

# A Double-Edged Sword: Social Media as a Tool of Online Disinhibition Regarding American Sign Language and Deaf Cultural Experience Marginalization, and as a Tool of Cultural and Linguistic Exposure

Social Media + Society  
January-March 2016: 1–9  
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/2056305115624529  
sms.sagepub.com  


**K. Crom Saunders**

## Abstract

Social media has become a venue for social awareness and change through forum discussions and exchange of viewpoints and information. The rate at which awareness and cultural understanding regarding specific issues has not been quantified, but examining awareness about issues relevant to American Sign Language (ASL) and American Deaf culture indicates that progress in increasing awareness and cultural understanding via social media faces greater friction and less progress compared to issues relevant to other causes and communities, such as feminism, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community, or people of color. The research included in this article examines online disinhibition, cyberbullying, and audism as it appears in the real world and online, advocacy for and against Deafness as a cultural identity, and a history of how Deaf people are represented in different forms of media, including social media. The research itself is also examined in terms of who conducts the research. The few incidents of social media serving the Deaf community in a more positive manner are also examined. This is to provide contrast to determine which factors may contribute to greater progress in fostering greater awareness of Deaf cultural issues without the seemingly constant presence of resistance and lack of empathy for the Deaf community's perspectives on ASL and Deaf culture.

## Keywords

Deaf culture, American Sign Language, social media, online disinhibition, social change

The separate fields of Internet studies and Deaf Studies share a common timeline: Both began to develop decades before public awareness of these fields became widespread enough to move beyond research and journals to courses and even degrees in these two areas of study. But both fields only really began to develop and expand rapidly after the arrival of the 21st century, with the amount and variety of research increasing at an exponential rate.

Eventually, these two fields would overlap, more than once, as people studying disabilities noticed the relevance of the Internet (and eventually social media, as the Internet reached the age of Web 2.0<sup>1</sup>) within communities, including Deaf and Hard-of-hearing people, considered disabled by legal, social, cultural, physical, and medical (and numerous other categories) standards. Conversely, scholars in Deaf studies also took notice of how the Internet and social media interacted with the lives of Deaf people in society, academic environments, the workplace, and at home.

However, a clear dichotomy has become apparent. There is a substantial body of research on the accessibility of social media and the Internet, in terms of how easily and what kind of approximation of equal footing a deaf person might be able to access information or networking options online. There is also a substantial body of research on how the Deaf community has developed a cultural identity and how these identities are perceived and understood (or not) by the mainstream public; people who have limited or no ties to the Deaf community.

On the other hand, there is a lack, one might even say, a vacuum of research on how Deaf people and attitudes about

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Columbia College Chicago, USA

## Corresponding Author:

K. Crom Saunders, Department of American Sign Language, Columbia College Chicago, 33 East Congress Parkway, Suite 401, Chicago, IL 60605, USA.

Email: [cromsaunders@gmail.com](mailto:cromsaunders@gmail.com)



Deaf cultural identity are perceived via social media, in spite of there being a great deal of information to analyze: blogs/vlogs, interviews, articles, stories, threads, posts, and so forth. Granted, a significant percentage of this information is in American Sign Language (ASL), and therefore not easily accessible or understood by people not fluent in ASL. This appears to be an obstacle for scholars well established in the field of disability studies, such as Tom Shakespeare (2006), the author of *Disability Rights and Wrongs*, or Kate Ellis and Mike Kent (2011) in their book, *Disability and New Media*.

These authors demonstrate a working knowledge of the Deaf community, the technology the Deaf community has access to, including barriers to said access, and the cultural identity versus medical sociology viewpoints that has long been the core of the Deaf community's struggle for recognition and acceptance as a cultural/linguistic minority. However, this knowledge reaches a limit since none of these authors (and many others in the field of disability studies) are able to converse in, or access information sourced in sign language directly without relying upon interpreters. When one speaks from a position of authority within a field that studies a community of people, without being one of these community members, in essence an insider (e.g., being Deaf myself allows me a perspective much more aligned with the viewpoints of the Deaf community and experiences that can validate or invalidate observations from outside the community), then their authority may be brought under closer scrutiny. It is one thing to discuss and examine issues relevant to a community, another to put forth opinions or observations that may not incorporate the cultural lens through which members of said community see the world and interact with society and the environment.

The majority of these scholars, it should be noted, who have pursued research concerning the Deaf community and online technology within the field of Deaf Studies/disability studies, however, have devoted more attention to online accessibility, compared to the primary focus of this article: credibility. There are a great many examples online in social media regarding how the credibility of the Deaf community in terms of issues that impact the Deaf community, culture, language, identity, and social equality is perceived by the mainstream society of America. These attitudes, interactions, and outcomes will be discussed here—especially the trend of dismissing the Deaf community's collective experience as a valid perspective on issues concerning ASL and Deaf people.

