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From scene to screen: the challenges and opportunities of commercial digital platforms for HIV community outreach

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From Scene to Screen: The challenges and opportunities of commercial digital platforms for HIV community outreach

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Abstract

This article draws upon data from *Reaching Out Online*, a collaborative research project that explored the need for, and development of, a digital health outreach service for gay, bisexual men and men who have sex with men (MSM) in London and Brighton, United Kingdom. It identifies the challenges that commercial hook-up apps and other digitally based dating and sex services pose for conventional forms of gay men's health promotion. It then moves to explore the opportunities that these same services offer for health promotion teams. Chiefly, the discussion highlights the potential that commercial platforms offer to peer educators in terms of reaching local cohorts of men, together with the constraints placed upon this form of outreach as a result of the commercial imperatives that underpin these digital services.

Keywords

community outreach, e-health, MSM, gay men, HIV

Introduction

It would be an overstatement to say that hook-up apps have been solely responsible for recent shifts in gay male sexual cultures. The increasing use of drugs during group sex parties (aka “chemsex”), for example, has as much to do with this culture's long relationship with narcotics, and the ease of access to such drugs, as it does with the popularity of hook-up apps. Likewise, the popularity of contemporary social networking apps designed for gay and bisexual men should not obscure the much longer history of media use by this community. The back pages of gay magazines from the 1970s and 1980s, for instance, reveal a thriving trade in contact advertisements that included the solicitation of casual sexual partners and more long-term relationships (see Thorne & Coupland, 1998 and Hatala & Prehodka, 1996 for discussion).

At the same time, smartphone applications and mobile-optimized versions of more established dating and sex websites have had an impact on the sexual cultures of men who have sex with men (MSM).¹ This enfolding of new digital platforms becomes intelligible when we recognize that a history of invisibility, prejudice, violence, and shame has ensured such cultures remain “flexible, transient and in some sense always virtual” (Mowlabocus, 2010, p. 11). Such flexibility has hitherto been required in order for

sexually dissident folk to negotiate contexts of “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich, 1981). Given such contexts, it is not difficult to see how and why gay, bisexual, and MSM men were well positioned to incorporate digital technologies into their practices of sex sourcing relatively early on in the history of domestic Internet access.

Numerous scholars (Campbell, 2004; Davis, Hart, Bolding, Sherrc, & Elford, 2006; Dean, 2009; McGlotten, 2013; McLelland, 2000; Mowlabocus, 2010; Race, 2010) have identified the initial and ongoing impact of digital and social media on the lives of gay, bisexual, and MSM men. Alongside research that celebrates the liberating potential of these platforms, hook-up apps and websites have also been the target of regular criticism and condemnation. Dean (2009) argues that such platforms destroy public sexual cultures, and that practices of digital searching mean we filter

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out difference and diversity, leading to the loss of a civic or public sexual culture. Arguing along the same lines, Rosser, West, and Weinmeyer (2008) have suggested that new forms of sexual/social media have been detrimental to the sense of a physically located gay community.

Alongside this mourning for “the good old days” of public sexual cultures, there is an ongoing concern that hook-up apps play a role in the transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). It would seem that barely a month goes by without a journalist suggesting that apps such as *Grindr* or *Tinder* are facilitating fast and easy sex, and that this is leading to a spike in transmission rates. These stories commonly reference studies such as Berry et al. (2008) and Rosser et al. (2009) who identify a link between aspects of digital cruising (such as the speed, efficiency, and access to sexual partner) and poor health outcomes.

While not disputing the research that underpins such scholarship, it is often the case that such findings are produced—and received—in a cultural vacuum that filters out the panoply of other factors that must be taken into account before pinning the blame on a sole cause.² At the same time, it is all too easy to dismiss such concerns as moralistic and conservative. The homonormative (Duggan, 2002) framing that pervades such journalism often draws upon reservoirs of stereotypical representation that aligns gay male sexuality with disease and death.

Yet, the fact remains that hook-up apps and mobile sites are a key route for sourcing new sexual partners today. This fact alone means that those charged with supporting the health and wellbeing of MSM have to respond to this changing landscape. If, as will be discussed below, HIV and STI prevention work is based on a model of informing publics in the spaces where they interact, then hook-up apps and websites must surely be targeted as a site for disseminating information and offering support—*whether diseases are being transmitted or not*. Exactly what form that support and dissemination work takes is a key question; how should sexual health agencies respond to digital cultures of sexuality? What opportunities lie within these spaces? And what are the obstacles that such responses face?

