Solidarity and Care: Information Activism in the Death Panel Podcast Community

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ABSTRACT

This poster highlights the connections between independent media, information activism, and disability through a case study of the podcast Death Panel and its listeners. Death Panel is a leftist podcast that explores issues of affordability in medical care and the dearth of public health resources. The ongoing project explores the independent media created by disabled people that concern their frustrations with societal and governmental neglect, and their desires to build community and a collective political movement for social change. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the podcast's listenership has grown substantially. Similarly, the number of members in the Death Panel Discord group has increased to over 2,000 members over the past two years. As of February 21st, 2023, there are 2,954 members in the Discord server. For many members, especially those who are disabled and chronically ill, the podcast's Discord has served as a significant site of politicization and community-building during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through semi-structured interviews, this project will explore the political and activist implications of information for marginalized people.

KEYWORDS

Disability; activism; care; podcasts; independent media

INTRODUCTION

As stay-at-home orders were instituted worldwide at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, disability communities were optimistic about the newfound possibilities for nondisabled people to show solidarity and the reimagination of everyday life (Goggin & Ellis, 2020; Thelwall & Levitt, 2020). However, inequalities nonetheless worsened while many called for a "return to normal." As nondisabled people returned to their previous ways of living in what many declared the "post-pandemic," disabled and chronically ill people continued to stay at home. As the general population's solidaristic sentiments waned, disabled people grew frustrated. The Death Panel podcast responded to these frustrations. Founded in 2018, the leftist podcast gained international recognition during the pandemic as it commented on the multiple failures of COVID-19 policies and the privatization of healthcare, internationally. The podcast employs a leftist, disability justice-informed approach to examine how the profit-driven healthcare ecosystem utilizes constructs of "health," "disability," and "illness" to distinguish those who do not adhere to capitalist notions of the ideal worker as "surplus" populations. The podcast explores how these exclusionary logics adversely affect those at the margins due to racism, ableism, sexism, and classism and their intersections, as well as undermine solidarity between different populations.

The project involves a case study of Death Panel podcast and its listeners. Over the past three years, the listener base has increased exponentially (Doran, 2020). For many listeners, especially those who are disabled, the podcast's online community on the instant messaging application Discord has served as a significant site of politicization and community-building during the pandemic (McNamara, 2021). This project explores information activism in the Death Panel community, with particular attention to how information is politicized for disabled and chronically ill people during health crises such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The project builds upon critical information science research that explores the information practices of activists (McKinney, 2020) and multidisciplinary research that explores political participation within disability communities. Unlike existing research within information science, the project aims to make novel connections between critical approaches in disability studies, Black feminist theory, and feminist studies. The approaches intersect in their interrogation of the institutions and structures that further inequality. As critical research methods, they underscore how identities, institutions, and social practices are linked to broader relations of power. The approaches are similarly concerned with exploring the overlooked nuances and operations of power within an issue, rather than proving or disproving predetermined hypotheses (Myers & Klein, 2011). By mapping the connections between information activism and "ethics of collective care" (Silber, 2022), this project will outline the informational aspects of activism that enumerate possibilities for a coalition-based politics of care.

The case study of the Death Panel podcast and its surrounding community underscores how information is integral to the cultivation of radical politics and solidarity-driven activism. The project departs from existing research within information science that examines disabled people's isolation through one-dimensional, single-axis frameworks of identity (Sum et al., 2022; Trevisan, 2020), and instead embraces a political interpretation of disability that challenges racist conceptions of deviance and normality.

While there are interdisciplinary information science scholars who locate themselves within feminist and disability studies scholarship, it is uncommon that they situate racism and white supremacy as central concerns of their work (Brilmyer, 2022; Goggin & Newell, 2007; Hill, 2013; Olson, 1997). To further expand on the intersectional issues surrounding information science's engagement with disability studies, this project explores disabled people's community-and movement-building practices with attention to how ableism is connected to systems of power such as white supremacy and heteropatriarchy. This is not to conflate the differential material realities of racism and ableism, but rather to explore the interrelations between ableism and white supremacy as they are produced by logics that devalue individuals based on deviations from white supremacist ideals of race, class, gender and ability. These connections have not yet been deeply explored in critical information science research.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The project explores the activist implications of information during an ongoing pandemic through a case study that examines leftist independent media and the information practices that surround it. More specifically, the project explores the independent media created by disabled people that concerns not only their frustrations with regards to societal and governmental neglect, but their desires to build community and a collective political movement toward radical social change. The aim of this project is to explore the political implications of information and its connections to emancipatory movement-building practices utilizing an interdisciplinary lens with a foundation in feminist-of-color disability studies (Schalk & Kim, 2020). Therefore, this research project will undertake a novel bridging between critical information science, disability studies, and feminist-of-color theory. Relevant literature concerning information activism, feminist ethics of care, and online disability activism will be explored. The theoretical implications of the study lie within its interdisciplinary approach and expanded definition of political participation that considers the role of information within the networks of care integral to social change. However, the impact of this study extends beyond academic discourse. The reformulation of political participation and coalition building is relevant to policy concerning political access and engagement in disability communities.

METHODS

The research design consists of a qualitative case study of the Death Panel podcast and its listeners, which includes qualitative semi-structured interviews as its primary method (Lareau, 2021). The semi-structured interview method is utilized to garner an in-depth understanding of listeners' own perspectives on their communal information activism. Archival and textual analysis methods will also be utilized to provide historical context of associated disability activist movements (Brennen, 2022; Moore et al., 2016). To trace the lineage of the podcast's political economic and disability justice-informed analytical approaches, the author will consult past health policy documents and mainstream media accounts of policy decisions using textual analysis methods. The researcher will also use archival methods (Caswell, 2021; Moore et al., 2016) to examine the archives of radical health- and disability-related movements in the United States such as the Disability Rights and Independent Living Movement Project at the University of California Berkeley.

Through the use of multiple qualitative methods including semi-structured interviews, textual analyses and archival methods, the study aims to provide a multimodal analysis that clearly articulates the connections between the interrelated histories of health policies, governmental austerity measures, activist movements and the healthcare crisis of the contemporary moment. Using archival and textual analysis methods, the study follows a Foucauldian genealogical approach to examine such issues (Ben-Moshe, 2020; Foucault, 1972; Foucault & Bouchard, 1977). In utilizing such an approach, the study aims to situate the podcast within historical context.

CONCLUSION

The project makes several contributions to the information science and disability studies literature. First, it broadens the scope of political participation to encompass activities such as creating zines, exchanging leftist literature, and hosting reading groups. The existing literature often focuses on disabled people's exclusion from dominant forms of political participation such as voting and policy creation with focus on their isolation from such activities (Mhiripiri & Midzi, 2021; Trevisan, 2020). This project explores disabled people's political participation through their engagement with independent media. Rather than focusing on structural exclusion, the project centers community- and movement-building as means of political participation. Additionally, the project opts for a broader definition of political participation that includes activities such as zine-making and the sharing of radical literature.

The study extends the subset of feminist information science literature within critical information science (Floegel & Costello, 2022; Gray, 2020; McKinney, 2020). The feminist information science literature has not built upon disability studies literature and Black feminist theory. By adopting a critical information science lens, this project explores how information is integral to the cultivation of solidarity that is foundational to activism and societal transformation. The project underscores the importance of a transformative coalition-based politics of care that arise from these often-overlooked affinities. Additionally, this project will combine complementary critical information science concepts and feminist theoretical approaches that have yet to be explored jointly in the literature.

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