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The new scarlet letter A: An exploration of the power of online informational websites to influence and *brand* those impacted by autism spectrum disorders

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Abstract

Technical communication is often perceived by the public as containing objective information that is supported by scientific data. Audiences of such products are unaware of the rhetoric employed within its content that works to perpetuate social constructions of dominant ideologies, including digital texts such as informational websites. This article presents a comparison of the rhetoric employed on two national websites, *Autism Speaks* and *Generation Rescue* that convey similar information on Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs), but present ASDs differently in terms of language, tone, and lens. Through the acknowledgement of these differences, I posit that web sites affiliated with the medical/scientific community such as *Autism Speaks* work to perpetuate damaging biases toward and prejudices about the ASD community, while operating under the commonplace of being objective.

This article argues for identifying, interrogating, and tearing down the walls of marginalization and prejudice that continue to stand between society and those impacted by disability. These walls are strengthened by the refusal to acknowledge the voices of the community, those with lived experiential information regarding the world of ASDs. Thus, instead of perpetuating the rhetoric that those with disabilities should work to overcome and accommodate, I encourage technical communicators to interrogate their normalizing practices in order to challenge hegemonic notions of disability as a means to project positive imagery that could result in increased notions of possibility and recognition of those with ASDs.

Introduction

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, a scarlet letter A that was symbolically placed on the bosom of Ms. Prynne's clothing, to be worn as a mark of shame, was a reminder to all of society that she was an outcast, someone who had broken a societal code of acceptable behavior. This stigmatic symbol not only impacted her, but her family, her daughter Pearl, as well.

Although Ms. Prynne's scarlet letter was a result of an act, a personal choice that was made after hearing of her husband's death, to move on with her life, it is nonetheless tied to the social branding that takes place in society today. This brand was a reminder to all of society that she was an outcast, someone who had broken a societal code of acceptable behavior, a deviant or other. This label, this scarlet letter A would consume her identity; it was her identity. The concept of a label overtaking and becoming a person's identity still takes place in society today, not as a physical brand, but an invisible one that is just as powerful and defining.

Those within the Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) community, (as a mother of two children on the spectrum, I include myself in this community), do not wear a physical brand of a scarlet letter, yet there is a mark that is no less emblazoned upon us as outcasts and categorizes *us* as the *them* of society: forever shunned to the outskirts and margins of society. Those within the ASD community include those directly impacted, who have an ASD, and indirectly impacted, those who are family, friends, or advocates of someone with an ASD. The brand society has placed on us as a community draws the stares of pity and ignorant frustration as well as pointing and whispers of "I'm glad that's not me." The brands of those directly and indirectly impacted by an ASD have different meanings. Those directly impacted, whether their ASD is visible or invisible, appear forever categorized from the affiliation with this label as never being capable of being society's definition of normal; they are given an *enfreakment* categorization that invites the stares of society as witness to these spectacles of difference. The brand placed upon those indirectly impacted is one that is (in)visibly attached to our external appearance. It is felt deep within our hearts and souls, for this brand stems from the feelings and recognition of the stares towards our loved ones and friends; we feel and anticipate what society is thinking and feeling, and that is incredibly painful and frustrating.

Branding originates within the medical community through their negating any possibility of hope for the future of those with an ASD; as having no possibility of a cure, thus they have no possibility of being like *normal society*. This categorization is then propagated on informational web sites, such as *Autism Speaks*, that further shape not only society's opinion of the ASD community, but further deteriorate this community's opinions about future possibilities for those directly impacted by an ASD. The technical communication that transpires in these web sites impacts not only how society views our ASD community, but how the ASD community views themselves and can determine the journey and effort those within the community take. The very websites that are considered to contain objective, scientifically based facts about ASD actually end up marginalizing and denigrating this community and can alter the very healthcare and therapeutic interventions that those within this community receive, or that due to the negating of hope, may never receive. When hope and possibility are made out to be non-existent, the therapeutic interventions that some with an ASD may benefit from or need in order to identify and develop areas of communication that work for and with them to ensure that their *voices* are heard may not be pursued, further silencing this community and strengthening the stigma of the label of an ASD (other). Additionally, this type of branding can also become the sole identity of the person(s) directly impacted by an ASD; they are not seen as individuals with anything meaningful to contribute, as they are deemed *disposable* or other; autism or autistic becomes their name.

Therefore, this article will incorporate a cultural studies framework to argue for the identification, interrogation, and tearing down of the walls of marginalization and prejudice that continue to stand between society (us) and those impacted by disability (them). These walls are only strengthened by notions of hegemony and embraced by technical information websites in their refusal to acknowledge the voices of the ASD community; thus, those with lived experiential information use visual rhetoric to further stigmatize a categorizing brand upon the ASD community. By ignoring or failing to acknowledge the voices of the community, these websites unconsciously silence and *brand* those within these communities as deviant or other, a practice of silencing that results in the loss of individual identity and that reinforce the walls of separation. These walls are perpetuated by the rhetorical velocity of information presented from *experts* in contrast to *non-experts*. Thus, instead of perpetuating the rhetoric that those with disabilities should work to overcome and accommodate, technical communicators should (1) overcome prejudice and bias informed by historical foundations of power and sustained by contemporary digital rhetorics and (2) accommodate and value the diverse experiential knowledge of those within the ASD community in order to build new community literacies that work for the community in respectful and responsible ways.

To demonstrate this, I analyze two technical information web sites that are developed and published to educate the public about Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs). I chose to focus on technical information websites, as the internet continues to extend the reach of information to a global audience that goes beyond the (supposedly) intended audience of Western culture. With this potential for a more global audience, the stakes become much higher in terms of how technical communicators are representing the subjects of their work; representation of the ASD community shapes not only Western cultural perceptions, but potentially the perception and realities of the world. Now, I recognize that an analysis of two websites cannot be expected to represent every ASD technical information website on the internet, but I feel that the websites chosen represent a good starting point to open a much needed discussion concerning the need for technical communicators to be accountable for including the voices of the community they are composing about and to consider the impact of the words they choose, as stated by prominent disability studies scholar Melanie Yergeau, “nothing about us without us.” (2011).

This article will commence with a literature review that identifies the cultural studies frameworks applied to this article, the history of disability studies, and a brief discussion concerning the rhetoric of power. It will then move to a comparative rhetorical analysis of the textual content and visual imagery presented within each website. The analysis will include Grabill’s (2007) concepts of community literacy and the struggle for impacted communities to be recognized as a source of credible authority, Ridolfo and De Voss’s (2009) notions of rhetorical velocity, and Garland-Thomson’s (2002) visual rhetorics of disability and more specifically the *gaze*. These discussions will outline how hegemony impacts the dissemination of information regarded as *expert* medical or scientific in contrast to *non-expert* anecdotal evidence, and conclude with a call for educators, professionals, and scholars within the field of technical communication to place an emphasis on accountability for the representation and inclusion of all audiences.

Literature Review

Theoretical Frameworks for a Cultural Studies approach to Technical Communication

In 1998, Longo presented the technical communication community with a theoretical approach that she felt would help technical communication scholars more fully account for the ways that “struggles for knowledge legitimation...are influenced by [larger cultural] institutional, political, economic, and/or social relationships, pressures, and tensions;” the incorporation of a cultural studies framework (p. 61). She furthers this concept by stating that the “discourse (of cultural studies within technical communication) can be seen as participating in systems of knowledge and power, exploring why some knowledge is articulated and legitimated while other possible knowledge is marginalized or left silent” (p. 61). Slack, Miller, and Doak (2006) added to Longo’s position that, as authors, “technical communicators contribute to the process of articulating meaning, [and] whether they choose to or not, they must be able to analyze critically the ethical implications of the meanings they contribute to” (p. 43). Walters (2011) identifies the idea that the “how and why a technical communicator crafts a message is often as important as the message itself” (p. 3). Therefore, Walters is addressing the need for technical communicators to acknowledge and interrogate their own bias or subjectivities. These perspectives not only provide the evidence for applying a cultural studies lens to technical communication documents to interrogate the commonplace that they are objective, they also provide the exigency for educators, scholars, and professionals to emphasize and promote the need for technical communicators (composers) to not give priority to the privileged voices of experts but to acknowledge and collaborate with those within the autism community in order to build new community literacies that are both respectful and responsible.

As cultural studies within the field of technical communication expanded, a variety of sub-disciplines began take up this point of view. One such area that is of particular interest for this article addressed the area of disability studies. Wilson (2000) “describes how the lens of disability studies can be used within the technical writing course to critically examine the assumptions of scientific discourse” that speak to building audience awareness around the idea that even scientific discourse can be subjective and influenced by social constructs of normalcy; objectivity is only a perception, and not always a reality (p. 149). Palmeri (2006) draws specific connections to how the artifacts produced by technical communicators both “construct and are constructed by normalizing discourses and that the application of a disability studies lens to areas such as usability testing can be a source of critical insight and potential progression” (p. 49).

