

# Queering the Interwebs

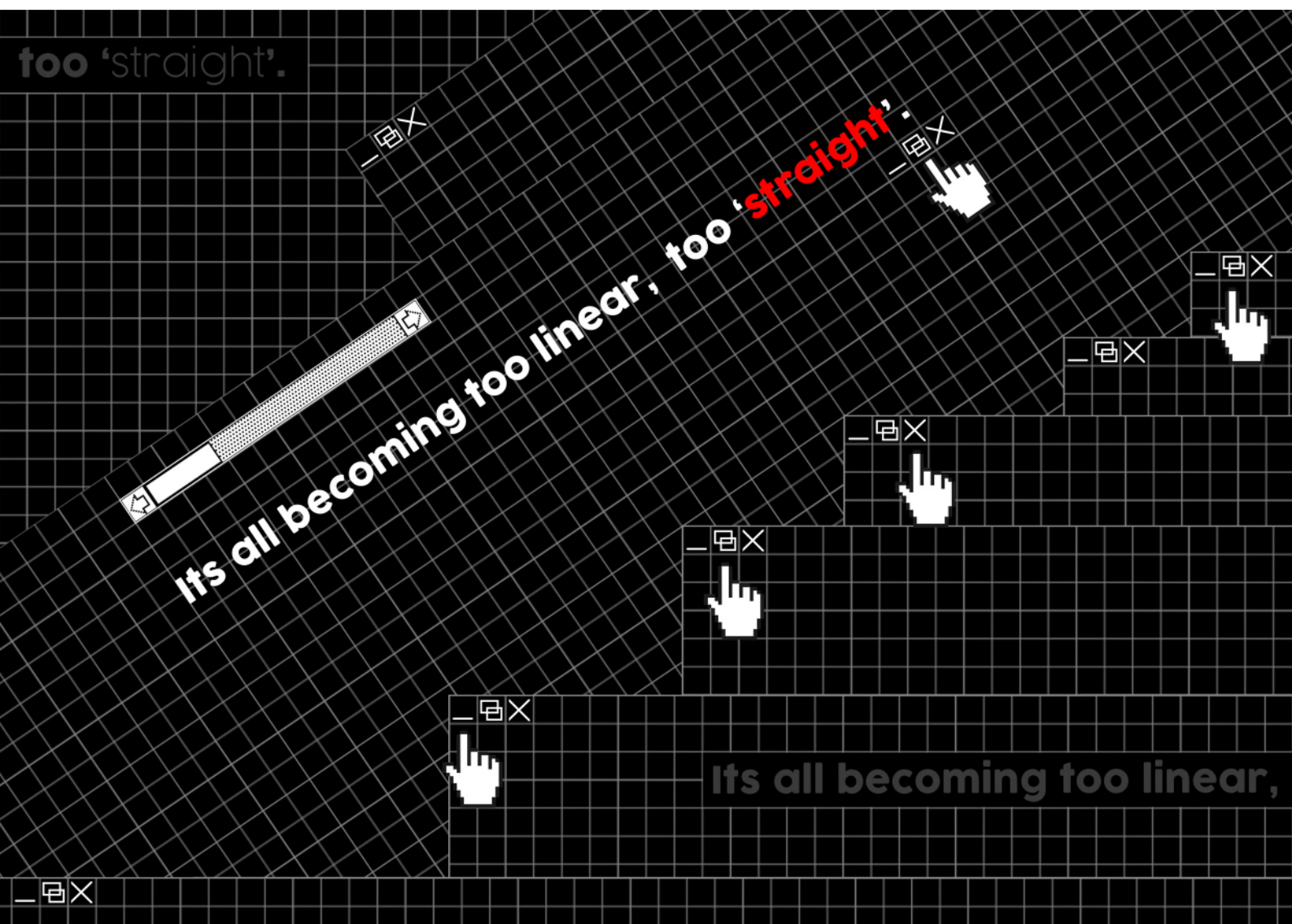


# “Is the internet queer?”

## Yes. But sometimes it acts very straight.”

-Paromita Vohra, writer and filmmaker

In its earlier avatars, the internet was an **open-ended space** that offered new kinds of knowledge and ways of being. Crucially, it offered the potential for play. Back then, says Jac sm Kee from APC, the internet was an **alternative** arena embedded in a real space, where margins could be centres, and where there could be multiple centres – some messy, some unruly; a space less constrained by norms. With the increase in corporate control of the internet, it is this playfulness, this beautiful unruliness, that is being lost.

