Broadband has been credited with ‘opening up the world’ to people with disability, allowing them access to both employment and social opportunities. At the same time, people with disability struggle not to be left behind in this digital revolution. YouTube as it has provided opportunities to some people with disabilities while excluding others highlights the importance of a cultural conversation about the future of telecommunications in relation to both content and the medium of transmission.

As a disability cultural movement emerged in the 1990s, activists, academics and media producers argued that people with disability should be in charge of their own image. Further, these images must make the able bodied audience feel uncomfortable in order for social change to occur. YouTube is the realisation of this vision. I offer two YouTube productions as case studies; In My Language and Talk (parts 1 and 2). These films demonstrate the way in which disability is a social construction dependent on environment and prejudicial attitudes. The paper then moves to situate YouTube within the broader digital context as it has disadvantaged people with disability through an inaccessible network.

By bringing together Christopher Newell’s (and others) work across the three disciplines of media, disability and Internet studies, this paper generates an approach that recognises the equalising potential of Broadband telecommunications to provide a purposeful rebuilding of the disability narrative and work that still needs to be done in this area.

The purposeful use of narratives can help transform the lives of people with disability. […] In imagining such futures and telling stories we need to remember that when my whole life and story as a person with disability has been colonised and devastated, told by others for me, I will need to have some purposeful rebuilding not just of my individual story but of the collective story of people with disability.

—Christopher Newell (2008, 83)

Christopher listened carefully to the stories of others, especially those most marginalised whose accounts are often systematically ignored, disavowed or not well known, if at all. Thus he retold such stories when he spoke and wrote. His enthusiasm for story-listening and storytelling stemmed from a sense that such practices were of great use in confronting otherness – especially in the collective task of transforming the relations of who speaks and who listens, and the accepted modes of doing this.

—Gerard Goggin (2009a, 494)

Everyone can watch videos on YouTube. People can see first-hand accounts of current events, find videos about their hobbies and interests, and discover the
quirky and unusual. As more people capture special moments on video, YouTube is empowering them to become the broadcasters of tomorrow.

~YouTube Company History

INTRODUCTION

In 2006 Google’s chief executive officer Eric Schmidt described Google’s acquisition of YouTube as a ‘natural’ partnership and promised an exciting future for the already rapidly evolving telecommunications industry:

The YouTube team has built an exciting and powerful media platform that complements Google's mission to organise the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful. Our companies share similar values; we always put our users first and are committed to improve their experience (Information gatekeepers 2010).

YouTube and other platforms enabled via broadband have increased the impact of telecommunications on social life and relationships. Broadband has been credited with ‘opening up the world’ to people with disability in particular, allowing them access to both employment and social opportunities. At the same time, people with disability are struggling not to be left behind in this digital revolution (Martínez-Cabrera 2010). As Goggin and Newell (2003, 40) argue ‘disability in global telecommunications has been governed by narrow norms, left to the state in a world where increasingly the market rules’. This status often means that disability is disregarded. However, the innovative use of video streaming via broadband telecommunications is changing the social status of disability. The YouTube videos under discussion in this paper and the flow on positive effects for accessibility, take us to the ‘challenging place’ Christopher Newell referred to in his work where people with disability are accepted as part of the community (Newell 2004).

Goggin and Newell (2005b) contend that a discussion of technology as it benefits people with disability must consider two aspects; firstly, the role it plays in assisting the individual and secondly the influence it has on the way disability is ‘conceived, experienced, and framed in society’. A consideration of the innovative use of YouTube allows such an important discussion but importantly also reveals the potential of social exclusion via these same devices. This exclusion is analogous to a digital curb cut where features that enhance access for groups with a certain type of impairment can diminish accessibility for another.

Many theorists have recognised the importance of the Web to people with disability in terms of education (Li & Hammel 2003, Mullen et al 2007, Altree & Quard 2007, Hasselbring & Glaser 2000), employment (Westin 2005, Roulstone 1998), entertainment (Ability Net 2008), and social interaction (Istance et al 2008, Huang & Guo 2005). The possibility for people with disability to participate in broader society via digital avenues is an important outcome of the increased use of broadband. Yet, the increasing use of graphics, user generated content, and the tendency of web browsers to move away from web standards has created accessibility problems for people with disability (Craven 2008).