Additionally, Hunsinger (2009) identifies the drawbacks of employing a heuristic approach where there is a tendency to treat cultures as monolithic, as a single label or identity in which broad assumptions, usually termed stereotypes, are made about a specific cultural group. For example, those who have an ASD are categorized by the label and the stereotypical assumptions affiliated with it such as the inability to make personal social connections, the inability to make eye contact, the inability to speak, cognitive impairments, and the inability to live independently. Hunsinger goes on to discuss how these assumptions and stereotypes can shape the perceptions and representations of specific cultural groups to a global audience that extends past the Western audiences. This is a particularly important concept, as technical information web sites are becoming increasingly more accessible to global audiences. These concepts and ideas further the need to interrogate preconceptions of objectivity of scientific information and emphasize the

importance of analyzing the language and context to identify normalizing and marginalizing constructs.

This article will employ the aforementioned cultural studies frameworks as the foundation and guide for the comparative rhetorical analysis of the ASD technical information websites, as well as additional ones in other areas, to further the aforementioned position that technical communicators should themselves acknowledge and interrogate their own subjectivities to overcome prejudices of othering and work to perpetuate this acknowledgement and overcoming to the general public. Additionally, technical communicators should work to ensure that the voice and position of those within the community being discussed and/or represented are included in the construction of the content being produced. The additional areas, which will be discussed in greater detail during the website analysis sections, include Grabill's (2007) concepts of community literacy and the struggle for impacted communities to be recognized as a source of credible authority; Ridolfo and De Voss's (2009) notions of rhetorical velocity; and Garland-Thomson's (2002) visual rhetorics of disability and specifically the "gaze."

The intercultural perspective and possibilities

While the premise of this comparative rhetorical analysis of two national (US) technical information websites about ASD communities appears to fall outside of a truly intercultural analysis, I feel that there are valid intercultural communication connections that can be made. The analysis for this paper appears to fall directly into the category of intracultural communication, defined as "occurring between people from the same country, although they have distinct cultural backgrounds (i.e., in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, or ability)" (DeVoss, Jasken, & Hayden, 2002, p. 71). The term intercultural communication is defined as being "the considerations that need to be made in communications with people from other countries" (DeVoss et. al., p. 71). Additionally, there has been debate as to how valid and applicable a cultural studies framework is in attempting to address or consider a global audience. Therefore, by explicitly identifying the manner in which this paper considers and/or correlates to intercultural theoretical approaches from Beamer (1992), DeVoss et al. (2002), and Thatcher (2010), I hope to address these concerns.

As indicated earlier, as the increasing availability of technology in the form of the world-wide-web increases and broadens its reach around the globe, the more diverse audiences will have access to these technical information websites. These websites thus become a type of global text that sends very specific messages and perceptions about specific communities that are being referenced and/or discussed. Technical information websites about ASDs are no exception. Additionally, while the comparative analysis performed within this paper is limited to what many in the field of intercultural communication define as a "local cultural analysis approach" that places a primary focus on one culture, the Western US culture, the fruits (results) of this analysis can be used to further facilitate discussions that emphasize the importance of education and research into the area of intercultural communication as it relates to the field of technical communication (Thatcher 2010 p.2).

Firstly, in addressing or answering the question as to how an analysis based in a cultural studies framework for a *local* analysis can contribute to an intercultural communication discussion, my response is that it lays the groundwork for identifying the stigmatizing and marginalizing

stereotypes affiliated with a specific community/culture, the “emic (local-insider)” foundations (Thatcher, 2010, p. 12). Specifically, the analysis looks to provide frameworks and theories for technical communication professionals to incorporate into their composing practices that work at eliminating the possibility of perpetuating marginalizing and damaging stereotypes for represented communities, regardless of where those represented communities originate, whether locally or globally. Thus, the “emic (local-insider)” perspective provides the “qualifying details for an etic (outsider-universal) cross-cultural comparison” (Thatcher, 2010, p. 12-13).

While the *etic* cross-cultural comparison is not explicitly made within this analysis, the implications for not including the voice of the community being represented in the technical product are focused on. Whether a represented community (culture) is of a local or global nature is a moot point, when taking into consideration the larger universalizing concept that in order to accurately represent a community (culture) one must include the voice, perspective, values, and beliefs of that community (culture). Now, this may seem to be a very obvious statement, but as scholars such as Grabill (2007), Grabill & Simmons (1998), and Giles (2010) have identified, technical communicators have a history of privileging the voice of authority; whether that voice is based in medical/science as *experts* or other hierarchical forms of perceived power such as that of the Western cultural lens.

Thus, by first situating the conversation within a local context, technical communicators can look at how the application of a disability studies lens can provide a framework for initiating and facilitating the much needed discussions of self-interrogation (self reflection) of having a privileged cultural positioning, western cultural privilege presenting as a *normalized* and *ableist* cultural privilege. As stated in DeVoss et al. (2002), “because the U.S. is a cultural and economic global force, Americans tend to see intercultural situations through the lens of white, Protestant, middle-class, male values, these discussions can be difficult for students to accept or initiate” (p. 76). DeVoss et al. continues by stating that “when students recognize that this lens provides the foundation for *their* culture, they can begin to see the complicated nature of intercultural communication” (p. 77). Therefore, the *emic* (local) context can act as the bridge to the much needed *etic* (universal and global) discussions.

Additionally, Beamer’s (1992) “five levels of the Intercultural Learning Model” appear to coincide with the comparative rhetorical analysis points (findings) and recommendations made by this article (p. 291). See the below chart for a listing of the specific five levels of this learning model:

Beamer’s “Five Levels of the Intercultural Learning Model” (p. 291).
Acknowledging diversity
Organizing information according to stereotypes
Posing questions to challenge the stereotypes
Analyzing communication episodes
Generating “other culture” messages

This Intercultural Learning Model focuses on what Beamer identifies as “developing the ability to decode effectively signs that come from members of other cultures, and to encode messages

using signs that carry the encoder's intended meaning to members of other cultures" (p. 291). This process focuses on the traditional understanding of communication stemming from an encoder (sender) creating a message or content that also contains signs or "signals that can be sent consciously or unconsciously with the intended message and either enhance or obscure it," and is then decoded by a receiver. Overall, Beamer is emphasizing the idea that "culture is learnable," and that when an individual takes the time to perform intense research and analysis in areas such as locating/acknowledging difference and interrogating the stereotypes affiliated with the difference, one can learn to compose technical/professional products in a more ethical and responsible manner (p. 291).

This framework for learning is very comparable to the emic, cultural studies approach for this paper's comparative rhetorical analysis of technical information websites focused on educating the public on ASDs. This analysis looks to identify how specific marginalizing stereotypes are perpetuated within the textual content of these websites when technical communicators exclude the voice of those within the represented community as both an audience and a resource. Therefore, this comparative framework provides further evidence as to the validity and trajectory of this cultural studies framework in laying the groundwork for *etic* discussions of cross cultural or intercultural communication significance.

A History of Disability Studies

The historical foundations of the stigma of disability arose from Aristotle as "the idea that the norm has legitimated the exclusion of the disabled from 'human' society as 'abnormal' and 'monstrous'" (Wilson & Lewiecki-Wilson, 2001, p. 12). This conceptual idea was further understood by Rosemarie Garland Thomson, as implying that "the source of all otherness is the concept of a norm, a 'generic type,' against which all physical variation appears as different, derivative, inferior, and insufficient" (Wilson & Lewiecki-Wilson, 2001, p. 14), thus spurring the notion that any *disability* is really a difference from societal accepted norm for appearance or presentation and can include items of gender, race, ethnicity, etc. Additionally, Aristotle proceeded to dictate the social hierarchy positioning of those with disabilities on the lower ring, if not the lowest ring, emphasizing his ideology that "those born with disabilities are granted no right to material life at all and should be excluded through the act of expulsion." (Wilson & Lewiecki-Wilson, p. 14) Thus began the construction of both the economic and social walls of prejudice that society is still attempting to *chip at* today with legislation and the voice of activists.

Our social and cultural histories play a large part of developing our internal voices that are employed, unconsciously, in all matters and types of communicative practices, regardless of having the intent of being objective in scope or premise. Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson (2001) argue this point in the following statement:

Disability studies sets aside the *natural* and medical model of disability as accidental disease, trauma, deficit, or defect, using and extending the insights of feminist, postmodern, and postcolonial theory and social and rhetorical studies of science to analyze disability as a sociopolitical construct (p. 10).