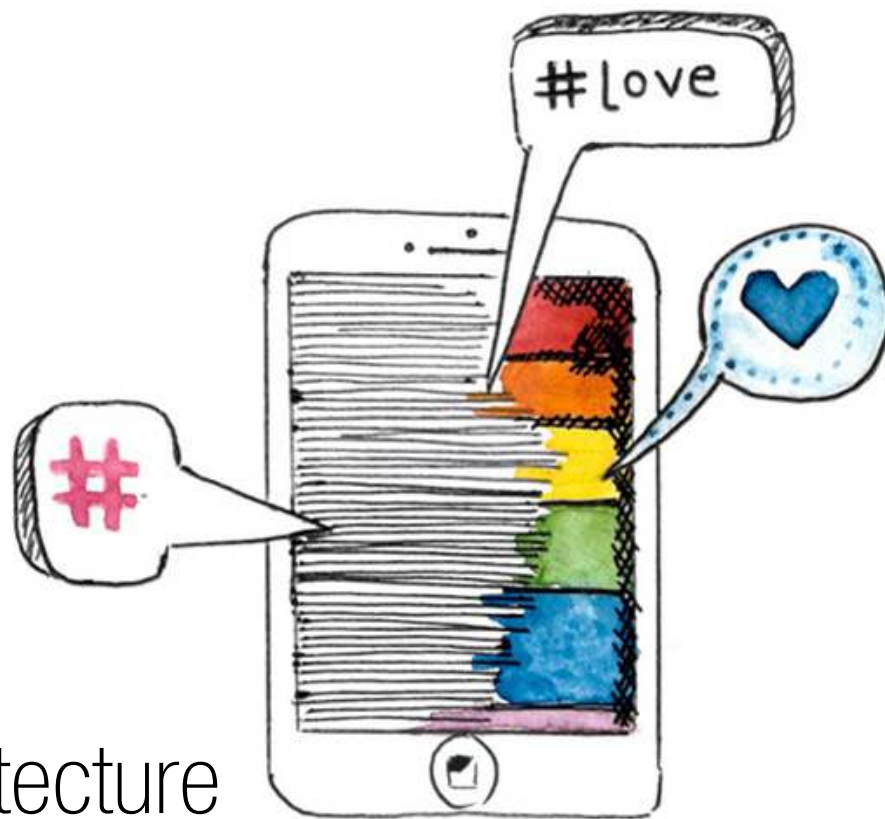




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# 1. Architecture

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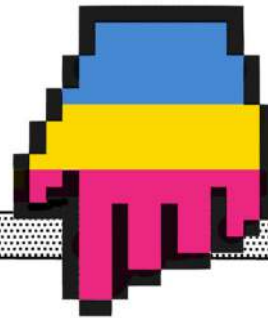
As more and more people live their lives on the internet, it is becoming **normative**. The internet was once a space where you could do and find things that you couldn't in other lives. Now, the internet is just life. And it carries all the baggage of life: power, hierarchy, discrimination.

The **architecture** of online spaces makes it hard to listen or engage constructively: a Twitter that prioritises tweets that get the most retweets, a Facebook whose algorithms run on polarity and conflict. Within such structures, debate loses its nuances

and critique hardens into criticism and judgement.

We see offline **power** structures continually being replicated online. Machines learn from and reproduce offline behaviour, including discrimination. And when discrimination goes digital, it persists. 'Everything comes with its own normative tendency,' says Paromita Vohra, founder of Agents of Ishq. 'But we need not let the structure control and define us. We need to be present to change it.'

To queer it.



## 2. Finding Community

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When Jac sm Kee from APC first came across a Yahoo! group for lesbians in Malaysia, she discovered 'the importance of the internet for **becoming**'. Online spaces provided her with the freedom to explore who she was – in relative safety. She says, 'The internet wasn't the only place I found community, but it was my gateway drug.'

