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MAKING ALL
VOICES COUNT

RESEARCH REPORT SUMMARY

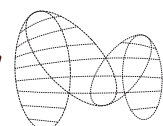
A GRAND CHALLENGE
FOR DEVELOPMENT



**Privacy, anonymity, visibility:
dilemmas in tech use by
marginalised communities**
Summary, findings and reflections

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TACTICAL
TECHNOLOGY
COLLECTIVE



A new language of openness, transparency and visibility

This summary presents findings and reflections from two studies of how marginalised communities use technologies commonly applied in tech for transparency and accountability (T4T&A) work, and the limits of this use. The research is intended to inform communities of practice around T4T&A initiatives: technologists, managers, donors, community-based activists and researchers.

Researchers interviewed respondents in two marginalised communities – lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) people in Nairobi, Kenya, and economically marginalised housing and urban development rights activists in Johannesburg, South Africa.

T4T&A initiatives intend to make the public functioning of government visible, and states accountable to citizens for their actions. The study was based on the assumption that privacy and anonymity are important tactics for activists using technology, especially in transparency and accountability work that challenges institutions and authorities. For a variety of reasons, privacy is very difficult to maintain on popular, commonly available, proprietary platforms – many of which are deployed in T4T&A activities. Does this limit activists' work with technology and if so, how? What are the other risks and barriers marginalised people face using technology?

Questions based on these concerns were clarified through formative interviews with 26 respondents, and fieldwork interviews with 37 respondents. The most significant reflections from the research are that:

- marginalised users have different needs for privacy and security online and offline, and T4T&A activities need to integrate these concerns
- collaborations across and within technology and activist movements and communities must recognise their different histories of engagement with politics, technology and the state
- without the full enjoyment of human rights, marginalised people's participation in T4T&A activities is bound to be limited.

The documentation of marginalised people's inability to control negative exposure online suggests that the language of openness, transparency and visibility needs to be rephrased with, and for, marginalised communities that face a range of threats from being online. Something that is 'open' may, on occasion, need to be closed, and visibility may need to be restricted for those who are perceived to be threatening, or merely outsiders.

FRONT COVER IMAGE:

A drone-mapping image of Kya Sands informal settlement (right) and Bloubostrand suburb, Gauteng, illustrating the spatial dynamics of housing inequality in Johannesburg, South Africa.

JOHNNY MILLER / MILLEFOTO, WWW.UNEQUALSCENES.COM

Voices from the LGBTQ community, Kenya

Kenya is among the ten countries in the world least accepting of homosexuality (Pew Research Center 2013).¹ LGBTQ people in Nairobi face physical violence, ostracism, homophobia, social exclusion and discrimination. Their fear of blackmail, extortion and entrapment is justifiably high. Most hide at least some aspects of their lives, and the threat of being exposed is dangerous and very real.

While all Kenyan LGBTQ people face discrimination, there are different levels of marginalisation within the community, stratified by ethnicity, class and gender. This is perhaps most relevant for those who do not enjoy the safety provided by social status and wealth. But it is also particularly relevant for lesbian, bisexual and queer women, many of whom spoke of the relative invisibility they face as a result of the Kenyan LGBTQ space being dominated by gay men.

Although a majority of Kenyans have mobile phones, their access to digital technology and social media is mediated by money and literacy. Airtime is relatively cheap, but phones, laptops and tablets are not. Digital literacy is also an issue; many do not have the knowledge to make informed decisions about how to use technology effectively, nor to feel sure of what is safe and what is not.

The risks and barriers LGBTQ people in Nairobi face online are connected to the barriers and risks they experience offline. They experience the digital both as personal individuals and as political activists. There is a desire for both personal anonymity to the hostile outside world, and individual visibility within the LGBTQ community; at the same time, there is a desire for digital visibility as a community, and a need for community privacy for offline events and activities.



ROBIN HAMMOND / PANOS PICTURES

'B', a 32-year-old gay man from Kenya, who fled to South Africa in fear of his life.

The most common way of managing these tensions in the use of social media at an individual level is maintaining two Facebook accounts. Most respondents have a 'straight' account using their real name, where they connect with their family, straight friends and church community; and a queer account under an adopted name where they connect with others in the LGBTQ community. This anonymity is difficult to maintain; it demands attention and a constant awareness of the leakage of digital traces.

¹ *The Global Divide on Homosexuality*, Washington DC: Pew Resesarch Center, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/06/04/the-global-divide-on-homosexuality> (accessed 3 June 2016)

“Every day we pose a question [online] – whether it’s on substance abuse, violence, trauma from assault – whatever queer women ... are going through. We have created visibility that way.”

Despite these difficulties, social media is the most accessible online space for the LGBTQ community, where many are able to connect – regardless of income – and where they find space for knowledge sharing and support. One respondent reported that “every day we pose a question [online] – whether it’s on substance abuse, violence, trauma from assault – whatever queer women ... are going through. We have created visibility that way.”

