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iTechnology as cure or iTechnology as empowerment: What do North American news media report?

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Abstract

With the growth of tablet technology as a communication method for many people with disabilities, the news media have created new narratives about disability, as well as reinforcing older narratives. This project evaluates U.S. and Canadian print news media coverage of people with communication disabilities and iTechnology (Apple products), as well as other new tablet and smart phone technology, being used as communication devices. Using qualitative analysis, the project investigates media coverage since 2007, when the first iPhone was available, through 2012 (N=98). Themes evaluated in the stories were related to the medical model, the social model, and the Supercrip model, as well as investigating economic models related

to the expense of and access to iTechnology. These media stories are rich texts that illustrate how news narratives about disability are changing, especially when disability stories intersect with the new hot topic of iTechnology.

Liberation. Revolution. Cure. Miracle. Even magic. These are just a few of the words the news media use to describe the growth of tablet, smartphone and iTechnology used by people with communication disabilities, particularly children. These words represent the media's praise toward devices that people with disabilities use to communicate, primarily applied to Apple products. Such words also represent the social construction of disability as a problem needing a solution by denying people with disabilities a role in employing iDevices meaningfully in their respective environments. Many in the news audience can point to stories about "the miracle" of "little Johnny or Suzy with autism" communicating for the very first time. It is the prevalence of these kinds of stories that has led to this research project.

The research focuses on the U.S. and Canadian print news media and their "uplifting" narratives about miracles and liberation. The positive twist of many of these news narratives is ironic given that the news media are often criticized for their somewhat constant negative news about disability topics (Haller, 2010). The textual analysis (McKee, 2005) of these news stories looked for theableist dynamic wherein technologies received plenty of praise for their role in "aiding" or "helping" people with disabilities, i.e. "rescuing" people from a seemingly dark abyss of clunky outdated communication technology or no communication methods at all. Technology, it seems, gets lots of press, while the useful and sometimes creative adaptations of these technologies by people with disabilities for purposes of communication are mostly overlooked. The technology devices became the star subjects of the stories, while writers insert people with disabilities as objects to signify the good these technologies can do.

The research analyzed 98 media reports from the United States (N=76) and Canada (N=22). The USA has 1,422 daily newspapers (Library of Congress, 2013), and Canada has 122 daily newspapers (Newspapers Canada, 2013). The project investigated print news media coverage since 2007, when the first iPhone became available, to 2012. The analysis sought to understand how news narratives about disability are changing. It should be noted that this project is narrowly focused on disabilities that affect communication because such stories offer particularly vivid evidence of a contemporary limitation of the news media when it comes to newer disability narratives. Therefore, the project's general objective was to investigate how U.S. and Canadian news stories framed their coverage of the use of tablets, smartphones, and other iTechnology by people with communication disabilities.

Literature Review

People With Disabilities And New Technology

Access to new technology and online communication has been changing people's lives all over the world for several decades. For example, Fallows (2004) identified three ways the Internet is changing the way Americans live: by tapping into information; by improving social contacts; and by making people more efficient (2004). Researchers have also demonstrated how engaging with the Internet aids people with disabilities, from improving their quality of life to contributing to a sense of well-being (Naslund & Gardelli, 2013; Moisey & van de Keere, 2007). Moisey and van de Keere's study of recreational Internet use among adults with developmental disabilities pointed to three major benefits to information and communication technology (ICT): providing recreational outlets that relieved boredom and connected them to others, including advocacy networks and friends; increased cognitive stimulation, which consequently resulted in a notable enthusiasm for learning including e-learning; and enhancing people's sense of well-being by fostering a sense of belonging (2007).

For example, Naslund and Gardelli's research (2013) shows that people with disabilities use technology to influence their levels of activity by improving sensory motor skills and triggering a people's curiosity to try new things. As a result, some participants formed relationships with others through ICT activities. In this respect, access to technology opened doors for networking, communicating, and searching for employment among other activities honed to each participant's particular interests: "The results show that accessing and using the computer does not mean that one is sitting solely alone in front of the computer. Instead, by interacting with other people, staff, classmates, and other adults in the peer group, the use of computers becomes part of a community project" (Naslund and Gardelli, p. 38).