This sentiment reflects the idea that how a person prepares or interprets information can be heavily influenced by their personal experience within specific communities. Thus “one always speaks, or in this case communicates, from a particular place in a social structure” (Wilson & Lewiecki-Wilson, 2001, p. 8).

The continuum or link between those deemed *abled* and *disabled* further propagates the fact that the concept of disability studies opens our minds to the possible needs or accommodations that await our future selves. This sentiment is furthered by Brueggemann’s statement that “if we all live long enough, we’ll all be disabled” (p. 369). The fact that the future is full of unknowns and that our human bodies are not impervious to trauma or harm stresses the fact that at any moment we could experience a life-changing event such as a car accident or the onset of a debilitating illness, or by simply experiencing first-hand the impact(s) of aging on the body and mind that could render us a member of the disabled community.

Discussions concerning the rhetoric of power

The power dynamic of whose voice is considered credible and the voice of reason is determined by the people participating in the conversation and their preconceived assumptions and experiences that make up the infrastructure that they carry with them into this discussion. However, society can often contribute to the creation of the hierarchy of power and the *roles* that each person should play as *expert* or *user/affected*; these roles are usually a reflection of what voice is deemed valuable and what voice should be in the listen mode. The power someone receives with titles such as doctor or engineer has included the ability to decide what information is maintained for historical purposes and what information is disseminated to the public sphere.

Essentially these professionals are performing what Foucault (1972) discusses as how the historical stance of the documents maintaining its history is changed. Furthering the fact that medical professionals are performing the following: “organizing the document, dividing it up, distributing it, ordering it, arranging it in levels, establishing series, distinguishing between what is relevant and what is not, discovering elements, defining unities, describing relations” (p.6). Stereotypic assumptions about experts and community members play their part in wreaking havoc on collaborative efforts amongst these groups to form a cohesive unit for change that is acceptable to all parties. “First, it was no longer the gaze of any observer, but that of a doctor supported and justified by an institution, that of a doctor endowed with the power of decision and interpretations” (Foucault, 1973, p. 89). Individuals with societal power, given by title or position of economic privilege, are expected to shape the viewpoints of society and thus are deemed the unequivocal experts. These assumptions lie in determining who has the authority and experience to speak out with valuable information to the decision making process.

Essentially, the medical community is trying to dictate the course of action and eventual end point of those individuals with ASDs. They are writing their own histories as to what people can and should expect and for the most part they are saying “we know best, we are the professionals.” This history and power of persuasion that they are writing and forcing by way of dissemination on certain informational websites re-enforces Foucault’s sentiment that, “history is one way in which a society recognizes and develops a mass of documentation with which it is inextricably linked” (1972, p. 7). For me, this means that the information posed on web sites like *Autism Speaks* that are backed by the majority of the medical community will be adopted by the

majority of society as *gospel* and thus spur additional websites, wikis, and other digital media that re-enforce this viewpoint. These websites appear to be “safeguarding the privilege of medicine to speak about and act upon the body, (those with an ASD), and be extension, to a particular vision of social order;” the perpetuation that is justified to *medicalize* those directly impacted by an ASD (Rocque, 2010, p. 3). What research and or assumptions need to change in order for a community to be heard and seen as valuable resources is the question that is constantly being asked by communities.

Scholars such as Grabill and Simmons (1998) and Giles (2010) have articulated the divide between the expert and the non-expert or what these scholars commonly refer to as stakeholders (the public). Giles identifies how “technical communication practices place the writer between two major audiences, the experts and the public” (p. 268). Writers, who should maintain a focus on trying to bridge the gap between these audiences in terms of vocabulary and knowledge base, are actually pushed to privilege the voices of the deemed authority, the experts of science/medicine. This process is in-line with what Grabill and Simmons (1998) refer to as the “technocratic approach that works to push the public into seeing the risk of a situation in a way that reflects the expert’s point of view.” This approach exemplifies the process of “one-way communication, in which the information flows from expert to the public/stakeholder without a reciprocation of information or input from the public/stakeholder” there is only one way of thinking, the expert way.

The two websites chosen for the comparative rhetorical analysis are *Autism Speaks*, a website that focuses on research with strong ties to the scientific community and *Generation Rescue*, a website that was developed by those within the ASD community. These websites were selected, as I wanted to not only compare and contrast the textual content and visual imagery of websites that either included or appeared to ignore the voice of those within the ASD community, but also identify how both of these websites fall victim to the same stereotypes that plague those directly or indirectly impacted by an ASD. Specifically, *Autism Speaks* was chosen as it is the most renowned ASD organization, known for its fundraising efforts towards scientific research, and it is at the top of the results for internet searches on ASDs. In contrast, *Generation Rescue* was chosen as it is the most renowned website created by those within the ASD community, specifically the indirectly impacted, and is affiliated with the celebrity of Jenny McCarthy, its spokeswoman. Additionally, when performing an internet search, *Generation Rescue* is usually the first website created by members of the ASD community to be displayed, albeit after several other scientifically focused ASD websites. Therefore, based on these characteristics, I felt that the selection of these particular ASD technical information websites is justified.

Introduction to the websites: First impressions of their rhetorics

Upon first glance at the two, national information websites about ASDs, *Autism Speaks* and *Generation Rescue*, there are vastly different first impressions. *Autism Speaks* contains imagery and text that connote negativity about ASDs and further marginalize the community as other. The navigation tabs of this website, displayed in the below Figure 1, use terms based in scientific origins like “science, what is autism, advocacy, and news” (*Autism Speaks*, 2005). These terms appear objective, as medically supported as there is even an image that links to a list of research grants that are supported by *Autism Speaks* to qualify and preface that the information presented is factual and objective data.

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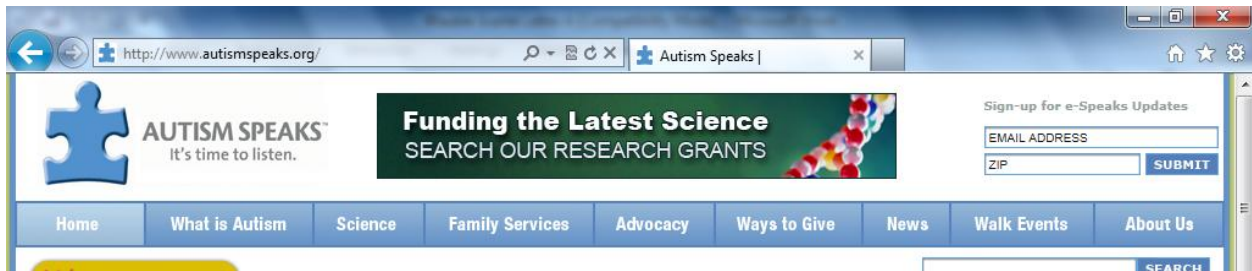


Figure 1. Screenshot of *Autism Speaks* Homepage.

As you scroll down the homepage, there is information concerning the fact that, to-date, research has not produced “breakthroughs” that families seeking treatment options and hope can benefit from (seen in the image below in Figure 2). This language could be taken up by audiences as an admission or confession that science is trying to find help in the form of answers and data supported therapies for success, but it has not been able to produce yet. Thus, the general public and those impacted by ASDs who are viewing this site might infer that regardless of what therapies or interventions they employ, there is little hope for being more than this label. This rhetoric causes the audience to accept the othering and identity of the label as the person and to donate money towards more research as a last ditch effort for possibility. While it is true that no definitive claims should be made that infer outcomes that are not proven or supported, it is the fact that this perspective also limits the ideas of potential and/or possibility that present a real danger here.

