Article

Cyborg hoaxes: Disability, deception, and critical studies of digital media

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Abstract
This article examines academic and popular examples of a "cyborg hoax"—an articulation of gender, dis/ability, and technology that is deceptive, reinforces an ideology of ability, and prevents users and scholars alike from seeing the value of disability for digital media cultures. The article uses cyborg theory, cyberculture studies, literature on online deception, and critical disability studies to argue that cyborg hoaxes are a dominant but stereotypical representation. This is contrasted with ethnographic data about disabled peoples' online experiences, which suggest that alternative linkages of disability, gender, and technology can provide valuable insights into the critical study of online cultures.

Introduction

The story is an academic urban legend. Its outline is as follows: in the early 1980s, a male psychiatrist, "Alex," entered online spaces under an assumed identity. Named either "Joan" or "Julie," and described by Sherry Turkle (1997) as "severely handicapped and disfigured" and by Jodi O'Brien (1999) as having damaged "speech and motor coordination," this persona quickly built a network of online friends.[1] In different versions, Joan befriended many women, offering therapy, engaging in cybersex, or setting up dates between these women and her "friend" Alex, leading to sexual relationships (Poster, 1995; Rheingold, 1994; Stone, 1995). Eventually, the strain of passing under an assumed identity became too much; Alex decided to kill Joan and end the deception. When he

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posted that Joan was ill, her friends attempted to contact hospitals and send their condolences, only to find that she did not exist. The community felt shocked, outraged, and betrayed by the deception.

Nearly 30 years later, University of Notre Dame football star Manti Te'o was the target of a similar hoax. His girlfriend, Lennay Kekua, was reportedly in a major car accident, diagnosed with leukemia, and underwent a bone transplant before dying in September 2012, within hours of Te'o's grandmother's death. Te'o frequently talked with press about Kekua and her influence on his life. In early 2013, it was revealed that this relationship existed only via digital media. Kekua had never existed, had cancer, or been Te'o's girlfriend. The hoax had been elaborately orchestrated by a young man named Ronaiah Tuiasosopo, who seemed to have hopes of benefitting from Te'o's success. Not only was Te'o shocked, but he was embarrassed in the face of widespread incredulity at his gullibility and suspicion of his possible complicity (Zeman).

The differences in these cases are many: the former disrupted an online community, while the latter was a media spectacle; the possibility of deception was outrageous in the 1980s, while skepticism was expected by the 2010s; and the motivations of Alex and Tuiasosopo differed significantly. Yet, what remains consistent is that a sick or disabled young woman online functions as a what I refer to as a "cyborg hoax"—an articulation of gender, dis/ability, and technology that is deceptive, reinforces an ideology of ability, and can prevent users and scholars alike from seeing the valuable insights disability offers to online cultures. Cyborg hoaxes are provocative, but they are necessarily incomplete, forged in the absence of lived experiences of disability.

In this article, I draw on cyborg and cyberculture studies, literature on online deception, and critical disability studies to problematize cyborg hoaxes. Throughout, I return to the cases above, as well as the 2010 film *Catfish* and *Catfish: The TV Show* (TTS; MTV, 2012–present). These examples were chosen for their prominence in the United States and English-language media; a search for "online catfish" revealed over 200 articles from US publications and additional stories from British and Australian publications.[2] These referenced the film, the show, the Te'o case, or other instances of online romantic deception. As a counter-weight to these hoaxes, I draw upon the academic literature focused on disability online and data gathered during my ethnographic study of a disability blogosphere. These sources complicate the articulations of cyborg hoaxes and offer alternative ways to think about the intersections of gender, technology, and disability.

First, I consider cyborg and cyberculture theories in relation to disability, before turning to the phenomenon of online deception. Following these contextualizations, I break down the specific elements of cyborg hoaxes that reinforce an ideology of ability. Finally, I look to the online experiences of people with disabilities to consider how alternative linkages of disability, gender, and technology might provide valuable insights into the study of online culture that do not replicate the oversights of cyborg hoaxes or ableist perspectives more broadly.

Cyborgs, cyberculture Internet studies, and the place of disability

In the many formulations of digital media, Internet, or new media studies, "critical cyberculture studies" is notable for its attempt to put "cultural difference—human

elements of race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, and disability … front and center, informing our research questions, frameworks, and findings" (Silver, 2006: 8). Despite such rhetoric, disability was marginalized by cyberculture studies and other strands of Internet studies in their first decade, either through its use as metaphor or through its invisibility.

