



Does this look dangerous to you? Online censorship puts LGBT lives in danger

December 19, 2022 By [Andrew Spieldenner, PhD](#)

At the World Cup, Qatar [banned people with rainbows](#) on t-shirts or armbands into the stadiums or any other possible LGBTQ-identifying signage or clothes. In Iran, [gay men have been executed](#) with hardly any notice, even before the current slate of [public executions of protesters](#). In several countries, laws are being introduced and passed that prohibit “LGBTQ propaganda.” In Florida, Governor DeSantis signed the infamous “[Don’t say gay](#)” (a shorthand for the wide range of sexualities and genders it targets) bill into law. And the new Twitter regime has made it clear that [it values the far right voices over others](#). This is 2022.

I am the executive director of [MPact: Global Action for Gay Health & Rights](#). We are the forefront of advocating for gay, bi, and queer men’s rights and resources, especially in the HIV response. We negotiate with international agencies like UNAIDS, WHO and the US Office of Global AIDS Coordinator. We do this through a network of local and regional partnerships across the world.

2022 was also the year we experienced online censorship directly. We started the year being depublished on Facebook. This means if you were looking for us between December 2021 (when it started) and April (when the appeal went through), then you would not be able to find us. What led to this attack?

We’ve just released a new campaign called the “[Right To](#)”. The campaign focuses on gay men living with HIV and our rights to sex, community, body autonomy, and freedom of expression. The campaign features men of different gender identities, shapes and ages in various positions together and solo. It’s an honest and affirmative deomonstration of our sexuality in the context of HIV

So of course it was reported as a violation of “community standards”. And then MPact was depublished.

It’s a dangerous thing - being invisible on social media networks. I have learned from others who have experienced it that this practice is far-reaching and affects all kinds of businesses, civic organizations, networks and individuals. Being online is not free and digital access is not guaranteed.

Because people do not want to see some of us. They consider us obscene and undeserving of public recognition in any meaningful way. One of those 1990s protest slogans - [“we’re here, we’re queer, get used to it”](#) - explicitly declared our presence in the face of people who would rather ignore us, disrespect us, discriminate against, outlaw us, or exert violence on us. There are [over 70 countries in the world which still criminalize gay sex](#), and even more places where violence and threats against us are commonplace.

These attacks explicitly restrict what kind of community, identity and information are on the internet. There are several impacts to this censorship:

- HIV & Health. Where do you go to get your health information or referrals? Without LGBTQ-led organizations, there would be very little appropriate and accurate information about LGBTQ health, sex and HIV available. These organizations help LGBTQ persons find health information in a non-stigmatizing way, and even provide access to life-prolonging services.
- Causing isolation. We join together as an LGBTQ community for lots of reasons, including but not limited to friendship, support, housing, safety, finding out information, jobs, and sex. Our online spaces have been important to reach across and find people with the same interests. What happens when we live in countries that actively censor and limit LGBTQ content online? How can we find each other? During COVID-19 lockdowns, we saw how damaging isolation could be. Online censorship exacerbates our isolation in a homophobic and transphobic world. Connecting to community is life-saving for LGBTQ folks.
- Loss of revenue. The move to online commerce has been amazing for some small businesses (and especially during COVID-19). Whether people are selling products (like t-shirts or books) or services (whether it be cooking lessons or sex work), the use of social media is integral to reaching potential customers. When people are censored due to violating “community standards” and their businesses are taken offline, they lose money. It’s that simple.
- Hiding our issues. Homophobia and violence is already underreported. Online, the news media can choose how they frame a subject (for instance, how many stories did any of us see about the impact of COVID-19 on LGBTQ communities and HIV communities?). On social media, when people talk in sex-positive ways or respond to racism, sexism or homophobia, they might get banned (the racists, misogynists and homophobes are rarely banned). Our communities have to

use gay apps and other online groups in order to get together and raise the alarm. With online censorship against historically marginalized communities, our ability to raise issues are stymied.

This cycle of hiding our LGBTQ issues has material consequences globally. Meg Davis writes in her 2020 book [The Uncounted: Politics of Data in Global Health](#), “if the country lacks official data about those populations, there is little justification for adding in the groups” therefore “tools thus structurally disfavor populations for whom there is no data, reinforcing historical discrimination, without explicitly addressing the fact that they are likely to be historically deprioritized.” In this way, online censorship of LGBTQ folks continues our ongoing marginalization and exclusion for the sake of homophobia and transphobia (and sometimes serophobia).

One of the dangers on social media is that queer content is automatically tagged as a violation of community standards. It happens in various countries, where moderators decide what is or isn't appropriate before you even see your feed. Even in the US, we posted a reel of two queer men living with HIV kissing and it was flagged for adult content on various platforms. [Two. People. Kissing.](#)

As we go into 2023, I encourage all of us - LGBTQ organizations, HIV groups, social justice movement activists, human rights advocates - to raise the alarm on these forms of censorship, especially across social media platforms. These attacks affect us all, and hamper our ability to reach our constituents, at a time when our communities need to be able to come together and organize.