**Disablism, cyberbullying and online opportunities for engagement**

Leah Burch (Liverpool Hope University, UK)

**Introduction**

Many disabled people experience hate and hostility on a regular basis. Indeed, research has suggested that disabled people are more likely than their non-disabled peers to be ‘bullied’ within their local communities (Beadle-brown et al, 2014) within the ordinary spaces of their everyday lives. Notable hotspots include public transport (Olsen et al, 2017; Wilkin, 2020), pubs and clubs (Burch, 2021), local towns and streets (Hall, 2019), and within their own homes (McCarthy, 2017; Thomas, 2011). Building upon these findings, this chapter considers how the internet provides a particularly unique space for hate to be shared and directed towards disabled people, within the ordinary context of everyday life. Indeed, the internet hosts a range of online communication platforms that have changed the way in which most people access information, communicate with each other and build communities, including disabled people (Gelfgren et al, 2022; Yates, 2001). Notably, online platforms open up various avenues of communication, many of which offer users anonymity, privacy, immediacy, and the ability to engage with a wide range of audiences (Nêmes, 2002). Anonymity has been widely debated as a tool that enables a level of privacy that is not afforded within our offline worlds, while at the same time, a tool that can be manipulated to harm others (Sardá et al, 2019). Similarly, global outreach enables users to connect and form networks with others on an international scale. Hosting both opportunity and risk, the internet has fast become a part of everyday life for many parts of the world.

It is important to recognise how these boundaries have become increasingly blurred within the geographies of our everyday lives. Our digital worlds have fast become a part of, rather than something separate from, our offline lives. Many of us, particularly in the Global North, live our offline lives through technology; we post, share, like, tweet, and scroll. It could also be argued that, social media and social networking sites have taken on a new level of prevalence within our everyday lives. The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated the multiple, complex, and layered faces of online communication. At its best, the internet enabled communication as a means of overcoming isolation and the sharing of hope during times of uncertainty. Indeed, research conducted by Pew Research Centre revealed the increasing use of social media technologies as a means of facilitating video calls with friends and families (McClain et al, 2021). Work by Wong et al (2021) has similarly highlighted the use of social media within the healthcare sector, enabling healthcare professionals to communicate with members of the public when face-to-face interactions were not possible. At the same time, the internet has provided a site for the incitement of violence and scapegoating towards marginalised communities (Ka-Wei Lee and Li, 2020), and the sharing of fake news and conspiracy theories (Patwa et al, 2021). Within this context, it is not possible to understand online communication as entirely separate from the offline world, but instead, as inextricably interwoven with one another.

Due to the prevalence of the online world within our everyday lives, the digital world has fast become a site of research. For example, the uptake of social media has created what Williams and Burnap (2016) have termed, a ‘social sensor net’ that can identify, monitor and trace social reactions to events both in real time and on reflection. In my own work, I have explored some of the possibilities and risks available to disabled people in the online world (Burch, 2017; 2018; 2020; 2021). These research projects have engaged with text-based methods such as critical discourse analysis, and participatory methods to explore the topic of hate and hostility on a range of levels. In earlier work (Burch, 2017; 2018) I employed modes of textual analysis in order to critically engage with cultural representations of disability as presented upon various online platforms. Following this, I employed participatory methods in order to explore the ways in which disabled people experience, process, and make sense of their experiences of hate within the context of their everyday lives (Burch, 2020a; 2021). Although methodologically different, these works have paid attention to the various ways that disabled people can utilise the facilities of online communication and social media as a tool for fostering relationships, self-empowerment, and activism, as well as the ways that online disablism can permeate online spaces. In this chapter, I consider examples from these different works and explore some of the online opportunities for disabled people in addition to the risks of cyberbullying and online disablism.

**Online opportunities for disabled people**

There are, as will be explored later in this chapter, a range of risks involved with all forms of online communication. Despite this, there are a variety of opportunities available to disabled people online that may not be as readily accessible in the offline world. Given the barriers present within the everyday lives of many disabled people, online communication presents an opportunity for new forms of citizenship to be harnessed (Cocq & Ljuslinder, 2020; Guo et al, 2005; Liddiard, 2014). In particular, social media and various forms of online communication can provide a ‘second chance’ for social interaction and the ability to distance oneself from social rejection in the offline world (Furr et al, 2016). One participant, Francis Emerson, discussed the value of online spaces created for specific groups of disabled people which can provide a site of mutual understanding and support. Similarly, members of a disabled person’s organisation (DPO) supported the positive use of Facebook to share their work with other people in their local community, as well as DPOs nationally. In these ways, online technologies enable modes of self-empowerment and digital activism. Digital activism presents the opportunity for disabled people to create new forms of social movements that address concerns of disabled people and in ways that disrupt traditional conceptualisations of activism as tied to physical movement (Mann, 2018). Blogging in particular has made it possible for disabled people to call out inaccessible societies and their experiences of prejudice and discrimination (Cocq & Ljuslinder, 2020). In her interview, Ariel reflected upon blogging as a tool to share her experiences with her followers. In addition to sharing stories and raising awareness, blogging helped ‘get it off your chest’ and made her feel better knowing that someone else was reading about her story.

