

## **Critical Media Access Studies: Deconstructing Power, Visibility, and Marginality in Mediated Space**

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The benefits of “accessible” media and technology for people with disabilities are rarely questioned, nor considered within broader critical/cultural frameworks. This article makes a contribution to the field of communication by proposing *critical media access studies* to further define a growing area of inquiry into contested notions of mediated access, drawing on work from disability media studies and critical access studies in architectural design. The proposal for critical media access studies is furthered through a case study of physical spaces designed for media engagement for young people, from museum exhibits to movie theaters, that provide “autism-friendly” programming. Qualitative analysis of interviews and observations with 27 autistic children and their families, as well as participant observation in 7 such sites, reveals ideological assumptions, frictions, and contradictions underpinning cultural accessibility. Critical media access studies can offer communication scholars valuable theoretical and conceptual tools for deconstructing power, visibility, and marginality in mediated space.

*Keywords: accessibility, autism, disability, children, critical media access studies, space*

People with disabilities comprise 1 billion people globally, or 15% of the world’s population. Many experience intertwined social and digital inequalities that significantly impede their economic, cultural, and political participation.<sup>2</sup> Disabled people are more likely to be underconnected to the Internet and, in turn, cut off from critical news and health information, educational resources, and employment opportunities (Dobransky & Hargittai, 2016; Goggin, 2017). Even with connectivity, technological solutions to inaccessibility, such as the use of artificial intelligence to automatically describe images posted to social

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<sup>2</sup> There is debate within the disability community about person-first (i.e., “person with a disability”) and disability-first language (i.e., “disabled person”; Kenny et al., 2016). In this article, I use “disabled people” and “people with disabilities” interchangeably, but employ language preferred within specific disability communities where appropriate (e.g., “autistic people” instead of “people with autism”).

media for blind and visually impaired users, are uneven in quality and availability (Ellcessor, 2016). Disabled people also bring unique problem-solving skills and cultural competencies to the online landscape. This includes remote political organizing, virtual socializing, and other “life hacks” that make the world more accessible to them and, often as a by-product, to nondisabled people as well (Jackson, 2018).

Critical analyses of disability and media accessibility that account for both the perils and pleasures of technology for disabled people have remained largely outside the purview of communication studies with exception (e.g., Alper, 2017; Bitman & John, 2019; Yadlin-Segal, 2019). This is despite a constantly expanding vocabulary to encompass a broad range of disciplinary and methodological traditions within the field (Peters, 2016). “Access” has emerged as a concept well positioned for deeper analytic engagement (Titchkosky, 2011). Drawing on feminist theory, Ellcessor (2017) encourages reframing notions of media access less as a stable or foreclosed category and more as a contested and fluid process, or media *accessing*. Hamraie (2017) challenges the idea of access as politically neutral, particularly in light of the radical disability activism that undergirded late 20th century accessible architectural design. This article centers one such case of negotiated access: physical spaces that provide “autism-friendly” media and cultural programming (alternatively “sensory-sensitive,” or in the UK, “relaxed”; Mattaini, 2020).<sup>3</sup>

Mediated spaces like movie theaters and museums can pose unique challenges for those who process sensory information in ways that diverge from the general population, including people on the spectrum and with sensory processing disorders (Crane, Goddard, & Pring, 2009). Such individuals may have difficulties processing stimuli through the traditional five senses of sound, sight, hearing, touch, and smell, as well as the proprioceptive and vestibular senses which pertain to body awareness and movement. As a result, live concerts, for example, may provoke intense pain through bright flashing lights or unexpected loud sounds. Expectations to sit still during a theatrical performance may be unbearable for people who require greater bodily movement to maintain calm. Experiences of “misfitting” (Garland Thomson, 2011, p. 592) in a space not designed to accommodate one’s sensory sensitivities can amplify psychological stress, anxiety, and social isolation (Green & Ben-Sasson, 2010). The “autism-friendly” versions of mediated environments have technical alterations such as softer lighting and less intense sound, modified social norms like greater freedom to move about, and areas allocated as onsite quiet rooms to decompress during a performance (Shrikant, 2018; see Figure 1).

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<sup>3</sup> I use “autism-friendly” and “sensory-sensitive” interchangeably in this article, though each can imply a different audience (e.g., autistic people, people with sensory processing disorder).

EVERY MONTH

# SENSORY SENSITIVE EVENTS

Low Light      Low Sound      Fewer Crowds



- **CHUCK E. CHEESE'S**  
FIRST SUNDAY EVERY MONTH AT 9-11 AM
- **SKYZONE PROVIDENCE**  
SECOND SUNDAY EVERY MONTH AT 8-10 AM
- **LAUNCH WARWICK**  
FIRST TUESDAY EVERY MONTH AT 6-8PM
- **CINEMAWORLD LINCOLN**  
FIRST SATURDAY EVERY MONTH AT 10 AM
- **SHOWCASE CINEMAS**  
FIRST SATURDAY EVERY MONTH AT 10 AM

WWW.AUTISMRI.ORG • (401) 432-1200 • @AUTISMRI



Figure 1. "Sensory Sensitive Events," Rhode Island Consortium for Autism Research and Treatment.

