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Holding the line online: exploring wired relationships for people with disabilities

Wendy Seymour^{a*} and Deborah Lupton^b

^a*University of South Australia, Australia;* and ^b*Charles Sturt University, Australia*

Clearly, the Internet represents a huge new step in interpersonal communications. It offers people with disabilities the possibility of confronting the issues of time, space, communication and the body, but what happens when people with disabilities engage with the computer? Do they use the Internet to develop friendships and intimate relationships? Does online communication enhance self-identity and social being? Do people use the Internet to transcend the vagaries of their frail and vulnerable bodies? Or are they simply 'holding the line' online, using the Internet as they would use a letter or a telephone? Is the Internet a chimera, a failed promise, for people with disabilities?

Introduction

Communication is the keystone of social life. We learn who we are and our place in the world through our friendships and contacts with others. We develop self-assurance by negotiating the minutiae of social interaction. We learn to address the serious business of public life by managing the less formal interplay of personal relationships.

The body plays a key role in interpersonal communication: the body not only enables participation in social encounters, it engages in and alters the flow of the interaction that takes place. People with disabilities that involve pain, fatigue or restricted physical mobility may be precluded from enjoying many of the sites of everyday sociability (Seymour, 1998, pp. 51–91). Disablist practices (Campbell & Oliver, 1996), including poorly designed public spaces, inflexible timetables, inhospitable environments and legislative infringements effectively disenfranchise many people with disabilities from physical participation in public life. Thus, access to

*Corresponding author: School of Social Work and Social Policy, University of South Australia, St Bernards Road, Magill, South Australia 5072, Australia. Email: wendy.seymour@unisa.edu.au

communicational media that does not require particular states of bodily capacity is a pressing issue.

The telephone is vital technology for people with disabilities. People with impairments involving mobility, vision, pain or unreliable function may transact their business from the comfort and safety of a familiar environment. It enables people to manage both the physical impact of their bodily impairment and the costly expenditure of time that are inevitably associated with maintaining satisfactory interpersonal communication by more direct means. If mobility, pain, unreliable function and time are common problems for people who live with disability, then time, space, communication and the body are key elements underpinning the project of enhancing participation and productive relations with others.

While the voice (via the transmission of auditory signals) is the primary medium of telephone communication, cyberspace eliminates all oral, visual, auditory and tactile forms of communication, but does it eliminate the body?

Much is made of the capacity of the computer to create a virtual reality, a context in which people may perform or represent their bodies in a multitude of ways (Stone, 1991; Turkle, 1995). The extensive literature that documents the detrimental impact of the visibility of physical disability on social interaction (Campling, 1981; Browne *et al.*, 1985; Deegan & Brooks, 1985; Dovey & Gaffram 1987; Fine & Asch, 1988; Morris, 1989; Seymour, 1989, 1998; Lonsdale, 1990) suggests that this would be an appealing prospect. Multi-user domains (MUDs) are text-based computer games in which players engage in anonymous social interaction (Turtle, 1995, p. 11). The body is represented by one's own textual description; you can be what you want to be. Because other people cannot see the body they are unable to judge the body in terms of its external characteristics. A site such as a MUD is a powerful example of the potential of computer-mediated communication to reconstruct bodies in more auspicious ways. Computers not only do things for us, they do things to us—they can mediate relationships and our way of thinking about ourselves (Turtle, 1995, p. 22).

The rhetoric of 'escape' that underlies virtual reality is clearly predicated on the mind-body split. While escape may seem an inviting prospect for people who live with troublesome bodies (Loader, 1998, p. 95), the experience of sensory discomfort, and disrupted skeletal or organ function serve as constant reminders of the physicality of the body. While the body may be represented in a multitude of ways in virtual reality, the pain and dysfunction remain. Indeed, computer-mediated communication may revive, rather than deaden, our awareness of ourselves as physical bodies (Lang, 2000). The real and the virtual are not separate worlds. They are permeable—each is predicated upon the other, and each has the potential to enrich and expand the other (Turtle, 1995, p. 268).

