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Disability, Media, and the Politics of Vulnerability

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Abstract

Vulnerability is a topic of considerable and long-standing importance for understanding media and its place in contemporary culture, social arrangements, and everyday life. Disability and those living with disability are often called to mind in discussions of media and vulnerability. In this paper, I sketch a critique of such dominant concepts of vulnerability and media. Firstly I discuss the problems with vulnerability, as currently conceived, as a way of understanding contemporary media and disability. Secondly, I give an overview of the state of the art of research on media and disability, and what priority research is needed. Thirdly, I consider how critical conceptions of disability help us to open up discussions of media and vulnerability.

Introduction

Vulnerability is a topic of considerable and long-standing importance for understanding media and its place in contemporary culture, social arrangements, and everyday life. This timely special issue is interested in how vulnerability has taken a heightened role in shaping the quality of relationships between media and its workers (especially journalists), and their sources and audiences. Disability and those living with disability are often called to mind in discussions of media and vulnerability, and accordingly there are a number of thoughtful pieces discussing these here.

In contributing to this anthology, and the debates it represents and furthers, I would like to reflect upon three things: the problems with vulnerability, as currently conceived, as a way of understanding contemporary media and disability; the state of the art of research on media and disability, and what priority research is needed; and how critical conceptions of disability help us to open up discussions of media and vulnerability.

What's Wrong with Vulnerability?

Vulnerability has been used to indicate the need for journalists to be sensitive to the needs, feelings, and attitudes of both their sources and their audiences. What is helpful about this approach is the recognition of relationships between those working in the media, especially journalists with their special role as news-gatherers, interpreters, and authoritative voices, and those communities and individuals who can be strongly affected by how they shape reality. Vulnerability has become a central, anchoring concept, underpinning and legitimating claims upon journalists to modify their language, reporting, and communicating practices. As such, it forms part of a broader social conception of journalism and its function, and how conceptions of ethics and justice have a crucial and grounding role in contemporary news and media. Many worthwhile practical measures have followed from the adoption of notions of media and vulnerability, whether in training, newsroom or production practice, or guidelines and information for journalists.

While such advances are certainly praiseworthy, there is a central problem with the narrow and often patronising way in which vulnerability is understood in relation to media. Certain groups in society, and particular individuals, are believed to be vulnerable to the customary operations of media. Thus they need particular attention or recognition, and should be handled with care. Obviously I am highly simplifying and generalising here, but it does seem to be that there is a certain structure to the concept of vulnerability and how it operates in relation to media, and how it organises relations among different actors in the media.

The problem presents itself forcefully for those interested in or living with disability. People with disability have long been regarded as objects of pity, solicitude, and special care and treatment. Unfortunately we do not have to look very far to see that this 'charity' model or discourse of disability (Fulcher 1989) still strongly shapes the dominant approach in Australia and elsewhere. Fund raising and charity events are big-ticket, high-profile media events still, underlined by the ongoing power of disability charities. Certainly there has been significant change in disability charities as

institutions, and how media regards disability, but still the charity approach has deep affective power.

Underlying the charity approach is the sense that disability is a tragedy and that people with disability need to be looked after, or helped, as they lack the resources, ability or power to survive independently. People with disabilities, as particular groups or individuals, are structurally vulnerable, and in need of special treatment by those in the media. Again, I simplify here, but there remains a strong flavour of the powerful (journalists; the media) needing to be nice to the powerless (the disabled). And, of course, put that way, the vulnerability doctrine is irredeemably offensive to all concerned. From the perspective of journalists, it jars with the other imperatives of their professional definition and social and intellectual role: that is, to report accurately and fairly without fear and favour, and to analyse, research, and represent important issues in society. From the perspective of those with disability, certification of vulnerability is a grudging accommodation given by those in the media who would rather not do so.