Such initiatives have tremendous symbolic capital and are largely undisputed as a normative good, with stories in the popular press highlighting their inclusivity (e.g., Lennard Goehner, 2010). It remains to be seen, though, to what extent these sites of media consumption broadly serve the needs and desires of disabled people and their social partners. Between 2013 and 2019, I interviewed parents of autistic children, ages three to 13 years, about their family's experiences with autism-friendly mediated spaces, observed these children using media within the sensory environments of their own homes, and conducted ethnographic fieldwork at mediated spaces marketed as autism-friendly for a youth audience. I found that although environmental adjustments can greatly expand the possibilities of media for people with sensory sensitivities, accessibility labels like "autism-friendly" do not guarantee cultural participation or supersede deeply entrenched structural forms of bias and exclusion that differentially affect disabled young people and families with varied access to economic and social resources.

Based on these findings, I propose *critical media access studies* to further define a growing subfield for interrogating prevailing ideologies that underlie presumptions of both access to media and communication technologies (*media access*), as well as access to human communication enabled by media (*mediated access*), particularly for disabled people who are additionally marginalized on the basis of their race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. I employ "mediation" both in Williams' (1983) sense of acting as an intermediary, as well as Livingstone's (2009) framing bridging the macro and micro conditions under which media themselves mediate. This work also builds on existing scholarship on accessibility in digital and virtual environments (Boellstorff, 2020; Elcessor, 2016) to include public spaces and activities that have been of traditional concern to cultural studies scholars where media is central to the experience (e.g., filmgoing, arcade gaming). Critical media access studies can offer valuable insights into "accessible" media use and media environments in a way that does not unquestionably accept or laud their gestures toward accessibility.

I begin below to lay a foundation for critical media access studies by first summarizing relevant literature on the visibility and adaptability of disabled audiences within public mediated spaces, and the burgeoning intersection of disability media studies and critical access studies. Next, I provide an overview of key themes that emerged from fieldwork, specifically with respect to the social, political, cultural, and economic factors shaping how and why autism-friendly mediated spaces are—and are not—used in practice. And lastly, I discuss broader applications of critical media access studies for the communication field.

## **Background**

### ***Disability in Mediated Cultural Spaces***

The ways that we behave in public mediated spaces are fundamentally shaped by a politics of access and stratification across markers of social differences. Levine (1988), for example, documents how the repression of shouting, stirring, and other audience activities in the 19th century reflected growing class distinctions and the highbrow/lowbrow politics of aesthetic engagement. Normative modes of media spectatorship have also long been influenced by the unavailability of communal public spaces for marginalized groups (Berry, Kim, & Spigel, 2009). In writing about Black cinemas during the silent film era at the turn of the 20th century, Stewart (2005) notes how the acceptability of social interaction (e.g., talking

to the screen or other audience members) was relative to the lack of physical locations where African Americans could imagine themselves as subjects of cultural address.

Hamraie (2017) refers to the process of managing and standardizing particular forms of accessibility as “access-knowledge” (p. 5). In the case of disability, access-knowledge in public space has been reconfigured in ways that tend to promote access for people with physical disabilities (albeit insufficiently) more so than sensory disabilities. During the Cold War era, industrial designers incorporated sensory differences such as sensitivity to vibration and scents into design philosophies. They did so, though less to champion disability inclusion and more as a reflection of cultural anxieties about “mechanical danger, chemical and thermal vulnerability, and sensory overwhelm” (Hamraie, 2017, p. 38). By the late 20th century, disability activism and the push for an ambitious redesign of public spaces would enable fuller societal participation for disabled people (Shapiro, 1993). Advocacy for the passage of the 1990 Americans With Disabilities Act, designed to appeal to both liberal and conservative government officials, bound mainstream conceptions of access to individual choice, economic citizenship, and consumer products, including media (Williamson, 2019). One result of legal codification was a centering of physical and mobility disabilities in accessible architecture and design, such as the addition of ramps at building entrances and wider bathroom stalls for wheelchair users.

Accommodating invisible forms of disability in the built environment is less straightforward. For example, a movie theater might remove seats and leave space for wheelchairs, but calibrating light, sound, and crowd size is more complex. Starting around 2010, alongside an increase in autism diagnoses and a broader “health turn” in cultural settings (Mangione, 2018, p. 283), autism-friendly events expanded in the United States, Canada, the UK, and Australia (Piepenburg, 2011; Roxby & van Brugen, 2011). Such events occur in locations that have historically been associated with middle-class tastes (e.g., libraries), as well as working-class culture (e.g., amusement parks). At family gaming arcade Chuck E. Cheese, the startling and sudden electronic sounds emitted from animatronic figures and video games are temporarily turned off during their Sensory Sensitive Sundays program to prevent overstimulation. Some sensory modifications may be permanent, such as museums’ availability of “stim” (stimulating) toys to calm active hands and minds. Other changes can be made infrequently, like a handful of sensory-friendly performances during the run of a Broadway musical that allowing patrons to dance in the aisles.