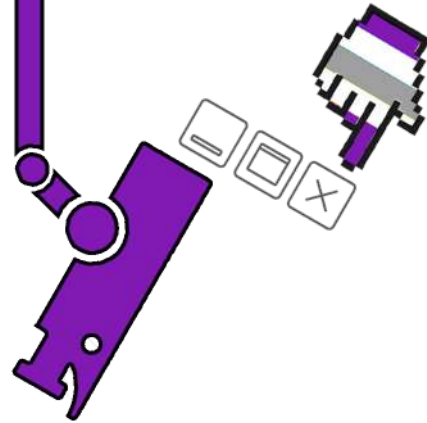
Realising that you are not alone is something that many people with marginalised desires emphasize as incredibly important. The internet, in turn, has completely **changed** how queer communities are founded and built.

Especially when it comes to **visibility**. Queer lives are often invisible in the media, and mainstream news fails to sensitively represent queer realities.

As Jac says, having a digital presence as a queer organisation is a declaration of your presence and your community, of your organising and your reality. And of your place in queer **history**.

But like with all things digital, there's a **flipside**. Moments of visibility, of asserting one's personhood, can easily be weaponised and turned into objects of surveillance. Take social media. These platforms have been integral to community-building, but in order to participate in this online world, you have to place yourself into a **system** of being watched.

Jac calls it the economic logic of social media: the more **connections** you have, the more value you have – and the more you are watched.



### 3. Sex and Surveillance

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For people with queer desires or marginalised bodies, the internet has been lifesaving. It was online that many queer people realised, for the first time, that they were not alone. It was here that they discovered spaces to explore who they really were; and where these spaces did not exist, they built them **together**.

These community-led spaces are, as Paromita Vohra of Agents of Ishq puts it, a return to 'the old ethic of the internet'. Messy, lived, powerful.

But, Jac sm Kee from APC asks, what happens when the infrastructure we rely on for sexual rights is used for the practice of surveillance? When the experience of sexuality online, irrespective of consent, is equated with harm and danger – which

in turn, leads to increased **surveillance**?

When sexual content is surveilled, bodies at the **margins** face the most scrutiny. When people are unable to express their bodies, desires and thoughts freely online, what they're really experiencing is the disciplining effect of constantly being **watched**.

Here's the **paradox**: the internet is a beautifully freeing space for sexuality, but it is also a system of surveillance that disciplines expressions of that sexuality.

And whether or not we can see the internet's network of surveillance, it makes us behave like we are always being watched.



## 4. Dating Apps

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A 25-year-old non-binary person living in Chandigarh creates their first Tinder profile. Male or female? They have to **choose**. They are annoyed, but decide to go with female – for today. They swipe through Tinder, and begin talking to a match. The next day, they decide they want to swipe as a man.

Meanwhile, at Tinder headquarters, there's a discussion underway. They want to restrict users from having more than one profile. For 'safety', of course.

Dating apps are an important space for sexual connection. But they are also a manifestation of how the very architecture of online spaces was not **designed** for queer people and their love, sex and desire.

By claiming that multiple profiles pose a security risk, dating apps ignore the

multiple experiences and **realities** that their users come from. Instead, these profiles are often labelled as 'fake'. But what makes a profile fake? This negative language adversely impacts queer people's access to dating apps, restricting and regulating their experiences.

Like the internet that birthed them, dating apps are both freeing and constricting for people at the sexual margins. And this **contradiction** comes from the very design of these apps; a design that can easily be fixed.

But the internet was, after all, created by people with **privilege** in the offline world. So we see the same power structures replicated, and then preserved, online. There is a way forward for **change**, but rarely the will to bring it about.



## 5. Pornography

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The regulation and surveillance of sexual expression online stems from the worldview that all sex is dirty, indecent, **immoral**. And this regulation often manifests as aggressive bans on internet pornography.

But what is porn? How do we define it? These are the questions that Richa Kaul Padte, author of *Cyber Sexy: rethinking pornography*, thinks we need to keep asking. To define pornography is to turn a subjective experience into something objective; to categorise desire into 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' lists. Lists that are then used to **censor** bodies and sexuality online.

Conventional, studio-shot porn is only a small part of what gets counted as pornography online. Everything from

chat rooms to nudies to webcams make up what Richa calls the 'sexy internet'. And it is this expansive terrain that enables a range of sexual **connections**.

When sexual identity is shrouded in **stigma**, the experience of desire can be terribly lonely. And the sexy internet has the potential to make countless people with non-normative desires feel less alone.

In a society where sexual desire, especially queer desire, is stigmatised – the potential for **pleasure** itself is valuable.