Interpersonal violence is one of the main threats LGBTQ people face on a day-to-day basis. Respondents discussed two T4T&A applications intended to tackle violence in different ways. Utunzi is a crowdmap platform intended to report violence, and *Speak Out*² is a Facebook page and Twitter feed to monitor human rights abuses against sexual and gender minorities.

Utunzi was built by two Nairobi-based developers. Although several hundred individuals submitted reports to the platform during its initial launch, this early interest dwindled. As a web-based platform, Utunzi required individuals to use a computer, introducing an entry-level barrier. There was limited understanding within the LGBTQ community about how the platform worked and no mechanisms through which to engage the community. Many potential users did not feel safe in sharing personal details, not necessarily trusting that the data they were reporting would be used for the purposes stated on the website, or be communicated securely. Since the lukewarm response to its launch, Utunzi has been successfully repurposed, and is now a much more specialised site for sending reports of violence to

a network of vetted first responders in a targeted geographical area where violent attacks are rife.

Speak Out – started by a well-known individual in the LGBTQ community, with technical and development support from an international non-governmental organisation (NGO) – enjoys a far higher level of trust than Utunzi. Against a background of widespread blackmail, suffered in particular by gay men, the approach of *Speak Out* is simple: it serves to expose extortionists. It invites people to submit the names and addresses, handles and online aliases of extortionists which, after careful verification, are then published on *Speak Out*’s pages as a warning system. *Speak Out* also verifies and documents cases of violence. It is well respected within the community, serving as a symbol of resistance that is based on familiar, known platforms, and actively provides a service that allows people to help secure their own online and offline spaces.

Utunzi and *Speak Out* offer valuable insights into the development and uptake of T4T&A projects in this community. Both were imagined as a response to the struggle to manage visibility and anonymity. In the case of Utunzi, a crowdmap was used to make violence visible, and this visibility was assumed to be key in claiming rights and acceptance in Kenyan society. *Speak Out* was designed to work in the opposite way, to expose the perpetrators of violence through the productive use of the online exchanges and materials that are used to harass a vulnerable community. The importance of investment in user research to establish and test the assumptions of an initiative, and the context of uptake, cannot be overemphasised.

² *Speak Out* is not the real name of the platform. Information requests about the service can be directed to Maya Ganesh at Tactical Tech (maya@tacticaltech.org)

Voices of housing activists, South Africa

In the landscape of South African activism and engagement with housing and urban development issues, a rich historical tapestry emerges. The class, race and gender identities of individual activists determine what their engagement with technology and activism is, what sorts of approaches they will adopt, and their attitudes to anonymity and visibility.

As one black woman activist – whose house was burnt down for blogging about campaigns against corporations, and who has been threatened for writing about whistle-blowers – observed, “complete transparency is a nice idea for white men in the suburbs... Whiteness protects people in South Africa and it is a white lens through which this idea of transparency is seen. It is also a gendered lens... I need to speak anonymously sometimes.”



Residents of Thembelihle informal Settlement, South Africa, protest against inadequate services in 2011.

Cost inhibits the use of T4T&A tools in South Africa; “people would rather have airtime to contact you in an emergency than use it to report corruption.”

Interviews with activists in low-income housing rights and urban development organisations identified three key factors that inhibit tech use:

- **Cost.** Airtime tariffs are particularly high in South Africa. Although some respondents from NGOs viewed mobile phone use as “ubiquitous,” local community activists pointed out that many community members, especially women, have very limited access to phones. When asked about using phones for T4T&A applications, one respondent pointed out, “people would rather have airtime to contact you in an emergency than use it to report corruption”. The cost of computers puts them even further out of reach than phones, and although they are sometimes accessed for specific purposes, this often requires a trip to an NGO office or Internet cafe in the city centre.
- **Language.** Respondents from low-income communities said that social media and T4T&A platforms tend to be predominantly in English, as well as perhaps Afrikaans and Zulu. But in a nation with 11 national languages, and where socio-economic divisions have implications for education and literacy, this excludes large communities.
- **Digital literacy.** Low digital literacy acts both as a barrier to using digital tools as effectively as possible, and to assessing the risks and possibilities of a particular tool.

Despite these barriers, the activists interviewed often use phones to organise, allowing them to save time and money by conducting meetings from afar. Voice calls, short message service (SMS) and WhatsApp are the most used tools for activism and organising, as well as listening to and participating in local radio shows. WhatsApp is favoured by activists as it uses minimal data, and group chat features make it appealing for social organising. It is also ‘reshaped’ for new uses, such as recording the minutes of group meetings and creating virtual newsrooms.

Police monitoring, crowd control, and the use of force against black working-class residents of Johannesburg’s informal settlements continue to reduce activists’ capacities to participate securely in protest actions, and these offline risks are mirrored online. Fears of surveillance tend to be stronger among the older generation; younger respondents tended to view digital risks more in terms of privacy than security. Nonetheless, some younger activists hold sensitive meetings and conversations in offline spaces. Activists’ fears of online surveillance by the security forces are matched by concerns about ‘lateral surveillance’ and the risk of intimate partners, family members or informants infiltrating activist groups.