Since the 1980s, scholars from a variety of fields have seen the promise of technology for many people with disabilities. California State University at Northridge has been hosting the Technology and Persons with Disabilities annual conference since 1985, which features everything from information about accessibility to employment. In the 1990s, media and disability scholar Jack Nelson (1994, 2000) wrote often about how he felt the Internet would change the lives of many people with disabilities. He saw it as a way for people with disabilities to better access the social world without leaving their home computers. Media latched onto this narrative early, with the Internet being heralded as the "liberating technology" for people with disabilities in a 1994 issue of *U.S. News & World Report* (Sussman, 1994). That article proposed that being online could lead to people with disabilities being less isolated, as well as allowing for people with disabilities to interact with nondisabled people with fewer barriers (Sussman, 1994).

And more recent technology for general use, like iPhones and tablets, is being adapted specifically for people with communication disabilities. Many augmentative communication devices that existed before iTechnology used

Minspeak, a product which was developed by Bruce Baker in 1980. A doctoral student in linguistics, Baker created a language system with *Minspeak* that uses pictures and icons on a computer keyboard rather than letters (Baker, 2009).

Before laptops and tablets were used as communication devices, many people with communication disabilities used Minspeak or simple notebooks filled with pictures to make sentences out of the icons or pictures. Communication devices using *Minspeak* were and are expensive, however. For example, in 2014, the augmentative and assistive communication (AAC) device, Accent 1200 costs $14,495 [USD] (Prentke Romich, 2014). Simple notebooks with pictures have always been very low cost, although bulky. In the Internet age, this lack of access to communication technology can cause other problems for people with communication disabilities. Research shows lack of access to communication technology contributes to the online exclusion of people with disabilities; they wind up falling behind nondisabled people on culturally relevant communication methods (Moisey & van de Keere, 2007). Although much less expensive than many AAC devices, tablets such as iPads remain unaffordable for many people. As Haller explains, "technology does not create a barrier-free utopia for people with disabilities; much of the new technology … gives disabled people more access to American [and Canadian] society, if they have the monetary resources to afford the cost of the new technology" (Haller, 2010, p. 26).

Now that iPads and iPhones are becoming a part of many people's everyday lives in North America, the news media has begun to take notice of their use for people, especially children, with communication disabilities. New technology being used in innovative ways easily fits with what the U.S. and Canadian media deem newsworthy. So it is unsurprising that the rise in iTechnology used by people with communication disabilities illuminates an evolving corner of disability culture that is now appearing in mainstream news publications.

Framing Theory

Past literature has pointed to problems with the frames the news media use when writing stories about disability topics. Framing is a concept by which the news media shape how stories are understood by audiences (Goffman, 1974; Davis & Kent, 2006; Haller, 2010; Haller et al., 2006; O'Malley, 2008; Haller, 1999; Valenzeula, 1999). O'Malley explains frame theory as referring to the expectations of the world, "based on prior experience, against which new experiences are measured and interpreted" (2008, p. 21).

News media frame disability through images and words that are often stereotypical: for example, a white man in a wheelchair as ill or a person with schizophrenia as detached from reality (Haller, 2000; Ross, 2001; Jones & Horwood, 2001; Haller, 1999; Schneider, 2003; Boyer, 1988). Framing occurs not only in the body of the text of the story, but also in the presentation of the

story through means such as images, headlines, and page layout in a newspaper or the story's position in a broadcast line-up. Importantly, some people and issues will be ignored altogether; they are outside the frame. For example, Canadian disability studies scholar Tanya Titchkosky examines disability through headlines, because headlines "frame a topic for the imagined reader," and they make meaning for someone who is looking for something sensible and interesting (2007, p. 120). "[Frames] *govern* our ways of knowing, taking interest in [something] and explaining it," she writes (2007, p. 120).