The research project

This article reports on a research project that investigated technology, disability and risk. It was begun in Adelaide, South Australia in 1998. Stage one of the project

involved 15 in-depth, face-to-face interviews. The nine men and six women represented a range of disabilities: seven participants were paralysed as a result of spinal injuries, four had experienced cerebral palsy, three of the participants were visually impaired and one had an amputated limb. The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 46. The first stage was deliberately broad: themes of understandings, links, experiences and barriers shaped the face-to-face interviews. In 1999, an additional 20 participants were recruited by means of a readily available disability list server (an Internet site dedicated to the interests of people with disabilities) with a wide circulation. The eight men and twelve women represented a wide range of disabilities and the age distribution of the participants was broad, but the authors make no claim that the data in this study are generalizable to all people with disabilities. We acknowledge that people unable to access personal computers or the Internet could not have become participants. Yet, despite these limitations, the data provides rich insights into the ways some people with disabilities use computer-mediated technologies.

Based on the data collected in the first stage of the research, the second stage investigated the nature, extent and role of information technology as a medium for interpersonal communication and social participation. Responding to the integrity of the topic, the researchers developed their own skills in online research techniques. However, the imperatives of the disability research agenda were no less influential in the decision to explore methods dedicated to maximizing participant input. We were influenced by the social model of disability (Drake, 1999, p. 13) whose focus is the disabling effect of social structural factors on people with impairments (Abberley, 1987; Barton, 1996; Oliver, 1996). Writers committed to the social model of disability claim that many research projects misunderstand or distort the nature and experience of disability, that they fail to involve disabled people, and that the outcomes have little or no impact on the lives of disabled people (Barton, 1992, p. 99). They contend that much disability research exacerbates the problem, rather than resolving it (Oliver, 1992, p. 101).

We used a threaded discussion online site, a format that enables 'asynchronous' online discussion to take place, provided by the Flexible Learning Centre at the University of South Australia. Participants could enter the site as often as they wished, enabling both researcher and researched to extend on a particular topic, to delete or qualify a point, or to clarify their responses over time. Questions were directed to the practical aspects of engagement, as well as to a deeper assessment of the pleasures, disadvantages, hopes, fears and dangers of online communication. Although a pre-prepared schedule guided each interview, the openness of the medium encouraged discursive, rather than didactic communication. The ongoing exchange offered the participants a significant opportunity to influence the research outcomes.

In retrospect, we underestimated the extent to which the role of the researcher is changed in the online context. While we have always believed that we engaged in participatory research, in this project the researchers experienced a greatly heightened sense of participation. Having invited participants to respond when it suited

them, the researchers had to accommodate this freedom into the design of the research program. The shortest interview, for example, was completed over 22 days, with the longest extending over 75 days. The average duration of the interviews in the study was 42.6 days. The exigencies and everyday concerns of both researcher and researched proceeded during the study; participants' emotions, thoughts, reactions and reflections were woven into the ongoing interview process.

The invisibility of online participants was another disarming aspect of the study. While we expected that text would replace the bodily dimensions of the traditional qualitative research encounter, the experience of conducting research with unseen participants in a textual medium confronted our taken-for-granted reliance on verbal and visual clues.

A broad categorization of each participant's disability will assist the reader to understand the data that follow. Four of the participants have lost their sight: Carol, Don and Vicki are declared legally blind, and Geoff has a visual impairment. Frank and Teresa have severe hearing impairments. Alison, Bob and Bev have spinal injuries that amount to paraplegia; Damien's injuries have resulted in quadriplegia. Phil, Dorothy and Robert live with the effects of cerebral palsy. Adam, Sophie and Rhonda have chronic fatigue syndrome. Lucy has an advanced stage of cystic fibrosis; Rita has Tourette's syndrome. Susan and Christine live with the prospect of progressive physical deterioration: Susan has multiple sclerosis and Christine has inflammatory arthritis. While the reader may wish for more information, an expanded description could also serve to identify the participants to others. The specific manifestations of the condition are experienced differently by each person, and the impact and consequences of the disability are mediated by factors beyond the scope of this paper. All names that appear in the paper are fictitious. I am extremely grateful to the men and women for the information they have given me and I have taken every precaution to protect their privacy.

Although the project was specifically constructed to expand the data collecting process traditionally associated with qualitative interviews, the long duration, the open interview and the 'body-less' nature of the research have raised a number of significant issues for research more generally. The research methodology is examined in detail in an earlier paper (Seymour, 2001).