Mediated environments reconceived as autism-friendly emerge, but are distinct from autistic spaces, an explicitly political concept (Mattaini, 2020). Physical autistic spaces grew out of a late-1990s LISTSERV for autistic adults known as ANI-L and in-person gatherings for the group catered to meet varied sensory needs (e.g., a ban on indoor flash photography to avoid triggering seizures; Sinclair, 2010). Within autistic space, access undergoes constant negotiation (Silberman, 2015). Competing access needs often have no easy solutions; for example, people with service dogs that shed and those with severe asthma. Media can be central in resolving some of these conflicts, such as noise-cancelling headphones to block loud sounds (K. Harrison, Vallina, Couture, Wenhold, & Moorman, 2019). Fundamentally, Titchkosky (2011) contends that disability *is* access—to human experience that creates a space for questions about difference and belonging. How access *to* media and access *through* media productively shapes those questions is something that communication scholars are only beginning to grapple with.

### ***Critical Approaches to Media, Disability, and Access***

Against the backdrop of disability and accessible technology, media takes on a multitude of meanings. It includes tools to access technologies for creating, consuming, and circulating content such as Amara, a Web-based platform that allows anyone to caption YouTube videos, particularly when the original video file lacks accurate captioning (Elcessor, 2016). Media spans hardware and software that enable people with disabilities to access face-to-face communication (Downey, 2008; Hickman, 2019) like Google's Live Transcribe app, which converts voice to text for Deaf and hard-of-hearing smartphone users in real time. It also involves physical accommodations (e.g., Braille labels on artwork in a gallery) that make possible the participation of disabled people in spaces wholly or in part defined by engagement with print, visual, and audiovisual media.

Access has wider significance beyond the technological or architectural when linked to opportunities for sociocultural, political, and economic participation (Donner, 2015). Both literally and figuratively, "access" implies "the power, opportunity, permission, or right to come near or into contact with someone or something" (Williamson, 2015, p. 14). Critical access studies, as conceived by Hamraie (2017), challenges "access" itself as universally beneficial or beyond reproach. They call for understanding universal design, which entails designing products, experiences, and architecture for the widest possible number of users, "as a shifting historical discourse [...] rather than a stable idea or practice" (Hamraie, 2017, p. 7). Legal frameworks alone do not make access materialize; rather, it is furthered by sustained communities of expertise, experimentation, and knowledge building centering and led by disabled individuals (Guffey, 2018; Hamraie & Fritsch, 2019; Petrick, 2015), with autistic space as one example.

Critical media access studies draws on scholarship from critical access studies, critical disability studies (Goodley, Lawthom, Liddiard, & Runswick-Cole, 2019), feminist disability studies (Garland Thomson, 2005; Kafer, 2013), and disability media studies (Elcessor & Kirkpatrick, 2017; Ellis & Kent, 2011; Goggin & Newell, 2003) that interrogates how shifting notions of bodily deviance and normativity raise material and philosophical questions about how people are co-constituted through physical, virtual, and hybrid spaces. One can both be disabled and privileged online or in a physical mediated space due to different aspects of one's identity being shielded from racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination (Thompson, 2019). Twitter hashtags such as #AccessIsLove, developed by disability community organizers Alice Wong, Mia Mingus, and Sandy Ho (2019), invite these intersectional conversations about accessibility. In theory, access might create an opening, but in practice, it does not guarantee openness across infrastructures and institutions including cultural organizations and media entertainment companies, the focus of the present work.

### **Methods**

This study of autism-friendly mediated spaces is part of a larger ethnographic project on media and technology use among autistic children and their social partners (Alper, 2018), the names of whom appear here as pseudonyms. Research with autistic children involves a number of ethical, communicative, and practical considerations, including gathering background information from parents while regarding children as primary sources about their lived experiences (Ellis, 2016). In addition to myself, the research team included three undergraduate and graduate student research assistants (RAs). As a team, we

collectively had professional experience conducting ethnographic research in the homes of nonspeaking autistic children and their families, employment experience working at an autistic self-advocacy nonprofit organization, personal experience as the sibling of an autistic person, and graduate training in providing culturally appropriate mental health services to marginalized youth.

### **Study Sample and Data Collection**

#### *Parent Interviews and Child Observations*

We employed a range of qualitative methods in Los Angeles during Wave 1 of the project (2013–14) and in Boston during Wave 2 (2016–19). After receiving university Institutional Review Board approval, parents were recruited via professional referrals, e-mail lists, Facebook groups, print flyers, and community meetings. Attention was paid to recruiting parents from a diverse range of socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, or what Lindlof and Taylor (2002) term “maximum variation sampling” (p. 123). This article draws specifically on research with the families of 27 children who provided information about their experiences with autism-friendly mediated spaces (see Table 1). Average yearly household incomes were nearly split below \$100,000 ( $n = 15$ ) and above ( $n = 12$ ), with seven children living in poor and working-class households earning less than \$25,000. The child sample was slightly less non-White ( $n = 12$ ) than White ( $n = 15$ ) and consisted of more boys ( $n = 19$ ) than girls ( $n = 8$ ). The average child was approximately six years old.

