Disability, listening and media justice

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Abstract

Much media and cultural studies scholarship is underpinned by a commitment to democratic participation, yet there has been limited direct engagement with questions of justice. It is clear that media and cultural practices are central to process of misrepresentation, non-recognition and disrespect. Nick Couldry advocates Amartya Sen's method of working from discernible injustices as a basis for developing an account of media justice. In this article, we argue that the uneven distribution of mediated attention or recognition is a key concern for an emerging interest in media justice. The article centres on the politics of listening to, for and with disability as a contribution to addressing the injustice of ableism in media and culture. We argue that social justice-oriented listening is vital to transform unequal hierarchies of attention and develop strategies for tackling manifest injustices that articulate with and reframe broader patterns of cultural value.

Keywords: ableism; disability; media justice; politics of listening; social justice

Introduction

Much media and cultural studies scholarship is underpinned by a commitment to democratic participation, yet there has been limited direct engagement with questions of justice. It is clear that media and cultural practices are central to the process of misrepresentation, non-recognition and disrespect. Nick Couldry advocates Amartya Sen's (2009) method of working from discernible injustices as a basis for developing an account of media justice. In this article, we argue that the uneven distribution of mediated attention or recognition is a key concern for an emerging interest in media justice (in Couldry, Dreher & Goggin 2016). The article centres on the politics of listening to, for and with disability as a contribution to addressing the injustice of ableism in media and culture. We argue that political listening offers a useful methodology. Since it operates as both a descriptive tool for tracing particular sites of injustice and a normative tool oriented towards transforming the unequal hierarchies of attention that underpin them, it enables us to develop strategies for tackling manifest injustices that nonetheless articulate with and reframe broader patterns of cultural value.

We begin by identifying a gap in research on the relationship between media and justice across the fields of media and cultural studies and social justice, even while Fraser's (2008) work on recognition makes implicit connections. Nonetheless, the significance of media justice is demonstrated by examining it as an emerging site of

advocacy and activism, primarily in the United States. We go on to explore Judith Butler's (2006) work on media framing as a tool to conceptualise how media contributes to the reproduction of cultural and material injustices as well as how scholarship on political listening (Bickford, 1996) can challenge established practices of media framing and hierarchies of attention. In the final section, we apply these frameworks to a case study in order to examine the possibilities and limits of media justice in the face of ableism. We focus on the resistance of disabled feminists to ableism in the online feminist activist group Destroy the Joint. Our analysis teases out the ways in which a lack of recognition can contribute to the denial of basic human rights for people with disability and First Nations peoples.

Media justice: Making the connection

Key debates in cultural and media studies have long been concerned with questions of media and democracy (Hackett & Carroll, 2006). More recently, attention has turned to the relationship between digital media and democratic participation. Stephen Coleman (2013) argues that 'the challenge of digital hearing' is the most pressing concern for democracies in the digital age. Similarly, Jean Burgess (2006, p. 203) suggests that 'the question that must now be asked about democratic media participation is not who will speak, but who can be heard, and to what ends'. These are vital questions; nevertheless, media and cultural studies work has paid rather less attention to questions of media and justice than to questions of media and democracy. It is only very recently that a scholarship on 'data justice' has emerged (Dencik, Hintz & Cable, 2016), with vital possibilities for developing a wider framework of media justice.

We find a comparable lacuna in the social justice literature. Highly influential social justice scholars have been concerned with the relationship between the redistribution of material goods and recognition of difference and political voice (Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Phillips, 2003). In Fraser's framework, socioeconomic injustice and cultural or symbolic injustice are analytically distinct even while intertwined in practice. Her conceptualisation of cultural or symbolic injustice is revealing due to the extent to which it invokes and yet offers little direct engagement with the significance of media institutions and representations in the politics of recognition:

> It is rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication. Examples include cultural domination (being subjected to patterns of interpretation and communication that are associated with another culture and are alien and/or hostile to one's own); nonrecognition (being rendered invisible via the authoritative representational, communicative, and interpretative practices of one's own culture; and disrespect (being routinely maligned or disparaged in stereotypic public cultural representations and/or in everyday life interactions). (Fraser, 2008, p. 14)

Where Fraser and Honneth (2003) focus on patterns of non-recognition and misrecognition as fundamental questions of justice, Dreher (2009) highlights media as crucial institutions for the distribution of cultural value and recognition. The emerging

media justice research agenda seeks to develop a framework that brings together the vital insights of media, cultural studies and social justice theorising.