Frames of disability issues suggest news gatherers are not sensitive to the changing nature of disability as an equal rights movement (Boyer, 1988, p. 45). So media and disability scholars Clogston and Haller developed eight different types of frames for understanding news media stories about disability; these frames helped develop the themes used to evaluate the stories about iTechnology and people with communication disabilities. Clogston's categories of framing (1991, 1994) include: the social pathology model, which pegs people with disabilities as charity cases; the medical model, which links disability to illness and relies on medical information to tell a story of human deficits; the "supercrip" model wherein some people "overcome" disabilities to live regular lives; the "minority/civil rights model," which categorizes people with disabilities as part of a specific community seeking equal rights; and the cultural pluralism model, wherein people with disabilities are presented in the same way non-disabled people might be portrayed. Haller (2000) has also developed three more frames: the business model, wherein equality for people with disabilities comes with a monetary cost to society; the legal model, in which people with disabilities fight for rights in the court system; and the consumer model, which considers people with disabilities as a new consumer base.

Other researchers have identified other frames. Karen Ross's research on radio journalism, in particular, explains that some people with disabilities feel represented as "tragic but brave," "dependent and helpless," "bitter and twisted," and/or "sexless and isolated" (Ross, 2001, p. 425). Other literature points to concerns that people with disabilities are portrayed as a liability; their humanity an afterthought (Jones, 2012; Ross, 1997; Cumberbatch & Negrine, 1992). Writer Karen Finlon Dajani (2001) identifies the "handicap role" as a trope often employed when someone is presented as having overcome limitations from a disabling condition (p. 198). Ross (2001, 1997) points out that one person's attempt to fight a particular impairment becomes the benchmark story, implying that anyone else with that impairment should be battling it as well.

Therefore, evaluating U.S. and Canadian news coverage of iTechnology and its intersection with disability culture offers an understanding of disability communication technology and its place in Canadian and American social culture. Naslund and Gardelli highlight the importance of exploring (the often negative) societal attitudes and expectations towards people with disabilities (2013). As Haller (2010) explains, dominant societal beliefs shaped by ableist

culture influence media content which, in turn, impacts North America's wider cultural understanding of disability. And, because journalism tends to both reflect and shape social attitudes towards disability, close readings of journalistic narratives offer insight into how, where and when communication technologies are emerging in the lives of people with disabilities and the general social attitude toward people with disabilities.

Methodology

This qualitative textual analysis sought to understand news narratives in the framing of stories about tablet and iPhone technology and people with communication disabilities, so it analyzed all stories on the topic in U.S. and Canadian daily newspapers from 2007-2012 (N=98). 1 The stories were evaluated for themes, sources, disabilities, and technologies mentioned. The themes analyzed in the stories were related to the medical model, the social model (Tremain, 2005; Shakespeare, 2010), and the supercrip model (Clogston, 1991, 1992; Haller, 2010), as well as economic models related to the expense of and access to iTechnology.

This study follows the textual analysis methodology proposed by Alan McKee (2005) that examines dominant cultural discourses in news texts, as well as Christians and Carey's notion (1981) that the qualitative researcher should assess all aspects of the media texts such as story sources, direct and indirect quotes, language/terminology used, themes about people with disabilities and communication technology and missing perspectives about the topic. Qualitative content analysis allows us to assess how ableist cultural beliefs about disability may be imbedded in the news frames of stories about a disability topic.

A number of studies have already shown how these beliefs make their way into general representations of disability in news media (Biklen, 1987; Clogston, 1989, 1990, 1991; Cumberbatch & Negrine, 1992; Haller, 1993, 1995, 2000a, Haller and Ralph, 2001, Lellis, 2009, McColl and Bickenbach, 1998; Boyer 1988). Additional studies of journalism revealed that disability issues were frequently misunderstood and misrepresented by journalists (Gardner & Radel, 1978; Yoshida, Wasilewski & Friedman, 1990; Keller et al, 1990; Haller, 2000b; Jones & Harwood, 2009; Jones 2012).

