

Reaching Out online: Moving On

Project Report

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Summary

Reaching out online was a pilot project that built on the *Literacy, Expertise and Knowledge* scoping study undertaken by the CCN+ network. It developed a prior research relationship between the University of Sussex and the Terrence Higgins Trust (THT), the organization in charge of HIV Prevention England (HPE)¹. The project ran for a six-month period in 2013.

In September 2014, follow-on funding (£10,000) provided by the CCN+ network allowed the principal investigator of *Reaching our online* (Mowlabocus) to undertake targeted dissemination work in order to explore opportunities for knowledge transfer and knowledge exchange. This original period of activity (September – December 2014) was extended to February 2015 in order to better fit with the timetables of stakeholders.

In total, xx organisations were invited to engage with the project findings of *Reaching out online*. These engagements included a series of workshops and discussion forums as well as more formal presentations.

Brighton & Hove Council
AllSorts (LGBT youth)
MindOut LGBT mental health)
Broken Rainbow (Domestic Violence & Abuse)
Terrence Higgins Trust (Black & Minority Ethnic service users)
GiFi – Commercial software development
Projekt – Swedish HIV/AIDS prevention
Albert Kennedy Trust (vulnerable LGBT Youth)
Health & Inclusion Project (community research organisation)
Birmingham CCG (primary care)
Positive East (*BME Community*)
MHealth Habitat

In addition, Terrence Higgins Trust, the collaborating partner organisation on the original *Reaching out online* research was able to secure funding from from the European Centre for Disease Control (€25,000) to undertake a pan-European scoping study that built upon the methodologies employed and findings identified in the *Reaching out online*.

¹ <http://www.tht.org.uk/our-charity/About-us/Our-work/HIV-Prevention-England>

Staffing

Sharif Mowlabocus – Principal Investigator

Dr Mowlabocus was the PI on the original Reaching out online project and was the sole investigator identified in this phase of dissemination and knowledge transfer work.

Mr Matthew Beetar – Administrative Assistant

Mr Beetar is a PhD student studying at the University of Sussex. His research focuses on issues on intersectional politics and discrimination as experienced by LGBT migrant workers in South Africa. Mr Beetar was recruited to provide administrative support to this phase of the Reaching *out* online project.

Ms. Kate Armstrong – Workshop facilitator.

Ms Armstrong is a registered counsellor and has expertise in the areas of LGBT sexual and mental health. Ms Armstrong was recruited to this project as a workshop facilitator and supported Dr Mowlabocus in developing materials and activities that drew upon the original research findings and which supported broader dissemination of these findings.

Many of the original research team for Reaching *out* online were unable to be involved in this dissemination activity owing to recent employment commitments. Following the end of the original project, Dr Haslop was appointed to a permanent academic post at Brunel university and Mr Dasgupta was appointed to a permanent academic post at the University of Winchester. While both researchers have remained in contact with the project (particularly in the area of publication development) they were unable to participate in the workshops owing to time commitment.

Funding for the period that this report covers was unavailable to support Mr Harbottle's involvement in Reaching out online. However, Dr Mowlabocus and Mr Harbottle worked together on THT's successful proposal to the European Centre for Disease Control. Dr Mowlabocus acted as a critical friend and was scheduled to be a researcher on this pan-European scoping project. Unfortunately time-commitments and issues pertaining to IP and funding rules prohibited his involvement.

Dissemination Events

The following pages document the dissemination work that was undertaken during the funded period.

1. GiFi / GeoSpock – presentation and workshop

In October 2014, Dr Mowlabocus was invited to introduce *Reaching out* online and present the project's findings to the staff of [GeoSpock](#) in Cambridge, UK. GeoSpock is a technology start-up that has developed a more secure method of using GPS software than that currently used by app developers.