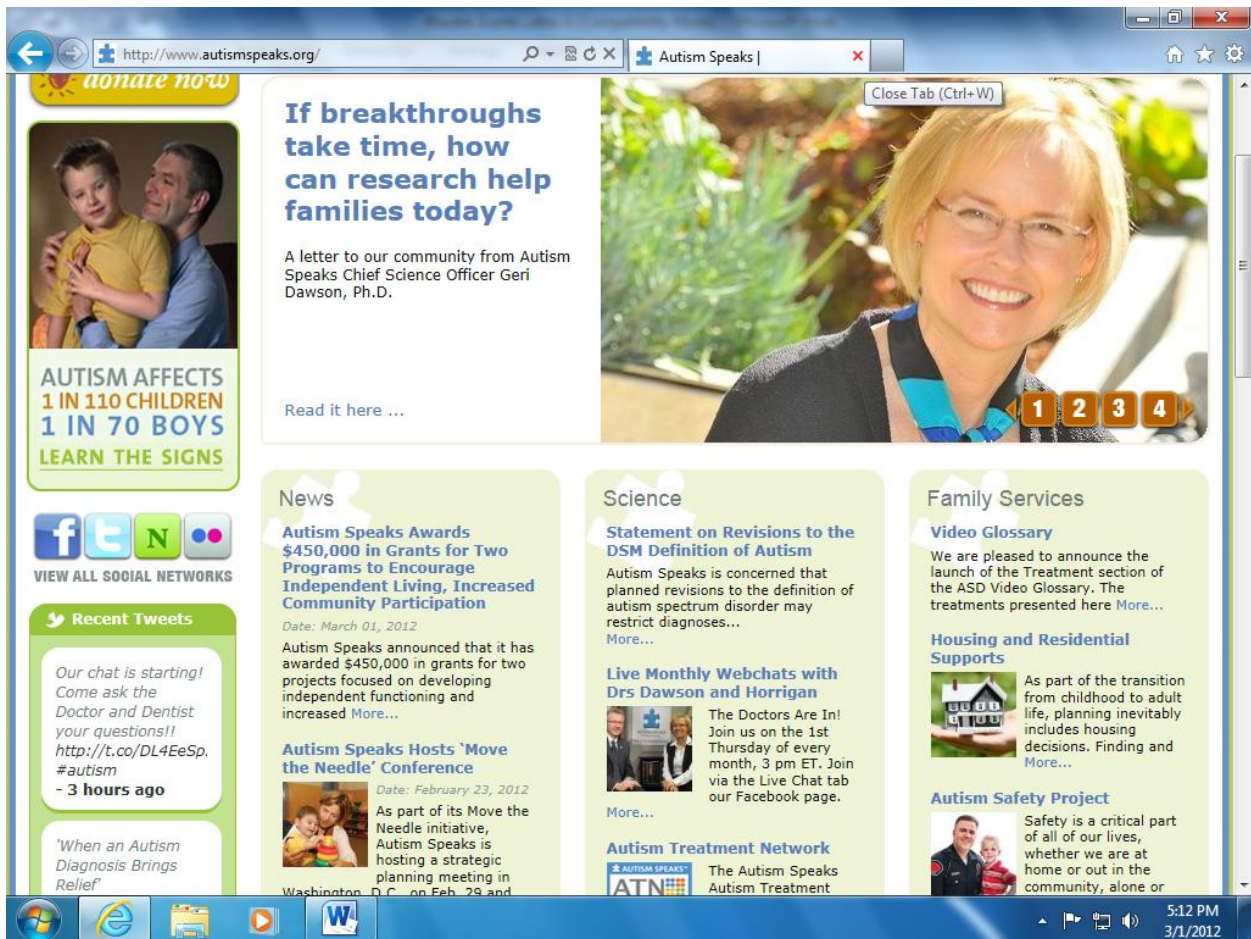


Figure 2. Screenshot of Autism Speaks.

The website then provides a cluster of information, under the News and Family Services columns, that speaks to the planning for living situations for those afflicted with an ASD; one speaks to the planning of housing decisions and the other discusses how they are seeking grants to “encourage independent living.” This choice of language risks the possibility of the audience inferring that this means that these individuals with ASDs are not capable of taking care of themselves and will need assistance for life.

The *Autism Speaks* website also appears to brand those in the Autism community, as never being able to escape or be seen as anything but the label; Autism (ASD) becomes their only identity. The vocabulary used within *Autism Speaks* implies that mourning is an appropriate response to a diagnosis:

It is painful to love so much, to want something so much, and not quite get it. You want your child to get better so much you may feel some of the stages commonly associated with grieving. Many parents must mourn some of the hopes and dreams they held for their child before they can move on (*Autism Speaks*, 2005 & 2012).

This sentiment further accentuates the label of being *different* or *other*. These words perpetuate the idea that once a person is labeled as having an ASD that they are never going to be accepted
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by (normal) society. It works to promote an image of those given a diagnosis of an ASD as a “disappointment to their families.” Parents are even told to expect a possibility of grieving for the loss of the life *they* wanted. There is no mention of the fact that many parents of so-called neurotypical children do not follow the life or plan that they wanted, as their child(ren) may have different ideas or goals for their future. These parents are also told to move on with accepting not the new possibilities or potential of their child, but to accept the stereotype(s) and the labeling of other as the only reality.

In another example from the website concerning the legal rights of those directly impacted by ASDs in terms of their education, *Autism Speaks* again employs language that connotes negative imagery and attempts to justify isolation and/or separation for being labeled different. In the first example, represented in Figure 3 below, it states that “your special needs child has the right to a free and appropriate education.” Here the uses of the words *special* and *appropriate* are troubling to me. This passage doesn’t address the fact that all children have the right to a free education, but emphasizes that even *special* children have this right; why continue to categorize and other this population? How does this distancing of this community benefit anyone?

Additionally, the term *appropriate* creates several questions such as, who decides what is appropriate and what encompasses an *appropriate* education? Another sentence states that “children with various disabilities, including autism, are entitled to early intervention services and special education.” What is rhetorically interesting about this particular sentence is the use of the phrase “special education” and not just education, as this implies that children with disabilities, including ASDs, are only entitled to a special (separate) education and not entitled to an education. This small phrase furthers the *them* versus *us* mentality, as according to this interpretation of the IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) legislation, separate should be considered equal. Individuals with an ASD, as well as their families and advocating support systems, should be content with the fact that they (those with an ASD) are allowed to share the same educational building space as *normal* (neurotypical) individuals. However, as history has shown, that separate does not mean or infer equality, as separation is another form of othering and marginalization.

A Child's Rights for Public Education

Your special needs child has the right to a free and appropriate education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which was first enacted in 1975 and most recently revised in 2004, mandates that each state provide all eligible children with a public education that meets their individual needs.

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) was most recently revised in 2004 (and, in fact, renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, but most people still refer to it as IDEA). The law mandates that the state provide all eligible children with a free and appropriate public education that meets their unique individual needs.

IDEA specifies that children with various disabilities, including autism, are entitled to early intervention services and special education. If your child has been diagnosed with a form of autism, the diagnosis is generally sufficient to gain access to the rights afforded by IDEA. The IDEA legislation has established an important role for parents in their children's education. You, as a parent, are entitled to be treated as an equal partner with the school district in deciding on an education plan for your child and his or her individual needs. This enables you to be a powerful advocate for your child. It also means that you must be an informed, active participant in planning and monitoring your child's unique program and legal rights.

Figure 3. Rights paragraph of *Autism Speaks*

In another example concerning legal rights and the education system, the definition of the term “least restrictive environment” (LRE) is explicated (Figure 4 below). Within this section it states that

While it may be true that seeking the least restrictive environment is beneficial for children with autism, it's important to consider whether or not an option such as inclusion is right for your child. It may or may not be more appropriate for your child to be placed in a special education program, in a school for children with special needs, or in a home instruction program (*Autism Speaks*, 2012).

This entire section could cause families and advocates to feel that seclusion and/or separate education is justified. The initial sentiment stating that “the least restrictive environment is beneficial for children with autism” is overshadowed by the possibility that this could be the wrong choice. Upon reading this segment, I found myself wondering *who* really benefits from the exclusion of children with autism from the least restrictive environment. Is it really beneficial for all children to be socialized and taught that when someone is different they shouldn't be included? How does this type of exclusion promote equality and negate prejudice? In a short answer, it doesn't.

What is "Least Restrictive Environment" (LRE)?

As specified in the IDEA, your child is also entitled to experience the "least restrictive environment." This means that your child should be placed in the environment in which he or she has the greatest possible opportunity to interact with children who do not have a disability and to participate in the general education curriculum. This is commonly referred to as mainstreaming or inclusion. In the general education setting, providing the least restrictive environment can sometimes be accomplished with accommodations, such as using a one-on-one aide who is trained to work with children with autism. While it may be true that seeking the least restrictive environment is beneficial for children with autism, it's important to consider whether or not an option such as inclusion is right for your child. It may or may not be more appropriate for your child to be placed in a special education program, in a school for children with special needs, or in a home instruction program.

Figure 4. LREs and exclusion in Autism Speaks

In contrast, *Generation Rescue* employs a more positive and inclusive approach to the ASD diagnosis. As presented below in Figure 5, the *Generation Rescue* website, this positivity is represented by the use of words such as recovery and resources as tabs for the viewer to open. These tabs of information propagate a possibility of hope for their loved one and push families to give this journey the bulk of their efforts and encourage individuals to never give up hope as to the future possibilities and opportunities for your child; countering what one is told upon receiving a diagnosis of an ASD from the medical community.