More broadly, online media and communication platforms offer new opportunities for traditionally marginalised communities to interact with a variety of campaigns and discussions (Trevisan, 2019) constituting what Trevisan (2013) has termed, ‘armchair armies.’ Indeed, the accessibility of online communication methods for many (but not all) disabled people can enable greater participation in important conversations about disability that actively challenge traditional narratives. Importantly, such forms of communication allow for more creative and innovative ways for disabled people to present their own stories, rather than those that are storied by non-disabled people (Bitman, 2021). Used in this way, disabled people and activists can make use of online technologies as a platform to educate and raise awareness about disability.

There are some notable examples of ‘armchair armies’ that have emerged online in recent years. Following the first airing of Sally Phillips’ BBC documentary *A World Without Down’s Syndrome?,* an active online discussion arose between disabled people, parents and guardians, allies, and professionals. Using the hashtags #worldwithoutdowns and #justaboutcoping on Twitter and Facebook, users collectively resisted an ableist imagination of a future without people with Down’s Syndrome and shared alternative, real and more positive stories of living with Down’s Syndrome (Burch, 2017). Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC) was established in 2010 by disabled campaigners and academics in response to the Coalition Government’s series of welfare cuts that disproportionately targeted disabled people (Ryan, 2020). Their online campaign was launched in 2013 and featured personal stories of disabled people affected by welfare changes. Due to their online following, DPAC were invited to parliamentary meetings to discuss some of the biggest changes to the welfare system (Pearson & Trevisan, 2015). In the US, #CripTheVote sought to engage ‘voters and politicians in a productive discussion about disability issues in the United States’ as a means of ensuring that the needs and concerns of disabled people inform future political landscapes (Disability Visibility Project, 2016). Finally, the Disability Hate Crime Network (DHCN), established in 2007 by Robin Van De Hende, has subsequently secured an online presence as a Facebook group. The group is underpinned by the importance of providing an accessible forum for disabled people to share their ideas, observations, and concerns relating to disability hate crime (Brookes, 2013) and, along with several others, I am very pleased to be one of the lead coordinators of this fantastic support network. The DHCN now has over 4,000 members and through close moderation by the coordinators, is able to provide a safe and supportive online space for disabled people to not only share their experiences of hate crime, but to stay informed of relevant news and events taking place across the country.

While online communication platforms can provide an avenue of opportunity for fostering relationships, developing a sense of community, and means of digital activism, such facilities are not available to all disabled people. Indeed, online technologies grant ‘conditional access’ to disabled people, as many continue to be excluded from participation due to access barriers (Bitman, 2021; Cocq & Ljuslinder, 2020). Continued barriers to accessing online platforms is particularly troubling given the opportunities that have been described. There is a clear tension then in moving towards greater online communication as a means of increasing accessibility against the risk of further marginalisation. This tension has been a particular problem for many disabled people’s organisations and self-advocacy groups who have found new opportunities to reach members, raise awareness of projects and discussions, and be visible in the wider community through their use of online platforms (Gelfgren et al, 2022). Indeed, to foster the opportunities that are available, greater attention needs to be paid to the widening of participation through finding ways to widen digital inclusion.

**Online disablism**

Some of the defining features of the internet that enable positive communication and identity formation simultaneously allow for the promotion of hate. According to Banks (2010), the internet has become the ‘new frontier’ for spreading hate and for the bringing together of hate mongering communities. Indeed, while restrictions within the physical world might prevent similar minded people from ever meeting, the potential for quick and easy global outreach online allows for greater communication and access to others (Duffy, 2003). And, since online platforms provide opportunities that are not always available to disabled people in their offline worlds, the presence of hate and hostility online can be detrimental.