In this article, we report on part of the *Reaching Out Online* (ROO) study,³ which explored how and why hook-up apps and websites can become useful spaces for peer-led sexual health promotion. One of the strengths of this project was that it did not seek to develop new digital spaces for outreach (such as a bespoke website or app) but instead harnessed existing digital and social media services in order to work more effectively within a community of existing digital users. We begin our discussion by briefly mapping the terrain of community outreach work, identifying the role that such work has played in reducing the incidence of HIV and STI transmission in the United Kingdom. We then outline the development of an innovative outreach scheme designed for, and implemented across, a range of pre-existing commercial hook-up sites and applications. Drawing on ethnographic

research and focus group interviews conducted with digital outreach workers, we document the potential that such a service has for supporting MSM in relation to their sexual health before considering what the challenges are to fully realizing that potential.

Throughout this article, our geographical point of reference is London and the South East, in the United Kingdom. Just as hook-up cultures differ across national contexts, so the epidemiological narratives of STIs shift according to geographical boundaries (see Gould [1993] for discussion). It is for this reason that we draw attention to the specificity of this study. However, we believe that our broad findings remain relevant across geographical borders. Finally, and in response to some of the moralizing journalism identified above, this article does not position hook-up apps and sex sites as harbingers of disease. Instead, and in the tradition of the very best practices of community health, the authors of this article recognize that as the sex sourcing practices of MSM change and evolve, so the health services that they may (or may not) rely on also need to develop in order that they continue to provide relevant and contextually appropriate services.

What Exactly Is Community Outreach?

The Terrence Higgins Trust (THT) is the longest running charity dedicated to HIV promotion and transmission/harm reduction in the United Kingdom. Named after one of the first people to die of AIDS in the United Kingdom, THT was formed in 1982 and has, from the very beginning, placed a strong emphasis on community outreach work. Five years before the British government began directly investing in HIV awareness campaigns, THT sought to inform and educate the gay community about the virus. While the charity has since gone on to work with a broad range of populations, it has its roots in the gay community, and from the outset, THT has worked *within* that community, often in the same spaces that men meet to drink, socialize, hook-up, party, cruise, and have sex. This form of localized intervention continues to be a key weapon in the charity’s fight against HIV and HIV stigma, and contemporary outreach activities include “bar blitzes,”⁴ on-site screening at gay venues and events, rapid HIV tests in saunas, and “drop-in” services at local cruising grounds.

The UK National Health Service (NHS) defines community outreach as “activity undertaken in order to contact individuals or groups from particular target populations, who are not effectively contacted or reached by existing services or through traditional health channels” (NHS, 2011). These activities often seek to connect “hard to reach,” “disengaged,” or “invisible” populations with relevant health information and resources with the aim of increasing the health and wellbeing of specific, often marginalized, sub-populations. Consequently, this form of health promotion is deeply invested in understandings of the spaces that disenfranchised

communities occupy and typically involves taking health promotion out of clinical settings and into the social, intimate, and even private spaces of groups and individuals in order to meet them on their “turf” (see Barry & Britt, 2002; Mills & Curtis, 2008; Needle et al., 2005; Rhodes, 1994).

As numerous studies have shown (Altman et al., 2012; Chan, StooVé, & Reidpath, 2008; Faugier & Sargeant, 1997; Herek, 1999), a fear of discrimination and of being judged can serve to frame the clinic (and clinicians) as a site of stigma and alienation for marginalized communities, especially when their behaviors and lifestyles do not align with (hetero)normative understandings of sexuality or sexual practice (see Emler, 2006; McCann, 1999; Rose, 1994). By contrast, the types of “informal” education and knowledge transfer (as well as practical resources) that characterize a typical outreach activity have been central to the success of HIV prevention, particularly in the West (for further discussion, see Barry & Britt, 2002; Latkin, 1998; Mills & Curtis, 2008; Needle et al., 2005).