Emerging interest in media justice

There are a number of NGOs in the United States that organise around the concept of media justice, including the Centre for Media Justice, and a few academic publications that provide some discussion or definition of the concept (see Jansen, Pooley & Taub-Pervizpour, 2011). Despite this, the concept is rarely used in academic, activist or advocacy work in Australia or internationally. The US academic and advocacy work on media justice is based in the assumption that the realisation of social and economic justice requires changes in the distribution and control of media and communications technology (Gregg, 2011). This tradition is strongest in the San Francisco Bay area, particularly among organisations focused on racial justice and young people. The Centre for Media Justice explains that 'we organize under-represented constituencies for media rights, access and representation to win social and economic justice'. Media justice advocates emphasise the struggle against broader forms of domination and links with social justice movements outside the media field. Hackett (2001) describes media activism as 'the movement of movements', as all social justice movements have an interest in transformation the ways in which media representations and production are woven into systematic injustices. Media are addressed as a site of intervention, rather than merely providing publicity for social justice movements.

In contrast to liberal reform movements, media justice campaigners stress significant structural and institutional changes, and the redistribution of resources and values (Hackett, 2001). Media justice advocate Makani Themba-Nixon (cited in Cyril, 2005, p. 97) captures why existing frameworks from media and cultural studies on media and democracy are insufficient to transform entrenched patterns of socioeconomic and cultural injustice:

> Media justice is more than an oppositional framework or simple effort at political contrast. It is a multi-layered, emerging analysis that draws on civil and human rights, globalization struggles, corporate accountability and cultural studies. It starts with a structural analysis but it doesn't stop there because media doesn't stop there. Who owns it, what's on it and how it makes us feel are all spheres we must address simultaneously. Where we go from here has to take into account where we've been and who has been advantages and who has been hurt. And it is this analysis that separates media justice from the fight for media democracy, because without a vision that seeks to repair the impact of the past and the privilege, we'll have the same old oppression with better, high-speed resolution.

Following Themba-Nixon, we understand media justice very broadly, and include questions of justice with regard to media and communications practices, infrastructures and representation – as well as the many ways in which media are vital to wider processes of social justice and transformation.

According to Nick Couldry (in Couldry, Dreher & Goggin, 2016), some notion of media justice has always been implicit within media and cultural studies (for example, in the tradition of work on alternative citizens and community media), yet little work has been done to develop an explicit framework for media justice. The new approach of Amartya Sen in *The Idea of Justice* (2009), however, suggests it is enough to work piecemeal, identifying and resolving manifest *injustices*. It is important to begin by establishing what today's manifest media injustices are, and how these might be addressed (Couldry, in Couldry, Dreher & Goggin 2016). This article follows such an approach, identifying manifest injustices in media, disability and voice, and further exploring the contribution that political listening might make to address such injustices. Research, activist and advocacy work identifies the ways in which people with disability are subject to cultural and symbolic injustices in media (Briant, Watson & Philo, 2013; Goggin & Newell, 2004; Haller, 2010), as well as strategies of resistance and innovations that might address these injustices (Ellis, 2015; Ellis & Kent, 2011; Haller, 2010).

Butler on precarious life

Butler's (2009) work on precarious life hinges on key long-term concerns of media studies – including frames and framing, and representations of war and death. Her analysis of the uneven distribution of grief and attention to 'grievable lives' in the war on terror provides a generative starting point for a cultural account of entrenched news values, which consistently reproduce hierarchies of which lives matter, and whose vulnerability is to be mourned. We apply this framework to a number of examples in which the uneven distribution of mediated attention or grief is called into question as a matter of justice. From #blacklivesmatter to social media memes connecting violent deaths in Paris, Beirut and Ankara, conventional news values are understood as central to the fundamental injustice of lives that are not grieved or valued.