**Table 1. Descriptive Data of Selected Child Participants.**

Child name	Child age	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Parent-reported diagnosis	Interviewed parent/s name	Yearly household income
Aaliyah	3	Girl	Black	Autism	Crystal	Less than \$25,000
Abbey	4	Girl	White	Autism	Molly	\$25,000–\$50,000
Adrian	13	Boy	White	Autism, autism spectrum disorder, Asperger’s syndrome, dyslexia, anxiety	Brianna	\$100,000 or more
Amaya	8	Girl	Mixed (White; Black; Hispanic, Spanish, Latino)	Autism, autism spectrum disorder, PDD-NOS, OCD, anxiety	Kimberly	Less than \$25,000
Anthony	5	Boy	Black	Autism, asthma	Danae	Less than \$25,000
Caleb	9	Boy	Black	Autism, ADHD	Audrey	Less than \$25,000
Chris	4	Boy	Mixed (White; Asian)	Autism	Phil	\$100,000 or more
Eli	4	Boy	White	Autism spectrum disorder	Julie	\$100,000 or more
Isaac	8	Boy	White	Autism	Sara	\$100,000 or more

Jackson	11	Boy	White	Autism spectrum disorder, PDD-NOS, epilepsy, ADHD	Linda	\$25,000–\$50,000
Joey	6	Boy	White	Autism, PDD-NOS	Kerry	\$100,000 or more
Kahlil	7	Boy	Black	Autism spectrum disorder, speech delay, “non-verbal”	Monisha	Less than \$25,000
Katie	6	Girl	White	Autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, anxiety	Annemarie	\$50,000–\$100,000
Karim	7	Boy	Middle Eastern	Autism, PDD-NOS	Nour	\$25,000–\$50,000
Lucas	5	Boy	White	Asperger’s syndrome	Melissa	\$100,000 or more
Luke	13	Boy	White	Autism	Rob	\$100,000 or more
Max	5	Boy	Mixed (White; Asian)	Autism	Norah	\$100,000 or more
Moira	10	Girl	White	Autism, childhood apraxia of speech	Vanessa	\$50,000–\$100,000
Noah	3	Boy	White	Autism spectrum disorder	Amanda	\$25,000–\$50,000
Orion	4	Boy	Black	Autism spectrum disorder, speech delay	Monisha	Less than \$25,000
Ryan	3	Boy	White	Autism, autism spectrum disorder, mixed developmental disorder, mixed receptive-expressive language disorder	Tara	\$50,000–\$100,000
Saylor	12	Girl	White	Autism spectrum disorder, PDD-NOS	Maggie	\$100,000 or more
Sebastian	6	Boy	Mixed (White; Hispanic, Spanish, or Latino)	Autism, Fragile X syndrome	Cathleen	\$100,000 or more
Skyler	6	Boy	White	Autism, ADHD	Naomi	\$100,000 or more
Sofia	5	Girl	Hispanic, Spanish, or Latino	Autism, autism spectrum disorder	April	\$50,000–\$100,000
Thomas	11	Boy	Mixed (White; Asian)	Autism, intellectual disability	Daisy	\$100,000 or more
Zahra	4	Girl	White	Autism	Becky, Raina	Less than \$25,000

*Note.* All names have been changed as to preserve the anonymity of participants.



After informed parental consent was obtained, semi-structured in-depth interviews of 60–120 minutes were conducted in-person with caregivers at home to provide context about their family background and their child’s media use. This article focuses on parents’ responses to the questions, “Does your child have any sensory issues? How do you think this affects their use of media/technology?” and “How does your child do with media experiences outside of the home (e.g., libraries, theater, music, museums, movies)? Do they go to any ‘sensory-friendly’ or ‘autism-friendly’ versions of these?” All parent interviews were conducted in English. Twenty-three children were later observed at home for 30–60 minutes, engaging in a favorite media activity that they selected. Child assent was obtained using a printed form read aloud to children explaining in plain language the purpose of the study, that they could “stop any time that you want,” and that the researcher would use a small tape recorder to “listen again later.” Children chose activities to do with a family member or by themselves, in which case a parent was in the room or within earshot. Field notes included observations about the sensory qualities of the domestic space (e.g., loud due to vehicular traffic outside) and materials that the child used to curb or seek sensory input (e.g., watching television while jumping on a trampoline). Families received a \$30–\$50 gift card at study completion.

#### *Field Observations and Informational Interviews*

Along with two research assistants, I additionally conducted participant observations at seven different public mediated spaces marketed as autism-friendly or sensory-friendly in the greater Boston area. We visited sites on eight occasions for 60–120-minutes each between the years 2016 and 2019 (see Table 2), including two visits to Chuck E. Cheese’s Sensory Sensitive Sundays.