In much of these literatures, disability has been a concretizing metaphor, used to illustrate abstract theories and not interrogated for its own political baggage and relation to lived experiences and identities. This recalls what literary and disability scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (2001) have argued about the use of disability in fiction, where it serves as a "narrative prosthesis," a motivating malady that drives further storytelling. In both cases, disability is abstracted and used to advance other ideas. The clearest example of such *metaphorical* use of disability lies in cyborg theory, where it appeared "only as example, not as critical category" (Kafer, 2013: 105).

As described in Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," the cyborg represented the increasingly blurred boundaries between human and animal, human and machine, in postmodernity. Haraway (1991) invoked disability to describe the pleasures of blending the human and the other, suggesting that "perhaps paraplegics and other severely handicapped people can (and sometimes do) have the most intense experiences of complex hybridization with other communication devices," and that "machines can be prosthetic devices, intimate components, friendly selves" (p. 154). Similarly, Constance Penley and Andrew Ross (1991) opened their anthology by suggesting that "the highly developed technoculture of the handicapped" would be important for the development of cyborg theory (p. xvi); this possibility was, however, unrealized in their anthology. Incorporation of actual experiences with prosthetics could have offered depth to these speculative cyborg futures, but it could also have troubled them, as lived experiences of disability and assistive technology are often frustrating, painful, or stigmatizing rather than politically liberating. In the few cases in which scholars considered experiences of disability in concert with cyborg theory, their findings were mixed. For instance, d/Deaf individuals who received cochlear implants did not experience this as an empowering cyborg identity but as a troubling of their community identity and sense of self (Cherney, 1999).

The *invisibility* of disability in Internet studies is evident when we turn a critical eye to the case of Joan. Although numerous scholars took up this case in relation to gender, sexuality, postmodern identity, and online disembodiment, analysis through the lens of disability was sorely lacking. Turkle focused on the boundaries between identity play as a healthy form of experimentation and identity deception as betrayal. Howard Rheingold invoked this story as part of a larger discussion of online communities' experiences of trust and deception. O'Brien used the story to argue the importance of gender in organizing interpersonal interactions online and offline. For Mark Poster, as well, the case was one of gender deception, demonstrating how gender could be reinscribed online. In Roseanne Allucquère Stone's chapter, "The Cross-Dressing Psychiatrist," she presented this story as an illustration of the flexibility of postmodern identity, an argument that both renders disability invisible as a lived phenomenon and treats it metaphorically.

Such appearances—but analytic irrelevance—of disability in Internet studies led Gerard Goggin and Christopher Newell (2003) to suggest that Internet studies and related fields retained a conceptualization of disability as deficiency that obscured its function

as identity and experience (p. 115). In their analysis of Joan, and related literature in cyberculture studies, Goggin and Newell provided a rare illustration of what disability studies could offer to scholars of Internet and new media culture. They wrote that Stone, in particular, "fails to identify the way in which [a medical discourse of disability] fundamentally shapes her own analysis and taken-for-granted views of … the disabled body" (Goggin and Newell, 2003: 113). While scholars readily explored the diverse personas adopted by online users in various contexts, Goggin and Newell (2003) noted reliance on a "fixed, reified identity position" (p. 114) regarding disability, an assumption that disability could only be performed in a limited fashion. The postmodern fluidity of cyberculture studies did not extend to disability, and the lived experiences of disability online were rarely analyzed, with metaphorical uses and uninterrogated anecdotes serving as the basis for theory. Goggin and Newell's *Digital Disability* offered serious study of uses of the Internet by people with disabilities, the limitations of technology regarding disability access, and the formation of disability cultures online. It laid the groundwork for future studies of disability online, many of which have addressed both online cultures and the offline structures of power that shape technologies (Adam and Kreps, 2009; Ellcessor, 2016; Ellis and Kent, 2010; Goggin and Noonan, 2006; Jaeger, 2011; Moser, 2006). Although this literature has grown, its insights regarding the interplay of bodies, technologies, and cultural hierarchies of identity have not been widely incorporated into studies of online culture more broadly.

Cyberculture studies, at its best, has destabilized assumptions about a default user who is White, male, Western, and heterosexual. Through studies of avatar design, interpersonal and visual communication, and differential treatment along lines of race or gender, scholars have long known that online culture is not neutral or utopian, but is shaped along the lines of existing axes of power (Campbell, 2004; Daniels, 2009; Gajjala, 2004; Nakamura, 2002; Taylor, 2006). This is particularly evident in critical race theory and cyber feminist work on online culture. Jesse Daniels (2013) argues that work on race online must go beyond visual and racial formation analysis to recognize "the persistence of racism online while simultaneously recognizing the deep roots of racial inequality in existing social structures that shape technoculture" (p. 711). Cyberfeminist work has issued its own calls for the integration of online and offline spheres, highlighting the necessity of bringing together embodied, material, and representational forms of culture and experience (Brophy, 2010).

