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Editors' Introduction

Autism_Media_Social Justice

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Autism_Media_Social Justice

In recent years, there has been a growing fascination with autistic characters in popular media. From Hollywood action thrillers like *The Accountant* to Sia's bizarre, misguided musical drama *Music* (Luterman, 2021), to Netflix dramadies such as *Atypical* and Amazon's *As We See It,* there are now more overt and implied depictions of autism than ever before. Many of these depictions have little to do with the actual lived experiences of autistic people. Rather, they have more to do with ableist imaginaries and are primarily driven by and for allistic (meaning non-autistic) people.

At the same time, autistic advocates themselves harness a plethora of communication forms in the active construction of their own identities and communities, building their worlds on their own terms. Alongside growth in Hollywood fascination, much of which infantilizes or treats autism as spectacle (Luterman, 2021; Milton, 2012; Murray, 2008; Smith, 2021) neurodivergent communities challenge stereotypical and ableist representations (Kapp, 2020; Davidson & Orsini, 2013). This special issue offers a window into the powerful work done by autistic advocates, scholars, artists, and creative thinkers. The contributors turn a critical eye on damaging

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and misguided media constructs while noting the capacities of media in creating collective autistic worlds. This is where autism, media, and social justice meet.

Autistic advocates and scholars have highlighted how autism discourses frequently serve to reinscribe and naturalize medicalization and violence against autistic people (ASAN, 2018; McGuire, 2016; Yergeau, 2018). Such discourses target autistic people as objects to rehabilitate without considering the ways in which social shifts might enable autistic people to thrive. Pushing back against biomedical and deficit-based discourses, autistic advocates instead challenge the media production norms that rarely include autistic people or consider them as audiences, and tokenize them when they do (Luterman, 2021). Centering autistic lives can help to "re-story" autism as a welcome difference that does not require cure or assimilation (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 2; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017). It instead requires participatory autistic-produced and co-produced knowledge (Waltz, 2014; Woods et al., 2018).

This special issue was created in part out of our understanding that there is insufficient critical scholarship addressing autistic creative expressions and in response to representations of autism in popular culture and discourse. Collective action by autistic advocates and allies can point out the most problematic and ableist attitudes toward autistic people, while drawing attention to the pleasure, catharsis, and escapism of media creation and consumption which resonate with autistic lives. While there is a lot to be concerned about in popular culture, media can also bring great joy, connect autistic communities, and inspire a stim or intense interest. The creativity of these endeavors is limitless.

As such, this special issue is dedicated to Autism_Media_Social Justice. We use underscores as we aim to illustrate the interconnectivity of these concepts and the utility of employing media for social justice, especially where autistic voices lead the way and are meaningfully included. This special issue seriously engages questions around how media and the process of making it can both disallow social justice imperatives for autistics and act as a vital catalyst for social change. It traces the relationships of power that construct autism in particular ways, challenges ableist approaches, and builds emancipatory autistic and disability culture toward more socially just futures.

Themes Emerging from Contributions

The contributions included in this special issue were created by autistic advocates, allies, and academics, and the issue's call for proposals particularly welcomed contributions from autistic authors. Importantly, contributions by autistic thinkers continued behind the scenes in the editorial process, helping the collection take shape and offering insightful guidance to add depth and nuance to each piece.

While scholarly in nature, we encouraged various forms of expression from creative interventions like drawings, poetry, fanfiction, and performances to long-form academic articles. The response to the call for contributors was overwhelmingly positive and assumed a variety of methodological, theoretical, analytical, and activist frameworks, making unique contributions to the existing literature and creative terrain. Authors and media makers both reflected on their process and the ways in which their collective social and individual identities informed their works yielding the collection offered here. The views of each contributor are distinctly their own and may or may not reflect those of other contributors and the editorial team. However, one common working assumption from the start required that contributors assume affirmative rather than deficit models of autism, and by extension autistic people.

The special issue took shape over much of 2020 and 2021 and ultimately includes eight academic articles, one dispatch, one interview, and four creative interventions. Various media forms are explored from fan fiction to television shows, live performance, government press releases and podcasts. Several contributors also illustrated how the reach and accessibility of social media such as Twitter, blogs, and YouTube have made them important spaces where autistic advocates can build community and assert their perspectives. Others provide responses to autistic experiences of marginalization as well as how to neuroqueer media and communication technologies toward better autistic futures.

Autistic Othering and Inclusion

Authors in this special issue work toward the goals of unravelling stigma and abuse by posing questions around autistic othering in the media and beyond. For example, Sobey's fanfiction rewrite (this issue) about the Dr. Seuss character, The Grinch provides an apt metaphor for the profound alienation and cruelty imposed on those deemed other to or outside of normative society. Ultimately, while Sobey's short story helps us reimagine the world through the perspective of The Grinch (and explains why he became so jaded), it invites us to turn a critical lens on the saccharine, and indeed compulsory, homogeneity of the Whos.

Whose voice counts is also of central concern in the promotion of political economic initiatives surrounding autism. Janse van Rensburg (this issue) questions how press releases by provincial governments reflect and impact societal perceptions and priorities. As Janse van Rensburg points out, particular framings of autism shape policy discourse, which can have real, material consequences for autistic people and contribute to ongoing power imbalances and social injustice.