A good example of the problems here can be seen in guidelines regarding disability. Again, they are useful for raising awareness of disability, and suggesting, or requiring, changes to journalistic practice. For instance, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's editorial policies state:

> In presenting content, the ABC has a responsibility to treat all sections of society with respect and to avoid the unnecessary use of prejudicial content.
>
> 11.8.2 To avoid discrimination, content should not use language or images which:
>
> (a) disparage or discriminate against any person or group on grounds such as race, ethnicity, nationality, sex, age, disability or sexual preference …
>
> (b) are not representative and reinforce stereotypes, or convey stereotypic assumptions about gender roles
>
> (c) convey prejudice
>
> (d) make demeaning or gratuitous references; for example, to people's physical characteristics, cultural practices or religious beliefs.

Two further provisions follow, specifically addressing mental illness. Vulnerability is mentioned once in relation to grief, and twice in relation to suicide: 'A step-by-step description can prompt vulnerable people to act' (5.14.1 — 'news and current affairs content'; and 11.4.9 — 'content standards'). My initial comment regarding the ABC *Editorial Policies* is that disability does not actually feature very much at all, and could be further developed. However, it could legitimately be responded that this is better done so elsewhere, such as in other aspects of ABC programming and policies that seek to deliver on its Charter, as well as equity and diversity obligations, as well as through specific resource kits and guidelines on disability (Tanner et al. 2003a and 2003b). Where vulnerability is mentioned, especially in relation to suicide, there is an interesting set of assumptions about what vulnerability is, how particular media practices can inappropriately respond to that, and what journalists should do to avoid

this. This use of vulnerability is quite similar to the wider use of the term in the Media Alliance Code of Ethics:

> 8. Use fair, responsible and honest means to obtain material. Identify yourself and your employer before obtaining any interview for publication or broadcast. Never exploit a person's vulnerability or ignorance of media practice (MEAA 2009).

It is worth observing that the preamble to the Code of Ethics declares:

> Journalists describe society to itself. They convey information, ideas and opinions, a privileged role. They search, disclose, record, question, entertain, suggest and remember. They inform citizens and animate democracy. … They scrutinise power, but also exercise it, and should be accountable. Accountability engenders trust (MEAA 2009).

I have only dipped into two examples of guidelines and codes to see how vulnerability is construed, so obviously this is a very selective and partial sample. However, both of these do seem to be representative of the dominant approach to media and vulnerability. Structurally the map of media given is rather static and tends to endorse the proposition that the power to respect vulnerability lies on the side of the journalists, buttressed by the media organisations and corporations for whom they work, and the codes of ethics by which their profession requires them to be regulated. In his apposite paper for this collection Ian Richards nicely sums this up in the phrase 'managing the margins' (Richards 2009). Richards argues that we recognise that vulnerability has different meanings in different contexts, then:

> it is clear that almost everyone has the potential of being caught up in a situation which will render them vulnerable to the media … However [in the case of this occurring to the wealthy such as the late media proprietor Kerry Packer] such individuals can afford to defend themselves with vigour. This is not the case for the less powerful … Many others — the disabled, mentally ill, homeless, traumatised, poor, unemployed and illiterate — are in an on-going position of disadvantage in life generally and thus are in a constant state of vulnerability (Richards 2009).

Thus Richards suggests that professional codes do not provide sufficient guidance to the ethical complexities of reporting in the midst of such relations of power, arguing for the need for ongoing support, resources, networks, and training.

Critiques such as those from Richards are very helpful, but we need to go further still. In the case of disability and media, as well as the charity discourse, there is another overlapping discourse at work, that comes out in the examples I have looked at, and that also influences the dominant conception of vulnerability — namely, the medical model. The medical model is firmly and elegantly critiqued by Holland et al. in their important paper in this issue on the voices of the suicidal in the media (Holland et al. 2008). Holland et al. argue that concepts of media in relation to people living with mental illness and psychiatric disabilities typically proceed with a stigmatised account — underpinned by the biomedical model. They note that research has sought to map and critique this, looking at the meanings available to audiences, but point out that this too has its limitations:

> such research documents the potential of stigmatising news media portrayals. It tells us nothing about how diverse audiences – including those diagnosed with mental illnesses – might interpret, misinterpret, ignore or even resist such reports, in accordance with their own personal knowledge and experience.