Many of these analyses, however, were quantitative studies that looked at general disability coverage, rather than a specific disability issue such as communication technology for people with disabilities. For this study, a qualitative assessment was chosen because it fits well with the analysis of frames (what this research calls themes) in news texts. A news frame is defined here as a "central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143).

Qualitative analysis also adds richness and is a context-based content analysis. Christians and Carey (1981) say that a mission of qualitative studies is to

understand better the interpretations of meaning and values that take place in media texts. Gamson (1985) adds that this is especially important in analysis of news frames.

> News frames are almost entirely implicit and taken for granted. They do not appear to either journalists or audiences as social constructions but as primary attributes of events that reporters are merely reflecting. News frames make the world look normal. They determine what is selected, what is excluded, what is emphasized (Gamson, 1985, p. 617).

This has significant implications for news coverage of a disability issue such as technology for people with communication disabilities because many journalists continue to represent disability as a medical problem or social deviance (Clogston, 1990). Also, as media ethics scholar Deni Elliott reports, journalists do not see the analogy between a minority group status and disabled people because they believe "there is something abnormal about being disabled" (Elliott, 1994, p. 77). This belief in the "abnormality of disability" can lead to misrepresentative or negative news frames, and in turn, these frames can influence public understanding of people with communication disabilities. Many times, these news frames are imbued with the "ableism" present in North American culture (Davis, 1999; Linton, 1998; Hehir, 2005, 2002, Campbell, 2008; Weeber, 1999; Phillips, 1990).

Frames as they have been applied to disability in the news informed the development of the 15 themes used to evaluate the 98 news stories about iTechnology and people with communication disabilities. See below:

Table 1. Themes evaluated in news stories:

1. Disability is presented as an illness/affliction dependent on health professionals or educators for cures or remediation.
2. People with disabilities are presented as disadvantaged who must look to the state or to society for economic support, which is considered a gift, not a right.
3. People with disabilities are portrayed as superhuman, inspirational, or "special."
4. Parents/family members of people with disabilities are portrayed as superhuman, inspirational, or "special."
5. iTechnology is portrayed as allowing the person to "overcome" the disability or an aspect of the disability.
6. People with disabilities and their iTechnology are presented as expensive and costly to society.
7. People with disabilities are presented as members of a "community," minority group or social group, who are deserving of access to assistive technology.
8. People with disabilities are presented as members of a "community," minority group or social group, who are deserving of equal rights.

9. People with disabilities are presented as having rights to technology/education/communication, no matter the expense.
10. People with disabilities are portrayed as able-bodied people would be in stories about iTechnology, i.e. the technology empowers everyone equally.
11. People with disabilities are presented as potential consumers, for whom making access to empowering technology could be profitable to businesses and society in general.
12. iTechnology is presented as affordable to all.
13. iTechnology is presented as replacing previous forms/attempts at communication.
14. The person with a disability is represented as "cured" by the technology/the disability no longer is a "problem."
15. People with disabilities are presented as needing separate services/education/programs rather than being included in the programs in which everyone participates.

Findings

Thirty-eight articles tapped disabling conditions, such as cerebral palsy, epilepsy, autism, diabetes, and Down syndrome. As expected, autism was the most prevalent disability mentioned, in more than half the stories. (Autism was one of the search terms because we anticipated the use of communication-related technology for people on the spectrum to receive news coverage.) Most of the stories were about children or teens with disabilities, rather than adults. One plausible explanation for the absence of adults with disabilities in the news stories is old popular disability stereotypes such as the "poster child." Although some in the news media go beyond the deeply-ingrained image of disabled poster children being helped by technology, many do not.

