engaged across sociocultural contexts to disrupt norms, feel free and at ease in building The HIVe for sharing, learning, teaching, bridging, bonding, celebrating and talking about sex.

Biographical Statements

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