Figure 5. Generation Rescue website.

The content of the website includes discussions concerning treatment plans and checklists that keep track of what is working, not what is failing; and keeping the focus on the positives of the journey. This website lifts the brand of being forever labeled with a stigma and turns it around to imply that the *label* of an ASD is just that, a label. This label represents a challenge that you and your loved one face. This website reminds us that we all face challenges of some sort, but that these labels don't make up our whole identity. *Generation Rescue* is saying that an ASD is not your loved one's only identity; they have an ASD, the ASD is not who they are. As referenced by the *Generation Rescue* website, "hope and recovery are possible." The brand appears to lose its negative categorization power within the *Generation Rescue* website.

Now, I feel that it is also important to recognize the rhetorical issues with using the term *recovery*. While I applaud *Generation Rescue* for their focus on hope and positivity, I have to question the impact of the word *recovery* on those directly or indirectly impacted by an ASD. What does recovery mean? If one doesn't reach a recovery status is that a failure? It appears that the term recovery is meant to imply that there is hope for those directly impacted by an ASD to become *normal*; they can become like *us*. Therefore, *Generation Rescue* appears to be promoting the concept of an *ableist* culture that prioritizes and privileges those deemed *normal*, or in the case of ASDs neurotypical versus atypical. James Cherney (2011) identifies that an ableist culture builds upon Aristotle's concept that "normal is natural" (p. 6). Thus, the pursuit *Rhetoric, Professional Communication, and Globalization* December, 2012, Volume 3, Number 1, 110-139.

of *normal* should be considered a natural journey for those deemed other, as everyone with an ASD should be *cured*. What this term does not appear to embrace or propagate is the notion that those impacted directly by an ASD are individuals with something to offer: a new perspective. This term perpetuates the idea that those directly impacted by an ASD have *deficits* and this “emphasis on deficits overshadows the abilities that some researchers and people with autism themselves believe to be the result of their difference” (Rocque, 2010, p. 7). This term doesn’t allow for celebration of individuality of identity, an identity that includes autism.

In looking for comparable information concerning IDEA legislation or other education related resources, I found that most of the information could be placed into two categories: 1. Providing parents and advocates with information about IDEA legislation (“special education laws”) and how to navigate the IEP (Individual Education Plan) process that accompanies any identified disabilities or developmental issues for a school system to address and 2. Providing parent or advocate narratives concerning their own journey with navigating the educational system, usually taking the form of a “success” narrative. (Please see Figure 6 below of a “success” narrative about Mei and her journey to a mainstream classroom and award).

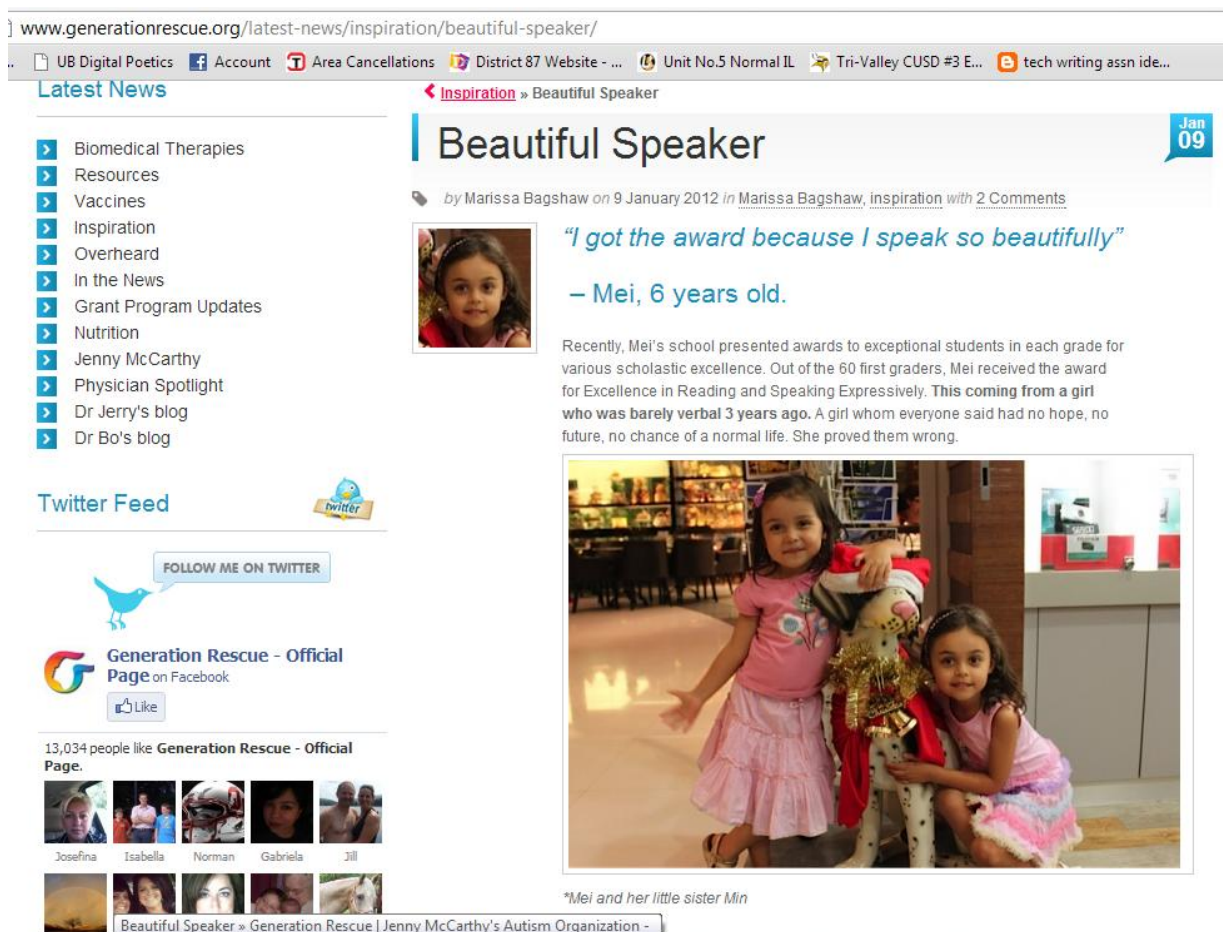


Figure 6. Rescue narrative on *Generation Rescue*.

While there is no specific discussion or interpretation of the IDEA legislation, it is implied that the *Generation Rescue* website wants to work to empower parents and advocates to not feel *Rhetoric, Professional Communication, and Globalization* December, 2012, Volume 3, Number 1, 110-139.

bullied by the system and to ensure that the rights of your child are not violated. However, by not having specific discussions of the IDEA legislation, outside of implicit reference in the *success* narrative, *Generation Rescue* falls short of their goal. Additionally, their use of the term *special education law* could construct the same stigma of separate is equal, if it is not contextualized in a more specific and different manner. Essentially, by providing implicit and extremely brief references to the IDEA legislation and how one can navigate and work towards more inclusive educational practices within a public school system, this website forces parents/advocates of those with an ASD to turn to websites like *Autism Speaks* for this information. Thus by engaging in a type of silence about this particular subject, they are reinforcing the voice and authority of the *Autism Speaks* website's interpretation of IDEA legislation.

What is not displayed or written about is just as silencing and marginalizing as the actual words on the web pages. In looking at both websites, I noticed that there is no place for accomplishments or success stories concerning people directly impacted by an ASD; only stories about *recovery*. No mention of Temple Grandin or other self-identifying individuals with an ASD; no scholars within the world of Academia like Melanie Yergeau; and no success stories or narratives about accomplishments. Thus, the web sites are conveying to the public that these situations are not possible, or even that they don't exist. Additionally, within the only interface exchange on each website (the Blog), *Autism Speaks* appears to only publish stories that are told from a standpoint that re-enforces the established narrative of the experts; the label and the stigmas are the identity of those with an ASD. Clearly, users don't feel the need to comment or take-up the conversation, as most posts receive no commentary. *Generation Rescue's* Blog does have stories from the ASD community about success, but again these successes are tied closely with the concept of *recovery* and do not provide success stories or accomplishments about people with ASDs, people who have names, lives, and families and are individuals that deserve to be seen as such.

Most importantly, both of these websites never talk directly to those with the ASD. While it is important to consider that these websites do a great deal of talking to or providing information to parents/advocates of children with ASDs that may or may not be of an age to understand or even read yet, there is also information about adolescents, teens and adults with ASDs. These older individuals with ASDs should be addressed and included within these websites, as their exclusion implies that they do not and cannot possess the literacy skills or mental capabilities to process the information from these websites. All of the textual content and information is geared towards the *abled* communities of the general public or those indirectly impacted by an ASD, the parents or advocates. This exclusion from the very websites meant to educate the public and ASD community about ASDs reinforces the stereotypes and stigma of the label of an ASD.

