

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

How Technology Is Forcing the Disability Rights Movement into the Twenty-First Century

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When I began blogging in 2012 for an online social work platform after graduating with my Master of Social Work, I never thought my words would become a part of the disability online activism sphere, and I never imagined the impact we will make on the collective movement. Technology, whether we love, hate, or avoid it, has been integrated into every facet of life in this decade, and those of us who use it for activism and connecting with each other often wonder how would our work exist without it.

One of the joys of technology and online activism is the foregrounding of intersected voices, particularly those of color, that have been overlooked and devalued for too long. The disability community is the largest minority group in the United States and world, yet white male faces and voices have dominated our history and movement. Disabled people of color have always been here and we are fighting for our rights since the beginning of the Disability Rights Movement; the Joyce Jacksons (Thompson, 2017a) and Johnnie Lacys (Thompson, 2017b) of the movement cannot be ignored or be reduced to a footnote in recounting powerful leadership. Omitting or minimizing the work of pioneers such as

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Jackson and Lacy (who were instrumental to the start and progression of the Independent Living movement) is not only disrespectful to their contributions, but is sadly a commonplace practice in our retelling of disability rights history, which includes who receives accolades and recognition.

Personally, I created my own platform, Ramp Your Voice!, in 2013 to add a unique perspective that I felt was missing—Black disabled women/femmes. I was already writing about disability from the lens of a social worker as a way to combine the two worlds I am a part of. Within social work, there was little representation of disabled voices, and I felt that I could fill this important gap with my perspectives. By writing in this way, I started to notice the invisibility not only within social work but also disability activism spaces as well. At that time, there were few disabled writers of color with platforms, specifically Black disabled women and femmes. I believe many of us who started writing around that time understood the impact of the lack of representation and sought to do something about it. Since 2013, there are more voices that sound like mine, but there is always room for more to bloom and be a part of this dynamic space online.

Technology gives us the ability to find the community we desperately seek, particularly those of us who live in areas that are not very diverse or where we cannot venture out safely or independently in our communities due to systemic and/or architectural barriers. Blogging, vlogging, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and online forums shatter these barriers and give us the freedom to be seen, heard, and to tell our truths, call out the -isms and -phobias that we fight against every day, and, most importantly, connect with those who “get” us. These are the people we do not have to explain ourselves to; the unspoken agreement surrounding the ableist nonsense we deal with is significant when adding these relationships to our support systems. Seeing people or stories you heavily relate to can also influence how you view and understand the interactions and experiences you have. For instance, when I created the #DisabilityTooWhite hashtag in May 2016, it opened the

floodgates online for disabled people of color to share freely about the racism, exclusion, and invisibility we deal with everyday. The hashtag allowed disabled people of color to connect over the mistreatment and disadvantages we endure, and to not be forced to have such conversations in private. We can share the injustices publicly to not only raise awareness but also to hold people accountable for what is going on within our disabled spaces. The hashtag has been used to explain discrepancies witnessed and experienced, and to give a name to something we all have felt but did not have an accurate term for. Technology, in the manner of hashtags, can be used to acknowledge gaps and bring us together to shed a light on issues that have gone unnoticed or unaddressed due to resistance against shaking up the status quo.

Technology is diverse in how we use it as a community. As a writer, my words are how I impact the world I live in and make my voice roar. The various ways to use technology, whether with words, videos, or hashtags, have dramatically shaped the issues the Disability Rights Movement focuses on at any given moment. We are able to fight about why the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) matters while also declaring that we are proud of the bodies and minds we possess. If there is something you are passionate about as an advocate or activist, you can lend your perspective to the current conversations or start your own good trouble. Disabled people are using technology to lead discussions (and when necessary, create controversy) on film and TV representation, fashion industry and inclusion, adaptive technology for video gaming, the rocky road to employment, and so on. The options are indeed limitless on what a person can establish as their particular niche to be heard.

Technology also removes the limits that traditional activism requires; many of us are not able to march in the streets, or our communities may have too many architectural barriers for us to navigate cities and buildings. For example, many of our rural and urban areas have broken or absent curb cuts or buildings that have not been renovated to provide wheelchair access—all of which can stymie our ability to protest safely and be fully included in demonstrations. Being able to use a smartphone, tablet, laptop,

or camera to film and/or write our stories was the much-needed edge that was missing in this work. While some argue that online activism is not real activism, the impact we are making cannot be dismissed. For example, without technology, some of the major moments in our current history would not exist, and the new wave of leaders in our movement would be unheard of. The fight to save the Affordable Care Act in 2017 was heavily influenced by the way disabled activists used technology to blog, vlog, and protest removing certain provisions and how it would place many of our lives in grave peril. This coming together not only was a victory, policy wise, but also allowed new activists to come on the scene and make their unique experiences known to the masses within and outside of the disabled community. Seizing opportunities to not only reshape our government, but also dynamic voices in the community, is powerful to both new and established activists.

The way I use technology for activism has empowered me in ways I never imagined. The ability to influence the progression of a movement, generate controversy on important issues that drastically affect my livelihood, and connect with other mighty individuals are some of the ways that technology is redefining both my world and others'. For many of us who once felt isolated, that feeling has lessened because we understand the power we possess to influence and connect is literally a keystroke away. There is no turning back, especially when multiply-marginalized voices are no longer silenced. This unexpected gain with technology is one that goes unnoticed, except by those of us who would not be as visible or heard in the movement if it did not exist. Technology has pushed our movement and community to be intersectional and remove the monolithic tone that has to be shed. We as a community are better when we all are able to see ourselves, feel valued, and have the ability to be a part of a movement that we have always belonged to.

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To the Black disabled people reading this: you are seen and loved tremendously.

References

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Bio

Vilissa Thompson, LMSW, is a macro-minded social worker from South Carolina. Ramp Your Voice! is her organization where she discusses the issues that matters to her as a Black disabled woman, including intersectionality, racism, politics, and why she unapologetically makes good trouble.