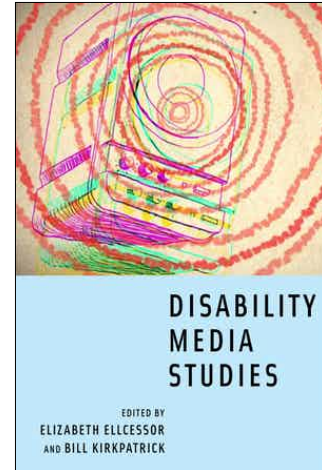


Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick (Eds.), **Disability Media Studies**, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2017, 416 pp., \$99.00 (hardcover), \$35.00 (paperback), \$19.25 (Kindle).

Reviewed by
Micky Lee
Suffolk University, USA



As indicated by the book title, **Disability Media Studies**, editors Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick sought to initiate a dialogue between critical media studies scholars and disability studies scholars so that the former will theorize disabilities as a variance in human communication while the latter will expand their tools to analyze media. Even though both fields share concerns such as social transformation and the validation of everyday life experiences, there has been little cross-pollination between them. When compared to gender, race, and sexuality, there have been few studies on disabilities and the media. For example, this journal has published only three research articles with the word “disability” or “disabilities” in the title (Davis & Boellstorff, 2016; Goggin, 2019; Trevisan, 2019). Similarly, there are only a few book-length works on disabilities and telecommunications policies (Goggin & Newell, 2002), representations (Jackson, 2015; Rodan, 2016; Smit & Enns, 2001), media employment (Ellis, 2018) and accessibility (Ellcessor, 2016).

Two factors may have hindered this long overdue dialogue: One is the tendency of media studies scholars to uphold a medical model that views disability as a problem; another is an overwhelming focus on the immaterial aspects of communication—such as texts and meanings—rather than the material ones such as the body and technological devices. A dialogue between media studies scholars and disability studies scholars may provoke the former to move past a pathological framework and adopt a social constructionist or embodiment view to conceptualize the body in its social and historical environments. Drawing on disability studies scholarship, media studies scholars may examine social environments that disadvantage certain populations through constructing disabilities as an abnormality; they may also look at how lived experience and self-identities are validated by people with a disability. This dialogue also offers disability studies scholars more methods to study the media, such as formalist analysis of media form and industry structure. To facilitate a dialogue, the editors named three objectives which I summarize and assess in the next sections.

The first objective is to demonstrate to disability studies scholars how to analyze media texts, technologies, and cultures. This objective is mostly fulfilled for three reasons. First, the book chapters show how to analyze a wide range of media from audiovisual (films, documentary television, reality television, television advertisements) to audio (music, radio) to visual (graphic novels) to “transmedia” (multiple platforms). Second, some chapters attend to the production and consumption processes of media. For example, Ellcessor’s chapter, “Kickstarting Community,” looks at how an actress with a disability crowdfunded a YouTube show that tells a story about how actors with physical disabilities navigate Hollywood. Not only are the protagonists played by actors with physical disabilities, but the show

also created a community of audience with such disabilities. This chapter shows that the media is about access to money and equipment as much as representation. Third, some contributors paid attention to meaning-making and media form. For example, Magnet and Watson examined the graphic novel form and argue that a space-based medium disrupts a linear storyline grounded in a neoliberal temporality. Unlike moving images in film and television, graphic novel form presents still images that immortalizes time, making it a better medium to show the sense of static time experienced by populations with mental illnesses. This form then effectively disrupts a neoliberal temporality that privileges future-oriented profits and looks down upon unproductive capitalist subjects, including people with disabilities. To sum up, this book has successfully shown that media analysis is more than textual analysis by examining a wide range of media, paying attention to the production and consumption processes, and emphasizing media form.