Findings

Using the Internet to develop and maintain friendships

It is clear that many of the participants see the Internet as an invaluable way to develop and maintain friendships. Online communication helps Carol 'feel connected and alive'. She claims that any shortcomings of net communication are 'all part of the adventure!' Rita says, 'I'm not all that brave trying new things and technology communications has been a big adventure'. Alison has 'been able to meet interesting and wonderful people who I would never have met without the Internet'. Through a disability chat site, Christine has developed 'close friendships with seventeen

people. Through gay.com I've met two friends'. In contrast to the women's enthusiasm, Bob says 'I think that I have only developed one friendship via the Internet. That was with a person who lived locally and I have since met.'

Alison has a wide and diverse range of friends. She says, 'I have been lucky in that many of my friends who live overseas or interstate have computers and I can keep in touch with them very easily. The computer [also] allows me to keep in touch with community life'. The Internet enables Bev to 'keep closer ties with friends and family as it is easier to quickly email than to write and mail a letter, and cheaper than long distance phone calls'. Bob, like Bev, has paraplegia. Information technology enables Bob to access his paid employment from home, eliminating the need to travel long distances in difficult circumstances and allowing him to tailor the work to fit his bodily requirements.

Intimate relationships

It is inevitable that intimacies will be established through Internet communication; a number of participants in the study have established important relationships by this means.

Dorothy discusses her experience of using the Internet to meet a future life partner. She says, 'Different things work for different people, this just happened to work for me—however the pitfalls being that you put your trust in that person being honest and open with you. Unfortunately some people aren't and you risk getting hurt, but that's a risk you have to decide whether or not it's worth it.' Lucy adds:

One particular man I have a bit of a fledgling romantic involvement with has kept intermittent contact via the web and phone. He rang me around June last year after seeing my photo in a singles service in [names place] and I was sort of dating someone so I told him I was too busy. A few months later I was in [names place] in hospital and one of my girl friends kept on top of my voice mail. She gave him my email address and the beginning of a friendship started.

While Frank is 'not interested in using the Internet to look for a deep relationship', he has 'frequently received feedback on how others have turned out. It seems that only the ones to succeed were those who went in with no pre-conceptions or went in after both were very honest and open about each other's appearances and values'.

Damien also met his future partner online. Evaluating his experiences, Damien identifies the advantages of the medium as:

a 'buffer' at times to avoid feeling confrontational. Think of a [email address] @ 2am—type it, send it, reply later that day. Wanna 'chat' but the house is occupied? Get on CG [Common Ground Bulletin Board], go into pvt. [private], chat & type away. Time to ponder a reply in text.

However, Damien is clear about the importance of vetting an online contact 'in person' before the communication proceeds. He says:

a computer date is unacceptable, but once met personally, messages can be swapped which can have some advantages over face-to-face contact ... [You have to] have the

one-to-one contact first though, but once a relationship is underway, the little things like private jokes and hidden meanings are invaluable in cementing things with online communication—gotta get there first though.

Use of disability-related sites

Many of the people in the study visit disability-related sites on a regular basis to learn more about their condition and to 'talk' to people who understand. Carol's visual impairment is progressive. She says:

Online communication puts me in touch with people who have experienced what I am about to experience, and vice versa. If I have had a bad [names condition] day (a well-documented phenomenon!) then there are people who know the feeling. It is good to feel like you can help other people by sharing your stories and providing information.

Rhonda talks of the particular benefits of communicating with other women she has met on a pen pal site for people with her disability. She expresses her experience eloquently when she says, 'we are able to suffer in words—we tell each other when we are in pain or feeling better and know that we empathize and understand more so than people who do not have our "problems"'. Christine has developed a number of friendships by using another disability-specific site. She says, 'My [name of disability] net friends are asking to see a photo of me now. One day I hope to go to the U.S. and meet them all—we talk about that possibility. Other regulars have met each other in the flesh—they hold weekends for people to get together.' Carol claims that 'the [name of condition] list chat group meant that I could not only enjoy chat, but I could chat and share jokes with people in a similar situation to myself in a relatively safe environment'.

Carol reminds us though that:

trust is essential in maintaining a supportive group and open communication. Acceptance means accepting that everyone is different—different politics, religious beliefs, culture, race, age, national identity, personality, interests, language and humour. All that many of us have in common is [names disability]. Even within these common threads we have to accept that, for example, our [disability] has progressed at different rates. We accept that our opinions and perspectives will differ and that we will hopefully (although it's not guaranteed) gain some insight or support despite this.