Butler (2009) develops a critique of war based in an analysis of how some lives are produced as more grievable than others, primarily via the framing of violence (Zehfuss, 2009). A hierarchy of grief involving grievable Western lives and ungrievable non-Western lives enables the possibility of war. The argument is grounded in analysis of visual images – including the photographs from Abu Ghraib – and frames that render only certain lives as grievable, and hence fully human:

> [U]nderstand the visual dimension of war as it relates to the question of whose lives are grievable and whose are not … norms, explicit to tacit governing which human lives count as human and as living, and which do not. These norms are determined to some degree by the question of when and where a life is grievable and correlatively, when and where the loss of a life remains ungrievable and unrepresentable … (Butler, 2009, p. 74)

The uneven distribution of grief and mourning underpins the 'war on terror' as US foreign policy and racialised over-policing at home:

> In the public discourse on Guantanamo Bay, the police harassment of Arabs in the US (both Arab-Americans and those with visas or green cards),

and the suspension of civil liberties, certain norms have been operative in establishing who is human and so entitled to human rights and who is not. Implicit in this discourse of humanisation is the question of grievability: whose life, if extinguished, would be publicly grievable and whose life would leave either no public trace to grieve, or only a partial, mangled and enigmatic trace? (Butler, 2009, p. 75)

Butler (2009, p. 75) further argues that because the effective regulation of affect, outrage and ethical response is at stake, the ways in which these norms enter into frames and into larger circuits of communicability are vigorously contestable.

Butler's interest in frames, framing and the politics of representation on the one hand, and the uneven distribution of grief, mourning and grievable lives on the other, connect in very productive ways with long-standing concerns in media research and practice – often grouped together under the concept of news values. News values can be understood as a naturalised, normalised convention of social communication that unevenly distributes grief and mourning – and unevenly values vulnerability, injury and injurability. This is often expressed in Eurocentric equations or hierarchies, for example:

One dead American equals 30 dead southern Europeans; 100 Persians or Latin Americans; 200–300 southeast Asians; and of Indians, Africans, and Chinese, Cockburn despairingly wrote, 'No sense of number is involved at all. Indeed, experts have calculated that roughly fifty thousand Indians are equal in term of news value … to ten Americans.' (Shafer, 2014)

Conventional, naturalised, normalised news values thus routinise which deaths count, so that media can be understood as a key institution for the uneven distribution of grief or grievable lives. To extend the argument, media are a key factor in how injustices are represented and hence contestable. Media can be approached as a site of struggle over whose lives count, whose are meaningful, who is grieved and for what reasons, and how deaths and vulnerability are framed. This framing, this politics of representation, underpins injustices 'at home' and abroad. If, as Butler argues, the denial of grief and mourning is a denial of a fully human life or value, then the uneven distribution of mourning in media is itself a fundamental question of justice.

As an example, we might consider news reporting of the murder of nineteen people in the Sagamihara facility for people with disability, the worst mass killing in Japan's recent history, committed by a worker at the facility. Georgia Cranko (2016) wrote of, the 'act of terrorism that did not devastate the world: disability erasure and widespread ableism'. The relative lack of media attention to and public grief about the lives lost at Sagamihara reveal 'the underlying tactless social attitude towards the disabled that we are "better off dead"'; what is inferred is that 'disabled lives are valued less, our pleasure, pain and ultimately our deaths affect other people less' (Cranko, 2016). In a similar vein, Shakira Hussein (2016) observes that, 'The mass murderer who targeted disabled people in a care facility in Japan said he wanted people with disabilities to "disappear". Our society seems to agree.'

Listening for media justice

Recent scholarship on the politics, practices and ethics of 'listening' suggests possibilities for shifting hierarchies of attention and value. The key characteristics of political listening have been outlined by Bickford (1996) and further developed more recently (Coles, 2004; Dobson, 2014; Dreher, 2009; Lacey, 2013; O'Donnell, Lloyd & Dreher, 2009; Thill, 2009, 2015). Bickford discusses a range of practices necessary for political listening, including openness, receptivity, attention, engagement, duration, continuation and recognition. Raymond Coles (2004, p. 685) describes political listening as 'less a singular capacity than a complex art that must be developed in a variety of different kinds of relationships', involving 'flexibility, curiosity, patience and a little vulnerability'. These key characteristics can be grouped loosely under the categories of receptivity, recognition and response and underpinned by the values of dissonance and shifting responsibility. The receptivity required in political listening is further described as 'a form of radical openness' (Lacey, 2013, p. 8), which necessarily involves the *possibility* of persuasion or change (Bickford, 1996; Dreher, 2009). This openness to the possibility of persuasion – described by Coles (2004) as 'a little vulnerability' – is crucial, as it involves a relinquishing of mastery and control.