**Table 2. Locations and Dates of Observations in Autism- and Sensory-Friendly Mediated Spaces.**

Event	Media type	Dates (chronological)
Sensory-Friendly Performance of <i>Honk! The Musical</i> (Kidding Around, Emerson College)	Theater (Student Production)	December 10, 2016
Sensory Friendly Sunday (Chuck E. Cheese)	Arcade	March 5, 2017 October 1, 2017
Morningstar Access Program (Boston Children’s Museum)	Museum	June 18, 2017
Sensory Friendly Films, Screening of <i>The LEGO Ninjago Movie</i> (AMC Theaters)	Cinema	September 23, 2017
Sensory Friendly Performance of <i>The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time</i> (SpeakEasy Stage Company, Boston Center for the Arts)	Theater (Professional Production)	November 19, 2017
Sensory Friendly Performance of <i>Flora and Ulysses</i> (Emerson Stage, Emerson College)	Theater (Student Production)	November 3, 2018
Sensory-Friendly Performance of <i>The Musical Adventures of Flat Stanley</i> (Kidding Around, Emerson College)	Theater (Student Production)	December 1, 2018

Locations were chosen to reflect both free and paid experiences, professional and amateur productions, and sites accessible by car only and by car and mass transit. While taking fieldnotes, we balanced our observations with our participation in the mediated spaces as audience members and patrons, sometimes jotting in the dark (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). This included collecting information on attendance numbers, children's use of sensory toys in the spaces, and interactions between children and parents while engaging in media and cultural consumption.

### **Analytic Procedures**

All interviews and observations were audio recorded and transcribed by research assistants. Transcripts and field notes were supplemented with reflective memos written immediately after site visits. All memos, notes, and transcripts were entered into the qualitative data analysis software program MAXQDA to create a customized searchable database of documents. In developing grounded theory, I employed open and selective coding and recoding of the data to identify key concepts and categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I also applied a constant comparative method to the analysis, coding data throughout the course of fieldwork and paying close attention to emerging patterns (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Though I served as sole coder, data exclusions and interpretations were discussed with participants and research assistants during fieldwork and data analysis to validate findings, also known as member checking (Saldaña, 2013). Combinations of inductive and deductive approaches were also used (Charmaz, 1983); for example, prior theoretical work on media nonusers investigating the multiple reasons why users resist and reject technology (Baumer, Burrell, Ames, Brubaker, & Dourish, 2015; Wyatt, 2003) informed coding for underlying factors potentially limiting attendance at sensory-friendly events.

### **Findings**

Though children and parents took some advantage of the accessibility afforded by sensory-sensitive spaces ( $n = 10$ ), the majority ( $n = 17$ ) reported infrequently or never attending them for a range of reasons. Incorporating insights gained from home observations and field visits, the accessibility of autism-friendly mediated spaces was found to be relative to social, cultural, political, and economic contexts of both their use and non-use. This included contexts under which they were *used* (including by unintended audiences), *unused* (as in, parents would use but did not for multiple reasons), and *not used* (as in, would not use).

#### ***Used***

Caregivers of autistic children reported attending a variety of autism-friendly mediated events in major metropolitan areas. When I spoke to Molly, for example, she had recently taken her four-year-old daughter Abbey to a "night for kids on the spectrum" at a local children's museum. Naomi, who described herself as "very connected to the autism community," brought six-year-old Skyler to sensory-friendly performances of Broadway musicals in New York City and Boston. A number of low-income parents like Crystal, Monisha, Audrey, and Linda also reported attending and hearing about a range of events, such as those at the symphony orchestra and a local kids' entertainment chain, through the print newsletter of a state-supported autism resource center in Boston.

Within these spaces, autistic children actively self-regulated their sensory processing using material objects, some of which were provided by venues and others that children brought in from the outside. For instance, at a professional theatrical performance of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, based on the 2003 book by Mark Haddon, a teenage girl pressed a star-shaped blue stress ball that she had picked up at the play's entrance into her hands throughout the show. Another boy rolled his squishy star into the arms of his seat. Children also used mobile media devices brought from home to make the space even friendlier to their sensory needs. One teenage boy put on headphones about 10 minutes into the show and was on his iPhone for the remainder of the performance.

Autistic child audience members used smartphones not only for media consumption but creation as well. During the intermission of *The Musical Adventures of Flat Stanley*, based on the 1964 book *Flat Stanley* by Jeff Brown, put on by Emerson College's children's theater troupe, an adolescent boy walked around the performance space alongside a caregiver while taking photos of the colorful set pieces on a phone. During a visit to the Boston Children's Museum's Morningstar Access Program in June 2017, one teenage boy stood in front of an installation of movable gears, rotating them in one hand while holding an iPhone and filming them moving with the other. He seemed to enjoy the layered rhythms, patterns, and movements of spinning, re-watching his video as he smiled, laughed, and jumped.

Parents made distinctions between different sensory-friendly spaces based on the type of mediated environment and the interaction between that environment and a child's needs and preferences. Kerry, mom of six-year-old Joey, said that while they had not gone to a sensory-friendly movie, they had attended a sensory-friendly performance of the Christmas ballet *The Nutcracker*. Amanda had taken three-year-old Noah to see a sensory-friendly film screening of the animated movie *The Secret Life of Pets*, but when she took him to one for *The LEGO Batman Movie*, he would not sit through the film. "There just wasn't enough action," said Amanda, "so it kinda depends on the movie." Overall, use of autism-friendly mediated spaces was conditional and negotiated across bodies, materials, and technologies.