Borrowing from the definition of telecommunications as ‘networks [which] provide the foundations for digital interactive communications, supporting a wide variety of contemporary
communications and media [... including] video streaming’ Goggin and Newell (2003, 39) I argue that the video sharing site YouTube demonstrates tangible benefits to people with disability in relation to both representation and participation. In this sense, telecommunication refers to both the message and the medium through which it is sent. People with disability are demonstrating an innovative use of this new form of telecommunications in both of these areas with vibrant disability communities networking on the sites and people with disability working behind the scenes to make the platform more accessible.

The first part of this paper focuses on the representation of disability in the media and how disability theorists have suggested this should change in order to improve the social position of people with disability. As a disability cultural movement emerged in the 1990s, activists, academics and media producers argued that people with disability should be in charge of their own image. Further, these images must make the able bodied audience feel uncomfortable in order for social change to occur (Hevey 1997, 213). YouTube is the realisation of this vision. I offer two YouTube productions as case studies; In My Language and Talk (parts 1 and 2). These films demonstrate the way in which disability is a social construction dependant on environment and prejudicial attitudes.

The second section of the paper situates YouTube within the broader digital context as it has disadvantaged people with disability through an inaccessible network – and this despite the reigning view that the web would allow ‘access for everyone regardless of disability’ (Tim Berners-Lee 1997). However, just as Berners-Lee predicted regarding the ‘move towards a highly connected world’ (cited in Goggin and Newell 2003, 109); web accessibility has become increasingly important to the broader community. In their book Digital Disability Goggin and Newell lamented the lack of disability theorisation within the discipline of Internet studies (Goggin and Newell 2003). In a later article they took the more revolutionary stance suggesting that disability studies should start interrogating digital technologies within that discipline (Goggin and Newell 2005b). I will address both of these disciplines and their inter-relationship to consider the social and cultural impact of the current telecommunications environment on the independence of people with disability. I conclude with reflections towards this end.

**FRAMING DISABILITY**

Christopher Newell argued that a questioning of deeply entrenched accounts of normalcy, as they excluded people with disability, was vital to a discourse of Human Rights. In From Others to Us and Human Rights Education Newell invites us to consider the ways ‘we have allowed a variety of norms in the built environment and technologies to dominate’ (Newell 2008, 78). Newell argues that because these norms often exclude people with disability, it is apparent that disability is a ‘social issue demanding a human rights response’ (Newell 2008, 77). Newell’s work encourages us to think about disability as ‘a socio-political space’ (Goggin 2009a, 492) in which people with certain bodies are oppressed and others accorded the right to speak on their behalf:

> When we think about disability we are thinking about some of the most entrenched accounts of normalcy, that which is nice, normal and natural. In particular we see that medical accounts of disability are so dominant that so often I find people failing to understand the distinction between the impairments that I have and the way society regards me. (Newell 2008, 78–79)
Newell’s terminology draws on the social model of disability as articulated by Michael Oliver, who redefined disability as a social construction by separating impairment, which he located in the body, from disability – the social interpretation of that impairment (Oliver 1996, 22). Newell describes this disabling environment as a social choice arguing that ‘many of us have impairments, yet whether or not they become a disability depends upon physical structures and norms’ (Newell 2008, 78). As these ‘social norms’ are communicated via the media the theorisation of an inaccessible built environment must be expanded to include narratives, characters and images (Mitchell and Snyder 2000). Traditional media individualises disability by emphasising the importance of personal attitude through the ‘super cripple’ stereotype popularised in films such as My Left Foot, Born on the Fourth July, Forrest Gump and A Beautiful Mind. These inspirational heroes perpetuate the individualisation of disability and do not acknowledge the way people with disability are disabled by society (Goggin and Newell 2004, par9). Two popular YouTube films In My Language and Talk (parts 1 and 2) confront audiences with social disablement by revealing ability and disability as a series of social choices.