Lack of trust was a common theme in interviews. One aspect of this related to using online platforms for transparency and accountability. People do not necessarily trust that the information they submit to a platform will be handled in a way that is secure, transparent and free from corruption – or that it will actually have any visible impact. Respondents also articulated a basic absence of trust in the government to respond to them, or that they will ever receive the basic services they deserve.

This lack of trust links to a broader question of how T4T&A initiatives can create change. As one respondent pointed out, even when communities do have access to information with which to hold the government to account, it is difficult for them to engage with or negotiate with government actors: “Even if people do get access to technology and the information they need, they don’t really know how to engage with power.”

This points to the need for a theory of change to accompany the application of T4T&A tools in community work, one which focuses on assumptions about engagement between community members and government actors, and the need to overcome this lack of trust. It also highlights the importance of recognising the dynamics of different communities and movements.

Reflections: a focus on selective transparency

Social movements use technologies in organising and mobilising, and these can be a powerful way to motivate and reach out to marginal communities. But movements are shaped by their histories, and are complex, dynamic systems in flux. Thus, the introduction of technology is never straightforward, predictable or easy. These two cases show that technology platforms do create negative exposure, and that there is therefore a legitimate need for anonymity and privacy. The research confirms the nature and dynamics of this tension for these communities and its impact on their use of digital technologies. It also suggests that:

- communities appropriate and reshape technology to suit their own ends, such as the two-account tactic employed by LGBTQ Kenyans, or the use of WhatsApp by South African housing activists to record meeting notes and mobilise
- marginalisation within already-marginalised communities is reinforced and replicated online; this can perpetuate inequality and invisibility, and create new centres of power
- low levels of trust between communities of activists and institutional authorities affect the kinds of dialogue intended to be inspired by T4T&A
- a significant distance exists between T4T&A communities and marginalised activist communities; this must be bridged if T4T&A applications are to be successfully integrated into social justice work.

The case of the crowdmap, Utunzi, underscores the value of user research and understanding what kind of visibility a community needs and wants. Community participation in the technology development process is an obvious solution, but more valuable perhaps is a deeper appreciation of different and diverse actors within a community, and their roles.

The South African case indicates that women are in greater need of controlling their visibility, and in some cases feel secure in speaking out under the cover of anonymity. This raises the question of how technology applications can respond to the contextual differences between different groups of users, or within a group of users.

LGBTQ activists in Kenya and low-income black and mixed-race housing activists in South Africa are marginalised and criminalised. The facts of their marginalisation and lack of rights cannot be ignored, and perhaps have to be the primary subject of T4T&A activities and engagement.

This is not to suggest that T4T&A activities cannot happen until poverty or marginalisation are eradicated. Rather, it is to suggest that a government that may be transparent about aid flows or the repair of public toilets, yet does not address violence against its queer citizens, or uses violence to squash dissent by marginalised citizens who simply need basic services, is an example of institutionalised selective transparency that allows for the perpetuation of marginalisation. It is perhaps this selective transparency that should be the focus of T4T&A activities.

About Making All Voices Count

Making All Voices Count is a programme working towards a world in which open, effective and participatory governance is the norm and not the exception. This Grand Challenge focuses global attention on creative and cutting-edge solutions to transform the relationship between citizens and their governments. The field of technology for Open Government is relatively young and the consortium partners, Hivos, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and Ushahidi, are a part of this rapidly developing domain. These institutions have extensive and complementary skills and experience in the field of citizen engagement, government accountability, private sector entrepreneurs, (technical) innovation and research.

Making All Voices Count is supported by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and the Omidyar Network, and is implemented by a consortium consisting of Hivos, IDS and Ushahidi. The programme is inspired by and supports the goals of the Open Government Partnership.

Research, Evidence and Learning component

The programme's research, evidence and learning contributes to improving performance and practice, and builds an evidence base in the field of citizen voice, government responsiveness, transparency and accountability (T&A) and technology for T&A (Tech4T&A). This component is managed by IDS, a leading global organisation for research, teaching and communication with over 30 years' experience of developing knowledge on governance and citizen participation.

About Tactical Tech

Tactical Tech is a non-profit organisation, working since 2003 to advance the use of information and digital technologies by advocates and activists worldwide. Based in Berlin, it works with an international network of partners and collaborators to help rights, accountability and transparency advocates and the communities they work with to use information and digital technologies effectively in their work, empowering them to effect progressive social, environmental and political change. Its work – developed out of a decade of direct capacity building worldwide – seeks to practically develop the specialised information and technology skills and strategies of those working to defend and advance fundamental freedoms and to advance critical thinking, methodology and best practice within the sector.

The full report of this research is: Ganesh, M.I., Deutch, J. and Schulte, J. (2016) *Privacy, anonymity, visibility: dilemmas in tech use by marginalised communities*, Brighton: IDS. It is available on the Making All Voices Count website (www.makingallvoicescount.org/publications) and at IDS Open Docs (opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs).

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