On 27 January 2015, *The New York Daily News* published an article about the actress Catalina Sandino Moreno's role in the film "Medeas" which saw a limited release in the United States on 19 December 2014. In this article, Moreno discussed the challenges involved in portraying a deaf and mute character.<sup>2</sup> Soon after the article was posted on the Daily News website, a series of responses began to emerge expressing disappointment that the role had not been given to a Deaf actress. The collective gist of these responses was twofold: (1) A hearing actor could not accurately portray

either the experience of a Deaf person deaf from birth, or the fluency and fluidity of a native ASL user. (2) The term 'deaf and mute' to describe members of the Deaf communities (regardless of the character description in the film) was outdated and offensive.<sup>3</sup>

These responses, posted primarily via the social media platforms Twitter and Facebook, in turn received counter-responses. These counter-responses, varying from dismissive to spiteful, for the most part expressed the viewpoint that the Deaf community needed to back off. The definition of acting, after all, included the ability to portray characteristics of other people. The online discussion, primarily posted via the hashtag #deftalent, branched out into discussions of the background and knowledge necessary to accurately portray said characteristics of a deaf person, the inappropriate use of the term "deaf and mute" and like terms for the collective Deaf community, and the common lack of fluency in ASL by hearing actors who have portrayed deaf roles in the past.

The counter-responses continued to express scorn, ad hominem comments, and outright dismissal of the Deaf community's values and opinions, particularly, the accuracy and credibility of Deaf people's own experiences. This is far from an isolated incident, however. Recent news events going back to 2012, the realm of social media, and a survey of numerous websites, blogs, and online publications all indicate a strong trend; The exposé and discussion of incidents regarding cultural appropriation and audism specifically receiving backlash from the Deaf community, which in turn receives criticism from the general public, often targeting the Deaf community as lacking in knowledge and understanding of these situations.

Audism, defined by Tom Humphries in 1975, in an unpublished but widely circulated essay,<sup>4</sup> is "the notion that one is superior based on one's ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears; a system of advantage based on hearing ability." Bauman (2004) expanded on this definition to include the phonocentric tendencies of hearing people to base perception of one's humanity, and therefore social status, by "a metaphysical orientation that links human identity with speech."<sup>5</sup>

This causes a disadvantage for many members of the Deaf community; if they do not speak for themselves, or speak very well, their authority in a non-Deaf community societal and physical setting is diminished. Those who have never heard a Deaf person speak before, outside the realm of television and film, where a handful of Deaf actors with clear and intelligible speech are featured as representative of the entire community, often immediately find cause to question the equality of a person whose voice is not equal to their own.

Charlie Swinbourne (2012) wrote in his article published in 11 November 2012 edition of *The Guardian*, "It doesn't help that society lacks the vocabulary with which it can respectfully discuss deaf voices, so the way they are described often demeans them."<sup>6</sup> The voice of Deaf parties involved in matters under discussion, if heeded at all, is perceived as

only as good as the voice of the ASL-English interpreter(s) speaking for each of these said parties, or as the collective level of receptive ASL skills among the hearing people present.

This has contributed to an online atmosphere within American society, in which “members of our society have talked *about* people with disabilities, rather than talking *with* us [disabled persons]”<sup>7</sup> The Internet may be considered a “great equalizer” in terms of a user being able to post and share viewpoints without disclosing one’s full identity, namely, cultural identity as a Deaf person. However, when issues and situations arise that bring this identity to the forefront, then the pre-existing condition of diminished authority not only comes into play, but also encounters online disinhibition.

The fact that the Internet allows for a degree of anonymity has created a social space where people express themselves and behave toward each other very differently than they would in a physical, face-to-face setting. In effect, the impact of electronic (and social) media on social situations. Authority in the physical world is expressed by position, but also voice presence, mannerisms, and expression of experience and knowledge. Authority in cyberspace, in social media, is expressed in text via writing skills, and in video via many of the same criteria as the physical world. Both of these mediums, however, leave the Deaf community at a disadvantage since neither is conducive to ASL as an effective way of reaching the public.

Deaf people often develop fluency in ASL far beyond their written English skills, which may not allow for equivalent authority in text. As for video, we return to the problem of using either spoken English, which may only leave the Deaf person speaking open to criticism based on his or her speech skills. Should the Deaf person posting the video use ASL, this presents the problem that in spite of any degree of eloquence in ASL, only those fluent in ASL will understand the content of the video, again removing any possible authority in spoken English.