YouTube has a growing community of people with disability. A number of grassroots videos have emerged that question social interpretations of the experience of disability and the tendency of the media to value the ‘expert opinion’ of people who have no direct personal experience of living with disability. YouTube is structured to allow the audience to comment following each video. This has resulted in lively discussions that see users questioning each others’ perceptions and experiences. This feature of YouTube invites a consideration of production, text and reception in line with the recommendations of several theorists within disability media studies (Ellis 2008; Shakespeare 1999; Ferrier 2001). In this post-structural model the filmmaker and the spectator have equal weighting, as ideology and context are acknowledged. While wanting to effect social change is an important starting point for the filmmaker, audience reception is crucial to the acceptance of this change. An active audience engaged in politics accepts social responsibility (Hevey 1997, 213). YouTube certainly has an active audience with the potential to enact lasting change. YouTube is not a minority media, videos can be (and are) viewed by millions of people and can even be translated into other languages (Jackson 2007, 409).

Amanda Baggs’ In My Language depicts people with autism, including herself, as a linguistic minority and questions who has ‘the right to communicate and define one’s own identity within the culture’ (Verlanger 2008). Baggs’ offers a radically different way of representing disability, beyond the deficit and super cripple stereotypes we are so used to. The filmmaker’s way of interacting with the world is valued:

The first part is in my ‘native language’, and then the second part provides a translation, or at least an explanation. This is not a look-at-the-autie gawking freakshow as much as it is a statement about what gets considered thought, intelligence, personhood, language, and communication, and what does not (Baggs 2007).

The film does not aestheticise impairment in order to make it entertaining or easier to watch, and furthermore highlights the intersecting experience of impairment and social disablement. Baggs can be seen in the film rocking back and forward, making a constant ‘e’ sound and performing repetitive behaviours such as running a tap and moving her fingers across a keyboard.
The film has initiated an energetic cultural conversation through YouTube’s format which allows the filmmaker to provide context and the audience to comment – indeed a conversation. Some agree with Baggs’ critique of socially constructed notions of personhood:

Unfortunately, when people (scientists or general public) find somebody not understandable, they just label them as ‘strange’, ‘deficient’ or ‘inferior’. It happens to people with autism or other mental conditions, but also happens to another race (black, asian)

[ … ] We use our self-centered, over-simplified standard to judge other beings. After watching your video, I realise that how foolish and arrogant we are… Thank you!
(post to Baggs)

This comment echoes Newell’s position on the way that people with disability are not treated as the experts in the narrative of their own lives (Goggin 2009a, 493). However, others do not believe that Baggs is offering a critique of restrictive interpretations of communication:

How can you even begin to claim that you’re having a conversation, when you’re not even establishing any sort of sense? You’re like a homeless man screaming at parked cars and calling it a ‘debate’.
(post to Baggs)

Yet Baggs is communicating, both in the film and through her activity in the YouTube forum. Baggs comments that ‘this is not a freakshow gawk at the autie film, rather it’s a strong statement about what we value and what we don’t’. The potential contradictions of this were debated by the YouTube community:

Wonderful video, but I have to ask: should thinking – any kind of thinking – equal personhood? Is that all there is to a person? Is that all that we should value and protect? It seems that your argument would lead to a marginalisation of those things and people that cannot think.
(post to Baggs)

Narrative was vital to Newell’s conception of confronting otherness (Goggin 2009a, 494). For Kestrell Verlanger (2008) In My Language is an eloquent example of the types of cultural conversations suddenly available through new media and broadband technologies:

[W]hile other cultural groups are constructing categories of taste about the value of new media over old, people with disabilities are always experimenting with new tools and technologies that will allow them to participate in the culture at large. Often it is the mere act of participating, of breaking into cultural conversations, which becomes a political act.

Verlanger claims that for this reason people with disability are often the earliest adopters of new technologies. Broadband, which allows video streaming sites such as YouTube, provides a
new opportunity for media representation by putting control into the hands of people with disabil-
ity. Seth Godwin (cited in Zetter 2009) describes the conversational features of social net-
working sites including YouTube as the emergence of a new type of tribe. He argues that through
this cultural conversation people become ‘connected to each other, to a leader and to an idea’
and that lasting social change is possible as a result.