Bev discusses the importance of a connection she has made with a woman with a similar injury who responded to the personal details that she posted on a disability-based net link. She says, 'This woman is a little older than me, also had a Catholic upbringing, had an accident similar to mine ... and her level of paralysis is the same level as mine. So we enjoy sharing stories about our disabilities and more so about our lives. We have not exchanged last names, phone numbers, addresses etc.' Bev also communicates 'with a young 24-year-old, more recently disabled man who I mainly encourage to stay sober a little more often than he says he does (note I said "says" as it could be a facade). We chat as an aunt/son relationship about early challenges that I had and what he has met as a challenge'. Phil is excited by his experiences of online communication. He says, 'I'm very much into disability

services and finding out what's happening elsewhere and reading the news bulletins on the cricket and whatever else. It is a very exciting medium'. Bev also communicates 'with other disabled [people] with similar interests', and feels that 'I have lent support to a few that have not "been there—done that" '.

Many people in the study use the computer for overseas communication. Email is an invaluable way for them to keep in touch with established friends, and to keep closer ties with friends and family. Although many participants have also 'been able to meet interesting and wonderful people who I would never have met without the Internet' (Alison), the contacts were initiated through disability-related chat channels.

Clearly, disability-related sites are the participants' preferred location for online communication. Given that the researchers recruited participants on a general disability list server, this finding is not surprising. These online sites are a significant source of information and support, linking people with common disabilities throughout the world. Carol reminds us that 'everyone is different—different politics, religious beliefs, culture, race, age, national identity, personality, interests, language and humour', and even in terms of the disability—the seemingly common factor—'everyone has progressed at different rates'. It is clear, however, that it is the similarities, not the differences, that determine the nature of the chat. The questioning of newcomers ensures that the nature and extent of their disability fits group criteria, ensuring a homogeneous composition. The predominance of disability as the 'chat' topic obscures the differences between members. While conflicting views may arise in this context, the overriding commitment to common interests ensures that sameness and conventional wisdom will be the currency of the communication: holding the line, not challenging established ways of thinking about disability.

The experience of 'body-less' communication

It is clear that the computer, like the telephone, presents a significant opportunity for people with physical disabilities to participate in everyday life. Although cost, availability of equipment and regular training will remain critical issues, the ease of access greatly enhances the motivation to engage with others, and diminishes the physical effort and time which is otherwise involved.

As the visible identifier of disability, the external body is the most potent catalyst for discriminatory attitudes and practices. Yet friendship and interpersonal communication are closely associated with bodily appearance and presentation (Seymour, 1998, pp. 31–36). In the popular media, the connection seems axiomatic. Particular notions of attractiveness, social desirability, intelligence and responsibility are tied to particular bodily appearances and expressions. Personal qualities are linked to specific bodily representations. Reliable communicational avenues that are not tied to particular notions of the body are thus central to the participation of disabled people in all aspects of social life. This is a key issue in disability politics. How have the people in this study established satisfying relationships with others in

the absence of the visual clues that underpin the construction and maintenance of interpersonal relationships?

Alison is enthusiastic about the capacity of online communication to obscure the impact of the visible body. She says, 'I don't have to get dressed up to chat and do things online as I do in person. It does not tire me as much as face-to-face communication; I don't have to worry about body language or giving reflecting listening. I can be more objective online.' Like Alison, Rita is excited about the possibilities of a medium that enables her to communicate with others on more neutral terms. She says, 'I am not guarded in my communication nor do I have to waste energy watching body language and imagining how people are really responding to me. I tried so hard to be normal.' While Sophie confesses to 'a certain fascination as to how people that you already know from email look', she is well aware that, 'one of the nice things about using the net is that you don't have to dwell on your disability (whatever it might be) or even mention it if you prefer not to'. Adam considers that there is too much emphasis on the body and body image: 'Sure some comments may seem sharper (or softer) edged than intended, but over time, you get to know a person's e-diosyncrasies [his word] and communication ploughs on as normal. It is a different style of communication, and, like all social interactions, you learn the rules as you go.'

Ironically, Sophie claims that 'if cost wasn't a factor, I'd quite like to play with a webcam'. The camera would enable the 'visual clues, body language that don't come across in email to be seen'. Frank says 'I can have a more realistic dialogue with someone online and be judged on what I say, not on what I look like'. He warns, though, that 'doing so without seeing the face can ultimately result in either honest dialogue or being led up the garden path'. While aware of the opportunities for body-less communication, Susan chooses not to eschew the body. She says:

Most of my email good friends and I have exchanged photographs and I have some of my favourites above the computer so that I feel I am really speaking to them. [I have] nothing to hide—[e]specially when you get on in age—I've got to the place where I am quite happy with myself whatever shape it is in and I don't give a stuff what anyone else thinks really.