Dr Mowlabocus was contacted by GeoSpock in the wake of news reports that identified *Grindr* (the UK's most popular gay male dating app) as being 'hacked', with user's location data being made available. This 'hack' identified the poor security employed by the software developers and the danger that this posed for users living in homophobic contexts around the world. Dr Mowlabocus was invited to comment on this security breach by editors at [The Conversation](#). Following the publication of this article, GeoSpock contacted Dr Mowlabocus to request further information about his research.

GeoSpock have developed an alternative to Grindr, named [GiFi](#). Working in a similar way to Grindr and other applications for gay men, GiFi offers further functionality (including community group involvement) and provides enhanced security options for users. The company are interested in using its technology to support gay men's health initiatives and where therefore interested in learning more about *Reaching out Online*.

Dr Mowlabocus was able to provide GeoSpock with a presentation that matched up the research findings of the original project with some of the aims and objectives of GiFi. In doing so, he was able to identify the challenges and opportunities that face GeoSpock in developing a relationship with third-sector organisations charged with improving gay men's health.

Following the meeting, Dr Mowlabocus has acted as a liaison point between GeoSpock and Terrence Higgins Trust, both of whom are now in discussions regarding a possible future collaboration. Reflecting upon the workshop and discussion, Kristian Tangen-Sorgendal (Business Development Manager) stated that the event 'proved extremely interesting' and that as a result of the meeting, the company were 'extremely keen to progress on talks with THT and how our unique focus in the LGBT Community can help broaden the good work covered by this wonderful charity.' This discussion is ongoing and Dr Mowlabocus has been central to facilitating these conversations.

2. LGBT Community Forum & Stakeholder workshop

“Brighton & Hove LGBT Switchboard was established in 1975 and is here to listen to, inform and support lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Brighton & Hove and beyond. Originally a helpline, we now offer much more.”
(www.switchboard.org.uk)

In September 2014, Dr Mowlabocus was approached by Maria Antoniou the Director of [Brighton & Hove LGBT Switchboard](#), who had been made aware of Reaching *out* online and had read the project report. *Switchboard* had identified an an increasing number of calls from LGBT people in which digital and social media were mentioned as sources of problems or concerns. Tasked with addressing this issue, and with better understanding how the organisation might use these same technologies for LGBT health and wellbeing initiatives, Ms Antoniou invited Dr Mowlabocus to run two events – one community forum and one service provider workshop – with the aim of disseminating findings of the research and identifying further concerns that community members had regarding these heavily used technologies.

The project team recruited 15 participants to the community forum and representatives from 6 community groups to the stakeholder workshop. The latter event was attended by:

- LGBT Switchboard
- [MindOut](#) (mental health service provision)
- [Brighton & Hove Health & Inclusion Project](#) (community research support)
- [Broken Rainbow](#) (domestic violence & abuse)
- [Brighton & Hove Council](#) (commissioner for sexual health)
- [Positive East](#) (BME HIV service)
- [AllSorts](#) (LGBT Youth)

Feedback from the workshop and community forum was overwhelmingly positive and participants spoke of it being ‘insightful’ (Broken Rainbow) and ‘useful for the sector’ (MindOut). The project report is currently being used to shape policy at both Broken Rainbow and LGBT Switchboard. Following on from this event, AllSorts invited the project team to run a session with their service users in order to better understand the uses of digital and social media by young LGBT people. This is currently being organised.

3. RFSL – Conference Keynote.

The reach of this project has extended beyond the UK and one example of this is the dissemination activity that Dr Mowlabocus undertook with a group of health and wellbeing agencies based in Sweden. In October 2014, Dr Mowlabocus was the keynote speaker at the annual gay men's health conference organised in Stockholm by [RFSL](#), one of the oldest LGBT organisations in the world. The theme of the conference in 2014 was *'The problematic sexuality': how different dating-apps influence peoples sexual behavior and health'*.

Dr Mowlabocus was offered the opportunity to disseminate findings from Reaching out online and engage in a dialogue with representatives from Swedish (and pan-European) agencies on the challenges and opportunities that mobile applications pose for sexual health and wellbeing.