The turn toward analysis of online culture in relation to structures of power and material conditions is a welcome complication of the first generation of cyberculture studies. In his review of various strands of digital media studies, critical theorist Christian Fuchs (2012) argues that cyberculture studies invested too strongly in the study of online identities and communities, without sufficient attention to the political economic structures that undergird digital media platforms and possibilities. The study of disability offers one way in which to observe and theorize connections between the virtual, material, and structural dimensions. The articulations of dis/abled, gendered, and raced bodies with variable technological apparatuses reveal the impossibility of universal experiences or theories. When a blind user enters an online space using an out-of-date (but affordable) screenreader, they may find some sites usable and others inaccessible. Their uses are constrained by their physical and material circumstances, and they often find work-arounds, community-driven

solutions, or alternate ways of using digital media. Although she does not specifically discuss disability, Jessica Brophy (2010) writes that the online space "*itself* excludes all who do not have access, those who do not have the cultural and technical knowledge required to participate and/or those who do not have the physical ability to participate in the utopian dream" (p. 933). The very inaccessibility of the Internet has fostered assumptions about the universality of access and equality of experience online and has furthered the analytic invisibility of disability. By reclaiming disability within cyberculture (and critical) Internet studies, these universalisms are revealed, and marginalized knowledges become available for theorization.

Although I criticized cyborg theory for its metaphorical use of disability, I employ it in discussing "cyborg hoaxes." These deceptions network bodies, cultural values, and technology in order to create a hybrid form of identity. They trouble any indexicality of bodies and identities and display some of the possibilities of digital media in creating new forms of identification, self-expression, and communication. I concur with disability scholar Alison Kafer (2013) that the concept of the cyborg may be usefully reclaimed, starting with

> an acknowledgment that human/machine interfaces are not always beneficial or pleasurable; an awareness that many disabled people lack access to the cybertechnologies so highly praised in cyborg writing; an accounting for the ways in which cybertechnologies rely on disabling labor practices across the globe; and a realization that not all disabled people are interested in technological cures or fixes. (p. 118)

Such acknowledgement forces, first, recognition of the ways in which theoretical or false narratives of disability are nonetheless "potent fusions" (Haraway, 1991: 154), even if enacted in banal or nefarious ways, which draw attention to the articulation of technologies, representations, identities, and relationships. Second, reclamation of cyborg theory requires attention to the "multiple, and often contradictory, deployments" of the cyborg (Kafer, 2013: 116) and the variable articulations of disabled bodies, technologies, and experiences. These tasks are the foundation of this article, which deconstructs cyborg hoaxes in order to rebuild and enrich theory on the basis of lived experiences of disability and technology.

Deception, trolling, romance, and *Catfish*

Internet studies is rife with identity deception and related phenomena, like trolling. Cyborg hoaxes are part of this lineage, deceptively expressing identities that articulate technology, gender, and disability. The literature on online deception illustrates how these hoaxes function through (often romantic) relationships and knowledge of an audience and how they perform false identities in ways that amplify broader cultural trends.

Early work on identity deception online often highlighted its potentially liberatory potential, as in Stone's analysis of Joan as postmodern identity play. Yet, practices of identity deception were not always beneficial to either individuals or online culture at large, as evident in Lisa Nakamura's (2002) work on "identity tourism" in which role play of minoritized identities was highly stereotypical. Many of the advantages of

crossing identity categories accrued only to those already in embodied positions of power—white, male, Western—while members of marginalized groups felt pressure either to assimilate to a disembodied majoritarian culture or to find ways in which to express their identity outside of stereotypes (Brock, 2009).

Not all online deception, however, involves the taking on of a raced, gendered, or dis/abled identity other than one's own. Often, deceptions occur at the level of beliefs and behavior, as in cases of "trolling." Trolling is a relational phenomenon, in which a troll enters a community and

> constructs the identity of sincerely wishing to be part of the group in question, including professing, or conveying pseudo-sincere intentions, but whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement. (Hardaker, 2010: 237)

The motivations for trolling have often been figured in terms of humor and community belonging, as trolls often participate in shared communities where they share the results of their trolling for the amusement of themselves and others. Julian Dibbell (2009) refers to trolls acting out for "the lulz," a dark humor that, Gabriella Coleman (2015) argues, speaks to the pleasures of transgression. Whitney Phillips (2015) similarly studies self-identified trolls as a subculture, invested in particular forms of wit, cultural creation, and rhetoric. One of Phillips' most provocative claims is that the discriminatory attitudes found in trolling are merely reflective of larger cultural biases and that the boundaries between trolling and normative forms of online and interpersonal interaction are porous.

