

Rethinking publics and participation in a digital era: A case study of *HOLAA!* and African queer women's digital interactions

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abstract

Feminist thinking and organising is being altered through digital spaces, as these spaces increasingly allow for greater participation of women and marginalised identities in the public sphere. The digital environment makes it possible for voices that may not have been present in the public sphere prior to the existence of social networking sites to be heard and viewed publicly (Goby, 2003). It also allows for individuals to be exposed to viewpoints that are not their own and to be held accountable for the values they espouse, as well as to have these challenged publicly. This ultimately allows for a richer and more complex public sphere, and for opportunities to construct counter-publics and counter-discourses (McLean, 2013, 2014; Nip, 2004). McLean and Mugo (2015) hold that the richness and complexity of this public sphere can be considered to be more reflective of lived realities and nuanced relationships of power than earlier conceptions of the public sphere. This article will speak specifically to the experiences of the queer African woman, and here 'participation' is inclusive of the sharing of lived experiences, decision making, organising and advocacy, public dialogue, and policy changes.

Writing as a previous editor and curator of the Pan-African queer online space *HOLAA!*, and taking this space as a point of departure, the possibilities presented by digital spaces for feminist thinking and organising are explored. The possibility for adding to global narratives is considered, and how digital communities impact on and alter feminist participation, resulting in the formation of rich feminist publics and counter-publics is discussed.

keywords

Queer, African, feminism, publics, digital, Internet

HOLAA! is a hub that uses online and offline space to have conversations about a range of issues, from sex and pleasure to identity and the everyday experiences of queer African women. The space is also a digital archive as it seeks to collect the stories of African women in one place, be it through writing stories, doing an Instagram takeover, podcasts, supporting and storying Twitter chats or posting a photo-essay on the Facebook page or Tumblr. *HOLAA!* has a number of platforms, including a Twitter account, Sound cloud, Tumblr, Facebook

page, Instagram and the main website (www.holaafrica.org).

Theoretical framing

The theoretical foundation of this article holds that digital spaces make it possible for voices that may not have been present in the public sphere to now be heard and viewed publicly. In addition it takes the position that the Internet and its platforms allow for people to be exposed to viewpoints that are not their own and to be held accountable for the values they present, as well as to have these challenged publicly, allowing

Agenda 2018

ISSN 1013-0950 print/ISSN 2158-978X online

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2018.1445345>

UNISA
university of south africa
PRESS

 Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

pp. 1–6



for a richer public sphere and for opportunities to construct counter-publics and counter-discourses.

In 'The Digital Age: A feminist future for the queer African woman' McLean and Mugo (2015) put forward what they consider a feminist digital space for lesbian and queer African women. The authors argue that it is within such spaces that the rights of lesbian and queer women can be protected nationally and internationally as the conversations that fight erasure, exclusion and the denial of rights can occur here, be shaped in a contained and safe space, and then extended beyond the digital and into society. This organising allows for the strengthening of a position or movement before entering into mainstream discourse, where it will inevitably be challenged by heterosexist and homophobic positions.

They suggest that a feminist future would be where queer African women "can speak of their experiences and their desires without fear of persecution or violence"; "are protected by the law and the criminal justice system"; "are able to seek out health care without fear of discrimination"; "have access to resources and knowledge that will improve their quality of life"; "can govern their bodies and have autonomy over their sexuality"; and "can contribute to public life and social progress without making invisible their sexuality" (McLean and Mugo, 2015:100). Digital communities afford queer African women the space to express their lived experiences, while also creating the possibilities for public and political expression. This contributes to what could be considered a feminist future for the queer African woman, and it is within this notion of a feminist future that digital platforms make it possible to see that the rights of queer women can be protected and extended (McLean and Mugo, 2015:97).