Cyberspace also has a tendency to neutralize hierarchies based on traditional structure of authority.<sup>8</sup> Internet users feel more freedom to say what they want, how they want, without fear of disapproval or reprisal. The nature of online correspondence also allows for the opportunity for a user to post a reply or opinion regarding an issue or discussion thread, and be done with it, without following up on any responses. This mindset and social space has led to a minimizing of authority. This, combined with the physical real-world experience of a deaf person’s oft-reduced authority and credibility, often presents a large disadvantage in cultural concerns regarding cultural appropriation of ASL, lack of respect for ASL, and a lack of acceptance of ASL as a valid language of equal status as English.

John Suler (2004) separates online disinhibition into two categories: benign disinhibition and toxic disinhibition. Benign disinhibition can allow for self-expression and

exploring new dimensions to one’s identity, which facilitates discussion of cultural identity. Toxic disinhibition, on the other hand, is often “a blind catharsis, a fruitless repetition compulsion,”<sup>9</sup> which clearly does not lead to an open and engaged discussion of cultural matters.

The toxic disinhibition apparent in the #deafTalented discussions from January 2015 until March 2015, while sometimes quite harsh, does not approach the vitriolic levels in the social media environment regarding the controversy of Tina and Paul Sirimarco’s “Signalong” YouTube videos. The Sirimarcos gained Internet fame after posting a YouTube video on 31 July 2014, in which Tina, a sign language interpreter, and her fiancé at the time, Paul Sirimarco, did a sign language version of “You’re the One I Want” from the musical “Grease,” recorded on their dashcam camera while driving.

The initial response from the Deaf community was relatively minimal even as the video went viral due to an overwhelmingly positive reaction from the majority of viewers. The popularity of signed music in the hearing, mainstream world is quite familiar to the Deaf community. Deaf people experience music on an individual basis; running the gamut from no interest whatsoever in anything musical to being immersed in music, even creating music as an artist. However, the concept of signing lyrics from songs is one that appeals to hearing people much more than the Deaf community. ASL is a visual language, so hearing people often embrace the idea of turning music into a visual display as a novelty and art form, whereas Deaf people have maintained that they have been aware of the beauty and artistic applications of a visual language for decades.

However, as the Sirimarcos’ video continued to gain popularity, Tina and Paul began to make appearances on television, and talked about raising funds to create more “signalong” videos to educate more people about ASL. The backlash from the Deaf Community grew, especially after the city of Los Angeles announced plans to award the couple for promoting ASL awareness with an award of recognition given by councilwoman Nury Martinez on 27 September 2014.

The Deaf and ASL communities (the latter including sign language interpreters and ASL students) felt that the amount of attention and recognition the Sirimarcos were receiving, to the point where Beyoncé linked a cover of “Halo” done by Tina to her own Facebook page via Twitter, was inappropriate, in light of two important facts.

First, that Tina was fairly skilled in ASL, but not fluent to the point where she might be artistically suited to translating lyrics into ASL clearly and accurately. In addition, her husband Paul was not fluent at all, and to those fluent in ASL, his attempts at signing lyrics were crude and difficult to understand. Second, there were so many other videos posted online created by artists both Deaf and hearing who were much more fluent. Specifically, an ASL interpretation of Pharrell Williams’ “Happy,” performed by Deaf children and adults posted on 13 August 2014 which got a mention in a

Times Magazine online post, was cited as an example much more deserving of recognition for promoting ASL.

These two arguments brought up by the Deaf community expounded on the concept of cultural appropriation in that many non-native users of ASL were gaining attention via social media by exploiting one very crucial factor: the lack of the mainstream public's ability to discern the difference between fluent ASL and poorly signed, even nonsensical, ASL. Anyone could post a video purporting to be signing something fluently, and any viewer who was not familiar with ASL would not know the difference. This is the downside of identity tourism, which Lisa Nakamura (2002) defines as "a superficial, reversible, recreational play at otherness" and "satisfied with an episodic experience as a racial minority."<sup>10</sup> Substitute "cultural/linguistic" for "racial" and the identity tourist's fascination with ASL as a novelty without understanding its role and importance in the Deaf community and cultural identity ideology is apparent.

This issue is not unique to American society, as demonstrated by Thamsanqa Jantjie's infamous impersonation of a sign language interpreter at Nelson Mandela's memorial service in Johannesburg, 10 December 2013, which brought to attention the very important concern of hiring practices that did not include an effective method of screening a sign language interpreter's fluency in signed language.

