

Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances Call for Input: the use of new technologies to search for LGBTIQ+¹ missing persons.

Involuntary disappearances in Colombia have, and continue to be a part of the repertoires of violence used to silence, exclude and eliminate individuals deemed to be undesirable, dangerous or threatening to the status quo. In the Colombian armed conflict, people were persecuted and systematically targeted for their real or perceived gender identities and sexual orientation, which resulted in disproportionate expressions of violence against LGBTIQ+ people including disappearances, with devastating consequences for individuals, chosen families and entire communities (Colombia Diversa 2020).

The Search for missing persons², in this, and other transitional or humanitarian contexts seeks to respond to searchers' right to know what happened and must also respond to broader efforts of truth and memory building, justice-seeking and guarantees of non-repetition. When investigating the disappearances of LGBTIQ+ people, the identification and documentation of their gender identity and sexual orientation is not only crucial to inform the whereabouts and fate³ of the missing person, but also to recognise and dignify their lived experience and identity.

Technological tools acquire different roles and respond to particular needs at each stage of the Search. Considering the Search process must be “multi-disciplinary, objective, integrated, holistic, exhaustive, multi-agency coordinated, and able to withstand peer review” (Salado et al. 2021), it is crucial that all tools designed to gather and review information - both investigative and criminalistic - are able to inform decision making processes to advance conclusions about the whereabouts and fate of the missing person, and the identification of the body (dead or alive). This includes information about the person's identity and experiences of violence that in the case of LGBTIQ+ people are closely linked to discrimination and experiences of prejudice-based violence and gender-based violence that in the case of the Colombian armed conflict can be linked to the crime of gender persecution.

Current data practices and intelligent systems designed to assist the Search for missing persons, rely on a binary understanding and classification of gender that ignore non-normative⁴

¹ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer+. The word queer, initially used as a slur, has been reclaimed by LGBTIQ+ people to define or describe any and all expressions of gender and sexuality that reject the gender binary, and challenge traditional gender norms. It recognizes and responds to the fluidity of gender and sexuality. The '+' symbol is used to include people that do not identify with the other sexual identities and orientations represented in the acronym.

² Salado et al. (2021) The Search (capital “S”) is a process that combines sub-processes conducive to determining the whereabouts and specific fate of a person.

³Salado et al. (2021). Fate refers to the state or condition of the person (alive or dead), while whereabouts relates to the person's journey and the circumstances that led to that state (fate) and location.

⁴ Gray (2016) Non-normative gender identities or expressions: the identities of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and those identifying as transgender or transsexual, as well as those identifying as queer



experiences and expressions (Holbeck 2021). Under the paradigm that archeological and anthropological tools and practices can *only* identify and document biological “truths” - namely binary biological sex categorizations - , information or markers that may lead to the identification of non-normative gender expressions are neglected, dismissed or become unaccounted for in reports, data analysis processes and hypothesis building during the Search. For example, pre-mortem forms gather information about victims’ sex assigned at birth, with no specific reference to their gender identity and expression. In the same way, sex estimation tools used to identify bodies and skeletal material, are limited to male-female categorizations, without accounting for the complex and diverse combinations of chromosomes, hormones and genitals, in addition to gender affirming procedures and body modifications (Holbeck 2021). This information is then documented in forms that leave no (or little) space for non-normative or non-conclusive findings of archeological and forensic procedures that may reveal information about diverse gender expressions, clothing, accessories or other indicators that can lead to the identification of LGBTIQ+ individuals.

An integrated approach to information processing that responds to the search of LGBTIQ+ individuals, involves the exhaustive search for details about the person (pre-mortem, perimortem and postmortem) with a gendered lens and the use of this information across the entire search process. This includes the creation and implementation of data collection tools (such as interviews, forms and storage systems) that are able to receive and process information about a person's gender identity and sexual orientation. These in turn must be able to lead to possible information providers (beyond consanguineal families) and hypothesize about the whereabouts and fate of the missing person to guide further search activities. These hypotheses must take into account a situated⁵ understanding of the local dynamics of gender and sexuality including discourses and languages of discrimination and prejudice against LGBTIQ+ persons, dynamics of targeting and repertoires of prejudice based violence, and places of gathering, socialization and organization of LGBTIQ+ individuals that can inform a queer reading of what happened (Colombia Diversa 2022). Finally, this input should be able to orient the use of intelligent systems and technological tools to search. For example, semantic, thematic and content data analysis, localization efforts with the use of drones, pattern recognition technologies, forensic facial reconstruction technologies and digital visualization processes can all benefit from specific information about the experiences of LGBTIQ+ individuals and groups in particular territories and local languages and expressions of gender and sexuality.

