

**CLAIMING OUR SPACE: CHALLENGES OF USING THE
INTERNET TO EMPOWER AND SUPPORT SAME-SEX
ATTRACTED YOUNG PEOPLE**

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Abstract

Qnet is an online project to provide a safe space for same-sex attracted youth (SSAY) in the Canberra region to form support networks and access and share information. It recognises the particular difficulties experienced by this group in an often homophobic world and that relatively few safe spaces exist in Canberra where SSAY under 18 could safely meet and access resources.

The project is based around a website developed by the AIDS Action Council of the ACT, with initial funding from Healthpact ACT. Capacity building had been an important aspect of the project which has been peer-driven through the engagement of SSAY for resource development and testing, and ongoing monitoring and maintenance.

The number of people accessing the website has been found to be significantly higher when it is being actively maintained by the Council. The challenge for the Council will be to balance independence and community ownership with a responsibility to keep the website alive and current.

The Internet is already a crucial part in the experience of SSAY today. Qnet has developed into a valuable resource for the Council providing young people that it would not otherwise have contact with. As the influence of the Internet grows, it will be a challenge for health promoting agencies to ensure that the sites SSAY access have relevant and accurate information, while providing a safe space to which they can contribute and own.

Introduction

Same-sex attracted youth (SSAY) are often denied a safe space to make links with their peers and access information related to their sexuality. Qnet is a project to create an online safe space that not only provides a venue to access information and ask questions, but also to form a community and build skills.

Writing Themselves In (Hillier et al, 1998) highlights the dangers for same-sex attracted young people in seeking information and support about sexuality and sexual health. Many SSAY are using the Internet to access information and meet friends, and 'come out' online, especially when it is not seen to be an option offline (Hillier et al, 2001).

Young people in Canberra often complain about the difficulty of connecting with the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex (GLBTI) 'community'. Reasons given include the lack of a 'gay press' and 'gay ghetto', and difficulties in travelling around Canberra in the evening without a car. The ACT does have a very high proportion of Internet use, with 80% of households having an Internet connection (ABS 2004).

The Qnet website was developed with funding from Healthpact and launched by the AIDS Action Council of the ACT (AAC) in February 2003. The address of the website is <http://www.qnet.org.au>. In the time since the launch, the project has faced several challenges in building a sustainable, empowered community. These challenges have largely centred on the question of what the role of the AAC should now be in this community. The project also experienced a significant set-back with a large loss of data.

Challenges aside, Qnet has become a valuable health promotion tool for the AAC, allowing the promotion of safer sexual practices in a context salient to same-sex attracted young people.

Building a sense of community

In order to foster a community ownership it has been important that the site be driven, as far as possible, by SSAY themselves.

A clear message from the SSAY focus-tested for the project was the need for things to 'do' on the website, for example: Posting messages, chatting and leaving opinions. There was also a strong desire for the site to not just be about 'gay stuff', and be a site where young people could discuss all the things important to them.

The young people surveyed indicated that they were disinterested in overly glitzy features. In general, they were opposed to special technologies, such as animation, Flash or plug-ins, that would slow the site down or make it difficult to access. This characteristic about young people has been backed up by research in the US and Australia (Nielsen, 2005).

The discussion boards have formed the core of the website, as it is on the boards that the majority of social interaction takes place. SSAY have also been encouraged to contribute to all the other sections of the website.

The skills and talent of young people on the site have been utilised throughout the project. Users have contributed their IT skills and their creative work, such as pictures and stories. Also valuable are online social skills: Some users adopt roles such as welcoming new users, and resolving conflict. We hope to foster these skills and encourage more users to adopt responsibilities such as 'moderator' and 'administrator'.

The tension between staff involvement and community ownership

The establishment of an ongoing community capacity to maintain this resource is inherent to the project strategies, and so it was initially envisaged that the Qnet site would become self-maintaining and a strong community would take over the running of the site. The AAC would be involved in an initial promotional campaign and a short period of support.

After a few months of ongoing involvement from staff at the AAC, the site was briefly allowed to continue without staff intervention. The effect of the interruption of Council involvement caused a significant drop in the activity on the site. Visits (multiple 'hits' from user's computer are compiled into a single 'visit') on the site dropped from approximately 3 000 to 4 000 a month to less than 2 000. Posts on the message board and new member registrations also dropped in the same period. While there are some problems in using these statistics as a measure of the success of a project, they give a rough indication of the use of the site.