4. Consultation on THT proposal to ECDC

Owing to the funding provided by CCN+, Dr Mowlabocus was able to collaborate with Terrence Higgins Trust on a grant proposal to the European Centre for Disease Control. This grant (which successfully secured €25,000) allowed THT to coordinate and run a pan-European scoping study that involved service providers from across the region and which mapped the current use of social media in gay men's health initiatives.

Although unable to undertake any of the primary research for this scope, Dr Mowlabocus was invited to attend and present at the findings event in Stockholm, in February 2015. While he was unable to attend this event, the report to the ECDC identifies the role of Dr Mowlabocus – and of Reaching out online – in the development of the scope.

5. MHealthHabitat – Sexual health in a digital age workshop

In January 2015, Dr Mowlabocus was the lead presenter and a co-facilitator at a [MHealth Habitat](#) workshop in Leeds. Over 30 participants from across the region came together to share how they use digital and social media to connect with their respective communities and to discuss opportunities for future digital initiatives.

The feedback from this event was overwhelmingly positive and respondents offered the following comments on the evaluation sheet:

- *A large variety of workers with experience on different topics and methods of working. It was very relevant for my work in particular as Dr. Mowlabocus' knowledge and research was highly relevant*
- *shared experiences increased understanding of how best to use twitter/blogs Interesting feedback form Sharif re 'reaching out online' project*
- *It was very organised and had great interaction with all of the attendee*
- *Definitely a need for this kind of training*

Following this event, Dr Mowlabocus has been contacted by [Yorkshire Mesmac](#) about future collaborative work and the report for Reaching out online is being used by this organisation for future digital outreach development.

6. Consultancy for Albert Kennedy Trust

The Albert Kennedy Trust supports lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans homeless young people in crisis. Every day we deal with the effects homelessness can have on young people's lives. We have offices in London, Manchester and Newcastle. (www.akt.org.uk)

In October 2014, Dr Mowlabocus met with Tony Butchart-Kelly, Communications officer for Albert Kennedy Trust. AKT has been undergoing a process of rapid expansion and Mr Butchart-Kelly requested a meeting to discuss the Reaching out online report and solicit feedback on the charity's plans to recruit and train social media outreach workers. Dr Mowlabocus was able to talk through some of the key principles of digital outreach work and at the present time, the two parties are in ongoing discussions regarding a future training event for new staff.

Challenges

While the number of interactions generated during the dissemination period have been substantial, reaching over fifteen organisations across Europe, unforeseen challenges have shaped the mode of interaction and resulted in a set of activities that are markedly different from those originally envisaged in the proposal document. It is pertinent to identify these challenges here as they are by no means specific to this project and may prove useful learning opportunities for other members of the network who seek to undertake similar activity.

A. Stakeholder time and resource

“can we do this next year?”

In spite of the generous three-month period in which this work was set to take place, the PI quickly found that many organisations had little to no ‘free’ time during the dissemination period in which to engage with the project. Often organisations were very keen to draw upon the learning of the project and host workshops to educate workers. However, when these organisations began to explore timetables and work schedules, it quickly became apparent that such a workshop could not happen in the timeframe available. In part this was due to organisational priorities (National HIV testing week in November, World AIDS day in December) and in part this was due to staffing resources. In short, many organisations simply could not spare the time to undertake the kind of concentrated work required for a workshop to be planned, implemented, attended and effectively used by the organisation.

B. Funding priorities and focus

“we want to build a website of our own – can you do that?”

A second challenge lay in the competing agendas of the project and the organizations it sought to engage with. In spite of having read the project report and discussed the findings of the report with the PI, organisations were often reluctant to suspend digital initiatives, or reconsider their priorities in terms of digital provision. In short, the PI found that organisations were less willing to engage with ideas such as using existing technologies and platforms and more interested in funding bespoke websites that acted as ‘flagships’ or digital ‘shopfronts’ for an organization. This was often an issue of branding rather than service provision.