Finally, Christie-White (this issue) and Keto (this issue) touch on the ways in which autistic voices may technically be folded into, but still othered in

institutional processes. Christie-White describes this as acceptance versus inclusion. In their creative intervention, Christie-White notes that true inclusion means providing the proper supports rather than expecting autistic people to manage in neurotypical and ableist institutions on their own once they are finally invited. Similarly, Keto notes the tokenism and co-optation they experienced while being consulted but marginalized on issues related to autism, and recommends congruence in words, thoughts, and actions as necessary in order for autistic social justice to take place; in other terms, true inclusion.

Questioning Media, Production, and Conventions

Similarly, the omission of autistic people from various stages of media production reflects broader social exclusions. Media forms like television shows hold promising avenues for better representations of autism. Moreover, some autistic audiences relate to shows that overtly include autism as a theme (Aspler et al., this issue) or read autistic codes onto their favourite characters and enjoy them immensely (Gaeke-Franz, this issue). However, autistic exclusion in production can also mean that shows inadvertently reproduce stereotypes and problematic ideological conventions (Brady & Cardin, 2021). As Dodman's creative intervention (this issue) notes of the TV series, *The Good Doctor,* their experiences differ drastically from the autistic character depicted by an allistic actor. At the same time, allistic expectations beyond the screen are shaped by such dramatic enactments. As Dodman (this issue, p. 476) states:

> Autistic people do not get to tell their stories or shape their truth - be it on TV, or in politics, or on committees. The truth we wear – the truth we are made to shoulder – is shaped by parents, by service providers, by people with letters after their names – and sometimes a non-autistic man on TV who gets paid very well to wear my skin without ever having to live a day in it.

Similarly, Gaeke-Franz (this issue) examines the sitcoms *The Big Bang Theory* and *Community,* identifying the need for writers to understand how audiences read characters as autistic in order to enable representative, non-stereotypical, and socially just depictions of autism. Pushing further, Aspler et al. (this issue) ask writers and media-makers to engage with intersectionality and diverse representations of autistic, disabled, and neurodivergent characters, paying particular attention to the assumptions of class that emerge with different representations of neurological difference. For example, they compare the relatively affluent depiction of autism in *Atypical* with that of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder in the show *Shameless*. Questioning the ways in which television shows use quick stereotypical associations for rapid character development helps to point out

longer cultural patterns that are of concern to many neurodivergent people. In order to avoid this, autistic voices must be central in autism-content creation rather than being an optional participant in autism stories. As Dodman argues, going beyond convenience, autistic-created and co-created content holds potential for nuanced and strengths-focused constructions of autism.

While often excluded in larger productions, one avenue where autistic people can be found thriving is in live performance, as evidenced by the Comics Not Otherwise Specified (CNOS) stand-up comedy troupe, who in addition to performing onstage also produce their own podcast. CNOS uses various media to platform issues of autistic experience as well as labour rights issues for comics in Canada more broadly, utilizing their sharp, humourous approach (see interview with CNOS, this issue). Similarly, through the Hoops for Hope campaign, Christie-White (this issue) has become a leader who bridges the art of dance with a passion for Indigenous and autistic communities. Finally, Brady (this issue) demonstrates how young autistic performers use their work onstage and behind the scenes to challenge deficit-narratives of autism and showcase their talents in every aspect of performance and media production. Whereas autism has often been treated as spectacle in performance, the stage is now an important site of social-justice advocacy.

Autistic Inclusion and Parenting

Allistics have shaped narratives about autistics for far too long, leading to cultural deficit-focused constructions of autism rife with misunderstandings. Liang (this issue) explores such discourses in the context of parenting autistic children. By comparing blogs of autistic parents of colour to non-autistic white parents, they identify the discrepancies in experiences shared, and the lack of intersectional perspective in publicized priorities surrounding autism.

Similarly, questions around what parents should share about their autistic children online is explored in Ryan's (this issue) dispatch, which provides commentary on the YouTube family Vlogging channel *Fathering Autism* and the ecosystem of fame related to family influencers. They question whether it is ethical for parents to create content that centres heavily on the participation of a non-speaking autistic child, discussing surveillance, the capacity to consent, education, and entertainment. Fletcher-Randle (this issue), by contrast, forefronts the lived experiences of autistic parents through a review of online parenting content. They challenge professional perceptions of autistic caregivers as unable to parent by highlighting stories of capacity and capability, bringing awareness to the strengths of autistic parenting.

Envisioning Multimodal Autistic Advocacy and Futures

Autistic advocates have established their space online, and over the last decade, there have been many digital communities developed for and by autistics. Egner (this issue) explores the virtual learning communities on Twitter created by autistics through the hashtags #ActuallyAutistic and #AskingAutistics. They find that Twitter is a site of advocacy for autistics, which provides an avenue for new ways of understanding autism, autistic expertise, and autistic experiences.

Finally, while envisioning a more accessible and supportive future, Rauchberg (this issue) identifies that there are limits to media and communication technologies so long as these are designed without the benefits of autistic expertise. Rauchberg argues for a *neuroqueer technoscience,* underscoring the need for neurodivergent users and design teams to determine the future of assistive information and communication technologies. In calling for "ways of knowing, doing, and making that do not rely on allistic, harmful technologies to stylize neuroqueer communication supports," Rauchberg "positions neurodivergent communication styles as valid and worthy in mediated spaces, regardless of individual access needs" (this issue, p. 381).

This special issue offers only one small window into the rich, creative, and intellectual landscape of autistic social justice as it intersects with media. We hope it will crack open some of the underlying assumptions and stereotypes that currently populate the ableist cultural imaginary about autism. Moreover, as a model of truly collaborative co-creation, we hope it will build a future where meaningful autistic inclusion is the place from which we start.

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