The literature on trolling is useful to understanding cyborg hoaxes because it highlights the relationships formed between those engaged in identity deception and those whom they deceive and, through Phillips' argument, locates various forms of deception and provocation on a continuum of normalized behavior. The targets of deception are largely absent from postmodern theorizations of online identity play, while trolling emphasizes that deception is a relational phenomenon, facilitated by a troll or deceiver's knowledge of their audience. Similarly, figuring trolling as an amplification of larger cultural forces, rather than aberrant, enables us to see similarities in a range of deceptive practices and attendant cultural values. Both of these insights are helpful in understanding the often-romantic context in which cyborg hoaxes occur. Deception in these contexts is often a matter of adjusting one's self-presentation in order to better appeal to a desired audience. This, in turn, requires awareness of that audience's preferences and the contextual cultural norms.

Online dating profiles, like the profiles comprising most social networking sites, are typically a mixture of textual material and photographs. Some text is informative or even menu-driven (age, sex, and location), while other fields allow for greater creativity and self-expression. In their analysis of daters' profiles and interview responses, Ellison et al. (2012) found that daters expected a level of misrepresentation, or enhancement, in their own and others' profiles, which daters justified by relying upon a compound sense of past, present, and future selves. The ease of deception in online presentations of self, coupled with the hope or expectation of meeting offline, led to a conception of the online

dating profile as a "promise made by profile-creators to their audience, rather than an exact representation" (Ellison et al., 2012: 56).

Cyborg hoaxes rely upon many of the same technological features (social networking profiles, asynchronous communication, easily feigned technical difficulties) as other romantic deceptions and are similarly a matter of relationships within a particular cultural context. I term these "hoaxes," however, because while they are intentional deceptions, they are neither subcultural trolling nor forms of benign romantic misrepresentation. While they mislead through the meticulous construction of a persona, the motivations and emotional effects of hoaxes often shift from the disruptive or playful to the sincere or regretful over the period of time in which the deception is maintained. At their core, they renege on the "promise" of online romantic interaction by raising the possibility that an interlocutor could be "pretending to be something else entirely" (Phillips, 2015: 17).

Paranoia about deception is the core of the narrative structure of *Catfish: TTS*. The targets of deception share the profiles, text messages, and other digital artifacts that have convinced them that their paramour is a handsome man, a successful musical artist, a blonde young woman, or otherwise idealized figure of (usually) heterosexual romance. Host Nev Schulman and filmmaker Max Joseph investigate these artifacts, ultimately locating and arranging a meeting with a person behind the hoax. The climax of each episode is a confrontation between the target and the "catfish" (deceiver), in which they discuss their emotions, reactions, and possibilities for any future relationship. Frequently, these hoaxes are not malicious but are indicative of circumstances in which "for whatever reason, a catfish is unwilling or unable to communicate honestly with the person they're interacting with" (McNutt, 2013). It is often cultural politics that drive these deceptions, as when a lesbian presents herself as male in an online relationship with another woman. In contrast to this masking of stigmatized identity, however, some deceivers take on a false identity that incorporates sickness or disability. If, like trolling, cyborg hoaxes are "game[s] about identity deception" (Donath, 1999: 45), why is presenting as a disabled young woman a winning move?

Cyborg hoaxes and the perpetuation of an ideology of ability

To understand cyborg hoaxes, I deconstruct them, highlighting the "ideology of ability" that supports them. Critical disability theorist Tobin Siebers defines the ideology of ability as "at its simplest the preference for able-bodiedness. At its most radical, it defines the baseline by which humanness is determined" (Siebers, 2008: 8). Such beliefs are reflected in cyborg hoaxes through the nature of the illness or disability, through the compensatory role of femininity, and through the static nature of disability as a problem to be fixed by technology.

Nature of the illness or disability

There is uniformity to the impairments or illnesses presented in cyborg hoaxes. Although chronic illness is not always associated with disability, I follow Susan Wendell (1996) in treating both as instances of the "rejected body" (p. 85) that does not live up to cultural

ideals or norms, a similarity which can be the basis of political affiliation. In cyborg hoaxes, car accidents and cancers are particularly common afflictions.