Notably, children on the autism spectrum, those with sensory sensitivities, and their family members were not the only individuals that made use of these spaces, even though they were the primary advertised audience. Disabled adults were in attendance for a Saturday morning sensory-friendly performance of *Honk! The Musical*, also put on by Emerson's children's theater group. The campus is in a central location in downtown Boston easily accessible by mass transit and the performance itself was free (whereas tickets for *Curious Incident* were \$30 each). These factors may have contributed to the fact that it drew a sizeable number of adults with developmental disabilities, mostly Black and Latino men, who were accompanied by aides from a nearby group home for disabled adults. They sat in the back rows of the theater space, while younger children and their parents gathered closer to the stage.

### **Unused**

Separate from people that gathered at autism-friendly mediated spaces were those who said that they would like to use or had used such spaces, but did not currently, for various reasons. Kimberly, for example, said that her eight-year-old daughter Amaya had previously enjoyed the Boston Children's Museum, but the increasing severity of Amaya's OCD and anxiety symptoms, challenges in coordinating

adequate therapy, and an incident in which Amaya was assaulted by a teacher in her urban public school resulted in her daughter not wanting to leave the house at all. The unavailability of nearby programming was another factor for some families. In three-year-old Ryan's working-class suburb 30 miles outside of Boston, "they don't have the sensory-friendly at our movie theater . . . and it's kind of crappy," his mom Tara said. Melissa did not take five-year-old Lucas to the access day at the children's museum in Boston because it was tough to travel into the city, so she took him to the closer suburban children's museum "and they don't have a sensory-friendly."

Inconvenient timing was an additional issue. Annemarie, mother of six-year-old Katie, said that "places want to do their sensory hour at the beginning or the end of the day, which aren't always our best times," as she preferred late morning. Time could be especially complicated for working-class families balancing multiple jobs to keep a family afloat. April, her husband, and their five-year-old daughter Sofia had recently moved in with April's parents when their rented apartment was sold in a rapidly gentrifying area of Boston. April's husband used the family car for work and she cared for Sofia, who found the experience of riding on mass transit to be overwhelming sensorially and spent most of her days during the summer at home watching YouTube. April shared that "we want to try a sensory movie, but their schedules are like Tuesdays and Saturdays. [My husband is] never off on those days and I'm not going to get on a bus and train with Sofia to see if it works out and if we can stay."

Programming could also be inconsistently scheduled for those wanting to attend. In Boston, the nationwide AMC Theaters' sensory-friendly film screenings that occurred three or four times a month were only held at theaters that retained the designated film reel for that date, which was rarely the case in the central Boston location. On our first attempt in March 2017 to visit a Sensory Sensitive Sunday at Chuck E. Cheese, taped to the front door was a notice saying that they were closed because of water damage. On another visit in October 2017, not a single patron came. When asked, the manager shared that four or five kids usually show up, and more did when they first implemented the program earlier in the year, but "we have problems opening up on time." She added that there had been weeks when families were outside waiting for them to unlock the doors and speculated that some might have been "frustrated" and stopped coming altogether.

### ***Not Used***

Lastly, many parents reported having no interest in or never taking their child to autism-friendly mediated spaces on account of different personal, social, and economic factors. Some autistic children simply had no sensory issues or none that would have posed a challenge in certain mediated spaces. Rob had not taken his 13-year-old son Luke to a sensory-friendly movie because "none of the textures or light, or anything in the theater is a problem for him." "We just go regular," said Raina when I asked if she took her four-year-old daughter Zahra to the Boston Children's Museum's access program. Twelve-year-old Saylor's mom Maggie said, "I'm on all those e-mails and stuff [for sensory-friendly movies] and we've never really done it." Some parents emphasized how some mediated spaces were already "friendly" without their child needing to significantly alter their behavior. For example, because of the natural clamor of the Museum of Science in Boston, Julie did not feel that it was necessary to take four-year-old Eli to a sensory-friendly day even if one were offered.

Parents and children also codeveloped strategies for turning mediated spaces into ones the child was more likely to enjoy. “[Adrian] loves to go to [the comics convention] Anime Boston,” Brianna said of her 13-year-old son, “but after . . . walking around for two to three hours, he sometimes is ready to go” so they decided that a break was needed after a while. Predictable routines and rituals were helpful as well. Joey’s mom Kerry relayed, “We’ll make sure we’ve watched the trailer before we go [to the movies], so he knows that’s how it’s going to be.” Walking through a chain of events beforehand was also key. Kerry had practiced a script with Joey that “when you go to the movies: ‘I’m going to print the ticket. I’ve printed it here. We’re going to give him our ticket. Then we’re going to go sit. We’ll get the popcorn.’”

A handful of parents actively preferred to take their young children to places that were not necessarily “for” children on the autism spectrum. Phil, a father in his late 30s who considered himself to be somewhere on the spectrum though he had never received a formal diagnosis, linked his four-year-old son Chris’s movement and noise during a dance performance at the symphony orchestra to broader claims of autistic personhood. “We try to fit them in that space,” said Phil, in reference to autistic people, “and sometimes we’ve got to back up and say there’s something to be respected.” Other parents spoke of reconfiguring norms within public mediated spaces. Sara reported that a few people asked about her minimally speaking eight-year-old son Isaac’s assistive speech device used during a recent trip to Disneyland. “I wish more people would ask,” she said, “because I think it would be nice for people to realize and see what is out there and how much more we really need to do” in terms of inclusion.