The lack of staff involvement in the site may have meant that the site began to look stale and dated. Web users, knowing that the Internet contains a vast amount of inaccurate and out-of-date information, may avoid sites with a stale-appearance (Devlin et al, 2003). Frequently updated and relevant content also leads users to revisit regularly, and encourages user participation. People are reluctant to post messages on a message board, or wait around in a chat room, which appears to have been dead for some time.

Websites also need some form of support in order to reach new users. Getting users to a site can be difficult because they need to seek the site. An online project will often need significant promotion to ensure potential users learn of its existence (Devlin et al, 2003).

In order to rectify the situation, simple but regular maintenance was performed on the website. This maintenance included replying to posts seeking support, starting message threads on general topics

in an attempt to nurture online conversations, and the rotation of featured items on the front page. As a result, hits rose to a high of over 8 500 visits in May 2004.

Although the AAC is supporting the website, it is important that as much as possible work on the website is performed by members of the target community. The AAC has employed SSAY to undertake the regular maintenance of the website. In order to remain sustainable, it remains an aim to build the skills of community members to enable them take over many roles currently performed by staff.

The importance of continuity

The importance of continuity for an online community was demonstrated all too clearly on the Qnet site in 2004. During July the server the site was hosted from was 'hacked' and many of the pages on the site were replaced by a few lines of graffiti. When the problem was discovered the site was taken offline.

Unfortunately, the site was not being regularly backed-up. This meant that the site was down for a few months while a new server was set up and the software running the site was reinstalled and reconfigured. Perhaps more disastrous, it also meant that almost all of the content created by the community was lost: This included messages posted and whole conversations, links to other sites, memberships and profiles.

The challenge was been to attempt to rebuild the community. As the site lost the membership list, contact with the majority of members has been lost. The experience and skill of long-time community members cannot be utilized.

It has proven very difficult to re-attract the original community members. The long downtime may have turned off some regular visitors who found they could not access the site. Some users may have been disappointed that everything they had contributed to the site had been lost. The software packages reinstalled on the site were different versions, and may have appeared unfamiliar to original users.

The obvious practical lesson is to back up all data regularly. Although nothing suggests that the Qnet site was targeted, such projects may have a slightly higher risk of attack. Perhaps a deeper lesson is that a community requires continuity. It is difficult for a community to continue as usual after having been temporarily dispersed.

Value to the AIDS Action Council of the ACT

Same-sex attracted young people, particularly at school-age, are a difficult group to target to promote safe sexual practice. SSAY are generally not well connected to the broader GLBTI community or the venues where campaigns are traditionally concentrated. The lack of a 'gay press', or definable 'gay ghetto' in Canberra exacerbates the problem for the AAC.

Qnet provides a channel for effective health promotion. With Qnet, the AAC is able to reach an at-risk audience that it may have otherwise been inaccessible. It has been recognised that many young people are using the Internet to access information about safe-sex, and are often unable to access this information through the sources their non-same-sex attracted peers typically use (Hillier et al, 2001). The Council is able to provide information relevant information, and hopefully empower individuals to be able to make informed decisions about their sexual health. Qnet is also used as a venue to promote to young people other events and programs of the Council – such as coming out workshops – and other agencies.

Discussion on the message boards and feedback through regular evaluation informs the AAC on the needs and issues of young people. Qnet has been used to get representation of young people at forums such as the GLBTI Health Forum, organised with ACT Health. This ensures broader advocacy for the community.

Conclusion and recommendations

The Internet can be a useful tool in reaching and developing communities that have difficulties connecting offline. Projects such as Qnet, however, need to keep a focus on the needs and wants of the community, and to facilitate as opposed to dictate.

Internet-based health promotion is sometimes seen as cheaper alternative to printed campaigns, but such a view does not account for the real costs of an online project, and its ongoing, dynamic nature. These projects require a significant investment in staff time for both initial design and construction and ongoing maintenance to ensure the resource remains relevant, safe and accessible.

Community building projects online overcome some of the problems of projects based in the offline world. This makes these projects invaluable in terms of reaching new audiences and empowered disadvantaged communities. The online world does however present a new set challenges and potential risks.

References

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