The Talk series produced by the Disability Rights Commission (2007) likewise provides rich
interpretative grounds for considering how disability is socially constructed through an unadaptive
environment and prejudicial attitudes. These films follow the experiences of Robert, an able
bodied worker charged with the task of looking into what his company should do about the new
Disability Discrimination Act, albeit with the agenda of doing just enough to stay ahead of their
competitors in the corporate world. Given that his cousin is disabled, Robert thinks he knows
what it’s like ‘for them’ however he doesn’t think the company should spend too much money,
especially due to the fact he doesn’t think anyone with a disability actually works for them.

Uninspired by the task, Robert falls asleep at the computer, only to wake up in a world where
having no disability is a barrier. He is unable to communicate in sign language on the street, he
is stuck in the rain as wheelchair taxi after wheelchair taxi drives past him and later finds that
he can’t get home by ‘wheelchair only’ bus. Indeed everywhere he goes people are condescending
and patronising. Throughout his life, Newell likewise had similar feelings of frustration when
social constructions excluded him:

> A wheelchair user, in 2008 I am still needing to take complaints about access
to premises and know the reality of waiting in a wheelchair in the rain for hours
while non-disabled colleagues head off with no delay in non-wheelchair accessible
taxi (Newell 2008, 78).

Although an attractive man, Robert finds it difficult to gain female attention and is treated
like some kind of sexual novelty. Newell likewise admitted to an overwhelming ‘lifelong and
daily socialisation’ regarding his romantic potential. Newell uses his initial apprehension regarding
marriage to demonstrate the way the exclusion of disability is internalised by all of us (Goggin
& Newell 2005a, 200). The Talk films also reveal this internalisation by creating a world where
the non-disabled are disabled by the actions and attitudes of people with disability. When Robert
is unable to read a form written in Braille or when people in a night club rub his head and tell
him how brave he is for coming out, and how great his mates are for taking him places, it’s clear
that Robert is not the problem, the rest of the world is. These films show that disability is society’s
unwillingness to accommodate the needs of people with impairments. This unwillingness is
evident through both the physical environment and the prejudicial attitudes. Robert’s inability
to communicate via Braille or sign language is clearly more about hegemonic communication
practices than any deficit on his part.

These YouTube videos are the creative realisation of pioneering disability social modellist
Vic Finklestein’s imaginary community where everyone uses a wheelchair. The physical world
is structured accordingly, as are social relationships and it is the ‘able-bodied’ visitors to the
world who are disabled (Finklestein 1980, 31). These imaginary scenarios reveal the social creation
of disadvantage and restriction of activity in response to impairment. The world in which Robert
finds himself in a very unwelcoming place – fellow diners in a restaurant are outraged by his mere presence and there is no possible way for him to be successful at a job interview he attends.

While YouTube has attracted a lively disability community and allowed people with disability, and disability rights organisations, a way to redefine the narrative of disability, it has been heavily criticised for being inaccessible to people with a number of impairments. The UK disability organisation Ability Net only gave it 1 star (out of 5) in their 2008 review of social networking sites. While new media is affording new opportunity for representation of disability, issues of accessibility cannot be glossed over (Goggin 2009b, 7). It is encouraging to note however, that paralleling the increased presence of disability activism on YouTube, is the prioritisation of an accessible Internet.

**DIGITAL DISABILITY**

As a way to participate in social networks and advocate for a more equitable and accessible world, the Web is a crucial medium for people with disability. Broadband allows a number of different ways to communicate using, for example, text, still images, moving images, and sounds. The opportunity to participate in the creation of ‘user generated content’ in ways that suit the user has proved invaluable to people with disability. However, while advantaging some, these modes of access can simultaneously block others from participation. For example, without captions people with hearing impairments cannot authentically experience YouTube videos. For this reason, measures to improve access for people with disability have become increasingly important to people with disability.