This issue of the inability of the mainstream society is to recognize either fluency or lack of fluency in ASL in fact has also been a discussion in social media more than once, especially in regard to people making a profit off this form of exploitation. Kristin Henson, the author of the book, *Super Smutty Signs with Kristin*, faced severe backlash from the Deaf community for her YouTube videos known collectively as "Dirty Signs with Kristin," when she announced that her book would be published. The contention that the Deaf community presented was that Henson herself was not fluent in ASL, nor were her translations conceptually correct; therefore, she was not qualified to create a book that purported to teach ASL signs for English phrases. The fact that Henson stood to make a profit from this book caused even more criticism from the Deaf community. Cultural appropriation and exploitation of the public's ignorance of ASL authenticity were often cited in postings via the social media platforms Twitter and Facebook.

The reaction to the Deaf community's criticism of the Sirimarcos (and Kristin Henson as well) was quick, strong, and often harsh. The amount of toxic disinhibition in discussion threads, on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms directed toward the Deaf community is overwhelming.<sup>11</sup> Counter-arguments often included sentiments such as that the Sirimarcos were just having fun, that at least they were trying, or that they had provided inspiration for learning ASL. However, one frequent, dominant counter-argument presented was this: that these members of the Deaf community (and ASL community) did not really know what ASL looked like, or how ASL could be used, and that they did not own the language anyway.

This bears further examination. A language primarily created by Deaf people, primarily used by Deaf people, taught by Deaf people, and studied by Deaf people (not exclusively, of course) is brought under claim by detractors that this language is an area of expertise in which Deaf people cannot be trusted or believed as authorities in the subject. In other words, Deaf people are not allowed credibility in terms of their own natural language.

Even taking into account that toxic disinhibition does not necessarily represent intellectual debate; there is one alarming constant that happens quite often in online debates. This constant is the fact that in a given discussion and/or debate regarding the appropriate and cultural use of ASL, public mainstream (and media) support quite often falls on the side of these being criticized for not respecting the language. This is troubling, especially for the Deaf community.

Even given that Suler's theory of toxic disinhibition predates the "Web 2.0" social media platforms, the term "cyberbullying" has the following definition as an entry in the Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary: "the act of harassing someone online by sending or posting mean messages, usually anonymously,"<sup>12</sup> which gives validity to the concept that hostile attitudes manifest often in social media in regard to online dialogue. Facebook is less anonymous, but Reddit, Tumblr, Instagram, and Twitter all allow their users to post using handles that do not reveal one's true name or identity if one sets up the user account in that manner. Negative attitudes and responses are well documented and easy to verify by scrutiny of any social media platform.

Cyberbullying is still a new concept, which has made its presence in discussion of social media and different kinds of hostile behavior in online correspondence and on social media platforms difficult to quantify, as acknowledged in the 2013 article, "Cyberbullying: A Review of the Literature," co-authored by Notar, Padgett, and Roden (2013).

This article points out that while the existence of cyberbullying is evident, especially in the age groups and social circles of children in primary and secondary education, the unique characteristics that constitute cyberbullying have been difficult to determine, since only about 26% of the comparisons between case studies of cyberbullying and case studies of traditional bullying show overlap in identifying characteristics, which leaves upward of 70% situational and behavioral indicators of bullying of a nature very different than traditional bullying.<sup>13</sup>

Given that social media is not limited to the social bubble of primary and secondary education students, but also the adult society beyond these age levels and social circles, it also stands to reason that cyberbullying would not be limited to just the traditional model of "picking on someone smaller (or different), but also include racism, sexism, and other forms of hostile intention and harassment towards groups seen as socially different." This is where online disinhibition also comes into play; people not given to public display of bullying behavior might take advantage of online anonymity

to engage in cyberbullying. Taking cyberbullying into account as an existing manifestation of the anonymity and complexity of interactions provided via Web 2.0 is an important part of the ongoing discussions regarding how this impacts dialogue about the Deaf community in public forums on social media platforms.

Yet again, these discussions often appear to have more or less equal support on both sides of the issue in question, with great exception of discussions regarding issues relevant to the Deaf community, where often there is greater support of these opposing the Deaf cultural viewpoint. The large number of discussion threads attached to stories, articles, videos, and posts that indicate this trend suggests that perhaps there is a form of audism that has a foothold in social media—perhaps best classified as *cyberaudism*. This would be defined as audist attitudes manifested through patterns associated with both cyberbullying and toxic disinhibition.<sup>14</sup> The cyberaudism approach in social media interactions repeatedly paints the Deaf community as victimizing themselves and creating trouble.