The second objective is to foreground dis/abilities in the study of media. Disability studies scholars' emphasis of embodiment may help media studies scholars "elevate disability to greater significance among their categories of analysis" (p. 17). However, the editors also acknowledge that dis/ability is not just yet another category of analysis because it is as much a social construct as an embodied, lived experience. In other words, even though people with physical disabilities may self-identify to be abled, their bodies experience the environments differently from someone without such disabilities. The second objective is only partially met: While the book excels at examining intersectionality between dis/abilities and other social categories, it does not foreground the body that defines and is defined by dis/abilities. On the commendable side, a number of chapters have problematized the intersections between dis/abilities and race (Porco, Lopez), gender (Samuels, Scott & Bates), geographical location (Ellis & Goggin, Kirkpatrick), and sexual identity (McRuer). These authors effectively illustrate that dis/abilities are understood and experienced in relation to gender and race.

However, the volume has not theorized the body, so it is hard to know if the editors and contributors see it as biological, informational, metaphorical, and/or a social construct. Lacking a definition of the body means that all kinds of dis/abilities are lumped into a single category, resulting in the volume homogenizing all embodied experiences. In other words, while the book is inclusive of a wide range of disabilities (neurological, psychological, psychiatric, and physical), it does not adequately show how the body enables and constrains experience. A biomediation framework discussed in Hagood's chapter may thus be useful to foreground the body because it explicates how bodies and technologies interact. According to him, media technologies shape the body when they are used by medical professionals to diagnose patients; technologies change how the professionals and the patients understand the body. Hagood's biomediation framework calls for a broader definition of media and mediation, an examination of how media technologies produce bodily experiences, as well as knowledge about the bodies.

The third objective is to call on "all scholars [to] recognize themselves in the critically oriented, humanities-centered concerns with social, cultural, and economic justice that unites both disability studies and media studies" (p. 4, emphasis added). This objective was also partially met primarily because likely readers are already sympathetic about such concerns. To persuade social scientists and natural scientists to shift their paradigms may first require critical scholars to engage more with the medical or technological framework. Despite this ambitious hope, the book has definitely shed light on social and cultural injustice by theorizing experiences of populations with disabilities. In contrast, this book only hints at, but does not

systematically examine, economic injustice as it did for social and cultural injustice. The only chapter that foregrounds the political economy of the media industry is Miller's, in which he shows how the manufacturing and recycling of technological products harms the bodies of global south workers. He also connects the dots between representation and production in a global political economy: The representation of abled bodies from developed countries is preferred to disabled bodies from developing countries, even though the representation of the former is only made possible through the disabling of the latter. In other words, the media dominated by Hollywood overwhelmingly prefer representations of younger people with abled bodies, yet the technologies (such as the television screens) that enable such representations are produced by workers who put their health at risk. Miller's piece also alludes to an understudied area, which is disability and media outside English-speaking countries (this lack is also pointed out by Adams in the first afterword).

Even though not all its objectives were fulfilled, this book has already provoked many questions to initiate a dialogue that will undoubtedly raise many more questions not only for scholars of the two fields but also practitioners such as universal access designers, policy makers, and activists. To move from a theoretical discussion to practices, Mills and Sterne offer some helpful propositions and tactics in the second afterward. They point out that there is no universal experience of disability: Different countries at different times use different terms for disability. Therefore, scholars and practitioners need to diversify the keywords and matters of concern to reflect variances in experiences. The most important step to recognize these experiences is a language that recognizes the full autonomy and citizen rights of populations who self-identify as disabled.

References

- Davis, D. Z., & Boellstorff, T. (2016). Compulsive creativity: Virtual worlds, disability, and digital capital. *International Journal of Communication, 10*, 2096–2118.
- Ellcessor, E. (2016). *Restricted access: Media, disability, and the politics of participation*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Ellis, K. (2018). *Disability media work: Opportunities and obstacles*. New York, NY: Palgrave Pivot.
- Goggin, G. (2019). Disability, connected cars, and communication. *International Journal of Communication, 13*, 2748–2773.
- Goggin, G., & Newell, C. (2002). *Digital disability: The social construction of disability in new media*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Jackson, D. (2015). *Reframing disability? Media, (dis)empowerment, and voice in the 2012 Paralympics*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Rodan, D. (2016). *Disability, obesity and ageing: Popular media identifications*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Smit, C. R., & Enns, A. (2001). *Screening disability: Essays on cinema and disability*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Trevisan, F. (2019). Using the Internet to mobilize marginalized groups: People with disabilities and digital campaign strategies in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 1592–1611.