Although web accessibility is of most benefit to people with disabilities, older people and people in the developing world, the recent trend toward mobile applications and Internet usage suggests the majority of Internet users would benefit from accessibility options (Zajicek 2007, 1). Digital information is most useful when it can be accessed by users with different needs in different ways. For example people with vision impairment have adopted podcasts while people with hearing impairments opt for video blogging (Goggin and Noonan 2006, 166). As these YouTube videos demonstrate, the social and personal commentary enabled via broadband telecommunications potentially advances a social understanding of disability that moves beyond and between the medical and social divide (see also Goggin and Noonan 2006; Ellis 2009).

Although accessibility has become more widely understood by web developers, many struggle with measures as simple as providing meaningful alternative text for images (Zajicek 2007, 2). As the Web becomes more complex and dependant on visual imagery and sound, alternative (ALT) text becomes more and more important. ALT text is a tag attached to the image that describes what the image is attempting to communicate in the context of the site. This text allows users with vision impairment to access a non-visual alternative. Similarly, people with hearing impairments are provided with the means to enjoy the video mode through captions. According to Ability Net in 2008, YouTube still had a long way to go in this respect:

> On the first page of the website, and in any search result listings, a thumbnail image of the video is used as the link to the actual video. However, the thumbnail image does not have any alt text assigned to it so a screen reader user will just hear the image filename, often cryptic and meaningless.
In 2009 Ken Harrenstien, a Software Engineer for Google/Youtube announced on his blog that Youtube was now automatically captioning all of its videos:

more and more people are becoming aware of how useful captions can be. [...] captions not only help the deaf and hearing impaired, but with machine translation, they also enable people around the world to access video content in any of 51 languages. Captions can also improve search and even enable users to jump to the exact parts of the videos they’re looking for

This demonstrates that ‘technologies and innovations designed to improve access by the disabled actually enhance access for all users’ (Ellis and Kent 2008). YouTube’s enhanced accessibility features are of great benefit to all people. This is particularly so in light of the recent mainstreaming of video search technology (Whitney 2008). The automatic captioning service demonstrates YouTube’s philosophy of continually improving their service by putting their users first. Further, it demonstrates the broader benefits of not treating users with disability as an afterthought. Harrenstien’s argument that captions improve search highlights the need to think about constructions of ableness rather than disability as deficit (see Campbell 2009, Goggin 2008). While a focus on users with disability is highly unusual, in this case it has done much to move Google forward towards its aim of making information accessible to all.

Captioning had been available since 2006 but had not been universally adopted because it wasn’t considered important by the content generators. For Goggin and Newell (2003), the Internet will never be fully accessible until disability is considered a cultural identity in line with class, gender and sexuality. Google and YouTube have a responsibility in initiating this shift, as the technical skill required to construct a blog, wiki or web page is minimal. Harrenstien, who has a hearing impairment, has pledged a ‘long-term goal of making videos universally accessible’ (Harrenstien 2009). While this first generation of automatic captioning has some flaws, it is an important step in making Youtube more accessible. It can reasonably be predicted that technological advancement in the future will result in further advancements in the achievement of accessibility.

By building accessibility into the initial template, end users will recognise the value of increasing accessibility (Gibson 2007, 4). Now that Internet giants such as Google and YouTube have started a conversation about accessibility, end-users are becoming more aware of the far-reaching benefits of accommodating for people with disability. As time goes on the general public will more and more question what are in reality unacceptably disabling technologies:

Once upon a time we had accounts of women as inherently inferior, based on so-called scientific accounts. Once upon a time we cherished myths of different creeds and races as other, even constructing a science of phrenology […] Yet the medical account that has been so central to the oppression of so many social groupings and narration as other is even more pernicious when we think of […] disability (Newell 2008, 79).

Newell calls for a respectful narration of the lives of people with disability, beyond that of ‘special needs’ in order to reveal the oppression that people with disability experience as something from which all people need to be liberated (Newell 2008, 83). While a more rigorous investigation
of disability studies within the burgeoning field of Internet studies is required, in light of both the exciting debates on YouTube and its improving accessibility measures, the discipline of disability studies needs to embark on an examination of Internet technologies.