Instead, what Holland et al. develop is a critique of the 'vulnerable', drawing on resistance to the biomedical model from postpsychiatric, and from consumer and disability movements. Accordingly, they draw attention to the various ways in which the 'vulnerable' talk back to the supposed centres of media power, drawing on Foucauldian concepts of discourse, and the work inaugurated by Bell Hooks, and strongly developed in post-colonial theory, on how resistance works. To do so, they make a telling point about existing concepts of vulnerability — that it rests, apparently still intact, on problematic media theories of how meanings are received by audiences:

> Like the effects tradition, media reporting guidelines also reflect a simplistic understanding of the relationship between media 'messages' and audience 'reception', and the role of the media in contributing to stigma and the role of media audiences in feeling and enacting stigma. The reason the 'direct effects' theory of media and communication lost favour is because it is unable to account for the broader context, including other media messages and audience habitus, in which people engage with media and communication.

Holland et al. note that there is a long tradition of regarding the masses as vulnerable to being influenced, or duped, that is now well contested (Blackman and Walkerdine 2001; Gauntlett 2005).

I would agree with this argument, and add also that while this tendency has been heavily contested in media theory, it still appears to hold sway when it comes to particular groups. What emerges from their analysis is a glimpse of how two problematic, yet still highly influential, models interact: the medical model of disability and the effects model of media, and its reception. Hence my concern that people with disability are still assumed to come under the mantle of the 'vulnerable'; when, as Holland et al. convincingly show, the vulnerable have agencies, voices, perspective, and some power also — but too often this is systematically ignored. My late friend Christopher Newell theorised this process as 'rejected knowledge' (Newell 2006). What this points to is that vulnerability operates in a particular, highly politicised way. While seeking to open up a relation of concern for an individual or group, in effect it does so through a process of controlling or managing them — despite, or alongside of, the good intentions. Clearly it is important not to overstate this 'hermeneutic of suspicion', and to reject, rather than engage with, those wishing to genuinely improve the quality of relationships with people with disabilities. However, my point is that as yet such a critique of the narrow, problematic concept of vulnerability has not been widely grasped, let alone accepted. So it is important to explore it and debate it further, especially in relation to particular groups and concepts, such as disability.

Current and Future Research on Media and Disability

From a critique of vulnerability, I'll now change focus to discuss the trends in research on media and disability. There has been a modest but promising growth in this area in recent years, and here I wish to just briefly comment on the main lines of this research

(updating Goggin 2003). In Australia, my feeling is that disability is now recognised as a legitimate field of research in media, communications and cultural studies. Disability research is welcomed, but it is still often seen as a speciality or somewhat marginal to the main topics and debates in these disciplines — and its theoretical bases, insights and implications are still not widely understood. One reason for this lies in the growth of disability studies itself.

To hazard a generalisation, disability studies has grown slowly and fitfully as a field internationally, with the strengthening of scholarly associations such as the US Society for Disability Studies and a dawning interest in academic publishers and journals for disability research (such as *Disability and Society*, *Disability Studies Quarterly*, and the newer *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*). Important new works in disability theory have been published and are being read outside the field (such as Davis 2006; Murray 2008; McRuer 2006; Pothier and Devlin 2006; Shakespeare 2006; Siebers 2008; Snyder and Mitchell 2006). There are emerging concentrations of work in cultural and literary studies of disability internationally, but less so, however, in the area of media. Useful studies continue to be published in journals (for instance, Haller et al. 2006; Kuusisto 2007; O'Malley 2008; Quinlan and Bates, 2008; Titchkosky 2005; Thoreau 2006; Wilkinson and Gill 2009). There are still surprisingly few of them, and they cluster around particular topics (for instance, analysis of the representation of aspects of disability in print media). The literature thus far leaves much to do with media and disability unscrutinised, and is especially lacking when it comes to sustained, longitudinal, comparative, or large-scale studies. Equally surprisingly, there are no recent book-length studies of disability and media I could find (with the exception of Riley 2005). Where is the follow-up, for example, to books on disability and media now a decade or more old (such as Cumberbatch and Negrine 1992, Pointon and Davies 1998)? Or even policy reports on disability and media, which remain too few and far between (Cumberbatch et al. 2004)? In the US, leading scholar Beth Haller maintains a helpful bibliography of media and disability (http://pages.towson.edu/bhalle/m&d-biblio.html), and the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication had for some years a 'Media and Disabilities' interest group. Elsewhere research on media and disability is even less clearly drawn together.