THT’s current outreach activities target the diverse groups and sub-groups of men that congregate under the umbrella term “MSM.” These include those across a range of self-identifying and “non-identifying” sexual identities; those in monogamous or open relationships; those who access “metropolitan” (Sinfield, 1999) gay culture including commercial bars and clubs; “party boys” who spend the weekend moving between clubs, parties, and saunas; non-defining or heterosexually identifying men who rely on “illegitimate” public sites (toilets, lay-bys, parks, and recreation grounds) to source sex; and those who are disenfranchised from commercial gay culture by virtue of their location, their (dis)ability, their financial situation, or their mental health.

In each instance, project workers plan, implement, and evaluate every outreach activity according to the identified needs of the target group. If THT is looking to support homeless gay men and provide them with testing facilities and condoms, then they know that such a service must be sited in a public space that these men feel comfortable accessing, and that this service will have more success if it also offers hot drinks and snacks. If THT is looking to engage with young men at a student club night, then the intervention strategy needs to be in keeping with the spirit of that club night—whether that involves health workers dressing up in fancy dress or giving out “freebies” such as lip salves or candy. In each instance, the key to a successful intervention is best summed up in the words of an experienced health worker who, during an interview for this project, stated that effective interventions were about “having the most impact on a particular group or community, with the least amount of disruption.”

NetReach: Community Health Promotion Goes Online

THT recognized that MSM were sourcing sex online relatively early, and by 2005, the charity was experimenting with

using digital platforms for outreach activities. This early work was characterized as “maverick” by one health worker, who suggested that it was a game of “cat and mouse.” By using profiles to advertise sexual health support services, health workers were seen to be contravening conditions of use set out by commercial dating sites. As the *NetReach* profiles got taken down, workers set up new profiles under slightly different usernames and continued working until, once again, the profiles were deleted. This antagonistic relationship was finally resolved in 2010 when THT began entering into formal relationships with digital providers to deliver sexual health advice via chatrooms and messaging services.

Around the same time, the *NetReach* initiative broadened its scope to reflect the continued growth of MSM digital hook-up culture. Today, the service operates across 11 different social media platforms that cater to gay, bisexual, and MSM men. These platforms include websites that offer desktop and mobile access (such as *Gaydar*, *BBRT*, *Recon*, and *Squirt*) as well as services (including *Grindr*, *Scruff*, and *Hornet*) that utilize popular mobile operating systems such as Apple’s iOS and Google’s Android OS. *NetReach* is run out of regional offices across the United Kingdom and is coordinated from the charity’s head office in London. This localized approach has been central to conventional forms of community outreach and, as such, *NetReach* seeks to replicate the success of older activities by adhering to the core philosophy of such services, outlined above.

NetReach is innovative in that it refuses to build new digital platforms, relying instead on the community outreach ethos of taking resources, support, and information into the (digital) spaces that MSM use to meet one another. It is also unique in that it isn’t simply an “online” version of, or a digital replacement for, “offline” activities. This kind of division (reflecting an outmoded vision of an online/offline binary) refuses to acknowledge mounting empirical evidence (De Souza e Silva, 2006; Latour, Camacho-Hübner, & November, 2010; Zook, Dodge, Aoyama, & Townsend, 2004) that highlights the co-existence of digital and physical spaces, which overlap and “stack up” on top of one another in myriad ways.

As with other forms of outreach, *NetReach* activities are tailored to the spaces in which the outreach worker is operating, and the needs of the target audience. Interventions might, for instance, take the form of individual discussions, conducted via a private messenger service on a commercial dating website. This is typical of the kinds of interactions that take place on *Gaydar*, for instance. In other contexts, such as *BBRT*, the health promotion work might involve message board discussions around “hot topics” (such as *post-exposure prophylaxis* [PEP]⁵ and *pre-exposure prophylaxis* [PrEP]⁶). In yet other contexts, the intervention might exploit the geo-locative capabilities of a service such as *Scruff* in order to alert nearby men when testing services are running in the local area. In all cases, *NetReach* activities seek to forge a dialogue between outreach workers and the men who

are on these hook-up services in order to foster honest and sex-positive conversations about sexual health, safer sex, harm reduction, and STI testing.