Other parents though brought their children to “regular” mediated spaces because they expressed wanting their child to essentially act more neurotypical. Nour drew on medicalized language to describe her approach to introducing seven-year-old Karim to moviegoing. “Exposure is key, exposure is key,” she said, “A little bit of it until the child gets brave. A little bit more, a little bit more, just like doing cognitive behavioral therapy.” Daisy did not take her 11-year-old son Thomas to autism-friendly movies “because for me, you want to teach your kid to adapt in the real world. There will never always be a sensory movie available out there. I want them to blend, to be able to adapt.” These parents spoke more of modifying their child’s behavior than of changing the public spaces and social contexts around them.

Some parents expressed resentment that sensory-friendly media events received more attention and resources than accessible recreation programs not having to do with media. Single mother Vanessa, for example, discussed the perceived ubiquity of media-focused programming. “I’m telling you,” she said, “all the time, people are like, ‘Oh, you know, Vanessa? They have these sensory friendly films now.’” Movies were not something that either she or her 10-year-old daughter Moira were very interested in, though, especially on a tight budget. “I guess that’s an American pastime,” said Vanessa, “[But] that’s not what I do in my family time.” Activities that Vanessa did appreciate included autism-friendly aquatics lessons, which both she and her daughter had done as a bonding activity.

Low-income and working-class families like Sofia’s and Anthony’s interestingly reported reduced entry costs for general admission were sometimes more appealing than full-priced autism-friendly events. Anthony “likes the science museum,” Danae said of her five-year-old son, “So I take him. We have an EBT [electronic benefit transfer] card [for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits]. You could get into the science museum for free, so we go all the time. I don’t got no 28 dollars to spend.” Danae,

who did not have Internet at home and relied on her phone's data plan for online access, was strategic in using public resources and made intentional choices about using her discount: "It's like two dollars to get in [to the children's museum with the EBT card], but on a Friday night it's only a dollar if you go at 5 [p.m.]." Meanwhile, the accessible program at the Boston Children's Museum was more expensive at nine dollars for nonmembers of the museum.

Finally, parents also expressed reservations about mediated spaces more broadly. Cathleen said of her six-year-old son Sebastian, "It doesn't take much to tip his sensory system off, and so he's processing all this extra input in his environment all the time." Norah had not taken five-year-old Max to any of the sensory-friendly movies in her area, of which there were many, because "I think that for him it's not a sensory thing, I think it's an anxiety thing. I think it would be the same" if it were a regular movie. Julie said that any media consumption that involved prolonged sitting would be difficult for Eli. "It's not like [the library is] an *unfriendly* place," she said, "it just doesn't feel very friendly to kids like Eli sometimes." Friendliness and unfriendliness—as affective placeholders for accessibility—were not given qualities in a place, program, or event, but inherently contextual and situational.

### Discussion

In this study of how "autism-friendly" media and cultural programs are used, as well as unused and not used, by disability publics (Ginsburg & Rapp, 2017), we observed autistic children enjoying the sensory freedoms of autism-friendly mediated spaces—stimming with arm rests, iPhones, and squishy stars—in almost every venue we observed. Yet the mere availability of these spaces did not eliminate the desires of parents like Nour and Daisy to obfuscate their child's disability in public. Others like Cathleen, Vanessa, and Julie found autism-friendly cultural programming either unnecessary, nonbeneficial, stigmatizing, or not adequately positioned to provide reassurance. Though some parents like Molly and Naomi enthusiastically took advantage of these spaces, others did not find them more accessible because they could not physically access them in their neighborhoods. Bias and inequality bounded autistic children's freedom of movement within and outside of their communities as well as the quality, flexibility, and length of their leisure time.

Building on a growing body of work centering disability in technology and society (e.g., Ellcessor, 2017), this article uses the case of autism-friendly mediated spaces to advance a rationale for critical media access studies as a promising area in the field of communication. Critical media access studies can offer room for analyzing how access to media in its various forms and varied access through media for people with disabilities are shaped by the larger availability of social, cultural, political, and economic means, as well as the ease with which individuals can mobilize these resources within institutional and infrastructural constraints (Costanza-Chock, 2020). This work joins Hamraie (2017) in critiquing the taken-for-grantedness of access-knowledge by attending to "frictioned negotiations of access and privilege" (p. xiii). The findings in this article illustrate a need for critical reflection about how accessibility efforts, however well-intentioned, may treat the symptoms of ableism but not the underlying causes of discrimination.

Critical media access studies can also provide communication scholars valuable theoretical and conceptual tools for deconstructing power, visibility, and marginality in even purportedly accessible media and mediated space, particularly as physical communal media consumption is an open question in the COVID-19

era and virtual spaces take on greater importance. Below, I suggest two key areas of continued work in critical media access studies: intersectional interdependence (L. Harrison, 2019) and spatial justice (Pineda, 2008; Soja, 2010).