This is especially important given recent calls to interrogate ableism rather than disability in these types of discussions (Campbell 2009). The broad uptake of mobile devices to access the web confronts many of the same access issues that people with disability routinely experience. If web designers continue to ignore accessibility, mobile Internet users, like many people with disability, will find themselves disabled by the network. In the context of the digital divide, the obstacles faced by people with disability shed light on the potential problems each of us could encounter if excluded from the web (Liccardi et al 2007). This exclusion of people with disability is at odds with what the World Wide Web was intended to be.

In articulating his vision for a platform to share information, Tim Berners-Lee (1997) believed that access for everyone regardless of disability was a crucial factor. Although integral, disability is rarely foregrounded as a case study or recognised for its potential to move grand visions forward. Digital technologies, including the Internet, broadband and advanced telecommunications have the potential to revolutionise our lives and have been held up as a way to eradicate disability yet disappointingly continue to ‘build in’ disability at the point of production (Goggin and Newell 2003, xiii–xv).

Since the publication of Digital Disability in 2003, there have been massive shifts in the way the web is used and developed. Although they foresaw the important role that video streaming could have for people with disability, YouTube did not become a reality until 2005. Using the framework of Goggin and Newell (2003), it becomes apparent that YouTube is an example of how people with disability can be both empowered and disabled by the network. Accessibility issues are more widely understood in 2010 than in 2003 when Goggin and Newell were first writing, yet restrictions on accessibility remain. This is primarily due to the continued existence of the social prejudices that Goggin and Newell sought to expose. At the same time, this social prejudice is being exposed on sites such as YouTube as they offer a purposeful rebuilding of the disability narrative and promote accessible technologies in their quest to make information universally accessible and useful. YouTube, with its vibrant disability activism community is leading the way in creating a socio-political space in which to confront disability and has had a significant impact on the accessibility turn in broadband technologies.

CONCLUSION

In the Conclusion to Disability in Australia: Exposing a Social Apartheid, a book he co wrote with Gerard Goggin, Christopher Newell confronts the feelings of social pressure he experiences as an academic with disability in the masculinist Australian culture:

Perhaps in Christopher’s striving to do too much he has taken on the very values which say we need to ‘do better than our best’ values associated with being a ‘super crip’. This can be a very real issue for many people with disabilities as they are exposed to some degree of success and opportunity, and to do all that non-disabled super-achievers manage (Goggin & Newell 2005a, 204)
That such a prominent disability theorist was willing to publically confront being influenced by the super cripple social values reveals the importance of offering another discourse. The YouTube films discussed in this paper offer a purposeful rebuilding of the collective story of people with disability. They recognise the social construction of disability and value the experiences of people like Christopher Newell.

While the media representation of people with disability is linked to ‘larger cultural modes of representation’ (Goggin & Newell 2005a, 94), Youtube is offering a varied representation precisely because it is a different media. The cultural conversation that allows filmmakers to have their say in their productions and then engage with people making comments later is revolutionising disability representation, increasing the visibility of disability, and highlighting access issues. However, new forms of exclusion, such as inaccessibility are likewise arising through these new disability cultures.

YouTube, as an example of an innovative telecommunications technology embraced by people with disability, is important to disability studies and people with disability in two ways. Firstly, it allows for different types of representations and encourages discussions around this. Secondly, YouTube’s recent focus on accessibility reveals that impairment and disability are crucial factors influencing whether people with disability can access this technology.

While it is important to celebrate the innovative use of broadband and other telecommunications technologies in assisting individuals with disability, it is vital too that we ‘explore the continuing nature of disabling telecommunications’ (Goggin and Newell 2003, 39). By bringing together Newell’s (and others) work across the three disciplines of media, disability and Internet studies I hope to generate an approach that recognises the equalising potential of Broadband telecommunications to provide a purposeful rebuilding of the disability narrative. A focus on cultural conversation rather than assistance likewise reveals the way disability can continue to be built into the network at the point of production and work that still needs to be done to avoid this.

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