Joan and several participants on *Catfish: TTS* were represented as having been in car accidents. In a season 2 episode of *Catfish: TTS*, Joseph refers to a car accident as a "huge red flag" for deception. The episode featured a young woman named Kristen who had, in fact, lost her eye in a car accident; she used someone else's pictures, but was otherwise telling the truth. In this case, the disability was not false, but the insecurity caused by her recovery, weight gain, and glass eye led her to present herself as someone else. This might be understood as an appearance of impairment, a spoiling of identity that leads to stigma. Stigma discredits an individual, setting them apart from expected identities and social interactions (Goffman, 1963: 12). Erving Goffman (1963) understood the most discrediting stigmas to be physical deformities, a category that included disabilities but could be extended to appearance impairments that impinge upon expected gender presentation. Joan, for instance, was understood to be "*disfigured*, crippled, and left mute by an automobile accident" (Rheingold, 1994: 165, emphasis mine). Thus, in addition to limitations of injury or disability, many of these women are assumed to be struggling with appearance, confidence, or sexuality following an accident. Kristen's paramour explicitly hypothesized that she was apprehensive about meeting because of her "physical handicap."

Cancers appear in the figure of Lennay Kekua and in the personas of several *Catfish: TTS* participants. Cancer does not have the same appearance effects as car accidents, but is presented as a constant drain on these girls' time and energy, preventing them from engaging in contact with others. It may also provide a convenient end to the hoax, when cancer gives way to death.

Both car accidents and cancer in these hoaxes serve as excuses for what might otherwise be odd or evasive behavior. Turkle (1997) explicitly described "Joan's handicap" as "provid[ing] her with an alibi for restricting her contacts to online communication" (p. 228). The function of disability or illness as alibi, however, is legible only under conditions in which disability is perceived as a tragedy, a deficit, or a disqualification from participation in social activities (Goodley, 2014). Conceiving of disability as deficit maintains a hierarchy in which able-bodiedness acts as a standard for citizenship, or humanity, preserving and justifying unequal treatment of people with disabilities.

Gender, the sweet innocent, and sexuality

The performances of disability in cyborg hoaxes are deeply intertwined with signs of femininity.[3] These are often compensatory traits; where a claimed car accident might result in a disability with effects on appearance, feminine traits such as caring are presented to recuperate that identity. For instance, many *Catfish: TTS* participants express a sense that they could "tell [her] anything" or that their paramour was "always there" and supportive. When the hoaxes involve cancer, depleted energy is often compensated for through feminine beauty, romance, and sexuality.

The reliance on feminine traits to recuperate a stigmatized disabled identity recalls disability scholar Martin Norden's analysis of the "Sweet Innocent." Norden (1994) identifies this trope in early American cinema, writing that the Sweet Innocent was "a

child or young unmarried woman … 'perfect' in every way except for the disability; respectful, humble, gentle, cheerful, godly, pure, and exceptionally pitiable" (p. 33). The perfection extended to race, as Sweet Innocents were paragons of White femininity, pale, virtuous, beautiful, and domestic. The combination of disability with feminine virtues evoked sympathy and protection from male characters in the films and was intended to do so in the audience. Cyborg hoaxes similarly articulate vulnerability, femininity, and disability through digital representations.

Articulations of digital media and gender have produced widespread concerns about girls' safety online, including technopanics about child pornography and sexual predation (Marwick, 2008). Cassell and Cramer (2008) argue that these concerns arise "from adult fears about girls' agency (particularly sexual agency) and societal discomfort around girls as power users of technology" (p. 55). When disability is added to this mix, it furthers presumptions about the need to protect these individuals, who are regularly stereotyped as asexual, technologically less savvy, and generally vulnerable. Online, disabled girls are thus presented in cyborg hoaxes in a way that flatters the protective impulses of those they deceive, offering feminine perfection juxtaposed with the stigmas of disability or illness.

The case of Lennay Kekua is illustrative of these dynamics. Although she was not represented as White, but as ethnically and culturally Samoan (like Te'o), she was attractive, innocent, religious, a "good girl." The status of Kekua as a kind of "innocent" was amplified by culturally specific virtues. Like Te'o, she was presented as an observant member of the Church of the Latter-Day Saints, a dutiful family member, and an upstanding figure in a wider Samoan community characterized by specific gender roles and forms of courtship (Gershon, 2013). Te'o spoke of her with reverence, as "the love of [his] life," to whom he dedicated a victory following her death (Zeman, 2013).

Femininity, romance, and sexuality compensate for the stigma of disability in many cyborg hoaxes. The very definition of "catfish" given on the television series is "pretending to be someone you're not to hook someone in an online romance." Disability can often entail desexualization, as disabled bodies are not often understood as sexually desirable or competent (McRuer and Mollow, 2012). Thus, even as representations of disabled women and girls recall Norden's innocent, they may simultaneously emphasize sexual attractiveness, agency, and romantic attachments. For instance, Joan "was married to a policeman and their relationship gave other disabled women hope that they, too, could be loved. Despite her handicaps, Joan was lusty, funny, a woman of appetites" (Turkle, 1997: 228–229). These elements are even more pronounced in episodes of *Catfish: TTS* in which declarations of love and suggestive innuendos are displayed as evidence of the depth and appeal of the relationship.