This, however, is not a new phenomenon. The stigma of the Deaf community as a community of “crybabies” goes as far back as an article published in the *Time Magazine* on 12 August 1991 issue as the cover story, “Busybodies and Crybabies: What’s Happening to the American Character?” This article mentions a contestant for the early rounds of a Miss America contest in California in March of 1991, who was Deaf. This contestant brought onstage a sign language interpreter for the question portion of the contest. The pageant claimed this was a violation of their policy of not allowing anyone onstage during this portion to assist in answering questions, despite the fact that the contestant was well within her legal rights under the Title III section of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).<sup>15</sup>

Given that the ADA was relatively new, having been passed into law in 1990, it is possible the article’s author (Birnbaum, 1991) was not aware of the contestant’s legal right to an interpreter for communication access. The author, however, included the contestant and her eventual lawsuit in the category of Americans designated “crybabies” given to suing over frivolous matters such as imagined civil rights and humiliation, out of a sense of entitlement.

While it is true that there have been lawsuits based upon a foundation of entitlement, the fact that the author focused upon the contestant’s alleged disregard of the pageant rules, rather than the issue of communication access is a significant issue. This issue has come up frequently in the 25 years since the ADA was signed into law, yet the Deaf person’s right to a sign language interpreter in a place of service or communication needs is still often denied as legitimate, challenged, or flat out refused. There is no shortage of articles citing cases where ASL interpreters for situations involving medical services, educational services, or other services were denied to Deaf clients/patients.

The idea that ASL is not the “civil, human, and linguistic right”<sup>16</sup> of Deaf Americans is one that has long been proposed by English advocates within the educational and medical fields which encourage spoken-English only speech training and educational settings for deaf people. Cochlear implants have been hailed and advertised as the equivalent to cure for hearing loss, and ASL has often been presented a language lacking in vocabulary and structure equivalent to English; indeed often referred to as “broken English.” The Modern Language Association (MLA) did not officially recognize ASL as a human language with full linguistic status until 1980, and sessions concerning the topic of ASL at the MLA conventions since the first special session on ASL in 1984 have been consistently under-attended, with numbers often at 20 or less attendees out of thousands each convention.<sup>17</sup>

These attitudes have carried over into the media and social media realms as well. The late 1990s and the early 2000s saw an increase in television show episodes featuring cochlear implants as a plot device (e.g., *House M.D.*, *Cold Case*, and *Law and Order: Criminal Intent*), often misrepresenting the cochlear implant as a device that allowed the Deaf patient being implanted to hear perfectly, immediately after surgery.<sup>18</sup>

YouTube and Facebook feature a number of short video clips showing emotional responses to the activation of a cochlear implant in either an adult or a child. These brief, 30-120 s videos show adults bursting into tears at “hearing their first sound” or the expression of wonder on a child/infant’s face as he or she “receives the gift of sound.”

This bias created by media and social media propaganda that cochlear implants are equivalent to a cure, that they will make a Deaf person fully hearing, and not at all in need of sign language for linguistic development has become so pervasive in our society that it even impacts the field of disability and Deaf studies.

The concept of cochlear implants as a fix for deafness has come up in publications, by scholars who have not investigated the science behind cochlear implants. Shakespeare (2006), for example, in his book, “Disability Rights and Wrongs” refers to cochlear implants as one of several “forms of cure,”<sup>19</sup> which indicates this same bias that cochlear implants cure deafness. Shakespeare (2006) then continues to address the Deaf community’s reaction to this bias from a cultural perspective, and then criticizes it as “internal contradictions in the Deaf approach.” He also continues, under the assumption that sign language and cochlear implants are mutually exclusive, another bias propounded by the medical profession and the media, going as far to include rhetoric used by the medical profession.<sup>20</sup> This, as mentioned in the introduction to this article, brings Shakespeare’s authority on the subject of Deaf Studies, or at least, this area of Deaf Studies, under scrutiny, since some of his opinions go counter to these of the Deaf community, and these opinions are based on a medical/impairment bias not thoroughly investigated on Shakespeare’s part.

Many scholars who deal with the sociolinguistic and cultural aspects of Deaf Studies, often those who are also “insiders” in the Deaf community, tend to point out the limitations of cochlear implant technology and also emphasize that sign language is still a crucial tool in language and cognitive development for implanted children.<sup>21</sup> A deaf child with an implant is still deaf at the end of the day, when the implant is turned off at bedtime, or removed for swimming, bathing, and many other activities. This research and scientific aspect of cochlear implantation is, however, often shunted aside by the mainstream society in favor of the more positive and normalized message in the videos posted online.

