# Grindr relents to user backlash – but does it respect its users?

September 3 2014, by Sharif Mowlabocus



You've been found. Credit: johanl, CC BY

The world's most popular gay social networking app, Grindr, is having a tough time. William Saponaro Jr is [suing](#) its developers for negligence, after he was arrested for sexual assault and endangering the welfare of a child. Sapnaro claims a 13-year-old boy that he and another man had sex with had been on Grindr – which has a minimum age requirement of 18 – and that the liaison had been arranged via the app.

Meanwhile, Thomas Miguel Guerra, an HIV-positive man living in southern California, has been [publicly outed](#) as planning to infect his sexual partners with the virus. We should perhaps not be surprised that these two stories have been so newsworthy. Almost 60 years after the [Wolfenden Report](#) was published, which said that "homosexual behaviour between consenting adults in private should no longer be a criminal offence", [gay](#) men's supposed links with disease and paedophilia still figure in the cultural imagination on both sides of the Atlantic.

Then, in late August, it was [revealed](#) that without even logging on to the app, internet users could access the exact location of other users of Grindr. While HIV transmission and child sexual abuse are extremely serious issues, the potential impact of this story, and the number of men that it could affect, makes it worthy of further consideration.

This "flaw" in the software allows anyone to pinpoint with alarming precision – about 100 feet – another user's exact location. Initially Grindr [insisted](#) that this isn't a "flaw" and [responded](#) to criticisms by suggesting that users who are uncomfortable with the geo-locative capacity of the app, can simply turn it off.

But after a backlash from users, on September 1, it was [reported](#) that Grindr has turned off the "distance" option. (An official announcement could not be located and accessing the app in the UK still shows how far away some users are.) Even if the feature is eventually turned off, Grindr's initial response underscores their lack of respect for users' political and social backgrounds.

## Grindr's selling point

Grindr became the killer app in gay [social media](#) not because of its design or for its communication utility, but because of its geo-locative

capacities. Anyone who uses Grindr knows their distance is visible to other users (unless they turn that function off). What few of us knew was that our exact location was being given out. Having spent the past ten years researching gay men's use of digital and social media, I can testify to this lack of awareness.

Social media's response to Grindr's "flaw" and users' prior lack of awareness of it points toward concerns that pervade not only gay male digital culture, but digital and social media more generally.

Grindr offers a chocolate box of hotties and tells users how close you are to the candy. In doing so, it reinserts geography into gay men's cruising culture, and resurrects [John Rechy's sexual outlaw](link) for the digital age. Its popularity highlights our willing ignorance of the technologies that we use in our daily lives.

I have interviewed men who have called Grindr "addictive", who say they cannot resist pulling their phones out and checking the local area, even when on a date. Men who have marvelled at the sheer scale of their local gay "community", even men who have used it to quiz others about whether a given street is a gay-friendly place to live.

## Easy candy

While I doubt the app is actually addictive in the clinical sense, it is certainly alluring. Grindr offers gay men something they have never had before – the ability to "see" one another as they go about their daily lives. Small wonder then that users don't stop to check the small print of the app's terms and conditions.

When it comes to matters of intimacy, it surely isn't surprising that many of us didn't think about the relationship between this sexy little app and, for example, the images of drone attacks reported in the pages of the

newspaper we read on the way to work.

We, as gay men, have largely been ignorant of Grindr's "back-end" because we have had little interest in it. It has been enough that it works – quickly, effectively and for free. (Of course, some do care. I know many gay men who would never dream of using Grindr for these specific reasons.)

Which brings me on to the second key issue that this glitch illustrates: Grindr's unwavering and dangerous investment in a culture of Homonormativity. Lisa Duggan of New York University coined the term "homonormative" in 2002. She defines the term as follows:

Homonormative means to identify a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilised gay constituency and a privatised, depoliticised gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.

Aligning homonormativity with a broader Anglo-American project of neoliberalism, Duggan argues that the political potential of the 1970s LGBT movement, which challenged gender inequality, the institution of marriage, income disparities, racism and misogyny became marginalised by the 1990s, as white, middle-class gay men became increasingly powerful within a system that was reluctantly accepting them. Such assimilation into the "mainstream" engendered a shift away from radical politics to designer lifestyles … for those who could afford to be good gay consumers.

That Grindr initially did not see this location "glitch" as a problem underscores the homonormative politics of the application, and its developers. You have to be invested in a politics of the homonormative in order to both support gay men's endeavours to connect and

simultaneously fail to recognise the implications of rendering such connections visible to anyone who cares to look. Such a belief can only come from those who have evacuated themselves from the ongoing daily struggle of queer people around the world.

Grindr's lack of empathy in their initial response underscores this and suggests that it is the user, as opposed to the service, that is "failing". The issue, for Grindr, is not one of being outed online, but of remaining in the closet offline. Accordingly, if anyone is at fault here, it is the user, for not living up to their digital persona.

## Missing the context

The fact that Grindr is available in countries where men are routinely beaten, tortured, maimed, flogged, imprisoned, raped and murdered for being homosexual is a shining example of Duggan's homonormative model at work.

I have spoken with wealthy Arab men and women who come to the UK each summer "to be gay". They talk of Grindr as if it was their saviour, allowing them to connect with one another when back at home. I am in no doubt that, within such contexts, an app like Grindr does feel like salvation. But Grindr's unwillingness to advertise its intense geo-locative capacities suggests that the developers have little to no interest in the political or social contexts of their users. Or, to be more precise, they are unwilling to consider any context of queer life other than the privileged, white, middle-class Anglo-American one that they inhabit.

In 2010, I researched several cases where mobile phones and personal computers – once lifelines for their owners – had been turned against them and used as both evidence and a method of locating other men. But this time it is different. This time, the service is gay-owned designed explicitly for gay men.

In its attempt to make their app as addictive as possible they guys over at Grindr have failed to acknowledge the vulnerability of queer people across the world. If there was ever a better example of a "privatised, depoliticised gay culture" then I don't know what it is.

*This story is published courtesy of* [The Conversation](link) *(under Creative Commons-Attribution/No derivatives).*

Source: The Conversation

Citation: Grindr relents to user backlash – but does it respect its users? (2014, September 3) retrieved 18 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2014-09-grindr-relents-user-backlash-respect.html