Technology, identity, and "fixing" disability

Despite the common analysis of online media as opportunities for self-exploration or identity experimentation, cyborg hoaxes present disability as a fixed element of identity that may, in turn, be "fixed" by technology that extends an individual beyond their (limited) capacities. In the first place, cyborg hoaxes reproduce stereotypical representations of disability as a fixed element of identity with predictable restrictions. Second, any

promise of technology "fixing" disability implies that disability ought to be fixed and reflects an ableist ideology.

Disability is presented as a fixed, static, identity marker in cyborg hoaxes. The very use of disability as an excuse, as described above, is indicative of an assumption that disability produces predictable symptoms. The presentation of disability as a static identity marker, with unchanging consequences, reflects assumptions of a dualist and ableist culture, in which ability is contrasted with disability and gradations are largely invisible. Cyborg hoaxes cling tightly to a narrow narrative of disability and limitation, while (as will be discussed later) people with disabilities online exhibit a range of changeable relationships to society, technology, and sexuality.

Insofar as technology offers to "fix" disability, it does so through invisibility, enabling people with disabilities to take on non-disabled representations of self. Yet, as media scholars Katie Ellis and Mike Kent (2010) caution, "if people with disability in this sense become invisible in virtual worlds, this could have implications for the visibility of people with disability in broader society" (p. 123). There are strong tendencies to assume the whiteness and maleness of online participants in the absence of complex representations of alternative identities (Nakamura, 2002). An able-bodied perspective is similarly dominant and reinforced by the invisibility of disability online. Kafer (2013) argues that culture often imagines technologically enabled futures as spaces without disability, meaning that "the value of a future that includes disabled people goes unrecognized, while the value of a disability-free future is seen as self-evident" (p. 3).

Technology may also "fix" disability by offering access to a social life that is portrayed as otherwise impossible due to disability. Rheingold (1994), for example, wrote that "Joan's mentor had given her a computer, modem, and a subscription to CompuServe, where Joan instantly blossomed" (p. 165). This statement privileges technology as a means to overcome stigma or isolation, but it relies upon an ignorance of how technologies can reinforce oppression through features that cannot be used by people with disabilities.

Ideology of ability

Together, these elements create an enormously appealing and familiar representation of gendered disability that supports a larger ideology of ability in which disability is a personal deficit, provoking pity or protection, and a static condition that may be fixed by technology. First, the car accidents and cancers described in these hoaxes only function as explanatory of odd behavior because the usually able-bodied targets of these hoaxes have very little frame of reference with which to understand what may or may not be possible. This is indicative of how an ideology of ability restricts social knowledge to a dominant able-bodied perspective, writing disability, and chronic illness out of mainstream representations and experiences. Second, the intersection of gender, disability, and romance both upholds and challenges an ideology of ability. In their similarities to the cinematic Sweet Innocent, cyborg hoaxes perpetuate an ideology of ability that sees illness and impairment as worthy of pity and sees compassion from able-bodied people as indicative of moral worth. In the words of Schulman, in a season two episode of *Catfish: TTS*, "You can't aggressively call someone a liar when they tell you they have

cancer, because that's the most insensitive thing someone could do." Yet, the compensatory role of romance and sexuality in these hoaxes is provocative, evidence of how these cyborg articulations may act as potent contradictions. Where an ideology of ability normally entails desexualization of people with disabilities, these hoaxes make romance and sexuality central, relying upon the norms of mediated romantic relationships to forge interpersonal connections and mitigate the stigma of disability. Finally, the static nature of illness and disability in these hoaxes reinforces an ideology of ability that assumes disability to be ever-present and visible, in which "suspicions of fraud often grant declarations of nonvisible disability identity" (Samuels, 2003: 242). These "fixed" disabilities, in turn, are presented as potentially fixed by technology which allows for the taking on of a normative (able-bodied) identity, reinforcing an ideology of ability in which disability is an undesirable identity marker to be cast off when possible.

Cyborg hoaxes articulate gender, disability, and technology in ways that most often reinforce cultural assumptions about disability and hierarchies of able-bodiedness. Yet, they are also provocative in their contradictions, as seen in their incorporation of sexuality. By bringing critical disability studies to bear on the study of these online deceptions, it becomes possible to see how digital media platforms and users are shaped by and perpetuate larger cultural norms. Furthermore, disability analysis reveals the gaps in these representations and ought to provoke questions about the ways in which people with disabilities present their own articulations of gender, disability, and technology online. Rather than allowing these hoaxes to stand in for online disability, it is crucial for critical studies of online media to look for lived experiences and analyze disability on its own terms in contemporary online environments.