What these videos of these patients receiving the “miracle of sound” do not show is the months of training and rehabilitation to come, the different triumphs and failures that lay ahead for each individual. It is also worth pointing out that at the beginning of the year 2015, the current level of technology used in cochlear implants is designed for access to spoken language. All other sounds are secondary, which means an implanted person does not hear the world around them as a person with higher functioning natural hearing does. Nevertheless, the number of views of these videos is in the hundreds of thousands.<sup>22</sup>

Videos (and blogs/vlogs) which feature people giving testimonials on how their implant failed to meet expectations; how a botched implantation surgery ruined facial nerves; or a child throwing a tantrum because she does not want to wear her implant, on the other hand, barely garner hundreds of views. The notion that Deaf people should embrace technology that would make their lives more normal and easier is biased toward making communication efficient and effective in a spoken environment, while dismissing social, cultural, and psychological effects upon the Deaf community.<sup>23</sup> This social and cultural imbalance, therefore, is not constrained to the issue of hiring Deaf actors to portray deaf roles, or the question of who is best qualified to demonstrate the full scope of ASL as a language online, but to many other topics relevant to the Deaf and ASL communities.

Yet time and again, the collective voice of the mainstream hearing community not familiar with Deaf culture and ASL, in discussions of Deaf culture and ASL often supersedes that of the Deaf community. This does have roots in the history of American culture; those recognized by society and in the media as knowledgeable or expert in deafness and ASL have predominantly been persons who were not Deaf. Deaf characters in film and television have often been shown as unable to compensate for the lack of hearing and dependent upon hearing people for success and survival. In addition, the majority of discussions of the Deaf cultural experience and ASL have been in spoken and written English, not the language which allows the American Deaf individual to express oneself most naturally and eloquently. Glickman and Harvey (1996) acknowledge this in their book *Culturally Affirmative Psychotherapy* with the term “social irony,” addressing the motives and consequences of authorities that have formed

critical perspectives upon social problems, which are often different than what the authorities claim.<sup>24</sup> Glickman and Harvey (1996) cite Dr. Barbara Kannapell’s (1989) statement that respect of and fluency in ASL is critical to understand the Deaf cultural perspective.<sup>25</sup> Fortunately, discussion of the Deaf cultural experiences has slowly been changing to include more ASL content and context, but again, slowly. The Deaf community faces sheer numbers of opposing opinion as both a physical and linguistic minority.

Given that Deaf people face disadvantages in light of the bias toward English within the realm of social media, their viewpoints are easier to ignore or criticize. History seems positioned to repeat itself online. However, social media has proven a platform for social change and increased awareness of diversity and issues related to diversity. The individual’s capability for exposure to civic engagement opportunities and information from diverse sides of each issue of interest to the individual has increased exponentially, especially with the growing popularity of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.<sup>26</sup>

Gallaudet University, America’s only liberal arts university for the deaf and hard-of-hearing, began allowing hearing undergraduate students to attend in 2000, the sum of which currently makes up approximately 5% of each year’s enrollment.<sup>27</sup> Gallaudet University offers graduate and doctorate degrees to hearing students as well. Gallaudet University also has the distinction of being the first academic institution to publish a journal of Deaf Studies, titled “Deaf Studies Digital Journal,” in ASL, rather than English, with the reasoning that the best framework to discuss Deaf Studies issues would be via the cultural language of the Deaf community, giving ASL a slightly stronger level of credibility at least in academic circles, as a language equally valid as English.<sup>28</sup>

Enrollment in ASL courses across the nation, from middle school level to colleges and universities, has gone up 16% in the last decade alone, which may be in part credited to the popularity of the ABC television show, “Switched at Birth,” which has found a strong fan base in the age 12-19 demographic.<sup>29</sup> Credit may also be given to the increasing proliferation of ASL literature posted via YouTube, Vimeo, and other online video posting sites. ASL literature includes stories, poetry, and academic/social discussions that are presented in ASL.

Advocates within the Deaf and ASL communities have also taken advantage of user-friendly software that has made it easier to caption (in English text) and/or overlay voiceover audio tracks (in spoken English) onto videos that are presented in ASL, circumventing the language barrier for viewers not fluent in ASL.