The fact that adults with disabilities were mostly absent from these news stories can most likely be explained by the lack of resources for adults with disabilities. Even those adults with disabilities who gain access to iPads during rehabilitation programs may not have the funds for iTechnology of their own. For example, American senior citizens over age 65 cannot use Medicare insurance for an iPad; Medicare only will fund AAC devices that cannot be used as computers (WebMD, 2012). *The New York Times* had one of the few stories within the stories analyzed that mentioned the fact that insurance does not cover an iPad as a communication device: "Since its debut in April, the iPad has become a popular therapeutic tool for people with disabilities of all kinds, though no one keeps track of how many are used this way, and studies are just getting under way to test its effectiveness, which varies widely depending on diagnosis.... The iPad is also, generally speaking, less expensive than computers and other gadgets specifically designed to help disabled people speak, read or write. While insurers [in the U.S.] usually do not cover the cost of mobile devices like the iPad because they are not medical equipment, in

some cases they will pay for the applications that run on them" (Hager, 2010, p. B7).

In Canada, although some provincial and territorial health care systems may provide a portion of financial support to cover the costs of assistive devices, such support depends on eligibility that varies from one region to another. In Ontario, for example, assistive devices must be authorized by a health professional and purchased within the provincial Assistive Devices Program. Clients are expected to share a portion of the cost of the devices, and only people who can prove they have had a physical disability for more than six months and do not require the devices exclusively for sports, work, or school are eligible. Canadians are urged by Health Canada to look to community and non-profit organizations for financial support (Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-term Care, 2013; Krzyszton, personal communication, August 6, 2013).

In the analysis, the study noted who was missing from (or secondary to) reporting about communications technology (often people with disabilities, particularly ones who are old, intellectually disabled, and/or poor). In terms of sources in the stories, this study found that about one-third of the stories interviewed a child/teen with a disability. This finding was somewhat surprising because in the past many people with disabilities (especially young people) have not been included in stories about themselves. This may have been because the technology used to communicate was present in contexts where it was not present in the past, therefore leaving room for one-on-one interviews with disabled sources. Nevertheless, the most prominent source in the stories was usually a parent or family member of a person with a disability, which was less surprising and typical of stories about people—especially children—with disabilities. As most of the stories focused on education, teachers or special educators were sources in about one-third of the stories as well. Because schools are the ones bringing iTechnology to children and teens with disabilities, this is unsurprising. Also, education beat stories are safe to cover because it is generally understood that advances in education for anyone is a popular topic, which leaves room for uplifting, often trite, disability-related stories. About one-fourth of the stories also included speech therapists, autism organizations and general disability organizations. So, a common story to come across was an upbeat account about a child with autism in a communication setting, sometimes speaking for herself or himself, but often being spoken for or about through someone else.

The most prevalent themes found were:

- **Theme 5.** iTechnology is portrayed as allowing the person to "overcome" the disability or an aspect of the disability (57 stories).
- **Theme 13.** iTechnology is presented as replacing previous forms/attempts at communication (30 stories).
- **Theme 15.** People with disabilities are presented as needing separate services/education/programs rather than being included in the programs in which everyone participates (27 stories).

Here are some examples of how the prominent themes were played out in the news stories. An example of theme 5 about people "overcoming" their disability through the technology could be found in a 2011 newspaper feature from *The Union Leader*, a Manchester, N.H., newspaper, about iPads helping autistic children: "Two-year-old Niall Murray presses a shiny red apple to his mouth, and his little tongue laps tentatively at the fruit. It's such a small moment. But for his parents, David and Kathy Murray of Hooksett, it's a small miracle. And it came about because of the iPad" (Bradley, 2011, 1A). In this story, we observe that the technology is credited for giving children the ability to communicate their thoughts and "overcome" communication barriers. This type of framing seems to discount other forms of communication children may use to get their thoughts across to others. Several stories assumed that such technology has allowed children to learn "life skills that [have] eluded them for years" (e.g. Bradley, 2011, p. 1A). The reporting ignores the children's already-learned communication skills, not perceived by parents as "normal."