This is an extension of the argument made by the author in 'Considering the Internet as enabling queer publics/counter publics', where the Internet is presented as providing an enabling environment for discussions and formations of publics and counter-publics (McLean, 2014). The digital environment is argued to be a space for political expression while also providing a safe space. McLean (2014) cites Hillier and Harrison's (2007) work on the Internet as creating a refuge for lesbians and lesbian groups

who are unable to meet in offline spaces due to fear of stigma, violence, and persecution – and that digital spaces make it possible for lesbians, or in the case of *HOLAA!* queer women, to form connections or a sense of community online. This is a key consequence of the Internet altering how individuals are able to connect and participate in community building, and this has a significant and positive impact on the formation of identity which, without the digital community, may have formed in a negative and repressed manner (Hillier and Harrison, 2007).

Nip (2004:424) argues that the oppression and marginalisation of LGBTIAQ individuals "accentuates their need for sharing and identity building", and this contributes to the formation of online communities. This formation of online communities to share lived experiences, build identity and, ultimately, develop a sense of belonging results in the formation of a public, and when in contestation with the status quo results in the formation of a counter-public. Dahlberg (2007) proposes that the Internet provides the platform for the creation of a space for marginalised groups in order to establish a counter to the status quo, which makes way for active engagement and deliberation. Warner (2005:56) argues that publics can be "defined by their tension with larger publics". This public, in conflict with the larger project, is then understood to be in breach of the "rules obtained in the world at large, being structured by alternative dispositions or protocols" – in effect a counter-public (Warner, 2005:56). Counter-publics, by definition, are shaped through their divergence from "the norms and contexts of their cultural environment" (Warner, 2005: 63).

Fraser (2007:497) argues that these counter-publics are "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses" in order to form and assert their own interpretation of their identities and interests. One essential purpose of counter-publics is to introduce new or alternative discursive positions into public spaces, where they are able to be publicly opposed or challenged (McLean, 2014; Fraser, 2007). In introducing alternative discursive positions and challenging the narratives of queer African women's sexuality, *HOLAA!* can be considered to be digital counter-public.

In being a queer digital space much of *HOLAA!*'s work and positioning is informed and guided by the Feminist Principles of the Internet developed by the Association for Progressive Communications. These principles were formulated at the Global Gender, Sexuality and the Internet meeting in Malaysia in 2014, produced by 50 participants from the spheres of gender and women's rights, LGBTIAQ, Internet and technology rights, and human rights organisations, movements and collectives. In the preamble the Association for Progressive Communications (2014) states that a feminist Internet is one which

works towards empowering more women and queer persons – in all our diversities – to fully enjoy our rights, engage in pleasure and play, and dismantle patriarchy. This integrates our different realities, contexts and specificities – including age, disabilities, sexualities, gender identities and expressions, socioeconomic locations, political and religious beliefs, ethnic origins, and racial markers.

The document consists of 17 guiding principles which speak to a number of matters, including access, movements and public participation, economy, expression, and agency. These principles are an excellent starting position or guide for anyone who wishes to establish a digital space in such a way as to encourage feminist participation. Of particular interest to *HOLAA!* are the principles of access, movements and public participation. The access principles speak to women and queer persons having access to the Internet, information, and the use of technology in order to inform their "sexual and reproductive health and rights, pleasure, safe abortion, access to justice, and LGBTIQ issues" (Association for Progressive Communications, 2014). The movements and public participation principles speak to the use of the Internet as a space of resistance, especially considering that "the internet is a space where social norms are negotiated, performed and imposed, often in an extension of other spaces shaped by patriarchy and heteronormativity" (Association for Progressive Communications, 2014). *HOLAA!* holds that in adopting the Feminist Principles of the Internet it is possible to craft and sustain a feminist digital space which

seeks to support, encourage and sustain feminist queer participation and organising.

Discussion: *HOLAA!*

Marginalised communities such as LGBTI and queer communities find the Internet to be a safer space for communication. This is particularly critical within the African context, where there are not many offline spaces to gather due to the laws of the country or social perceptions of LGBTIAQ people. *HOLAA!* has come to be one such safe digital space, and through encouraging individuals to 'gather', share their stories and participate in conversations can be considered to be a counter-public space, which provides space for the formation of multiple counter-publics. Five categories create a hub to guide online content: 'Gender and Identity', 'Culture and Religion (Queerly Cultural, queerly spiritual)', 'Sex and Relationships', 'Afro Queer Politics' and 'Afro Queer Wisdom'.