Use of visual rhetoric and perpetuation of gaze

For those in the visible or invisible community of disability, the power and influence of visual rhetoric for society is most evident in the propagation of prejudice. The gaze of individuals upon those with a visible or invisible disability is best described by Garland-Thomson as a *stare*. (Garland-Thomson, p. 56). This *stare* encompasses the categorization of those with disabilities as different, initiates the stigma of disability, and forever reminds those with disabilities of the challenges presented in the pursuit of societal acceptance and acknowledgement as *a person or*

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human being and not someone to pity or ostracize. The stare is something that reminds us of the prejudices against those who don't meet society's definition of the norm or standard. Today's imagery of those with disabilities, both visible and invisible, are no exception to the *staring* phenomenon as they promote images that, more often than not, evoke the emotional responses of predominantly wonder and sentiment in the ASD community.

A point of much distress concerning the use of visual rhetoric is how it distorts the idea of people with disabilities, like ASDs, wanting to be seen as people and be given societal equality as a form of justification for the *staring* by insinuating that those with disabilities want to be seen and recognized. While it is true that those with disabilities want to be seen and not hidden away, the idea is to be seen as equal and not as different or *special*. The principles of visual rhetoric, specifically wonder and sentiment, deployed on informational web sites, such as *Autism Speaks* and *Generation Rescue*, concerning Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) are used to influence not only society, but those impacted directly or indirectly by the ASD.

Wonder is often evidenced in the imagery of individuals who have, according to society, overcome their disability to achieve some type of success. Temple Grandin is a world-renown pioneer in the area of agricultural science. She also happens to have autism. Her innovation and brilliant designs for developing more humane and effective forms of meat processing have progressed this industry; however she is always *stared* at by society with a sense of wonder, not at her achievement in architectural design for this industry, but because she is a person with a disability (Autism) that was able to obtain independence and success, two items that counter the position of the scientifically supported rhetoric on websites like *Autism Speaks* that one should, as indicated earlier, "mourn the hopes and dreams for your child." However, she is still stigmatized by her disability and not seen as an *equal* to other professionals in her field.

This is evident in Wilson's discussion of Oliver Sack's interview with Temple Grandin, a well-known professional with autism. Wilson identifies how "Sacks does acknowledge the accomplishments of Grandin, but always with a sense of astonishment that serves to undermine Grandin's stature" (Wilson, 2000, p. 158). This point emphasizes how the stigma of a disability is never really eradicated. They are forever tainted by being one of *them*, on the other side of divide. She is not seen as an individual, but as the culmination of the label and the stereotypes that come along with it.

The employment of the sentimental gaze further brands those deemed different, due to the affiliation with a disability such as the ASD community, and further propagates the divide between a *them* versus *us* dichotomy. The sentimental gaze is defined by Garland-Thomson (2002) as the following:

An example of pathos that produces the sympathetic victim or helpless sufferer needing protection or succor and invoking pity, inspiration, and frequent contributions . . . In such appeals, impairment becomes the stigma of suffering, transforming disability into a project that morally enables a nondisabled rescuer. (p. 63)

Through the use of a sentimental gaze, society is stating that even though they pity those who face challenges unknown to them they are not willing to accept them on an *equal* level. The person with the disability, unless they conform or aesthetically manipulate themselves to infiltrate society in a manner that hides or masks their disability from the start, is never seen as being a member of *us* or the norm.

Stare of sentiment

The *stare of sentiment* is a gaze that can be both useful and dangerous to those with disabilities. This gaze can be useful when used by individuals to inspire society to donate to organizations that are researching various forms of disabilities to find cures or increase the hope for individuals to be able to actually live longer and fully live life to the fullest. Children with ASDs are usually depicted *stimming*, physical movements or mannerisms such as hand flapping, spinning uncontrollably, or using assisted forms of technology to communicate. These images, while effective fund-raising techniques, are still dangerous to society as the *stare of sentiment or pity* becomes a further cementing of the divide between *them* and *us*. For society, these images can be *damning* to the plight of these individuals to ever be seen as equals. For the parents of children with this disorder, these images can promote a sense of hopelessness for their child's future and cause them to give up on therapies or interventions; the power of visual rhetoric is a knife that can cut both ways in terms of influential power.

ASD support group websites are ones that most people would assume to utilize a focus of hope and opportunity in the application of visual rhetoric; however for most of these websites, that is not the case. Websites like *Autism Speaks* (as displayed in its homepage below in Figure 7 and Figure 8), apply the rhetoric of *sentiment* in that they depict individuals as other or different; they are using assistive technologies, not fully engaging people by not making eye contact, showing a lack of emotional response to hugs or other forms of positive stimuli, and may also show behavioral issues of tantrums and or having to be restrained. These images create a sense of pity or sentiment within the public; thus, these images may be dangerous as they may influence or further perpetuate the stereotypes of the disorder.



Figure 7. Screenshot from homepage of Autism Speaks



Figure 8. Homepage of *Autism Speaks*.

The *stare of sentiment* is a gaze that can be perceived as useful by organizations when being used to inspire society to donate money towards research aimed at helping, assisting, or curing those with a disease or disability. These images, while effective fund-raising techniques, are still dangerous to society as the *stare of sentiment or pity* becomes a further cementing of the divide between *them* and *us*. For society, these images can be *damning* to the plight of these individuals to ever be seen as equals. The power of visual rhetoric is a knife that can cut both ways in terms of influential power.

Informational web sites like *Generation Rescue* depicted below in Figure 8, provide images of children and adults in ways that reflect age appropriate and societal appropriate images. The images used for this site demonstrate kids, just being kids by playing or smiling. They show families embracing, showing emotional connections, as well as provide images of adults with ASDs in thoughtful and appropriate poses. I use the word *appropriate* to signify that the individuals (adults as well as children) within the images or vides of this web site portray images that people would see posted to Facebook, blogs, photo albums or any other familial display of everyday events or occasions. These images don't appear to say, "I have a disability" or that "I am different, stare at me." They are pictures of real people engaged in everyday activities, thus promoting the concept of positive visual images of a marginalized group; these images could be of anyone, with or without a diagnosis of an ASD. These images could influence society to see these individuals as people with unique perspectives and skills to offer to society and not just as *Autistic people*. These people have names, lives, and families and are individuals; they deserve to be seen as such.

Smyser-Fauble: The new scarlet letter A: An exploration of the power of online informational websites to influence and *brand* those impacted by autism spectrum disorders

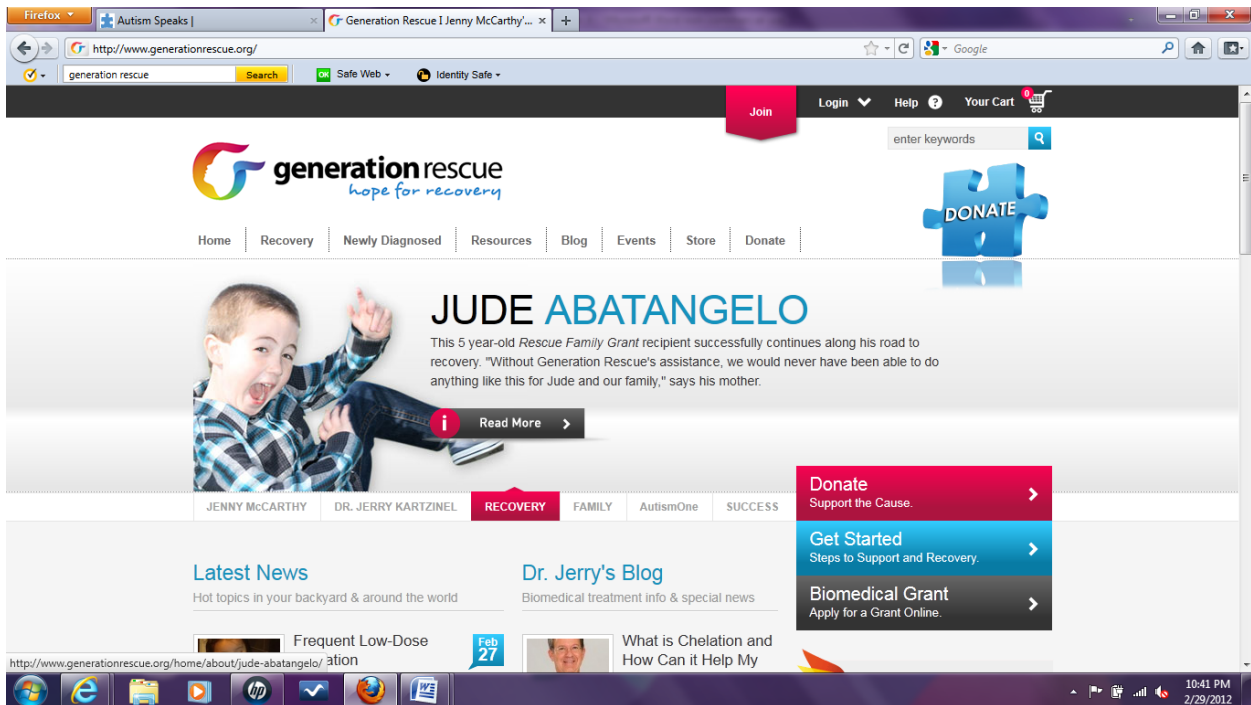


Figure 8. Screenshot of *Generation Rescue*.