All of these would seem to be encouraging indications of an increase in mainstream hearing members of society being exposed to at least introductory courses in conversational ASL and the fundamentals of Deaf culture. The more people in any given group that share the same information, accurate and authentic information, the less likely the information

will be misunderstood, discounted, or ignored. Cyberaudism still occurs if the Deaf and ASL communities identify an example of cultural appropriation or marginalization of the Deaf perspective via social media platforms, but the discussion becomes less one-sided. It does not hurt that Marlee Matlin, a well-known Deaf actress has a very active Twitter following. When Matlin chooses to make a Deaf issue a priority to advocate in her tweets, results occur.<sup>30</sup>

The ongoing #deafalient discussion indicates a shift in the depth and openness of discussing the Deaf community's concerns and viewpoints, concerning the statement made by Michael Ojeda, the director of "Avenged," another film that cast a hearing actress in the role of a deaf character. Ojeda stated in an interview on 10 March 2015 that he was relieved that he had not cast a deaf actress after all since he believed that a deaf actress could not engage in fight choreography effectively. "It really wouldn't have been logical to have a deaf girl playing the role because it was so action intensive; she would have got hurt."<sup>31</sup>

Jules Dameron (2015), one of the moderators of the #deafalient Facebook page, posted her own correspondence with Ojeda regarding his casting choice which led to numerous posts about the validity of Ojeda's decision. While there are many posts that fit the category of cyberaudism, there are also a great number of more tolerant and civil discussion threads. Social media platforms are not as anonymous since relationships formed in these platforms are less arbitrary compared to online news forums or blogs. Therefore while engaging in discussion with like-minded, homogenous groups, whether in agreement or in opposition to a specific viewpoint on a given issue, one also faces greater exposure to diverse, heterogeneous interaction, leading to greater civic participation. Greater civic participation leads to greater tolerance and improved deliberative processes in discussion of social issues.<sup>32</sup> Greater empathy develops when a society makes language considered hateful to a group socially unacceptable in any context. Greater empathy also develops when one takes away labels and looks at what is left.<sup>33</sup>

The upswing in ASL course enrollment does present the possibility that we as a society shall arrive at a point at which there are more non-Deaf ASL users in America than Deaf users. This creates the possibility that American society will return to the precedent of viewing those who are not Deaf as the experts on ASL. This may well close and perpetuate the cycle of hearing people exercising social irony (and audism) deciding what is best for the Deaf community. However, social media in America has proven to be a tool of social change, and also a platform for political and cultural movement, but primarily through means of English-based discourse. This allows non-ASL users the continued opportunity to gain crucial understanding and respect for the cultural Deaf perspective and exposure to ASL and the role ASL plays in the Deaf community, allowing the Deaf community far greater credibility in Deaf issues. It remains to be seen in what direction social media will guide the American Deaf

citizen's place in the strata of American culture and social equality ranking.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Notes

1. See Ellis and Kent (2011). Web 2.0 is summarized as Internet content that users can contribute to and develop through wikis, blogs, social networking, and file-sharing, without needing to know how to write code.
2. See Rivera (2015). The thread discussing this article on Facebook originated under the hashtag #deafalient on an event post. <https://www.facebook.com/DeafNightOut/posts/10152744269398215?pnref=story>
3. See Marschark (2007, p. 21) and Creighton (2004). Two oft-cited sources regarding the American Deaf community's viewpoint of the terms "hearing-impaired," "deaf-and-dumb," "deaf-mute." Creighton was the primary editor of the National Association of the Deaf's newspaper, the *NAD Broadcaster* in 2004. Marschark cites the 1991 joint statement of the World Federation of the Deaf and the International Federation of Hard of Hearing people rejecting the term "hearing-impaired" in favor of "deaf and hard of hearing." The United States is a member of the World Federation of the Deaf.
4. See Bauman (2004). Tom Humphries' unpublished essay, "Audism: The Making of a Word" is listed in the References for Bauman's essay.
5. Bauman (2004, p. 240) derived his findings from Jacques Derrida's observations on phonocentrism.
6. See Swinbourne (2012). Although the author of the article is British, and discusses situations concerning Deaf people in England, the Deaf experience is identical in America.
7. See Newell and Goggin (2003).
8. See Meyrowitz (1985).
9. See Suler (2004, p. 321). Suler lists six factors that contribute to toxic disinhibition, but the most relevant one is minimization of authority, which ties in with Bauman and Derrida's observations of a phonocentric society, manifested online in social media.
10. See Nakamura (2002, p. 78). Further indication of cultural tourism specific to ASL is also covered by Caroline Solomon and Jeffrey Archer (2014) in their article on ASL.
11. A great many of these hostile responses are ad hominem attacks on the English skills of Deaf people's posted responses, which reinforces the elevation of English above ASL even when the subject of discussion is ASL itself.
12. See Cyberbullying (2005).
13. See Notar, Padgett, and Roden (2013). These numbers come from tables based on cyberthreat statistics.
14. See Notar et al. (2013, p. 4). Reasons for and after effects of cyberbullying align with Suler's observations and the reactions in the Deaf community to the more extreme hostile reactions on social media threads. Also Michael Walrave and Wannes Heirman's (2001) essay on cyberbullying.