Theme13 about iTech replacing previous forms of communication can be found in a story from *The Stamford Advocate* in Connecticut, about the use of iPads in a classroom for kids with autism: "McClafferty is in the final stages of developing an iPad application for ASD students, which will help with speech and language skills. 'Typically, ASD teachers carry around a whole bunch of flashcards to help teach verbal skills. It can get expensive, and there's really only one of each card in a deck,' McClafferty said. 'What I created on the iPad is a replacement for that with enormous flexibility'" (Gordon, 2011). Here again, iTechnology is credited with revolutionizing communication by replacing older forms of communication. Very few stories acknowledged multiple modes of communication beyond iTechnology. The argument in the news story suggests that flashcards are somehow less expensive than iPads. This type of framing can be linked to the Western mentality that newer technology is always better, which in turn fits with mainstream news values that consider anything new and changing as story-worthy in the journalistic sphere.

Theme 13 about people with disabilities as needing separate services or programs is seen in a story from *The News Courier*, an Athens, Alabama newspaper, about how iPads are being used to educate children in the segregated special education classroom:

> Johnstone told the board she teaches special education students with moderate autism to learning disabilities. One student in her class is completely non-verbal and he was able to use the iPad as a communication device. 'He could tell us what he wanted through pictures,' she said. Johnstone said she was thankful for the opportunity to use iPads in her classroom. 'The opportunities are endless,' she said. 'There is something to fit every need right at your fingertips' (Scripps, 2012).

This example speaks to using technology within a segregated setting in the name of promoting improved communication methods for specific children. But there is no mention of integrating students with disabilities into the regular classroom once

they have a communication method. Children will want to communicate with their classmates primarily. And in an inclusive setting, nondisabled children will learn from their disabled classmates to understand and respect multiple styles of communication.

Theme 2 is informed by the social pathology model in which people with disabilities are presented as disadvantaged and must look to the state or to society for economic support, which is considered a gift, not a right. An example of this theme was found in the *Austin American-Statesman* in Texas: "'The foundation gave the school money to buy that device in the first place,' said Tamara Atkinson, Savannah's mother. 'It's a voice she would never have had without this foundation and this wonderful school'" (Ball, 2011). In this excerpt, Savannah's mother is joyful that her child has this new communication technology. But what is missing from the story is the narrative about government responsibility for providing technological resources that would provide equal communication rights for people with disabilities. Another missing narrative is about all the people with disabilities who need these technological resources but do not live in a place where there is a charitable foundation to provide these "gifts."

Theme 4 focuses on the loved ones of a person with a communication disability, who are portrayed as superhuman, inspirational, or "special." An *Associated Press* story from Logansport, Indiana, is headlined "Mother's experience leads to autism awareness work" (Einselsen, 2012). The story presents the mother, Marlene Espinoza, as "superparent" (similar to the supercrip trope): "When David [her son with autism] got too old to participate in First Steps, she resigned her position as an aide at Logansport Area Joint Special Services Cooperative to care for her son full time.... David's behavior improved significantly over the last year, his mother says, because of one-on-one therapy she's given him" (Einselsen, 2012). Again, by elevating one mother of an autistic child to a superior status, the story is an unspoken criticism of all the parents who cannot afford to quit their jobs or do not feel skilled enough to work with their child with autism or just do not want to (which is their right and does not make them bad parents). This angle also plays into medical model narratives that suggest that individuals, and in this case the mother, should take responsibility for disability as an individual problem rather than considering disability and the iTechnology that might accompany it as facets of a wider social construction.

Another example of theme 4 came from a newspaper story in Wichita Falls, Texas, headlined "Teen with autism, mom communicate via texting." The story reports: "A mom knows a miracle when she sees one. Especially when it concerns her son. Two months ago, Vera Word penetrated the autistic world of her 15-year-old son, Jonathon, using — of all things — a cell phone" (Work, 2009). Although it is commendable the teen is now communicating via text, this is almost a non-story because almost all North American teenagers with a cell phone text, and the mother got the idea because her cell phone was capable of texting. Again, texting resonated with her autistic teen but there is no mention of all the autistic teens who are not "miraculously cured" through texting.