Christine and Damien miss the body and the subtleties of verbal communication. Damien says:

I miss the body language when communicating via IT. Body image, smell, language, respect for space, eye contact, vocal nuances all miss out with IT. Nothing can replace the face-to-face meeting, but 'colour' of words and phrases are a personal trait like a person's tone of voice on the phone, familiar responses become like 'body language'.

Christine says, 'I hope that people "see" the real me—which is difficult without the subtle use of language like inflection, timing and tone. It is very easy for online communication to be interpreted the wrong way. Chatting online is a very different way of communicating'. Frank derived little satisfaction from his efforts to develop online friendships because 'there was a lack of depth or face-to-face knowledge.' He

found it difficult 'to establish rapport in such a way that's immediate and re-enforcing to each other'.

We invest great faith in our ability to 'read the face'; we believe that it is this that brings us closer to the hearts of others, that the face is a 'channel to the soul' (McNeill, 2000, p. 11). Not surprisingly, online 'conversations' are a fertile source of misunderstandings. Thus, the absence of the face or other forms of visible bodily expression may encourage irresponsibility and reckless patterns of online communication.

Carol has developed her own set of online ethics. She says, 'it's important to be aware of others' online needs, and to respect that people will be more open with their feelings and stories than in face-to-face meetings. You still have to be responsible for what you say. It's important to be accurate and to remind people that you're not an expert, that you offer only an opinion'. Sophie agrees with Carol. She says:

You have to be much more careful how you word things and what you say. There's no body language to help make your meaning clear, or vocal/verbal intonation. I think this is why the various 'emoticons' sprung up—the smilies etc. :-) smile :-(unhappy ;-) wink > :-(frown etc. They can help clarify if something is meant as a joke. Also the various acronyms (eg LOL laughing out loud, AFK away from keyboard, TIA trembling in anticipation), and so on.

However, Frank warns that 'even with emoticons ... it is still up to the individual to interpret the meaning and the feeling/mood/nuance in which it was sent/meant'.

A number of participants talked of the insults and misunderstandings they had experienced online. Frank claims, 'I've seen plenty of flame wars [abusive and inflammatory language hurled at each other via emails] caused by misinterpretation of the meaning of the writer'. Sophie considers that, 'Many of the disagreements and arguments I've seen on email lists have been down to misunderstanding of irony or sarcasm, or that someone is joking but has been taken seriously'. She adds, 'But sometimes folks can get upset by what they perceive as an insult when it wasn't meant as such by the person sending, just the different cultural meaning gets in the way'.

Although Susan is enthusiastic about email as a quick and cheap way of communicating with her children she says, 'now and then I am overcome by the desire to hear their voices'. She claims: 'The telephone can always convey better what the caller is trying to get across, be it by words or warmth of voice'. Despite her frequent use of online communication, she is unequivocal that 'face-to-face is best of all'. Teresa reinforces Susan's sentiments, especially with someone familiar, 'because it is more flexible—and because other senses can be brought into play (touch, sight, body language)'.

Discussion

The people in this study are enthusiastic about online communication; they see it as an important way to engage with others, and to maintain and develop significant

friendships, but what is happening when they communicate in this way? Certainly, the Internet opens up the possibility of international contact, but so do letters, faxes and the telephone. What does the 'new' technology offer that the 'old' technologies—the pen and the telephone—do not?

The world of strangers

In the past, particular perspectives and views of the world have shaped the life experiences of people with disabilities. Themes of private tragedy, bravery and a 'special life' (Oliver, 1990) have positioned disability as an individual 'problem', a problem that has defied the ingenuity of medicine. Disablist attitudes and policies (Abberley, 1987; Oliver, 1992, 1996; Rioux, 1994; Barnes & Oliver, 1995; Barton, 1996) have reinforced and enhanced the power of this discourse and compounded the impact of the medical paradigm. Constructed to suit the needs of the able-bodied world, the built environment exacerbates isolation by preventing people with disabilities from accessing the venues where everyday social life is enacted. The prospects of people with disabilities are confined by the assumptions underlying these formidable discourses.