Alternate experiences and articulations of disability, gender, and technology

The persistence of these cyborg hoaxes indicates that they remain both technologically feasible and culturally relevant. They may also, however, further marginalize embodied disability identities in digitally mediated contexts by casting doubt upon their veracity and burying specific technocultural experiences beneath stereotype. Looking beyond cyborg hoaxes to lived experiences at the intersections of disability, gender, and technology illustrates how this nexus may open up new spaces for the exploration of disability identity and new understandings of digital disability culture, both of which may inform a broader Internet studies in the cyberculture tradition.

The disjuncture between cyborg hoaxes and lived experiences is evident as far back as Joan. Lindsay Van Gelder (1996) notes that the first to question Joan's persona were disabled women in the community. This detail is left out of many analyses, a choice by which cyberculture scholars ignored experiences of users with disabilities. When it did appear, in Stone's (1995) analysis, she wrote that disabled women "knew the exquisite problems" of interacting with non-disabled peers and that Joan's experiences did not reflect these experiences (p. 74). Despite the delicate wording, we can assume that such "exquisite problems" include stigmatization, exclusion, and likely other forms of ableist oppression offline and, potentially, online. In the glorification of technology as a means of interaction, scholars and cyborg hoaxers alike overlook the barriers that persist in

access to technology by people with disabilities and the articulations by which disabled Internet users enter into and create online cultures.

Before turning to the cyborg potential of these experiences, a final hoax. The 2010 documentary *Catfish* followed Schulman's online relationships with an artistic child, Abby, and her older sister, Megan, an attractive young White woman. Over the course of the film, the Facebook-enabled relationships included telephone calls, physical gifts, and interactions with the entire family, including mother Angela. Ultimately, it was revealed that all of Schulman's interactions online had been with the middle-aged Angela, who was also responsible for the paintings. The film followed Schulman to Michigan to meet the family, where Angela (falsely) claimed to be undergoing treatment for cancer. It was further revealed that Angela's daily life entailed caring for Abby and two seriously disabled stepsons and that she was estranged from her daughter, Megan.

The online deceptions of *Catfish* did not incorporate disability, which emerged only in the physical interactions. Yet, there was a cyborg element to her deceptions—she defied the normative uses and structures of Facebook in order to recalibrate the articulations of aged and gendered bodies, technologies, and cultural interactions available to her. José Van Dijck's (2013) analysis of *Catfish* casts Angela as a "subversive user" in opposition to Schulman's "compliant content generator," pointing out that "human users' interactions with technologies may be predictable but can also be seditious" (p. 142). Users with disabilities may be particularly seditious. They often rearticulate gendered and dis/abled bodies, technologies, and social structures out of both necessity and desire, circumventing exclusionary structures and developing spaces for disability identity and culture. Disability is often incompatible with normative technoculture. In the absence of closed captioning, streaming video excludes d/Deaf users. Inaccessible code prevents people who cannot use a mouse and keyboard from online shopping. The lack of representational options for wheelchair users may limit the ability to produce indexical self-representations. Faced with such obstacles, users with disabilities forge new articulations that reveal the gaps and oversights in technological structures and cultural assumptions.

By turning to the lived experiences of people with disabilities as users of digital media, it becomes possible to see these alternative arrangements of bodies, technologies, and practices as challenges to any universalized notion of what Internet use "is" or who users "are." This is evident from both existing literature about disability online and from my ethnographic study of a disability blogosphere conducted from 2011 to 2012. This study followed over 50 blogs, as well as related Twitter, Tumblr, and Flickr accounts, and was supplemented by open-ended interviews with 10 participants. Through study of lived experiences, a reclaimed and politicized cyborg emerges, in which articulations of disability and technology enable (1) the claiming of disability identity and community formation, (2) the reconfiguring of default arrangements of hardware and software, and (3) speaking back to dominant narratives of disability, gender, and sexuality.

First, there is ample evidence that people with disabilities marshal digital media in order to explore disability identity and form communities. This is seen in blogs and message boards, where users may be introduced to academic and activist conceptions of disability identity or use their experiences to produce original formulations that complicate these definitions (Goggin and Newell, 2003; Goggin and Noonan, 2006; Thoreau, 2006). In interviews, bloggers often returned to this motivating use of technology, as

blogs and social media allowed for desired social interactions and for outreach to others with similar disabilities, sharing of information, and building of community around shared experiences. Blogger Marissa recalled that she began blogging explicitly because she could not find resources or first person accounts related to her condition, and she wanted to provide that for others. Here, the linkage of disability and technology is explicitly bringing marginalized knowledge to light and encouraging the formation of distinct cultural communities.