A common theme that is utilized on both websites is the image of the puzzle piece. It is displayed in the above image from *Generation Rescue* with the word “donate” written on it and below in Figure 9 from the *Autism Speaks* website. There appears to be a strong affiliation with the image of a puzzle, whether one piece or many, that is directly tied to the world of ASDs. It appears as a mainstay on advocate merchandise such as ribbons, t-shirts or jewelry. What is rhetorically interesting is what the puzzle imagery appears to imply, which is that those with an ASD are a puzzle that needs to be solved; once solved they can be *cured*. This idea becomes extremely problematic as it furthers the idea that people with an ASD are only identified by their ASD; the ASD takes priority as the most prominent feature, a feature that needs to be fixed, a puzzle that needs to be put back together.

As someone that is indirectly impacted by an ASD, I must say that the idea of the puzzle is both frustrating, for the reasons stated in the earlier paragraph, and interesting. I find the fact that both of these websites use a single puzzle piece as a distinct or prominent image on their website intriguing, as I feel that it should reflect the idea of a single viewpoint: The public only sees a piece of the person with an ASD, as they only see the ASD and not the individual. However as stated earlier, all too often, if not always, it is reflective of society’s need to put their own puzzle together, as they see a person with an ASD as a puzzle waiting to be solved. With this perspective, they are missing out on the big picture. They are assuming that the label of an ASD, this one piece, is that person’s whole identity; or I should say that they unconsciously make it the label of the whole identity. It is important to note that while I see the irony in the use of this imagery, as a pushback to society, it is not the message that most take away from this imagery. The majority sees autism as a puzzle to be solved.



Figure 9. Puzzle imagery in Autism Speaks.

The use of visual rhetoric in the depiction of those impacted with disabilities has been a powerful tool of influence on society expectations. These forms of visual rhetoric, more often than not, are used to further the prejudices of the past about those with disabilities as being different; particularly in the community of those impacted by ASDs. The *stare* of society further categorizes those individuals with disability as different and as a spectacle that should only invoke the emotion of wonder and/or sentiment (pity). These emotions have been reinforced by the use of visual rhetoric principles in advertising campaigns, web sites, movies, and other forms of media to society as being accepted and just categorization. Any and all use of visual imagery, especially in the form of technical communication information web sites, should always employ strategies that work to perpetuate notions of inclusion within society and not further denigrate the population that they are representing.

Rhetoric of community literacy

The struggle by the community, deemed *non-experts*, to have their voices not only heard, but acknowledged and received as a resource is one that entails a new understanding and appreciation for community literacies and research. This struggle or frustration stems from items including the challenge of being heard and recognized for *embodied life experience*, the deciphering of medical or scientific information that was created for them as the end-user/recipient, to feeling trust with those in the position of power. A rather large obstacle that faces the community in its endeavor to be heard and recognized as a credible resource is the lack of socially accepted positions of power and *expertise* that are bestowed on individuals through achievement of titles, such as doctor or lawyer. Society's social construction of authority is shaped by the rhetoric founded in the commonplace that all data presented by or supported by medical or scientific community is the only information that is credible and/or relevant.

Grabill (2007) furthers this notion by stating the following:

When citizens find themselves in a situation in which they must challenge a powerful understanding of who they are, what they are capable of, or the utility and value of the physical space they inhabit, they find themselves at a moment that is ambivalently rhetorical. They find themselves confronting audiences that understand knowledge to be produced by individuals and organizations of

expertise, but who do not understand the production of knowledge to entail rhetoric (p. 14).

Therefore, the tacit knowledge and experience of individuals actually affected by a particular subject are deemed anecdotal or entertaining, but not necessarily informative or factual interpretations of a situation.

From personal experience as a mother sifting through countless websites to obtain public information on ASDs for treatments and up-to-date research information, I can honestly say that the voices of experts are seen as the dominating authority and/or the *voice of scientific reason*. While the voices of parents discussing their own personal experience and successes with treatments on this journey are seen as anecdotal speculation and given little to no *real* credibility. For example, the use of *biomedical treatments*, which are treatments that are based in holistic concepts, are strongly affiliated with the label of being anecdotal treatments that are only voiced by the experiential community (ASD parents/families) and are, thereby, only highlighted or mentioned by websites created by or affiliated with experiential community groups. It is important to note here that biomedical interventions include dietary interventions such as eating organic foods or removing high allergenic food groups such as dairy and gluten products, and supplemental strategies that look at ensuring a person receives needed vitamins/minerals and that promote natural forms of detoxification.

This type of information doesn't promote experimental drug therapy or procedures, as they focus on lifestyle changes and promote making healthier choices, so I was surprised by the fact that it was difficult, sometimes impossible, to find biomedical treatment information on a scientifically credible or supported web site such as *Autism Speaks*. Additionally, I find it more interesting that the medical community doesn't try to stop families from enforcing a vegan lifestyle or religion based diets on their children; they just say that they need to ensure that their family gets their full nutritional needs. If that concept is a part of the biomedical approach, to ensure those with ASDs get their nutrition from organic sources, why is it being treated differently?

Scientific communities, for the most part, do not support or acknowledge anecdotal accounts of success through biomedical treatments for ASDs; therefore, they do not provide much, if any, information on these subjects. Doctors and medical professionals cling to what they perceive as scientifically supported data, a position that reinforces the notion that a *cure* is "not possible" and that *adaptive structures* geared at helping established caregivers (parents/legal guardians) provide a lifetime of care and oversight are all that can be hoped for. From this type of experience I personally felt the struggle for the *community of the affected* to have their experience and tacit knowledge recognized as credible, a result of *them versus us* mentality. For this particular example, the *them* are the parents and select medical professionals believing in the holistic and biomedical interventions, the *community representatives*, and the *us* being the rest of the scientific community who believe that holistic and biomedical interventions are not effective or useful due to a lack of qualified studies or data collection. This notion was interesting to me as the only two treatments identified as being scientifically proven on the *Autism Speaks* website are ABA (Applied Behavior Analysis) or ESDM (Early Start Denver Model), but that didn't stop the website from promoting other therapeutic interventions that were not biomedical in nature.

Autism Speaks continued to promote this ideology about therapies/treatments on their “Treatment” page in 2011 that was later removed. Previously, this page identified and discussed a category for biological and medical conditions/treatments that was almost always accompanied by a phrase or statement indicating that these methods are not scientifically proven and could be harmful. They stressed the concepts of being wary of these “not scientifically supported treatments” and, therefore, establish the emphasis that this information is irrational and appeared to discredit any source of anecdotal support or evidence to the contrary. Then, when I went back to this website in 2012, the content about biomedical (biological and medical conditions/treatments) had been removed; by not acknowledging this concept, they potentially eliminate any possibility for this data to have credibility or perceived factual value. The voice of the experienced parent(s) is deemed invaluable and untrue, as they are the ones to relay this type of anecdotal evidence.

These websites promote feelings of negativity when they tell parents or families to accept that their child’s possibility of reaching a status of being cured is extremely rare and that most of the time is only attained per a misdiagnosis of the child with Autism, implying that those who really have a disorder affiliated with a lesser impairment such as ADD or ADHD are the only ones to achieve possibility, and those who really have an ASD are viewed as having almost no possibility (*Autism Speaks*, 2005). Recent updates (2012) to the website, indicate that there is a “rare possibility that with intensive early intervention a small group of individuals may lose the diagnosis of an ASD,” but they still reference the belief that most who “recover” are initially misdiagnosed with an ASD (*Autism Speaks*, 2012). Diehl, Wolf, Herlihy, & Moller (2011) bridge Lewiecki-Wilson’s concepts of less stigma and lower end of disability with their statement that “making one subgroup of a disability *less stigmatized* runs the danger of only highlighting the stigma in the *lower* end of the disability” (p. 2). This type of communication furthers the identity of this community as *unfixable* and forever deviant to the notion of *normal*, as most of the communication submitted by medical professionals reflects and reaffirms this type of categorization of those impacted by ASDs.