C. ‘Conflicting’ research agendas and methods

“We’ll speak to you, but only after you’ve done your research ‘our’ way”

Linked to the above, challenge was the issue of research questions and research methodologies. Often organisations struggled to understand that research knowledge could be transferrable and that the findings from one project might be useful (if correctly translated) to their own situation. The PI

was repeatedly invited to run new research activities to generate data for organisations. When it was explained to them that this was not the object of the funding, now was this feasible (given the budget), they often disengaged, believing that the project could not offer them what they needed.

D. Competition & ownership of research

“I don't want to share my ideas with the competition”

“Who else are you speaking to?”

This was perhaps the largest and most worrying issue and points towards the unintended consequences of a culture in which short-term contracts and funding competitions have become normalised. Regularly, when trying to put together ‘themed’ workshops that focused on a particular community, the PI was informed that such conversations and discussions could not take place in front of sector ‘competitors’. A fear of peer judgement or of ideas and suggestions being ‘appropriated’ by other organisations – who might be competitors in the next round of funding – caused many organisations to shy away from themed workshops. This resulted in Dr Mowlabocus abandoning this initial approach, and instead adopting a more ‘eclectic’ approach to workshop audience groupings.

All of the above should not be read as evidence of a failure to engage. As the rest of this report demonstrates, there have been numerous fruitful engagements with many different organisations. However, these challenges do suggest that external pressures and influences can shape (and in some cases diminish) opportunities for engagement and knowledge exchange.

Reflections: What have we learned?

Reaching out online was a successful research project that generated a great deal of interest and a raft of useful findings. The object of this dissemination period was to explore opportunities whereby the knowledge and learning gained from this original project could be transferred into different settings. Most importantly, this programme of work sought to explore how digital ICTs could be used in different contexts of health and wellbeing provision. It is too early to identify the success of the engagements identified above. While there is some qualitative evidence that the reception of the research has been positive, it will take several months, if not years, before the full impact of this work can be measured.

In lieu of a more quantifiable evaluation the following reflections have been identified:

1. Findings on digital literacy skills can transfer

The series of engagements undertaken have demonstrated that the key findings regarding digital literacy and expertise are relevant to different sectors and have use beyond the 'narrow' field of gay men's sexual health. The underpinning knowledge garnered from the research is transferrable to other health and wellbeing settings and is useful, especially when designing training packages for community outreach workers.

2. Training resource (framework) transfers

Linked to the above, the framework for training staff in digital intervention work and also for planning and developing intervention programmes is also transferrable. Brighton & Hove Council have already commissioned Dr Mowlabocus to run a training workshop to support third-sector partners in developing robust and sustainable digital initiatives. This workshop will draw upon the key learning from Reaching out online, and which was presented to a council representative at one of the stakeholder workshops identified in this report.

3. Useful in starting conversations around (managing) expectations in relation to digital health initiatives

The series of engagements was also a very useful method for establishing a dialogue – between the researcher and organisations, but also between organisations themselves. This dialogue has centred on managing expectations and thinking creatively about digital intervention programmes. In particular, the focus on intervention programmes that utilise existing digital ecosystems (a key element of Reaching *out* online) has sparked an interest in

developing 'outreach' initiatives, rather than building new digital infrastructure in which to 'pull' service users in.

At the same time, the dissemination work has revealed two limitations of the research.

- *The specific digital ecosystem of the original client group is not replicated across other cohorts.* In short, different groups use digital technologies in different ways. This inevitably has an impact on the effectiveness (and the appropriateness) of the research findings for different stakeholders.
- *Intervention methods and histories of community of outreach differ radically.* Gay men's health programming is rooted in community-centred outreach work. This form of activity remains core to HIV/AIDS prevention. The same cannot be said for other health and wellbeing contexts (e.g. mental health or teen sexual health). As such, the underlying history of sector engagement can shape the effectiveness of (and willingness to engage with) digital outreach work.