Thus, the interactional worlds of many people with severe disabilities have been restricted to close family members or paid carers. Attending to the essential tasks of daily bodily management may create a context for familiarity and instrumental communication, but the routine nature of the tasks is unlikely to encourage more expansive communication. Obligation, dependency, competing priorities and exhaustion are more likely to dominate the interaction (Seymour, 1998, pp. 79–85), and serve to reinforce the isolation and 'tragedy' that underpin this model of disability.

Online communication exposes people with disabilities to the world of strangers. The computer opens the door to a world of new ideas and values. It heightens the possibility that disabled people will come into contact with people who do not share their view of the world and that the communication will take place in a context that is not dominated by their 'tragedy'.

While the cost of computers is an issue, and the possibility of increasing pain or bodily damage through over-use is a substantial concern, it is the openness of the Internet that presents people with disabilities with a double-edged sword. The advantages of broader communicational opportunities must be set against the increased hazards and dangers involved. Inexperience in managing the complexities of social life has left many people with disabilities fearful and reluctant to engage with new technologies. Unprotected online by conventional norms associated with visible disability, people with disabilities must learn to negotiate the prejudice, hostility and bad behaviour endemic in social interaction. Online intimidation and harassment (Herring, 1994) are frequent; cyberstalking and cyberrape (Loader, 1998, p. 84; Hoffman, 1999) are possible. While 'netiquette' (Herring, 1994) and other precautionary measures have arisen to regulate online conduct, technology is a 'moving screen of acceptable behaviour' (Loader, 1998, p. 32). Expanded commu-

nicational boundaries may compromise the safety and security of interpersonal exchange, but negotiating the wild woods of everyday social relationships will build confidence and selfhood. Exposure to danger has transformative power.

Different relationships

The appearance of the external body has long been implicated in obstructing the possibilities of satisfactory interpersonal relationships for people with visible disabilities (Seymour, 1998, pp. 31–50). How have the participants experienced ‘body-less’ communication?

Many of the participants have used the computer to develop enduring friendships and intimate relationships. The computer facilitates practical issues related to access and time, but it also plays an important role in providing a more neutral context for a relationship to develop. Initiating a relationship online enables the participants to ‘hold off the body’, to extend the time for the delicate early stages of a relationship to develop. It enables the participant to take control of the interaction, to disclose information when or if they see fit and in a manner that suits them. It protects them from the disruptive impact of conventional prescriptions of bodily attractiveness and desirability that dominate intimate relationships ‘in the flesh’, at least for a time.

While many people in the study regularly use the computer to keep in contact with friends and family, and some report the establishment of important connections with previously unknown people, there is little evidence that the computer has facilitated the development of significantly different kinds of relationships. Disability or kinship remains the principle bond. Rather than opening up the interactional worlds of people with disability to strangers, the online communications in this study are modelled on conventional connections. While expanding the parameters of communication beyond the home and local community, the nature of the communication remains circumscribed by the disability. ‘Sharing stories’, and information and talking with ‘people who understand’ is facilitated by the computer, but the content and nature of the communication replicates the ‘special world’ of disability of the past. The communication focus remains problem-centred, while geographically expanded, the world of disability is reinforced and strengthened.

The impact of online communication on disability politics may be profound. The significant advances in the political position of people with disabilities over the last two decades may be diminished by the advent of the computer. Talking with ‘people who understand’ provides much needed comfort and support, but it may serve to divert attention from the struggle that must take place if change is to occur. Providing a comfortable space to ‘talk amongst ourselves’ isolates the issues to the ‘special world’ of disability, a world removed from issues of significance in the public domain. Disability is in danger of returning to the realm of personal troubles, to separatism and ‘ghettoization’ (Herring, 1994, p. 6). Shielded from public scrutiny, a disability is easy to ignore. As in the past, a disability may be seen as a ‘personal tragedy’, as ‘a problem that doesn’t go away’ requiring sympathy, rather than social analysis and political solutions. The interpersonal nature and specific disability focus

of the communication militates against the development of a broader community or social movement; it fragments and disperses the political voice.

While the notion of citizenship affirms the value of choice, independence and control (Barton, 1993), material conditions and prevailing ideologies clearly determine the extent and quality of this citizenship (Drake, 1999, p. 43). Chat rooms, discussion groups and information sites can provide a wealth of information to people with disabilities that could lead to change in key areas of social oppression, but this is not how they are being used. 'Finding out things for oneself' is empowering, but the danger of 'virtual community care' (Loader, 1998, p. 16) is that it may divert attention from reductions, or the demise of essential aspects of the health and welfare service.