Additionally, parents, whose emotions are already in a state of shock and despair, are pushed to the brink and given no reason to look further. As indicated earlier, the terms *recovery* and *cure* by themselves can bring about a whole set of rhetorical concerns about the need to be fixed and *normal*, but the bigger issue at hand is the fact that hope and possibility are being limited, if not eliminated from the lives of those with an ASD. Those parents who are new to the ASD issue may get lost in the negative outcomes and lose hope. This could result in someone doing nothing for the person with an ASD and, therefore, not giving the person a chance to succeed or become more than the stigma or stereotypes affiliated with the label of an ASD. This type of circulation is not what the experts are striving for, hopefully not anyway, but it is the interpretation of many families looking for hope and answers concerning ASD from the recommended scientifically supported web sites.

Generation Rescue, on the other hand, embraces the experiential knowledge and journeys of ASD community members. They promote possible treatments, including biomedical interventions as being theoretically proven by method of accumulation of data and self-reporting statistics. They discuss other methods of intervention such as speech, occupational, and behavioral therapy interventions. Additionally, they identify that “in order to give your loved

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one the highest probability of recovery you need to incorporate multiple approaches and combinations of interventions” (2010). As stated earlier, the use of the term *recover* can be problematic in that it promotes the idea of needing to be fixed; I like to think that what they are really saying is that parents/advocates are ensuring the empowerment of individuals with ASDs by providing them with the right supports and interventions to ensure their voices are heard. They also indicate, in agreement with *Autism Speaks*, that “every child is different and needs to have interventions and approaches that are tailored to their specific needs” (2010). They do not dictate what should be expected or what is possible, as they simply provide the options for families to consider on their path to recovery for their loved one(s) and allow each family to decide what the best course of action is; they just present *all* the options in a manner that provides authority/voice to anecdotal evidence from the experiential community. “For all information’s independence and extent, it is people, in their communities, organizations, and institutions, who ultimately decide what it all means and why it matters” (Grabill, 2007, p. 24).

Communities appear to have been plagued with the *burden of proof* to be included at the table as an equal contributor to these discussions. Discussions that are shaped by experts, who are defining what is even termed *proof*. What both communities are not taking into account is that “medical certainty is based not on the completely observed individuality but on the completely scanned multiplicity of individual fact” (Foucault, 1973, p.101). This implies that experiential data should be considered as the past medical history of theorizing first started with an inclination or notion of an individual by scanning their possible avenues for change. Nothing is certain, at least not at first. Proof takes time to establish and requires the initial acknowledgement of possibility, which is the major obstacle here. Those in the position of power do not want to recognize the theory of biomedical treatment as it arose from a *non-expert*; they can’t see past the labels to reap the benefits of collaborative efforts. Inclusion of information, respectful discussion, acknowledgement of differences in experience, and true collaboration are the key to developing a process of community literacy and research that can be effective for all parties involved.

Impacts of rhetorical velocity

Some of the most *damning* aspect of web sites like *Autism Speaks* that propagate the further discrimination and branding of the ASD community, is that others in society will use the information from this web site in constructing current and future informational content. *Rhetorical velocity* is “a strategic approach to composing for rhetorical delivery” (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009). Essentially, rhetorical velocity is the potential for any composition or informational content to be taken up by another individual or group, at a specific time and space, and while it may present in a different format, it yields the same results, in this case perpetuating a stigma and/or categorization of marginalized other.

Websites like *Autism Speaks* work to re-enforce society’s viewpoint that those with an ASD are not capable of being able to attend to *normal society*. Anyone reading this information and desiring to create their own information web site or report on this information could very well believe that this was 100% factual information and create more digital forms of communication, reaching a massive national and possibly global audience, which would further emote the negativity and branding of those within the ASD community as being “not worth the efforts or financial backing of society” as these supports wouldn’t help anyway. Additionally, families of

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those with ASDs could feel the pressure from society to stop using government and or assistance to cover the costs of therapies when their child will only end up dependent on society anyway. *Autism Speaks* makes the quest for independence and recovery seems to be a farfetched dream in statements like “You may have heard about children who have recovered from autism. Experts disagree about whether or not this is possible” (*Autism Speaks*, 2005). The potential harm that this type of information has on these web sites alone is extremely high, but when you also consider the possibility that others will take up this information to present in various different venues or presentations it is downright dangerous and scary.

Conclusion

Instead of following the more socially accepted reactions to those with disabilities that are embodied in terms such as the *rhetoric of sentiment* (pity that assures someone of their own good fortune) or *wonder* (a sense of awe that is solely based on the individual’s ability to achieve something by triumphing over tragedy), I posit that the general public needs to perform individual, internal reflection of the rhetoric of overcoming (Jung, 2007, p. 165) I use the term *rhetoric of overcoming* to establish the notion that it is *society*, the public in general, that needs to be charged with the ability to overcome their prejudice and exclusionary tactics aimed at those within the marginalized community of disabilities. The concept of overcoming is all too often employed as an expectation of those with disabilities to overcome their challenges and conform or assimilate to socially constructed definitions of *normal*.

Throughout my research, it became apparent that the fear of society at being faced with the vulnerability of their race, in the form of disability, and the fear of being a social outcast or pariah for embracing those with disabilities as equals is at the heart and foundation of the erected wall of prejudice. This wall has a long, strong historical foundation that will not be easy to eradicate. And fear that is based in the realm of a sociopolitical nature is one that takes much time and effort to overcome. Thus, I suggest that in order for society to move forward, they must first acknowledge their historical formations of prejudice, and in fact that they still have forms of prejudice. Though this may seem to be a small and insignificant step, it will be the hardest for society to make, as historically we are blinded by the expectation that prejudice is non-existent. Women have equal rights, right? Racism no longer exists, right? Those with disabilities, are not still facing discrimination, right? Assumptions, like these are the ones that society has to overcome to fully embrace action for change through communication, particularly in the area of technical communication.

Informational web sites such as *Generation Rescue* can provide much insight into the rhetoric of overcoming for society, as well as to the technical communicators creating similar products, as they are the life-line link to information about the ASD community. Shaping web sites to reflect a more positive and hopeful future prospect for those with an ASD, like *Generation Rescue*, will in turn shape the opinions of the masses to see them as individuals and not just categorically referred to by their disorder. Additionally, when technical communication accurately relays current scientific data in a more positive light that focuses on possibility, while addressing the current realities of facing unknowns, they negate the possibility of further marginalizing the community they represents; they also negate the possibility of appearing to promote notions of hopelessness. A focus on positivity and possibility could also result in viewers being more open to seeing the potential of these individuals and could create anticipation as to what they could

offer, albeit sometimes through varied forms of communication. Additionally, it will be extremely important, if not crucial, to include the voices of those with an ASD in the development of the websites, as well as to ensure that they are addressed as an intended audience. This would ensure that a more accurate representation of individuals with ASDs is constructed, and reduce, if not eliminate, the tendency to connote marginalizing stereotypes. Technical communicators can focus on the fact that these individuals still have a voice and things to say; things that need to be heard, but may be presented in alternative communication forms. The brand of an ASD, today's version of the scarlet letter A, would not dictate who these individuals are, as they could use their own voices and personality to develop that identity.

As for the family brand, as society becomes educated on the possibility of hope and developing ways to communicate and interact with these individuals and overcomes their own apprehensions and prejudices about those directly impacted by an ASD, the stigma felt by families will disappear. However, the journey of these pioneering members of the ASD community, both the directly and indirectly impacted, who fight for those with an ASD to be seen, heard and appreciated, will never and should never be forgotten, not by society or by the individuals themselves. This memory and history will be the only thing that will assure that this branding and labeling doesn't happen to future generations, regardless of their ability or disability. The new scarlet letter A should not be a stigma of shame and other; it should be a symbol of possibility and new perspectives to be heard and appreciated.

She had returned, therefore, and resumed, - of her own free will, for not the sternest magistrate of that iron period would have imposed it, - resumed the symbol of which we have related so dark a tale. Never afterwards did it quit her bosom. But, in the lapse of the toilsome, thoughtful, and self-devoted years that made up Hester's life, the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, and became at type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too. And, as Hester Prynne had no selfish ends, nor lived in any measure for her own profit or enjoyment, people brought all their sorrows and perplexities, and besought her counsel, as one who had herself gone through a mighty trouble (Hawthorne, 2003, p. 215).

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