And after all, that is what pornography is ultimately about: pleasure.





## 6. Newsworthy

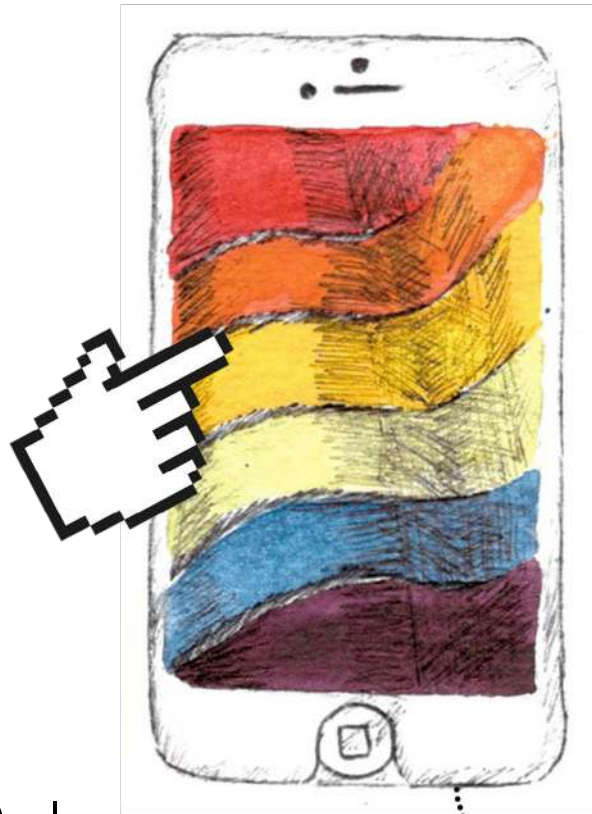
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Mainstream news often fails queer communities. Wrong pronouns. Sensationalism. **Tokenism**. As Ritambhara of Nazariya says, 'When the media does interview you, they make it seem like they're doing you a favour.'

Gender and sexuality are often seen as 'soft issues', and it's difficult to hold media houses **accountable** when they get things wrong.

In this context, the internet becomes incredibly important. It provides spaces and platforms for queer people to build counter **narratives**, and to claim visibility for themselves.

As Grace Banu, founder of Trans Rights Now Collective says, 'For us as trans persons, before social media, there was no way for our **voices** to be heard.'



## 7. Not for Sale

The internet is increasingly being governed by profit-driven platforms.

Platforms whose **business** models are built on turning information about users into commodities. Platforms that track our lives in the service of data. Platforms that form the backbone of the new **dataveillance** regime – where users are data, and data is money.

‘But what does it mean when you become the sum of your data set?’ Jacsm Kee from APC wonders. ‘You in all your **complexity**?’

Our data, combined with other data sets, is being used to develop models, predictions, algorithms and policy-level decisions. And it is being used to turn a huge **profit** for even huger companies.

The more the internet is ruled by profit, the straighter it becomes. And the straighter it becomes, the further it moves away from the anonymity, fluidity and autonomy that makes it a **vital** space for queer people across the world.



**‘If we’re not at the table, we’re on the menu.’** - Jac sm Kee

Queer communities **live** and **work** at the intersection of privacy, autonomy and anonymity. Between the online and the offline. Amidst the private, the personal and the public.

And the internet, in all its **complexities**, poses both challenges and possibilities. It is a space where queer people can claim the right to love, desire, expression and community-building. At the same time, it is also a space that reflects and learns offline power structures.

But today, there are greater numbers of queer people who are also part of decision-making on and about the interwebs. And if it is **human** behaviour that influences algorithms and shapes the internet’s architecture, then surely we, as humans, can **restructure** the internet too?

As Smita Vanniyar from Point of View puts it: ‘We have more control than we realise.’

So, is the internet queer?

Yes, if **we** make it.



**point  
of view**



**Written by** Zarah Udwadia

**Edited by** Richa Kaul Padte

**Conceptualised by** Bishakha Datta

**Designed by** Mihir Desai and Lekha Samant

**Phone illustrations by** Zara Shah

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**Queering the Interwebs was hosted by Point of View, based in Mumbai, India. We build and amplify the voices of women and other marginalised genders - and remove barriers to speech and expression. Our program on gender, sexuality and technology equips women, trans and queer people to freely – and fearlessly – inhabit digital spaces.**