

Playlist

Annals of Communication and Disabilities

Yukari Seko
Ryerson University

Throughout the 47-year history of the *Canadian Journal of Communication* (CJC), the topic of disability has been a faint note played in the background. Only occasionally, it comes to the fore to sing in the chorus with other socially constructed categories, such as gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, social class, and health. Although there is a growing call for “cripping” communication to address the longstanding ableism in the field, (e.g., St. Pierre, 2015), scholarly interest in disability tends to fall far behind other topics in the fast-expanding field of critical communication studies.

This playlist features hidden gems in CJC’s vast archives. The five articles featured here address in one way or another how communication shapes the way we see, feel, and live disabled bodies. These pieces date from 1980 to 2011, each bearing witness to the changing relationship between disability and communication. There is a shared recognition among the authors about the role of communication in perpetuating the “hegemony of normalcy” (Davis, 1995, p. 24) that normalizes certain forms of human variation while excluding others. Some authors problematize the stigmatizing stereotypes and derogatory images the media attaches to the disabled, while others address how communication mediums can be used to both enable and disable people with disabilities. Others shed light on agentic voices of the disabled that are striving to reconstruct coherent identities beyond medical labelling.

Together, these pieces demonstrate that we continue to need critical scholarship and activism that explores how communication practices, along with medical discourses, enact a cultural vernacular of ableism on a daily basis. Disability is a vastly rich and complex social phenomenon emerging between and across dis/abled bodies. Yet, it is still flattened, distorted, and marginalized within mainstream culture. The intersections between disability and communication can be explored creatively from issues of access, representation, legislation, and lived ex-

periences, which in turn makes it possible to unpack the latent ableism in communication theories and practices.

As the COVID-19 crisis is hitting the one-year mark, the voice yearning for a return to “normal” is being replaced by a prophetic call for a “new normal.” However, critical thinkers argue that the glorified notion of a new normal, symbolized by social distancing, confinement to households, and reliance on digital technologies, is perhaps simply the old normal for the disabled (Goggin & Ellis, 2020). In the post-pandemic reconstruction of social life, the question thus becomes, how can we imagine a new normal rooted in principles of equity and justice? Each article in this playlist provides food for thought in envisioning alternatives to the current hegemonic normalcy.

Playlists

Article 1



Stein, A.L. (1980). Stigmatization as negotiation of moral meaning: A communicational approach. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 7(1): <https://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/242>

The stigma associated with illness and disabilities reflects a deep structure of moral meaning. A.L. Stein’s commentary portrays the moral sanctioning of three medically disabled conditions (obesity, paraplegia, and epilepsy) as possessing a Goffmanian spoiled identity. Framing stigmatization as “a type of moral communication” (p. 12), Stein draws parallels between these people with these disabilities and other discredited persons—including homosexuals, Black people, and alcoholics—who are held responsible for their non-adhesion to specific social expectations. Published four decades ago, this article holds a startling prescience to the issues we face today, from anti-Black racism to the continued stigmatization of the disabled.

Article 2



Dahl, Marilyn. (1993). The role of the media in promoting images of disability—disability as metaphor: The evil crip. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 18(1): <https://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/718>

This short article is an early piece in CJC that comments on the media’s role in shaping public perceptions of people with disabilities as objects of pity, abhorrence, or inspiration. Referring to the 1980s media enthusiasm for Terry Fox and other disabled athletes as “heroes by hype” (para. 8), Marilyn Dahl questions the media’s selective portrayal of disabled people as perpetuating stereotypes. Instead, Dahl suggests, the media can contribute to the destigmatization of disabilities through realistic presentations of the disabled as ordinary citizens and community mem-

bers. Though written from a communication studies perspective, Dahl's approach resonates closely with her contemporaries in disability studies, such as Tom Shakespeare (1994), who troubled prejudice against disabilities enacted through cultural imagery.

Article 3



Schneider, Barbara. (2003). Narratives of schizophrenia: Constructing a positive identity. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 28(2): <https://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/1358>

Twenty-three years after Stein's article, Barbara Schneider published this empirical study examining how people diagnosed with schizophrenia reconstruct positive identities in the face of the stigmatizing discourses they experience daily. The narratives of those living with schizophrenia illuminate their rhetorical strategy to reconstruct and normalize their identities. This seminal article marks a unique presence in CJC, where empirical studies on the lived experience of disabilities had been scarce. It also heralded a surge of interest in narrative approaches among communication scholars, which continues to date.

Article 4



King, Samantha. (2007). Designer babies, stem cells, and the market for genetics: The limits of the assisted human reproduction act. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 32(3): <https://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/1972>

The advancement of assisted reproductive technologies has shed light on the hitherto underdiscussed friction between reproductive rights and disability rights. This commentary on the 2004 Canadian Assisted Human Reproductive Act chimes into this ongoing debate from a communication studies point of view. Samantha King argues that through reproductive technologies, the rhetoric of eugenics has begun to merge with that of reproductive freedom in a way that promotes a medical model of disability. Rather, King advocates for a broader social awareness of the need for "social structures that allow children with disabilities and their parents to have a full life" (p. 618). As part of CJC's 2007 special issue on health, this incisive commentary encourages us to explore the convoluted relationship between disabled bodies and technoscience, as well as the increasingly complicated relationship between feminism and disability studies.

Article 5



Aspevig, Kristen, & Pederson, Isabel. (2011). Death Comes to Town, irreverent humour, and accessibility for the blind and low-visioned. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 36(3): <https://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/2363>

The subjective experiences of media audiences who embody physical, mental, and neurodevelopmental differences provide an important critique of the ableism and exclusion inherent in media production. Kristen Aspevig and Isabel Pederson tackle this issue by analyzing *Death Comes to Town*, a Canadian television comedy series with an audio description for blind and low-visioned viewers. They introduce the notion of cultural accessibility to advocate for making humour, sarcasm, and other aspects of entertainment fully accessible to a differently abled audience. Their call for cultural participation for all Canadians still holds significance.

Yukari Seko is an Assistant Professor, School of Professional Communication at Ryerson University and an Adjunct Scientist, Bloorview Research Institute, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital. Email: yseko@ryerson.ca

References

- Canadian Journal of Communication. (2007). Communication health. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 32(3). URL: <https://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/issue/view/120> [February 01, 2021].
- Davis, Lennard J. (1995). *Enforcing normalcy: Disability, deafness, and the body*. London, UK: Verso.
- Goggin, Gerard., & Ellis, Katie. (2020). Disability, communication, and life itself in the COVID-19 pandemic. *Health Sociology Review*, 29(2), 168–176.
- Shakespeare, Tom. (1994). Cultural representation of disabled people: Dustbins for disavowal? *Disability & Society*, 9(3), 283–299.
- St. Pierre, Joshua. (2015). Crippling communication: Speech, disability, and exclusion in liberal humanist and posthumanist discourse. *Communication Theory*, 25(3), 330–348.