Thus far, *NetReach* has proven to be successful in developing such dialogue and in providing a space for men to talk frankly about their sexual practices and sexual anxieties. When interviewed for this research, outreach workers regularly identified the speed and depth of disclosure that occurs during *NetReach* interventions, stating that men typically disclose unsafe sexual behaviors far more easily, and far more quickly, when talking to workers via a web interface, than when compared to other forms of outreach:

[What do you think is the biggest advantage of online work?] Depth, honesty and the opportunity to really explore some of the issues . . . to get really into it, straight into it. (Ralph—Focus Group 1)

Similarly, *NetReach* was seen as a powerful resource for engaging difficult-to-reach populations, including those who might have hitherto felt marginalized by conventional health promotion discourse. One such example would be the work that THT has undertaken on websites such as *BBRT*, which are dedicated to bareback hook-ups⁷:

I genuinely think we are reaching some of those people. Some of the conversations I've had I'm like "right you exactly kind of, why we are doing this." People that have er are taking lots of drugs and erm or erm are caught up in a cycle of behaviour and don't want to keep doing it but find it hard to stop so want to talk to somebody about how to minimise risk and how to . . . I do think we are reaching some of that group. (Josh—Focus Group 2)

NetReach has allowed health workers to enter these digital spaces and undertake contextually relevant harm reduction work. This work involves providing health information that does not privilege condom use, while also signposting resources such as gay men's health clinics and drug therapies. Together, these two strategies help to reduce anxieties about being judged when visiting clinics and enfranchise men who might otherwise feel that their sexual practices are incompatible with the services and advice of a health organization. As another worker explained, one of the advantages of undertaking outreach work in spaces dedicated to a particular sexual practice is that the information given out—and the framing of that information—can be "gated":

it means we can say "we know you might see THT as being about promoting condoms and we do do that, but we respect the choices that you are making and we want to help you negotiate those choices in ways that take into account other options and opportunities for reducing the risk of STI transmission." (Mike—Focus Group 2)

Thus, while community outreach operates in similar ways in digital and physical spaces, the specificity of certain

digital environments offers opportunities to engage with niche populations on their own terms, and provide support that acknowledges the sexual practices and sexual choices of that community. *NetReach* also provides an opportunity to reach out to men who might be heavily involved in particular sexual cultures, but who might fall "under the radar" of traditional outreach. One such example was given during a focus group interview:

It's interesting, thinking about Grindr, there's big sex parties going on and stuff and those aren't the people that would see THT out on the scene or be out on the scene. Grindr is probably one of the few kinds of places where we are visible to these men cos they'll be using Grindr to find other guys to come round to their private parties. (Mike—Focus Group 2)

When journalists write about the "risks" of hook-up apps, it is often these kinds of parties that they allude to. Chillout parties, chemsex parties, and other forms of social-sexual gatherings have become a mainstay of urban gay male culture in the United Kingdom. Hook-up apps are central to the organization of these casual events and play a role in keeping them going. One research participant commented on the heavy use of apps and the constant messaging that occurred during these parties, suggesting that it was through apps that men learned about parties, were invited to different parties, and hooked up. This echoes Jensen's (2015) statement that "social media are distinguished by their potential for many-to-many communication, drawing on and feeding into networks of one-to-one and one-to-many communication" (p. 1). Although those who are part of the chemsex and/or chillout party scenes may well also access physical commercial gay scene spaces, outreach through apps enables real-time interventions to take place. Once more, the emphasis is not on curbing sexual activity or counseling men against making "wrong decisions." Instead, THT *NetReach* workers answer questions, offer advice and provide support when asked for it, and (as happens regularly) give information on how to access (for instance) PEP.

Navigating Code(s): (Commercial) Challenges to Online Outreach

As successful as *NetReach* is, digital outreach is not without its problems or limitations. Many outreach workers in the study cited difficulties in trying to "read" a client's situation without the help of visual aids or cues as the biggest drawback. Indeed, communicating digitally in the written form also facilitates the creation of records of conversations that could be kept by users and/or rapidly shared online. This created an added pressure for workers, who were regularly seen spending a great deal of time and energy preparing carefully worded responses to questions. Despite some of these drawbacks, *NetReach* is already proving to be a powerful resource for HIV community outreach work particularly to access

those meeting for sex through digital networks in “real-time.” Arguably, however, its potential has yet to be fully realized. Whether this potential can be reached depends on several factors. In the final section of this article, we sketch out three key challenges that face *NetReach*—and similar initiatives.