This scholarship on the politics of 'listening' offers further concepts for thinking through media, justice, voice and disability (Goggin, 2009). Where Western liberal democracies conventionally foreground rights of expression or free speech, a focus on listening brings the other side of communication into analysis. One reason to focus on 'listening' is to shift some of the onus and responsibility for media change from marginalised voices and on to the conventions, institutions and practices that shape who and what can be heard in media (Dreher, 2009). A focus on listening also turns our attention to the hierarchies of value and attention that shape the ways in which voices are or are not heard. For instance, the resistance of disabled feminists to ableism in online feminist activist group Destroy the Joint (DtJ), discussed in the next section, can be seen as a demand not simply for a diversity of voices or representations, but more fundamentally for a shift in the uneven value accorded different lives – not only via conventional news values and frames but also across digital media platforms.

As the digital media environment offers proliferating opportunities for (certain forms of) 'voice', questions of receptivity, recognition and response become increasingly urgent. It may well be that people and communities whose voices have historically been marginalised now have increased opportunities to produce and circulate media content – although these opportunities are still shaped by considerations of accessibility (Ellis & Kent, 2011) and they do not ensure that voice *matters* (Couldry, 2010). Drawing on African communication rights traditions, Husband (1996) argues for a 'Right to be understood' to counter-act the 'ego-centrism' of the Western free speech tradition. Analysing truth and reconciliation processes in numerous jurisdictions, Stauffer (2013) identifies 'the injustice of not being heard' even where institutions invite certain forms of testimony. Attention to 'listening' can thus focus attention on the institutional practices and values which might ensure voice that matters.

Overall, then, scholarly work on the politics of listening suggests responsibilities for shifting attention and continuing agonistic relationships of receptivity and responsiveness. The practice of political listening is difficult and potentially unsettling, involving a decentring of privileged subjects, voices and stories. To shift precarious attention, then, requires unsettling naturalised and normalised positions as well as space for unheard voices.

Disability, digital media and resistance

In this final section, we apply Fraser's (2008) framework of recognition and Butler's (2006) work on media framing and scholarship on political listening (Bickford, 1996) to examine the possibilities and limits of media justice in the face of ableism. We analyse the resistance of disabled feminists to cultural domination, non-recognition and disrespect in the online feminist activist group Destroy the Joint (DtJ).

A debate between feminist disability activists and mainstream feminist activist group DtJ demonstrates that established hierarchies of attention over whose stories are worth listening to and whose lives are grieveable shape social as well as mainstream media. DtJ is an online feminist activist group committed to challenging sexism, amplifying the voices of women in media and public debate and drawing attention to gender-based violence in its Counting Dead Women campaign. In 2015, Samantha Connor contacted DtJ to share the White Flower Memorial – an event to remember the women, men and children with disability who have died due to violence, abuse and neglect. DtJ considered the event outside its 'remit' and suggested 'posting it to disability activism pages' (D49, cited in Connor, 2015). Connor wrote back to emphasise that the event was (in part) 'a memorial service for dead disabled *women*' (2015, emphasis added) and then attempted to explain gendered disability violence – only to find that she had been blocked from messaging because the previous message had been defined as 'abusive'.

The framing of the White Flower Memorial event as disability-specific suggests that the loss of life of disabled women remains ungrievable and unrepresentable in this online feminist space. Connor (2015) eloquently makes the point that:

> We can count dead women, but not dead disabled women.
> When we are murdered, it is not violence, because it may not be the type
> of violence you know and understand.
> We are abused and murdered in places that you do not know about, in
> circumstances that you're not familiar with.
> But there is this.
> We are still women, and we are just as raped, just as dead.

DtJ is thus complicit in reproducing an uneven distribution of grief in which able-bodied women's lives 'count' while disabled women's lives are siloed as only grievable in disability spaces.