Online disablism, as expressed through hate, hostility, and various harmful narratives, contributes to a number of negative constructions of ‘disability.’ For example, in their analysis of disability-themed memes, Hadley (2016) identified three prevalent representations of disability: the ‘charity case,’ the ‘inspiration,’ and the ‘cheat.’ Memes are argued to make offensive or misleading messages more palatable through the use of humour (Elkhatib & Hill, 2021). Moreover, memes allow for the expression of instant social performance, an intertextual image that ‘conveys a complex set of ideas, ideologies and discourses in a swiftly digestible package’ (Hadley, 2016, p. 678). Memes that present disabled people as charity cases, inspirations and cheats are able to tap into culturally constituted narratives of disability under the veil of ‘banter’ (Levin, 2013). Indeed, these memes do not create new narratives of disability, but present culturally constructed representations in more creative, innovative and, in turn, more implicit ways.

Work by Liddiard (2014) has shown how such simplistic representations of disability have similarly been used by non-disabled people and larger corporations as a means of commodification. In these cases, memes, images, and narratives of disabled people (most notably disabled children) are shared for ‘likes’ and profits. Such practises therefore exploit disabled people while simultaneously replenishing harmful narratives that have been constructed by and for non-disabled people. Liddiard (2014) also noted the presence of such memes as perpetuating narratives of disabled people as scroungers and fraudsters in stark contrast to the superior, self-fulfilling, non-disabled person. My own research has exposed a wealth of disablist rhetoric present on the online bulletin board, Reddit, situated within the context of austerity. Upon this platform, disability was presented as an unfortunate and tragic prospect worse than death and, in turn, something that needed to be prevented. Indeed, my analysis of Reddit threads unearthed widespread support of forced sterilisation, mercy killing, and euthanasia (Burch, 2020b). More closely connected to the context of austerity, disabled people were presented as a burden to society, a waste of resources, and an infringement to the economic development of society (Burch, 2018). In these examples, online disablism serves a damaging purpose, regurgitating eugenic messages of eradication under the guise of economic and scientific justification (Burch, 2021; Quarmby, 2011). Narratives of austerity and disability are tied to the self-identification of non-disabled people to the independent, self-supporting ‘hardworking taxpayer’ who is the real victim of austerity (Hughes, 2015). Indeed, while such messages are innately hateful towards disabled people, they were presented as justifiable responses on behalf of ‘hardworking taxpayers.’

It is important to highlight that online platforms do not create the harmful narratives described above, but provide a means of sharing long-standing assumptions and stereotypes that continue to position disabled people as lesser and inferior to their non-disabled counterparts. Indeed, by tapping into long-standing assumptions, online disablism becomes more palatable and, in some contexts, a source of culturally accepted mockery and humour. Indeed, in an analysis of people’s responses to memes of Harvey Price, (Morris, 2019) demonstrates how online disablism becomes an accepted part of memetic culture, rather than a contested presence. Thus, while examples of online disablism such as those described above do not directly target individual disabled people, their presence can have detrimental impacts to the everyday lives of disabled people, both online and offline. On a more personal level, misleading or offensive comments that appear on disabled people's feed or viral threads can harm the image of disabled users themselves (Bitman, 2021) and impede their sense of belonging. In addition to creating a space that is not for ‘them,’ harmful narratives and images can be used directly against online disabled users and become part of a broader process of cyberbullying and online hate.

**Cyberbullying**

Despite there being an extensive history of literature exploring disabled people’s experiences of hostility and harassment within their physical socio-cultural environments, less is known about how disabled people experience, perceive and react to cyberharassment and cyberbullying (Alhaboby et al, 2016). This lack of knowledge does not, however, suggest that disabled people do not experience cyberbullying, but that it exists largely hidden and unknown. Indeed, like for all victims, the internet provides another venue for bullying behaviour to take place (Brennan, 2009). As Pritchard (2021) points out, the lack of regulation and promotion of Free Speech on various social media platforms presents an opportunity for the promotion of disablist hate speech against disabled people. Indeed, platforms such as Reddit allow their users to create ‘throwaway’ accounts as a means of enabling a greater sense of anonymity and freedom of expression (Burch, 2018). The facilities of the internet similarly provide access to a wider audience, who, without the facilities of the internet, would not have been in contact with. As a result, the internet not only enables communication between disabled people and perpetrators with little geographical boundaries, but as a part of our everyday life, can become an inescapable form of communication.

Although online geographies of hate were not extensively discussed in my own PhD research, it was reflected upon by some participants who had been directly targeted by hate online. Indeed, a number of participants shared experiences of being ‘bullied’ while using social media platforms such as Facebook and Snapchat. For example, Francis Emerson reflected upon being told to ‘burn in hell’ when engaging with online Christian communities due to his transgender identity. Particularly concerning, he also noted the number of people who would join online groups for autistic people in order to say ‘horrible things to people.’ In these instances, online spaces that have been created to provide a safe outlet for marginalised communities become a targeted site of hostility; a space that provides direct access to whole communities of disabled people. This has previously been documented by Sherry (2020) who describes the practice of hacking websites for epilepsy organisations through the use of flashing animations designed to trigger seizures among those with photosensitive epilepsy. Such expressions of hate are intentional and have clear direction and can therefore be considered as examples of cyberbullying.