Occasionally, the themes in the stories were empowering rather than patronizing: our Theme 7 about people with disabilities as members of a minority group who are deserving of access to assistive technology and theme 8 about people with disabilities as members of a minority group, who are deserving of equal rights. An example of these themes was found in *Wired* magazine's interview with Ari Ne'eman, an autistic activist who was appointed to the National Council of Disability in 2009:

> The goals of the neurodiversity movement coincide with the goals of the broader disability and civil rights movements. We have a lot of solidarity between us. When a hold was put on my nomination last spring, I was grateful to have the support of groups like the American Association of People with Disabilities and the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights. What we're all trying to do is in the grand historical tradition of people fighting to achieve equal opportunity and control their own destiny (Silberman, 2010).

This type of content in a magazine article is extremely important. It allows an autistic advocate who is on the spectrum himself to explain the autistic rights movement, neurodiversity and their connection to other human rights issues.

Other themes dealt with the economic side of iTechnology, i.e. that it is less costly than some communication technology and more expensive than others. Theme 12 evaluated whether iTechnology is presented as affordable to all in the stories. In a story headlined "Special needs kids get tech savvy" from the Ontario, Canada edition of the *Caledon Enterprise*, a teaching assistant for children with disabilities said: "Communication aids (devices or improvements made to the wheel-chair or installed in desktops) have to be specially ordered and are not cheap. Typically, they range from two to tens of thousands of dollars. iPads are easily available and can be brought from the store. The beauty of it is there are apps that cost just $4.99. Some are even free" (Panjwani, 2012). The next paragraph states, "Traditionally, some parents of autistic children use a book with a clip art of pictures known as Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) to understand their child's needs, explained Gamble. Often these pictures would be in bulky folders that had to be lugged around" (Panjwani, 2012). These paragraphs show multiple mixed messages about the affordability of technology such as the iPad. On the one hand, it is accurate to write that a $300-$500 [USD] or $500-$800 [CND] iPad is less expensive than a $14,000 AAC device [USD], but any electronic technological option is going to be much more expensive than the PECS system that has to be "lugged around." A parent or teacher creating a PECS system can purchase the book, *Photos for Building Language Skills,* which has 900 pictures, for about $50 [USD or CND] (National Autism Resources, 2013). Obviously, the journalist writing this story just took the comments about "lugging around" the PECS system at face value without checking on the potential savings from using a paper format.

Discussion

After analyzing these media stories, it became clear that despite their journalistic relevancy and cultural timeliness, the way people with disabilities are portrayed is much the same as portrayals of the past. With the growth of tablet technology as a communication method for many people with disabilities, the news media have created widely reported new narratives about disability, and in doing so have also reinforced older narratives. But there remains a discrepancy between the story that needs to be reported—a newsworthy piece about a change experienced by some disabled people via technology—and the way the story of communications-related assistive technology is told with formulaic, stereotypical disability-related tropes. From a journalistic perspective, these stories do have news value: If the lives of people in the disability community are changing with the emergence of new technology, that story should be told. But where are the stories focused on people with disabilities and their allies, who are actively transforming these new technologies (Alper, 2014) to make them more powerful means of communication?

Who is missing?