This injustice of non-recognition is not simply symbolic. Connor (2015) describes it as 'lateral violence'. It reproduces dominant representations of gender-based violence as domestic or family violence and sexual assault and fails to recognize other types of

violence committed against women and girls, including gendered disability violence. Gendered disability violence is:

> institutional violence, chemical restraint, forced or coerced sterilisation, forced contraception, withholding of or forced medication, violations of privacy, forced isolation, seclusion and restraint, deprivation of liberty, denial of provision of essential care, humiliation and harassment (Frohmader, Dowse & Didi, 2015, p. 6)

The non-recognition of gendered disability violence has material effects on disabled women's access to justice. Women with Disability Australia (WWDA) problematises the widespread framing of violence against women and girls with disability as abuse or neglect, rather than violence per se, which means that it is not regarded as a crime (Frohmader, Dowse & Didi, 2015). DtJ not only refuses to listen to Connor's intervention, which reframes the meaning of gender-based violence to include gendered disability violence, but by banning her from messaging also refuses to continue the engagement. This refusal to listen openly reproduces dominant framings of gender-based violence, and thereby contributes to the misrecognition of gendered disability violence.

The White Flower Memorial debate is not the only intervention to complicate the framing of DtJ's Counting Dead Women project. Celeste Liddle (2016), blogging at *Rantings of An Aboriginal Feminist*, used the DtJ data in 2015 and 2016 to compile lists published online under the title 'Counting Dead Aboriginal Women'. Liddle's project highlighted the persistent over-representation of Indigenous women as victims of violence against women: 'At 16/10/16, Destroy the Joint have counted 55 women, therefore Aboriginal women make up 18% of the women counted. This is six times what a population parity rate would be.' While violence against women has received increased media attention over recent years, the interventions of Connor, Liddle and others are a reminder that the voices, specific experiences and over-representation of Indigenous women and women with disability remain largely absent from the mainstream media narrative. This has significant impacts, as the voices of those with most experience and expertise are sidelined when developing policies and interventions:

> Quite clearly, for almost thirty years, Aboriginal women have spoken about the violence in communities, have suggested solutions, yet there is little evidence that their advocacy has been taken into consideration. (Longbottom, Roe & Fredericks, 2016)

The non-recognition of the voices of Indigenous women and women with disability is further illustrated in an intervention on a 'buzzfeed' post on DtJ, where Connor (2015) describes women being invited to post on their experiences of #atbeingawoman. The tweets range from humorous to serious – for example, 'We should probably stop applauding men for marrying accomplished women as if they adopted a blind one-legged rescue dog' (cited in Connor, 2015). Such experiences are so alien to Connor's own experience of being a woman that they constitute ableism (Campbell, 2009) as a form of cultural domination (Fraser, 2008). Connor (2015) joins in the discussion and makes some contributions from a gendered disability perspective, such as, 'My doctor

told me to get a hysterectomy or change my tampon in my office because there was no accessible toilet nearby at my workplace #beingawoman.' She is joined by other disabled women, including an Aboriginal woman with disability who posts: 'when i lodged a complaint against a taxi company for racism and all the drivers assumed i had been sexually assaulted because that happens to lots of disabled women. taxi rape #beingawoman' (cited in Connor, 2015).

These women's engagement was interpreted by DtJ moderators as 'repetitive, circular and off topic' (D25, cited in Connor, 2015), their comments were deleted and they were banned. In other words, the injustice of ableism was compounded by non-recognition and disrespect.

Conclusion

Our examples sketch some of the contemporary possibilities and challenges for disability and media justice. The debate around the White Flower Memorial and DtJ's Counting Dead Women is a reminder of the continuing injustice of hierarchies of voice, value, grief and attention. The campaign by Connor (2015) indicates the increased opportunities for 'voice' and resistance in the digital media environment. Interventions by Connor, Liddle, and Longbottom, Roe and Fredericks highlight ableist and racialised media frames that sideline the expertise and experience of people with disability and indigenous peoples. Even as the digital media environment ensures greater opportunities for these critiques and interventions, the question of 'listening' remains crucial for our interest in media justice. Shifting unjust patterns of value and attention requires not only 'voice' on the part of those subjected to this injustice, but also shifts in 'listening' on the part of decision-makers and the relatively more privileged and powerful. Media participation and resources for those whose voices are not valued is a vital component of any conception of media justice. Just as importantly, these voices must be valued and attended to.

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