In Australia, concerted efforts are underway to consolidate disability studies as a field. There is a new Disability Studies and Research Centre at the University of New South Wales, various attempts to formulate a national agenda for disability studies, and a venture to establish a local journal of disability studies (this is due for launch in mid-2009, with the proposed title *Disability Studies Journal: Aotearoa & Australia*). At the annual conference of the Australian and New Zealand Communications Association, there is now a disability and communications stream (commenced in 2008). There is notable work available or in progress by scholars based in Australia that touches upon media, communications and journalism (for instance, Ellis 2009; Hickey-Moody & Wood 2008; Jones and Harwood 2009; Matthews 2008; Pedlow 2009; Penhallurick 2008; Power et al. 2007; Power and Power 2008; Suzor et al. 2008). A useful starting place is a special issue of the journal *M/C* edited by Liz Ferrier and Viv Muller entitled 'Able' (Ferrier and Muller 2006). 2008-2009 also sees the publication of three landmark books on disability that directly or indirectly bear upon questions of media and culture: Katie Ellis's book on disability and Australian cinema is a landmark achievement (Ellis 2008); Fiona Campbell's critique of ableism (Campbell 2009); and

Anna Hickey-Moody's account of intellectual disability, performance and embodiment (Hickey-Moody 2009).

While interest in disability grows in media and communication studies, and some important work is underway, it is fair to say that the action really is in the shifts in media itself. Not so much the mainstream traditional media, which still has considerable, indeed decisive power, but which is still not very open to embracing disability and diversity — though there have been some shifts, and interesting new possibilities, especially in new formats, but also in the creative efforts of disability organisations, agencies and activists (for example, in the 'Bar None Campaign', discussed by Richardson in this issue). Rather in the various forms of new media, there is an explosion of experimentation underway, whether in Internet cultures and technologies, mobile and wireless technologies, digital broadcasting, or location and positioning media, that really complicates our understanding of disability, normalcy, and vulnerability. While I am enthusiastic about these new disability user cultures, I would certainly be the first to point out the real problems in accessibility, affordability, and new power relations around disability being created. Further, that while audiences have become more fragmented, niche, and customised, traditional broadcasting and print media, albeit with much cross-platform capacities, retain great sway over what audiences see and hear, and how they are able to interact with this material, or control the content they now get to generate. New media and disability is a topic of interest to a number of Australia-based scholars, who are theorising such issues: for example, the book length projects by Katie Ellis and Mike Kent on disability and Internet and Anna Hickey-Moody and Denise Wood's project on disability and Second Life discussed above.

Clearly, a great deal of work in media and disability lies ahead. Broadly, there is an existing agenda on disability and media that internationally, but especially in Australia, has not been undertaken. This includes: larger, systematic, and comparative studies of representation of different media forms and genres across television, print, radio; studies of disabled audiences; disability and media policy; studies of media institutions and workers, and how they construct disability in their work – for instance, in news and other forms of journalism; the forms of impairment and disability created by journalism – for instance, from the trauma and injury of war reporting, or from occupational health and safety perspectives; understanding how many people with disabilities are employed in media industries, what kinds of work they are doing, and what their experiences might be.