Despite its potential, it is clear that the computer must also be seen as an instrument of further alienation of people with disabilities. While the screen may open the user to new worlds, it may also serve to deepen isolation and prevent acquisition of the skills and confidence required to conduct relationships in the everyday world. As the 'digital divide' increasingly exacerbates the gulf between the information rich and the information poor in society (Evans, 1998; Loader, 1998; Luckman, 1999, pp. 43–44), the division will cut more keenly for disabled people, further fragmenting the loosely aligned 'community' and dispersing the possibility of a united disability movement. If online communication 'keeps people happy', or seduces them into the illusion of support and control, analysis of the implications for already marginalized groups is pressing.

New ways of having and being a body?

In directing their participation to disability sites, the people in this study guaranteed that their body dominated the communication. Far from 'escaping' the body, the body was expressed in the 'chat': the chat was created, interpreted and shared by bodies. While the physicality was not visible to the eye, it was clearly evident in the discourse and in its performance. Rather than seizing the chance to relegate the visible body to a subordinate role, the participants actively sought ways to reinstate the visible body in their interpersonal communications. They missed the body, they yearned for the visible body, and they instigated steps to meet 'in the flesh' as soon as possible to verify their online relationships. It is clear from the data that conventional ideas regarding the 'suitable' appearance of companions, friends and lovers remain unchanged in cyberspace. The visible body still plays a central role in so-called virtual neighbourhoods (Argyle & Shields, 1996, p. 68); the notion of the 'real' fights back (Turkle, 1995, p. 267).

Conclusion: 'holding the line' or challenging social structures?

It is clear that the online communications of the people in this study have not strayed far from the comforts of home and the known world; they have used online technology much as they would use the telephone or a letter. Facilitating the practical

dimensions of time and space are significant advantages, but while the means have changed, the nature of the communication remains essentially the same. Friendship is still friendship—two people negotiating a relationship. Although mediated at a distance, the relationships remain embedded in the core elements of bodily, face-to-face friendships in everyday life. Unlike the creative adventures of the information elite (Stone, 1991, p. 10; Luckman, 1999, pp. 45–46), the online experiences of the participants in this project may seem prosaic. Rather than an engine of transformation, the new technology may be seen to merely hold the line in terms of the experience of disability and the position of people with disabilities in society.

Nevertheless, the activities of the participants are vitally important. While negotiating interpersonal relationships, the participants are acquiring the skills and confidence that will prepare them to engage in broader dimensions of electronic communication. While there is much evidence that new relationships may be laid over old patterns of geography and economic inequality (Loader, 1998), and gender (Herring, 1994; Luckman, 1999), and concerns about privacy, trust and deception will remain, this is a ‘new world’—a world that ‘may begin to emerge and challenge existing social structures’ (Loader, 1998, p. 10).

Despite its provenance and subsequent appropriation by commercial interests, cyberspace may be harnessed to serve other ends. Utopian dreams must make way for more realistic strategies. While simulated environments may seem more attractive than negotiating the discriminatory structures and prejudice of real life, electronic communication must not become the new ‘opiate of the masses’ (Turkle, 1995, p. 201). It can be re-positioned to work in the interests of people with disabilities. In providing the technical means to participate, cyberspace must be used by people with disabilities to construct satisfactory avenues of fulfilment for themselves and effective new forms of political activity. Techno-sociality and virtual participation promise new avenues for personal fulfilment and political action, and point to new ways of being and having a body.

Rather than bodily escape, the real promise of cyberspace lies in its potential to escape the binaries that bind—the able-bodied-disabled distinction. The dominance of biological/medical conceptions of disability has made this distinction seem inevitable: efforts to create inclusivity by changing words and terminologies are ridiculed or dismissed as ‘political correctness’ (Marrin, 2000). Using text as a common language to communicate with others in a place where access is not determined by physical ability offers a real opportunity to merge the seemingly irreconcilable distinctions. Text-based, interactive, virtual performance provides the means for people with disabilities to actively engage in the task of breaching the divide. While well established ‘disability identities’ may deter some people from exploring the new technologies, the choice to do so is in their hands. It is not an easy choice, but it is a significant opportunity.

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