15. ADA Title III includes the regulations and policies to promote nondiscrimination in public accommodations and commercial facilities. Supart C Part 36, Section 303 has been updated since 1990 to include more specific language to clarify the criteria for a qualified interpreter as part of communication accommodation options. Situations such as the Miss America pageant may well have not been in violation of the ADA's specific language, only the general spirit of the law. The updates have come to reflect the spirit of the law more clearly with specific language.
16. The National Association of the Deaf, America's oldest nationwide advocacy group for Deaf rights drafted and sent a letter on 30 June 2010 addressing the 21st International Congress for the Education of the Deaf, asking the Congress to formally reject resolutions passed during the 2nd Congress which discouraged the use of sign language in educational programs worldwide. The 2nd Congress met in 1880, so these resolutions stood until their formal reversal in 2011, 131 years later (Scoggins, 2010).
17. See Bauman (1997).
18. The specific episodes for these shows are as follows: House Divided (Ep. 22) *House M.D.* (Lewis, Friedman, & Yaitanes, 2009), Andy in C Minor (Ep. 14) *Cold Case* (Harris & Szwarc, 2008), and Silencer (Ep. 18) *Law and Order: Criminal Intent* (O'Shea & White, 2007).
19. See Shakespeare (2006, p. 115). Cochlear implants are a form of technology designed to increase the brain's access to speech and a limited spectrum of other sounds. It does not give the implanted person a full range of hearing, nor does it allow the implanted person to independently comprehend and produce speech. Intensive training in speech comprehension and speech therapy is required over a lengthy period of time. Background sounds and music often remains distorted and difficult to discriminate aurally. The success rate of implantation as a surgical procedure also has not reached 100%. Therefore, not a cure at this time.
20. See Shakespeare (2006, p. 115). Said rhetoric includes terms such as "suffer," "sacrificing their best hope of communicating effectively with their own child," "improve the life chances (with an implant)," and "the maximum benefit of a cochlear implant comes when the child forgoes sign language."
21. Liben (1978, pp. 103-152), Bouvet (1989, p. 347), Delore, Robier, Bremond, Beutter, and Ployet (1999) and Swanick and Tsvetik (2007). Just a few examples of research done on the English literacy of Deaf children from different parentages, and also on the linguistic development of children with cochlear implants (not limited to America). For the former, studies consistently show that Deaf children with Deaf parents, especially Deaf parents who use ASL, often develop superior English language skills to Deaf children with hearing parents. For the latter, more recent findings have indicated that at best, using ASL in conjunction with cochlear implants has increased the speed and complexity of linguistic acquisition, and at worst, does not hinder the benefits of cochlear implantation in terms of developing speech and lip-reading/auditory skills.
22. Sloan Churman's YouTube video posting of her own cochlear implant activation, posted on 26 September 2011 had a total of 24,325,909 views as of 28 March 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LsOo3jzkhYA>
23. Newell and Goggin (2003). Attention is given to the cultural viewpoint of cochlear implants as opposed to the medical viewpoint.
24. Glickman and Harvey (1996).
25. Glickman and Harvey (1996, p. 127). The citation Glickman gives is the following: Kannapell (1989).
26. See Kim, Hsu, and de Zuniga (2013). Also Na (2006).
27. Gallaudet's Fiscal Year 2014 Budget Request to the Department of Education provides these statistics. (Hulsebosch & Lipkey, 2013).
28. The *Deaf Studies Digital Journal* may be found at [dsdj.org](http://dsdj.org). At the time of writing this article, there are currently four issues available for perusal on the website.
29. Switched at Birth's 4 March 2013 Nielsen Television Index ratings released via a press release from ABC Family on 5 March 2013 indicated the show swept the #1 rating across Adults 18-34, Women 18-34, Adults 18-49, Women 18-49, Viewers 12-34, and Females 12-34. Also discussed by Anya Leyhe (2014) in her thesis.
30. See Haller (2010). Matlin's 2010 campaign for Netflix to caption its streaming media is outlined in Haller's essay titled, "The changing landscape of disability 'news'."
31. See Ojeda (2015).
32. See Kim et al. (2013).
33. See Coates (2015). Ta-Nehisi Coates writes a great deal for *The Atlantic* and in his autobiographical book about how empathy can be improved when words and labels are not tossed around so blithely, but a true, closer, inspection of where perceptions originate and are perpetuated, in media, and comparing that with one's own behavior toward others perceived to be different.

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### Author Biography

K. Crom Saunders (M.A. California State University, Sacramento) is a Professor of Deaf Studies at Columbia College Chicago. His research interests include American Sign Language sociolinguistics, Deaf Studies, and international sign language communities.