### ***Intersectional Interdependence***

Critical perspectives on media accessibility shift the goal of access from individual independence to the collective interdependence of bodies and the specific interdependencies of disabled people (Mingus, 2017). Interdependence does not ensure access, but an emphasis on mutuality allows for recognition that accessible media—be it assistive technology (Bennett, Brady, & Branham, 2018) or “autism-friendly” mediated spaces—are shaped by infrastructural-level decisions and prioritizations of social welfare. This includes access to food, transportation, and affordable housing, particularly for queer, poor, and disabled people of color. For Anthony and his mother Danae, for example, a more expensive autism-friendly museum experience was weighed against lower cost museum tickets obtained through a discount program available to families who receive a monthly benefit to purchase food. Putting the onus on individual families to show up for autism-friendly programming and expecting that all children will be served equally disregards the multiple access needs that disabled people balance.

Intersectional approaches to interdependence are core to the criticality of critical media access studies. The assumption that media environments can be made universally “friendly,” before disabled audiences even enter, underplays their agency and the diverging lived experiences between them. Prior work has illustrated, for example, that White families are more likely to readily find information about sensory-friendly activities among friends and family than Black parents, who tend to seek out harder-to-reach institutional and professional sources (Gibson & Hanson-Baldauf, 2019). In addition to race, age is another significant factor. Despite the large turnout of disabled Black and Latino men at the sensory-friendly performance of *Honk!*, adults with disabilities and particularly those who are non-White and low-income are largely underserved by cultural and media arts organizations. As Hamraie (2017) notes, “design for all” (with “all” signifying people with and without disabilities) presumes that participation or exclusion in public life only occurs along the axis of disability, without accounting for how race, ethnicity, and income generate symbolic and material barriers (p. 9).

Intersectional interdependence (L. Harrison, 2019) cultivates and centers the leadership of those most negatively affected by ableism, a corrective that should extend to theorizations of accessible media and technology and accessible theorizations of new media. Mills and Sterne (2017) call for “dismediation” as a reorientation of media studies toward the unexamined methodological and epistemological insights that disability brings to the human experience (p. 366). With respect to critical media access studies, dismediation includes appraising technologies designed and developed in the name of accessibility that ultimately lead to injustice. Bennett and Keyes (2020), for instance, have documented how computer vision algorithms designed to assist blind people are deployed to legitimate state surveillance. Late disability activist Milbern (2019) refers to such practices as “access washing” (akin to whitewashing), or when accessibility needs are used as justification for policies that harm other marginalized communities (para. 1). One direction for counteracting this bias in communication is to turn toward scholarship in human-computer interaction led by disabled researchers that reorients the study of technology around the expertise and experiences of people with disabilities (Shew, 2020).

### ***Spatial Justice***

Critical media access studies can additionally influence broader theories of media and mediated space by adopting a spatial justice lens (Soja, 2010), which recognizes the role of space in both shaping and reflecting inequality, exclusion, and discrimination. This perspective on the physical and social world offers multiple ways of understanding media and its relationship to the disabled experience (Pineda, 2008). Space is itself a social construct, produced through embodied practices and subjectivities (Lefebvre, 1991). This is evident, for example, in the spatial constraints of housing instability and unaffordability faced by Sofia and her family, which impacted their access to sensory-friendly mediated spaces and their ability to leave home altogether.

Further work should explore how meanings of media and mediated space within the disability community intersect with existing theorizations of spatial justice (Belek, 2019). "Space," according to de Certeau (1984), "is a practiced place" (p. 117). Geographically defined locations are permanently or temporarily transformed by the social meanings attached to them, and media can alter our relationship to those geographies and to one another (Couldry & McCarthy, 2004). Routines and rituals centered around the home, a spatial necessity for all in response to COVID-19, are not novel for disabled, chronically ill, and immunocompromised people. What is new is the sudden availability of remote access, for instance, to workplaces through video chat platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams, for which people with disabilities have long fought resistant employers to obtain (Meng, 2020).

In the aftermath of the coronavirus and public health recommendations to engage in "social distancing" to prevent its spread, the inability to meet in large groups was acutely felt (Jacobs, 2020). Traditional cultural spaces pivoted by offering virtual visits to museums, movie premieres, and Broadway musicals from home. People with disabilities have historically developed innovations and tactics for virtual participation and pleasure like remote dance parties (Gotkin, 2019). Though people without disabilities are benefitting from those strategies, the perks of technology that enables being in public without going outside are not mutually shared. For instance, those with mobility limitations who prior to the pandemic regularly relied on app-enabled services for groceries had to initially fight for delivery slots with a massive influx of nondisabled users who were avoiding walking the aisles (Hayes, 2020). To date, it is unclear what form arts and media spaces will take in the future. but understanding how their accessibility has been negotiated and contested prior to COVID-19 provides important insights into social inequalities that are likely to persist if not worsen.

In close, this article intervenes in communication, media, and cultural studies by interrogating the ideological assumptions, frictions, and contradictions underpinning "accessibility" in physical, virtual, and hybrid mediated spaces. Building a sustained community around critical media access studies is key to the continued evolution of an intellectually diverse, robust, and equitable communication field. If we do not see disability in the social scientific study of media and communication studies, then it is difficult, if not impossible, for disability and disabled people from a wide array of racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds to visibly and vocally take part in the continued evolution of our field and society writ large.



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