'Gender and Identity' sees the discussion of alternative sexualities and gender identities taking place, and serves to bring forward the issues relating to sexuality and gender identity in order to challenge the manner in which discussions of heteronormative expressions of sexuality and gender dominate. 'Culture and Religion (Queerly Cultural, queerly spiritual)' provides the space for the exploration of those who hold cultural and religious beliefs to reconcile and negotiate these beliefs with their sexuality, sexual practices, gender and identity, and to further the conversation of how these identities are often in conflict with each other. The (ever popular) 'Sex and Relationships' category is a space for discussions on safe sex between women, orgasms, pleasure, polyamory, and same-sex domestic violence, to name a few. This is particularly significant for a continent where issues of sex, sexuality and relationships are rarely discussed within the heterosexual realm, and much less so in reference to non-heteronormative relationships. 'Afro Queer Politics' addresses the politics of sexuality on the continent, an increasingly contentious issue. Content in this category ranges from discussing the politics of hosting a pride event within a community, to tackling matters within the legislative realm (for example, Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Bill), and in doing so provides an



HOLAA!

alternative lens to the dominant heteronormative narrative. Lastly, 'Afro Queer Wisdom' seeks to document and begin new conversations on matters which may be silenced within the public sphere: the intention here is to generate information from within *HOLAA!* through calls for content, which ensures that content is generated by those who visit the site.

Through the posting of various articles the site covers an array of topics, with all material being produced by those within the community. This is a key aspect of the way in which the *HOLAA!* platform functions: those who the site seeks to represent and create space for, are those participating in the production of the content, and the space by proxy. From issues pertaining to sexual health to socio-economic topics, matters that occupy the margins of general society are debated and interrogated by those who occupy the margins. Topics are covered in such a way as to allow for others within these spaces to identify, engage with, and thus contribute to discussions on various matters. The act of documenting alternative experiences from around the continent and creating a counter-public through doing this creates a sense of empowerment and embodiment, not only for those producing the content but also for those consuming it. This creation can be utilised as a basis on which one can seemingly 'carve out an existence' in the greater conversation rather than being confined to the fringes.

HOLAA! is a digital platform that has whittled a space for a greater inclusion of voices in order to recreate and shape the narrative of queer lived experiences, and in doing so expands the margins in order to compete for space with the centre.

Reshaping the narrative

The Internet can create spaces for queer women to express themselves and to seek

out like identities, which may enable queer women to share stories of their lived experiences. This enables a building of a shared narrative, communities, and the possibility of organising collectively. This further allows for knowledge sharing and knowledge production from within the community – not without – in a way that sees knowledge being created and not imposed upon queer identities. This is particularly significant when one considers that in society queer identities are rendered invisible and policed into silence through persecution.

The Internet allows for the archiving of content, and what becomes a historical telling and collection of narratives which may be passed on from one generation of queer women to the next, so that future generations of queer women may not feel that they are the only ones carving out an identity. Queer women, especially within Africa, may find that their stories are underrepresented, and when they are spoken of it is through one major narrative – that of homophobia and specifically corrective rape. Digital spaces such as *HOLAA!* make it possible to shift towards more positive and holistic representations and narratives of the queer lived experience. This aids in reshaping how queer African women are viewed, read and understood by their peers, their communities, their governments and the international community. This, in essence, forms part of a larger project to counter the narratives that come out of the continent, that are primarily written by those removed from the experiences of the continent.

Limitations: Access to the Internet and online harassment

It is pertinent that mention is made here of the limitations of the Internet and the queer African woman's ability to participate online. The opportunity to participate in digital spaces is limited to those with access to the Internet. In Africa Internet communities are "restricted to the digital 'haves' (or at least those with digital social capital) rather than the 'have nots'" (Murthy, 2008:845), and offline class and social divides continue to exist online. Further, primary digital access is mobile – so consideration ought to be given to the impact that the mobile digital environment has on feminist thinking, organising and publics.