(a broad term for a wide range of non-normative sexual and gender identifications) and intersex. Collectively, these challenge prevailing binary gender norms and the hegemony of cis-heteronormativity, defying structures, institutions, relations and actions that promote and produce heterosexuality as natural, self-evident, desirable, privileged, and necessary’ (Cameron and Kulick 2003: 55).

⁵ Based on Donna Haraway's (1988) proposal of “situated knowledges” as a frame of understanding that asserts all knowledge is produced from a positional perspective (it is not objective) and therefore a reading that understands and analyses such positionality is crucial to address the bias built into assertions perceived as truths.



As data continues to be the most powerful and “neutral”⁶ form of evidence, the experiences and bodies that are not accounted for by data and intelligent systems are perceived to be non-existent (D’Ignazio & Klein 2016). Hence, data gathered and processed irreflectively and lacking a broader understanding of sex-gender spectrums ignores crucial social and cultural systems that must be accounted for in order to best inform the Search and fill with truth and dignity the narration of what happened to victims (Holbeck 2022). The documentation and systematization of information that fails to recognise LGBTIQ+ identities contribute to wider processes of underreporting and undermining of the disappearances of LGBTIQ+ people. This leads to widespread invisibility of the systematic and disproportionate and differential experiences of violence withstood by people with non-normative sexual orientations and gender identities. Ultimately, this can also hinder search processes and truth-building efforts.

We believe that new technologies for the search of missing persons can provide crucial tools to strengthen and speed up the process of searching for, and identifying a missing person, as well as inform search hypotheses, collective search processes, patterns of crime, and sites of forensic interest. Best practices in the development and use of new technologies for the Search must evaluate the bias embedded in these systems and work to address homophobia, transphobia, racism, classism and other forms of bias held by the individuals (mostly an academic, privileged primarily white elite) who create and employ such technologies (D’Ignazio & Klein 2016). This will advance the identification of the magnitude of the issue and contribute to a virtuous cycle of data production for decision making to document, search for, and identify LGBTIQ+ missing persons.

⁶ The neutrality of data systems and practices is questioned by D’Ignazio and Klein in “Data Feminism” where they critically address the human, hence inherently flawed processes of data collection, analysis and visualization.

Sources

- Colombia Diversa. 2020. "Who is going to tell us? Report for the Truth Commission on the experiences of LGBT people in the Colombian armed conflict". Colombia Diversa.
- Colombia Diversa. 2022. "Someone is searching for you: A guidebook to search for LGBTQ+ missing persons". Colombia Diversa.
- D'Ignazio, Catherine, y Lauren Klein. s/f. "Data Feminism · MIT Press Open". Consultado el 26 de enero de 2023. <https://mitpressonpubpub.mitpress.mit.edu/data-feminism>.
- EAAF. s/f. "Nuevas tecnologías de búsqueda forense". <https://eaaf.org/> (blog). Consultado el 30 de enero de 2023. <https://eaaf.org/nuevas-tecnologias/>.
- Franco Miguez, Darwin. 2019. "Tecnologías de esperanza. Apropiaciones tecnopolíticas para la búsqueda de personas desaparecidas en México. El caso de Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte". *Comunicación y sociedad* 16. <https://doi.org/10.32870/cys.v2019i0.7280>.
- Gray, John. 2016. *Language and Non-Normative Sexual Identities*. Routledge Handbooks Online. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315669816.ch14>.
- Haraway, Donna. 1988. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective". *Feminist Studies Inc.* 14 (3). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3178066>.
- Holbeck, Audrey. 2022. "Dismantling Binary Assumptions in Sex Estimation: Uplifting Trans and Gender Diverse Identities in Forensic Anthropology". *Honors Theses, University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, abril. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/honorstheses/428>.
- Salado Puerto, Mercedes, Denise Abboud, Jose Pablo Baraybar, Angel Carracedo, Stephen Fonseca, William Goodwin, Pierre Guyomarc'h, et al. 2021. "The Search Process: Integrating the Investigation and Identification of Missing and Unidentified Persons". *Forensic Science International: Synergy* 3 (enero): 100154. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fsisyn.2021.100154>.