

Distance and proximity: Research on social media connections in the field of
communication disability.

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Social media connects people in digital spaces, affording opportunities for personal, local and global communication. For some people with severe communication disabilities secondary to lifelong or acquired health conditions social media is a usual part of everyday communication, and may provide a welcome reprieve from the usual “temporal imperative” that “dominates face-to-face communication” (Higginbotham & Wilkins, 1999, p.77). The expressions possible within social media also enable multi-modal communication using text, pictures, and videos to augment or replace face-to-face interactions, and this may be particularly useful to people who cannot rely on natural speech to communicate. Social media and virtual worlds evoke feelings of both *distance* and *proximity* (Clark, 1990) between people who share online spaces, and this is reflected in the current field of research on the use of social media by people with communication disabilities.

With limited research to date, we are distant from a full appreciation and understanding of how people with communication disabilities experience and participate in online forums, or the supports that are needed in encountering barriers to participation online. Adults with communication disabilities experience social exclusion, isolation, and loneliness, and also lack access to information, have limited social networks, and are often dependent upon direct support workers or family members for access to information. Despite social media offering a ‘level playing field’ and removing the need for the use of spoken language, the uptake and use of social media by people with communication disabilities is at lower rates than in the general population (Media Access Australia, 2012). While governments and community organisations increasingly turn to social media to convey information to service users and the public, people with communication disabilities experience many barriers to participation online, are under-represented in the social media (Media Access Australia, 2012), and their use of social media is under-researched (Selwood, Wood, & Raghavendra, 2012).

And yet, with this special issue on Social Media and Communication Disability and the forward research agenda of these and other researchers, we are also now closer in our understanding of how people with communication disabilities and those who work with them view and experience social media forums. This collection of evidence shows that Twitter™ (Davis, 2015; Hemsley, Dann, Palmer, Allan, & Balandin, 2015; Brunner, Hemsley, Palmer, Dann, & Togher, 2015), Facebook™ (Hynan, Murray, & Goldbart, 2015; Raghavendra, Wood, Grace, & Newman, 2015), Second Life™ (Balandin & Stendal, 2015; Stendal & Balandin, 2015) and many other platforms (Brunner et al., 2015; Hemsley et al., 2015; Hynan et al., 2015; Patterson & Carpenter, 2015) including Instagram™, YouTube™, and Skype™ offer people with communication disabilities and those who work with them valuable connections with friends, celebrities, the general public, other people with communication disabilities, and service providers. People with acquired (Brunner et al., 2015; Patterson et al., 2015) or lifelong (Hemsley et al., 2015; Hynan et al., 2015, Raghavendra et al., 2015; Stendal & Balandin, 2015) communication disabilities may find social media to be a valuable medium for inclusion, support, and connection; and one that relieves some difficulties associated with face-to-face communication and enhances interactions in the real world. Documented herein are many ways in which people with communication disability can and might use social media, for a range of purposes and with different styles. As Wolf, an adult with autism, explained of Second Life: “friends I make here help me refine my models of friendship and social interaction in RL [Real Life].” (Stendal & Balandin, 2015, p. X). We look forward to discovering how studies contained in this special issue inform or influence ongoing social media research, policies, and practices to increase social media participation by people with communication disabilities worldwide.

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