Second, users with disabilities are often actively involved in reconfiguring their technoscapes in order to make them more usable. Blogger Mark joked that he had to know something about accessibility because "At a practical, existential level, I wouldn't have a job, I wouldn't have a life if I didn't know something about how to make [the internet] accessible for me!" Users petition Facebook for accessibility (Ellis and Kent, 2010), share tips and tricks for Tumblr access, and use a range of specialized assistive technologies, including large displays and photo editing software, to create and share art through the Flickr Blind Photographers group (Ellcessor, 2016). By developing their own technological hacks and preferred practices for navigating Internet technologies that they know to be inaccessible, users with disabilities producing the conditions for their own online inclusion and refute the normativity of default technological structures.

Third, many people with disabilities use digital media technologies to speak back to dominant narratives of disability and gender and sexuality. Chally Kacelnik (2011) reflected on feminine clothing in a context in which "disabled women are regularly disallowed from expressions of the feminine and full membership in their own gender." Two series of posts at *Bitch Media* reflected explicitly on femininity, queerness, and expressions of sexuality in their personal lives or in popular culture explicitly (*Bitch Media*, 2011; Narby, 2012). At *Beauty Ability*, letters asked for advice on how to date while using a wheelchair or how to disclose a disability to a potential romantic partner met online. In these technologically facilitated spaces, writers and readers alike could participate in the formation of a disability culture that incorporated many forms of sexuality and refuted the dependency and charity bound up in romance under an ideology of ability (BeautyAbility | Love, n.d.).

These examples indicate that lived experiences of disability produce varied cyborg articulations of gender, disability, and technology, forged through combinations of hardware, software, community, and self-presentation. By taking these examples as a basis for theorization, contemporary critical analyses of digital media may interrogate technocultures while avoiding the replication of ableist ideologies.

Conclusion

Cyborg hoaxes, deceptive forms of identity presentation that articulate gender, disability, and technology, have been persistent but unremarked upon elements of online culture. By identifying, contextualizing, and deconstructing them, this article has highlighted the persistence of an ideology of ability in online culture and in cyberculture and Internet studies. An ideology of ability is at work in the pitiable presentation of a digital sweet innocent and in the excuses offered by cancer. Identifying these themes reveals that online cultures remain closely connected to larger ideologies and norms. Far from

offering a "liberation technology" (Coombs, 1991), online spaces may reproduce and amplify the prejudices and normative assumptions of a broader cultural context. These deceptive assemblages deploy disability strategically for an able-bodied audience, taking advantage of existing hierarchies. Yet, they may also challenge the very ideologies upon which they depend. For instance, the prominence of romance and sexuality in these hoaxes counters very real tendencies to desexualize people with disabilities.

Such contradictions, and the blurring of identity and technology, are indicative of the "cyborg" component of these hoaxes. While I retained this language in order to highlight the possibility of such provocations, it is in the experiences of people with disabilities using online media that a richer form of cyborg can be found. These experiences reflect a variety of possible linkages of gender and sexuality, disability, and technology. In these formations, people with disabilities can be understood "as cyborgs not because of [their] *bodies* (e.g. our use of prosthetics, ventilators, or attendants), but because of [their] *political practices*" (Kafer, 2013: 120). In claiming disability identity and engaging in community formation, by reconfiguring default settings of computer hardware and software, and by speaking back to dominant narratives of disability and gender, these individuals and communities are producing disability technocultures that are seditious and, too often, invisible.

Disability is a necessary and theoretically rich addition to the forms of identity, community, and material technology that have dominated critical and cultural studies of digital media. Present since the earliest cyberculture work, but rendered invisible or metaphorical, disability offers important critical resources for the nuanced and complex study of the digital networked media that increasingly permeate daily life. Not a metaphor, and not invisible, but ever-present and meaningful, disability offers a lens through which to examine theoretical assumptions and exclusions and with which to critically interrogate normative forms of digital media and the ideological structures that maintain and challenge them.

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Notes

1. For simplicity, despite the variable retellings, I use "Alex" and "Joan" when discussing this case.
2. This search, which paired "online" with "catfish" in order to avoid piscatory results, was conducted using LexisNexis Academic in December 2015.
3. There are some cases of male disability on *Catfish: The TV Show* (TTS), but these were usually only revealed in the physical meeting, not online. Furthermore, most disabilities in male participants were posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or combat-related, allowing militarized masculinity to compensate for disability.

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