It has not proved possible for the research directions indicated by various Australian researchers to blossom into the range of comprehensive, well-resourced, conceptually ambitious, and highly influential projects we really do need. To give just one example, in 2003 Andrew Jakubowicz foreshadowed a 'systematic examination of disability in the Australian media in a collaboration with disabled people and the media' to give a 'much wider sense of how best practice can be developed and implemented' (Jakubowicz 2003: 101). Despite best efforts (including my own), this overarching project did not come about, but we do have some good examples of ideas that bring together media and disability studies, media practitioners and people with disabilities.

The work around suicide and mental illness is especially important in this regard, undertaken by researchers in collaboration with journalists, media organisations, and consumer organisations, especially the sustained work by Warwick Blood and

collaborators (Holland et al. 2009; Blood et al. 2005) and also that by others engaged in journalism and media education and practice, such as Kerry Green's project on suicide and mental illness (Romeo et al. 2008). Researchers in this area are now starting to engage explicitly with the critical disability studies literature, and this encounter looks very promising. Also vitally important is the work that directly seeks to grapple with how disability is represented in the media — but also how to transform this, by research, education, and resources formulated with industry, people with disabilities, and other actors in the media (Tanner et al. 2003a & 2003b).

In addition to an existing, if still sketchy and unfulfilled agenda on media and disability, there is a new agenda that looks at digital media and users with disabilities, disability and creativity, and disability, innovation and technology (to mention but three themes). Of course, both of these research agendas now must intersect. And such research on disability and media needs to cross-fertilise with cutting-edge research about media forms and practices, production cultures, and journalism studies. There are many reasons while such research is overdue and badly needed. We still know so little about a sizable group of the population — 3.9 million Australians on 2003 figures (AIHW 2008) and how they figure in media. Now there is a new international political and policy imperative to propel work on disability and media. The current Australian Labor government, through Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities Bill Shorten, is placing an emphasis on disability as a human rights issue — and enacting a range of important legislation and policy measures. The Government's hand is being strengthened by the new United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which entered into force on 3 May 2008 (http://www.un.org/disabilities/).

Among the general obligations of the Convention, set out in Article 4, are unprecedented and powerful requirements for states to pursue research and development of universal design, and of new technology (especially with reference to affordability), and to provide accessible information to people with disabilities concerning a range of mobility aids, devices and technologies. Article 9 follows with specific obligations, including that:

> … States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas (Article 9, clause 1, CRPD).

States Parties are also charged with taking 'appropriate measures':

> g) To promote access for persons with disabilities to new information and communications technologies and systems, including the Internet;
>
> h) To promote the design, development, production and distribution of accessible information and communications technologies and systems at an early stage, so that these technologies and systems become accessible at minimum cost (Article 9, clause 2, CRPD).

These provisions concerning rights to technology appear well before the classic human rights regarding freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information. We might recall these from the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

> Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers (Article 19, UN, 1948; http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html).

Then there are the original articles regarding cultural rights and participation in cultural life set out in Articles 22 and 27:

> Article 22.
>
> Everyone, as a member of society … is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organisation and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.
>
> Article 27.
>
> (1) Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.(UN, 1948).

Such cultural rights many would now believe to be highly relevant to the media. This is what is indeed set out in the new CRPD — statements very much in the spirit of the 1948 Declaration, suitably rendered to capture the realities of today's media environment:

> States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise the right to freedom of expression and opinion, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas on an equal basis with others and through all forms of communication of their choice, as defined in article 2 of the present Convention, including by:
>
> a) Providing information intended for the general public to persons with disabilities in accessible formats and technologies appropriate to different kinds of disabilities in a timely manner and without additional cost;
>
> d) Encouraging the mass media, including providers of information through the Internet, to make their services accessible to persons with disabilities;
>
> e) Recognizing and promoting the use of sign languages (Article 22, CRPD).

The implications of the new Convention are still being considered, but the range and number of provisions that relate to communication, information, media and their related technologies is unparalleled — and surely will focus governments and their publics upon the great reforms that are required to bring such sweeping change about. It underscores further the importance of research in this area — as the issues of disability and media are quite complex, even if the general requirements of justice are clear.