Commercial Gatekeepers

The first challenge is accessing the commercial environments in which *NetReach* operates. The sites that THT outreach workers visit are privately owned commercial platforms. Many of the most popular services that target gay men offer a “freemium” model (Pujol, 2010), whereby a basic level of usage is available without cost, with further content, features, and services locked behind a paywall. Commercial developers dominate gay men’s digital culture, and in many ways, this echoes the material situations in which outreach programs have historically operated. Market forces continue to influence decisions as to whether a bar, club, or commercial public sex environment (PSE)⁸ will engage with or support community outreach initiatives. However, while denial of access is not unheard of,⁹ many gay venues are keen to support lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) charities and causes. Although some have rightly questioned the political power of gay business owners (see Browne & Bakshi, 2013), it is nevertheless the case that gay health organizations such as THT have found support from the gay commercial world (for discussion, see Sender, 2003).

This support has extended to online service providers, with *Gaydar*, *Grindr*, *Manhunt*, *Scruff*, and *Gay.com* all having sponsored gay Pride events in one or more UK locations. However, while these companies have sought to develop a presence at gay events, some have been less forthcoming in supporting intervention work *within* the context of their services. This reticence can, in part, be attributed to the politics of the platforms on which many such services rely. As Gillespie (2015) writes, “[p]latforms matter. [They] don’t just guide, distort, and facilitate social activity—they also delete some of it. They don’t just link users together; they also suspend them” (p. 1). Gillespie’s claim is realized at the point of access into the marketplace for such applications:

18.2: Apps that contain user generated content that is frequently pornographic (e.g. “Chat Roulette” Apps) will be rejected. (Apple App Store Review Guidelines 13/11/14)

The conservative ideology that frames the development and availability of applications on the popular iOS platform (for example) is here rendered transparent. Conversely, it obscures the impact that such framing has on sexual health services. The fact that *NetReach* is dedicated to discussions of sexual matters, even if they are not intentionally pornographic, renders the outreach service “risky” to many applications running on Android or iOS. This is because software

developers who choose to “ignore” the sexual content of public messages put out by health workers (perhaps because they believe that the work that such a service might offer is a positive contribution to the application) face deletion from the app store, almost certainly spelling the end for that service.

NetReach currently manages to operate “under the radar” of these regulations but its situation remains precarious. Such negotiations highlight the methods by which a politics of (hetero)sexual normativity is being imposed upon one of the most popular methods of accessing digital data—the mobile application. While HTML5¹⁰ allows developers to bypass the regulations of the Internet giants, the popularity of applications among consumers and developers, their ease of use and of design, and the market dominance of Apple’s App store, Google’s Android store, and Window’s mobile app market mean that HTML5 will likely remain an “also ran” in the consumer software market.

Community Gatekeepers

In addition to the policing practices of software developers and the platforms on which they build their products, users of digital and social media also perform a policing role when community outreach workers visit “their” online space:

I find online people can be very defensive and say, where anyone can walk into a bar, [in] chatrooms we’re almost intruding . . . cos people sit in those chatrooms, like we sit in our offices—all day long—it’s their space and they do police it in quite an aggressive way sometimes. (Greg—Focus Group 1)

It is worth considering Light’s (2014) work on disconnection from social networking sites here. No matter how well *NetReach* activities are planned and executed, they are an unsolicited intrusion into the spaces of hook-up apps and mobile sites. Such intrusion can be greeted with hostility by some men, while others might seek to disconnect from the service altogether. Complicating the “augmented” or “hybrid” forms of space cited earlier in this article, it appears that there *are* instances of difference between digital and physical contexts of inhabitation and emplacement. It is one thing to enter into a commercial public space, hand out condoms, and chat to guys as they socialize with one another. It is quite another to step into an online forum and try and start a conversation about sexual health.