To help address this limitation *HOLAA!*'s website has a responsive design, which means it is suited to being viewed on multiple devices and thus caters to those users and members of the *HOLAA!* community who may be accessing the site from mobile devices. In addition, the team feeds their content to Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, which are mobile-based apps, with Facebook in particular being mobi (mobile Internet browser) friendly. The social platforms allow for the collective to utilise the online space more effectively. Although the site is the primary focus, there is an understanding that these spaces are as important to people and are utilised by far more, and are thus kept extremely active in order to continue and mirror the conversations had on the site. The Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts are kept very active so that the core notions within the *HOLAA!* ethos are continuously proliferated in a number of mediums and on a number of platforms.

Upon realising that there were in fact 'pockets of community' within the *HOLAA!* camp, the team made a point to engage with various audiences in their spaces; for example, understanding that not everyone engaged with Twitter, and that Tumblr as a platform is extremely data heavy, while Facebook is a platform that can be accessed from most phones and does not need expensive or top of the range devices for access.

HOLAA! has also begun organising offline events, and the online presence thus comes to act as a supplementation and strengthening of this participation until the individuals or various collectives in the community are able to meet again. The work done within the offline space is meant to supplement the work done online and to mirror it. This work is done in close proximity with key stakeholders offline, such as organisations and individuals in the countries in which they have an online audience. An example of this is the work done in terms of body positivity and autonomy online, through Twitter chats and the like, which was mirrored offline with a mural project conducted in Johannesburg along with the One in Nine Campaign, a local women's rights organisation, and the Fearless Collective, an artistic group based in India. The project consisted of a workshop with participants and culminated in a three-storey high mural in the middle of

Johannesburg declaring that 'My kanga is not an invitation'. This declaration was made in light of the 10-year anniversary of the Jacob Zuma rape trial.

A further example of aligning the online and the offline is the hosting of the '#Please-Her: Safe sex and pleasure series', which took the #SexySafety conversations about queer women and safe sex out of the Twitter-sphere and into offline spaces. The dialogues were held in South Africa and Namibia, with the final product being a safe sex and pleasure manual available for free download as well as physical copies to be handed out to organisations and individuals that *HOLAA!* engaged with. These are just some of the examples of the offline work *HOLAA!* has done to support online initiatives. Some of the other work done by the organisation includes supporting offline initiatives of other organisations and collectives through providing facilitation and workshop services.

Another matter needs to be noted: online violence. While the Internet allows for a safe space to meet, discuss and organise, it also makes those in the digital spaces vulnerable to abuse from outside the space. Members of digital spaces are at risk of hate speech, being outed and harassed online, and this violence may follow them into offline spaces. For the purposes of protection many LGBTIAQ individuals and others at risk may choose to use an alias to keep their identity, bodies and communities safe.

Conclusion

The digital environment and what it offers by way of communication and organising adds a depth to counter-publics, social causes and social movements. The digital environment not only allows for the meeting and mobilising of individuals, but for conversations to be taken into different spaces – either other digital spaces or offline. This depth and layering of multiple voices contributes to the feminist movement through connecting individuals online, and thus supplementing and supporting organisation and participation digitally.

While the Internet provides the facility for necessary and alternative feminist and queer digital spaces, it also provides communities and governments with the tools to monitor counter-publics. As the Internet develops and governments become aware of online activity and the role it plays in governance, we may

find that digital spaces increasingly become policed and politicised. Queer women and other marginalised identities need to take into consideration their digital security and protection of personal information, particularly in light of various anti-homosexuality laws within various African countries.

One thing that has proven exciting about the growth of *HOLAA!* is witnessing the development of the community and networks that the platform remains a part of. For example, there has been significant growth within the sex-positive community. The platform has encountered blogs such as dizzlesbay.blogspot and *Adventures from the Bedrooms of African Women*, or @obaa_boni, @amgodiva, @Mbongomuffin and @aghanaiangirl on Twitter, and Instagram accounts such as @her_mentality and podcasts such as *The Spread Podcast*. All of these are from the African continent and form part of the sex-positive and sexuality experience of queer African women within their regions. This makes it possible to extend the conversation beyond South Africa, and thus integrates numerous voices and lived experiences in the issues that *HOLAA!* discusses and hosts.

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