This research has explored the news narratives about iTechnology and people with communication disabilities. It was soon clear that large groups of people with disabilities were absent from these stories—older adults who have age-related communication disabilities (from stroke or brain injury), adults with intellectual disabilities and communication disabilities, and finally people with communication disabilities for whom tablets and smart phones do not provide any meaningful assistance. Most of the stories in this research focused on children and teens with disabilities primarily in an educational setting. This is not surprising because educational settings are *the* place for someone with a communication disability to access free or low-cost iTechnology (Bortfeld, 2011), and obviously children and teens populate educational settings. But journalists, in addition to missing groups of adults who use iTechnology, missed an important news angle for this topic: Adults with communication disabilities cannot easily access iTechnology unless they have financial means. And working-age Americans and Canadians with disabilities have high unemployment rates: "The unemployment rate for persons with a disability [in the U.S.] was 13.4 percent in 2012, higher than the rate for persons with no disability (7.9 percent)" (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012), and in Canada, more than 55 percent of working-age adults with disabilities are currently unemployed or out of the labor market (Prince, 2009). Many people with disabilities are not in the labor force so would not be counted in unemployment statistics: "A large proportion of persons with a disability—about 8 in 10—were not in the labor force in 2012, compared with about 3 in 10 persons with no disability" (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). This is the story journalists missed — that many people with communication disabilities cannot afford the iTechnology that could assist them.

Senior citizens who acquire communication disabilities may also fall into this group, if they are on a fixed income and have had their savings depleted by a medical event, such as acquiring a disability from a stroke, for example. People who have had strokes can be greatly helped by many iPad apps, but may not be able to afford them. The Stroke Wise blog lists more than a dozen apps for

communication, dexterity and reading (Stroke Wise, 2011). A number of stories did mention people who had strokes but in a peripheral way and usually only a sentence or two. For example, this story in the *Houston Chronicle* focused primarily on children with autism but included this one sentence about a stroke survivor: "The urTalker was designed with autism in mind, but it can be used by others - people whose language and speech have been affected by a stroke, for instance" (Ward, 2012). Experiences involving iTechnologies and older adults are worthy of greater attention from the news media. This is particularly the case for those who experience communication disabilities as a result of stroke, aphasia, Alzheimer's and/or dementia and may utilize these devices for communicative purposes. Communication is an issue that includes everyone, so the exclusion of many older adults with disabilities from these news stories could reflect ageism. Ageism is defined by Nelson (2005) as a system of oppression that encompasses prejudice, discrimination, or negative attitudes against persons of a certain age or a particular age group.

Where does this ageism exist? With technology developers, with app creators, with journalists, with marketers, or with everyone? This ageism appears to be intersecting with ableism, as well. Future research should evaluate whether or not technology marketers and programmers are focusing solely on children and young adults for app and technology development, without considering the many uses by people of all ages with a variety of disabilities. The extent of exclusion from technology faced by older adults with disabilities who have similar needs to their younger counterparts could indicate that both ageism and ableism are taking place.

A notable other group missing from the news stories: people with intellectual disabilities *and* communication disabilities for whom these technologies may not be accessible for a variety of reasons. Adults with intellectual/developmental disabilities may be missing from the stories because of larger societal issues: a shortage of age-appropriate apps, barriers precluding access to professionals who work with iTechnology, and cost, since these adults have usually aged out of educational programs that may provide free or low-cost technology. An adult with Down syndrome, for example, was only mentioned in two of the media stories — all other mentions were about children. And only one story discussed an adult with Down syndrome using an iDevice, but it was in a story that was not about technology, but about the romance and engagement of two adults with Down syndrome. The iPad was part of their courtship: "Kevin touches a button on his iPad: 'I love you, Sara'" (Garza, 2012).

It is possible that these groups are missing simply because of the nature of newsworthiness. Obviously, a journalist will probably not write a story about tablet technology that does not help a person with a disability communicate. Future research should investigate standards of newsworthiness in disability contexts. That might help illuminate why older people with age-related disabilities and adults with intellectual disabilities do not make the journalistic cut in terms of newsworthiness. It is unclear why journalists missed the significantly newsworthy story about Americans and Canadians with communication disabilities not being able to afford iTechnology. But it is not that surprising considering many journalists

know little about disability issues as news topics (Haller, 2010). Finally, this research illustrates that even though some new narratives about technology are informing some stories about people with communication disabilities, the news media tended to give credit to the technology as enabling people to communicate rather than credit being given to people with disabilities who make the technology work.

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Endnotes

1. All news briefs, event notices or stories of less than two paragraphs were not included in the stories analyzed.
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Return to Top of Page

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