In order to manage the presence of cyberbullying, Harry described some identity management techniques that he had engaged with, such as considering the images that are shared on his profile. He explained that posting photos of himself openly using his wheelchair would likely be used as ‘ammo’ against him, and so would only share these photos with audiences he was familiar with. The management of identity, however, is not always possible. For example, Pritchard (2021) noted the widespread posting of photographs taken of people with Dwarfism without their consent as a means of fuelling comments from other online users. Similarly, in my own research, several participants reflected upon this happening to them and their peers, particularly when using public transport. Some shared incidents where images had been taken of them in public, and they had later been alerted to these images being shared on Facebook. Significantly, this form of cyberbullying relies upon the simplicity of a photograph as a means of eliciting hate as various derogatory language is attached to the photograph, shared, and then reproduced by others (Sherry, 2020). As discussed previously, the multimodal format of these images enables a quick and effective visual message which in turn, can be more difficult to interpret by coding software than messages that are solely text-based.

Some participants explained that they did not use social media platforms due to the risks that this could entail, despite recognising some of the opportunities that could exist. For example, Shaz described the ‘devastating’ impact of hate crime via the internet in closing down his ability to socially engage with others and Francis Emerson explained limiting the types of online communities he was now associated with. As discussed earlier, such spaces offer a sense of community, identity formation, and a platform to share experience and voice opinions. Online spaces can, and in many cases do, present an opportunity to be present within a chosen community, which is vital for many disabled people. As such, greater regulation and prevention of cyberbullying and online disablism towards disabled people is vital.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have explored various examples of the risks and opportunities for disabled people that are posed by online communication technologies. Drawing upon existing, albeit limited research, I have argued that online communication has become part of, and not detached from, our offline everyday lives. Given the immersion of online technologies within everyday life, it is important to raise awareness of the potential risks that this might entail. Indeed, I have explored the risks that all online communication can pose, and how the very facilities that can offer possibilities for disabled people similarly provide the tools for the dissemination of hate. Forms of online disablism and cyberbullying both tap into culturally constructed narratives of disability that reinforce the exclusion and discrmination of disabled people more broadly. Such narratives contribute to the perception of disabled people as inherently inferior and lesser to non-disabled people (Burch, 2020b) and as an object of ridicule. As shown in the examples presented in this chapter, online disablism and cyberbullying is not always articulated in explicitly hateful terms, but contributes to the normalisation of hate and so-called ‘banter’ towards disabled people both on and offline.

Despite this, and in my determination to be optimistic, I would like to conclude this chapter with a focus upon the possibilities that online technologies can provide in order to challenge cyberbullying. Indeed, throughout this chapter, I have shown that online technologies can offer a myriad of opportunities for disabled people in terms of establishing communication networks, sharing knowledge and experience, and fostering a sense of collaborative resistance. While these opportunities should be located within the community, universities can, and do, similarly play an important role in supporting staff and students within their wider community. These opportunities can vary in focus, and indeed, do not need to be specific to cyberbullying and disability but can touch upon broader issues relating to violence, harassment and hate crime. For example, in 2018 Leeds University Union and the University of Leeds ran a joint project entitled ‘Draw the Line’ where they introduced an online reporting system for staff and students to report incidents of hate crime, sexual assault, and online harassment on university campus. The Centre for Hate Studies at the University of Leicester have created a series of digital training modules to support better understanding and responses to hate and extremism, and the National Union of Students have worked on a number of campaigns to address sexual violence and harassment on campus. Finally, I am utilising my position within the university and actively working with disabled people to create an online and freely available disability hate crime toolkit. Such a resource will, when it is available, demonstrate the collaborative potential of working on campus, in partnership with communities.

While online, or digital activism, is not suggested to be the single means of ensuring the inclusion of disabled people within society, or the means to challenge hate and bullying in all facets of life, it does open up a number of opportunities. Thus, it is suggested that a hybrid model of online and offline communication strategies might enable a plurality of tactics and opportunities for disabled people to engage collaboratively and innovatively with activism (Pearson & Trevisan, 2015). So, if it is that online technologies are becoming an inescapable part of everyday life for many people, it seems helpful to focus our attention on supporting disabled people to use these platforms to their advantage. In doing so, it might be possible to work with disabled people and online platforms to tap into the ways that they are already engaging with online platforms to connect, collaborate and resist forms of disablism and bullying within their everyday lives, both on and offline.

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