Compounding this challenge is the fact that workers reported struggling to “read” and comprehend online spaces as quickly or as easily when compared to the physical space of a bar or a sauna:

I suppose with the gay scene, even if you get a new venue there are kind of tropes or genres of gay bar . . . Whereas online you haven’t got all the body language stuff and all that kind of stuff . . . and the ability to look around and see that’s

where people are, this is a public space, this is a private space. (Mike—Focus Group 2)

Mike's quote sums up some of the challenges that the disembodied nature of using social and digital media platforms conjures up in relation to understanding and communicating information in an appropriate manner. At the same time, it also acknowledges the different relationships that users of digital and social media (especially hook-up apps and sex sourcing sites) have to that space, and their understanding of that space. For the outreach worker, the message boards on *BBRT* or the messaging facility on *Grindr* might feel quite public, not least because the outreach worker is engaged in work. However, for the user of these apps, such methods of communication might feel intensely private. When an outreach worker misreads (and thereby "mistreats") this "private" space, users can feel exposed, and monitored. This sense of exposure and surveillance is likely to lead to disconnection and disengagement with the digital service (as was identified during focus group interviews with users of these services).

Localized App Profiles

Platform design represents the final challenge that we identify in this research. While acknowledging the success of app-based interventions for reaching hard-to-reach populations, there was a sense among workers that commercial mobile platforms presented a challenge for *NetReach*. Along with the restrictive guidelines identified above, the design of such platforms challenges effective outreach work. The reliance of many applications on the geo-locative capacities of smartphones today is perhaps the most obvious example of how the design of hook-up apps presents challenges to effective health communication. The focus on nearness and the reinsertion of place into conceptualizations of digital environments today result in only very "local" user profiles being displayed via the interface:

Grindr still feels a bit like a missed trick I guess . . . I don't know, 'cause its so quick and because its geographical and people come and go and the list of people—guys come and go and you don't have a static profile on a website in the same way to sustain anything, to anticipate. (Matt—Focus Group 2)

The loose, ephemeral networks created by these forms of "digital cruising" (Mowlabocus, 2010) ensure that men move in and out of the "range" of outreach workers at such a rate that it is difficult to engage them in sustained conversation. Another worker described the design of apps as resulting "*in effect . . . in thirty silent strangers in a room*" (Gary—Focus Group 1). Meanwhile, the ability to permanently "block" profiles (primarily) in order to narrow one's purview to see only men who match particular criteria of desirability means that *NetReach* workers can be rendered invisible, almost immediately, and without any recourse to reappear on a

user's screen at a later date. The commercial, regulatory, social, and architectural dimensions of these digital environments all serve to challenge and, in some cases, undermine the work that health promoters attempt to undertake in these spaces. As an increasing percentage of gay and bisexual men's sexual cultures are maintained via "lightweight" mobile platforms—perhaps the most restrictive platforms for *NetReach* workers to operate within—the affordances of digital technologies for embedded, context-specific, and individualized health promotion work appear to be diminishing before they have been even partially realized.

Conclusion

In September 2014, and reflecting both their ongoing commitment to technological innovation, and through such innovation, to meeting the needs of their client base, THT began trialing a new outreach scheme that targets men who may not be accessing traditional commercial physical venues, and particularly those involved in high-risk sexual practices involving sex using recreational drugs ("chem sex") and intravenous drug use. "Slamming"—the practice of injecting traditionally methamphetamine (crystal meth) or, more recently, mephedrone—has become an increasing concern among gay health professionals working in urban centers such as London.

Slamming forms part of the broader "chem sex" sexual culture that involves marathon sex parties, lasting days at a time and which employ pharmaceutical technologies (Gamma Hydroxybutyrate [GHB], mephedrone, and methamphetamine) and digital technologies to engineer and maintain these parties. While the former enhances stamina, libido, and sexual performance, the latter provides a means of connecting men, and recruiting people in to the party. These parties are not "visible" if one's understanding of the urban landscape is limited to the physical environs of the city, but are highly visible on the apps and social media websites that MSM use. Community outreach models that focus solely on physically located venues and spaces of interaction risk overlooking these urban, yet digitally maintained, networks of casual and anonymous sexual interactions.