Opening up Vulnerability

I have argued that conceptions of vulnerability and media remain problematic and narrow, and fail to grasp the conditions of media. In relation to disability and media, vulnerability is even more problematic, because it encapsulates a highly politicised and potentially oppressive account of disability — that misrecognises the social relations of disability and the construction of media helps constitute these. Should we just cast vulnerability aside, in favour of other operative concepts? Actually, I think not.

There is an important revaluing and radical turn in vulnerability that critical accounts of disability allow us to recognise. Disability teaches us — and my relationships with friends, colleagues, and associates with disability have taught me personally — that vulnerability is enormously important, because it goes to the heart of what it is to be human. The difficulty has been that disability is marked out as the abnormal, the problem, the lack, and, in this case, the vulnerable. The non-disabled, the normate, and the ordinary is coded as unmarked, an operation of powerful differentiation we are familiar with from critical race, sexuality, gender, and whiteness studies (Goggin and Newell, 2005). Once we recognise that the centre, the normal, the masculine is only phantasmally invulnerable — constitutionally not admitting to weakness — then we can proceed to knowingly trace the operations of vulnerability. Here I am informed by the work of various disability studies scholars, including Michelle Jarman, who proposes:

> a transgressive reading of vulnerability which not only critiques these discursive practices [of disability], but also understands vulnerability as a radical element in forging cross-identity, cross-cultural alliances committed to exposing and interrogating the ways western values become inscribed upon the bodies of 'Third World' subjects (Jarman, 2005: 108).

Jarman draws upon the important work of another disability studies scholar, Margrit Shildrick, whose important study of the monstrous is premised on a critique of the 'self-possession' that underpins Western notions of the self — and the formulation of an alternative ethics of embracing, rather than disavowing, the vulnerable self (Shildrick 2000 and 2002). More recently, Angharad Beckett has presented a new model of 'active citizenship' based upon an account of 'vulnerable personhood' (Beckett 2006).

Conclusion

While there is a developed body of work on disability and vulnerability, I would suggest there is much work ahead in bringing this to bear on media — and also using new work in media and journalism studies to better conceptualise the cultural dimensions of this. Space only permits brief concluding remarks to indicate what I see as useful directions here.

In journalism, then, the idea of vulnerable subjectivity and the kinds of active citizenship that can be predicated upon it would allow us to acknowledge the vulnerability in journalists, as well as particular kinds of sources and audiences historically approached as vulnerable. This is the value of this special issue, it seems to me — because it pluralises and proliferates the figures of the vulnerable. And in

paying such attention to this, opens the way for us to better understand and recast relationships among these cardinal points of contemporary media.

Such recognition of the politics of vulnerability allows us to find new strategies to rethink and improve the relationships in which media is constructed, as well as reforming the institutions and organisations which still wield much power over media producers, consumers and audiences alike. Disability scholars and activists also offer an ethics of engagement, which can be enormously fruitful too. A sharpened sense of vulnerability can help us to draw upon, critique and reformulate the work on trauma, mental illness, grieving, and other concepts that have figured in media and journalism research and practice. Research on an expanded concept of vulnerability and how this takes shape through media, is likely to lead to contributions to the debates and questioning with disability studies and movements about accepted forms of identity and expression — and how these can themselves lead to new forms of exclusion (Goggin and Newell 2005; Shakespeare 2006; Matthews 2008). As Ellis reminds us, for instance, '[p]ain and exclusion are very real aspects of the lives of people with disability and this must be acknowledged within any model that purports to empower this group' (Ellis 2009).

With a renewed, reoriented concern for questions of voice and representation comes too a new emphasis on the importance of listening (Goggin 2009), acknowledgement and collaboration — all of which promise to see better media springing from a much wider and deeper notions of vulnerability, which comprehends the broken, fragile, and still hopeful nature of whom we are.

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