The *Luber* team operates in London and maintains a presence on popular mobile platforms such as *Grindr* in order to promote a highly localized condom and safer drug use resource delivery service. Recognizing that these platforms are central to this emerging subculture, and that this subculture represents an ideal opportunity for HIV and STI transmission, the *Luber* team navigate through the densely populated city on bicycles in the evening and at weekends, using the apps to connect with men online and, when given the opportunity to do so, delivering harm reduction materials—and advice—into the hands of men at the point at which they are looking for sexual partners and may be about to engage in high-risk practices.

While facilitating very targeted and tailored harm reduction work, *Luber* also provides a way to (re)invest in some of the more traditional aspects of community-focused, peer support outreach into the online sphere, allowing workers to physically re-connect with their clients, and use more traditional communication skills (such as banter and body language) to achieve positive outcomes.

The fact that the *Luber* scheme does not have a formal partnership with the platforms it uses to reach out to service users demonstrates the challenging relationship that continues to exist between digital commercial platforms designed for gay and bisexual men, the sexual cultures and environments that these men create and negotiate in cities and towns across the United Kingdom, and the services set up to support harm reduction and risk negotiation. Alongside *NetReach*, the scheme also illustrates the levels of digital and physical enmeshment involved in gay and bisexual men's sexual practice. There is no doubt that sexual health community outreach services must operate across digital and physical environments, while seeking to recognize both the specificity of each site, and the ways in which these sites merge and stack up in order to create new networked spaces of sexual connection.

If community outreach that targets MSM sexual health is to remain relevant and of use to those it seeks to support, it must navigate this enmeshed terrain, while recognizing that new rules, new codes of conduct, and new relationships with commercial service providers must be developed. Such recognition (and the subsequent [re]training of community health workers that it invariably engenders) is vital to the success of future intervention services and, by extension, the sustainability of online outreach for sexual health. Meanwhile, the authors of this article call upon commercial platform developers (and platform providers) to recognize their corporate responsibilities and support organizations such as THT in their work by providing better service integration for community outreach and, in turn, recognizing the role that they are playing within urban (and suburban/rural) gay men's sexual cultures.

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Notes

1. The term MSM—standing for men who have sex with men—is an umbrella term adopted by health promotion agencies in the late 1990s as a means of circumventing complex issues of (non)identification. The term “MSM” refers to all men who have sex with men, irrespective of their stated sexual identity. We utilize this term in this article in order to point toward

homosexual behaviors while also acknowledging that users of gay hook-up apps may not identify as gay or bisexual.

2. Such factors are numerous and range from internalized homophobia and poor mental health through to the pleasures of risk-taking through to poor knowledge of sexually transmitted infection (STI) transmission routes.
3. *Reaching Out Online* (ROO), an Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) funded project in partnership with Terence Higgins Trust (THT), set out to critically engage with, and capture, the experiences of THT digital community outreach workers.
4. Bar blitzes involve a team of outreach workers visiting several gay bars and clubs in one evening, giving out free packets of condoms and lube, distributing information on clinic-based services and chatting with patrons about sexual health—as well as other “social” topics.
5. PEP stands for *post*-exposure prophylaxis and consists of a course of anti-retroviral medication which, when taken within 72 hr of exposure to HIV, has been proven highly effective in preventing sero-conversion. The treatment lasts for 3 months during which time the user typically receives support and advice to assist them in developing and maintaining robust harm reduction strategies.
6. PrEP is the common acronym used for *pre*-exposure prophylaxis. Unlike PEP, PrEP is a drug regime that can be offered to men to help them to remain HIV negative. This regime is not in common use in the United Kingdom at the time of publication, although the medical research council is currently involved in a study of the treatment and it is likely that Truvada (the core component of PrEP) will be made available to HIV negative men. As a harm reduction strategy, PrEP remains somewhat controversial within both gay male culture and medical circles. Health promotion agencies are keen to advance the belief that PrEP should be understood as part of a broader strategy of harm reduction, including the maintenance of condom use. This is not least because PrEP has no effect on the transmission of other STIs including hepatitis, gonorrhoea, and syphilis.
7. Barebacking is the colloquial term for anal sex that intentionally avoids the use of condoms.
8. Public sex environment.
9. During the ethnographic research period, one outreach worker reported having being turned away from a new gay bar, having been informed that the management did not believe that its patrons wanted to be “bothered” with the distribution of free condoms.
10. HTML5 allows for the production of a mobile Internet interface as opposed to a “separate” application program.

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