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18

ENGAGING ACCESSIBILITY ISSUES THROUGH MOBILE VIDEOS IN MONTRÉAL

Laurence Parent

Media scholars claim that the rise of mobile media has changed how they interact with the world around them and experience the everyday. Barbara Crow, Michael Longford and Kim Sawchuk argue that "wireless technology has modified both individual and public life, transforming our experiences of space, time, and place, while reshaping our day-to-day interactions."[1] Moreover, technologies that used to be reserved solely for professionals also became available to a wider public. Smartphones, which generally include powerful built-in cameras, are a good example. "Camera phones have emerged as ideal tools for capturing and sharing the visual traces of the everyday via social media," argues Dean Keep.[2] It became possible to make documentaries solely by using a mobile phone. However, this media revolution is more complicated for disabled people, as mobile media technologies are simultaneously empowering some disabled people and further marginalizing others. One of the problems that have been raised by activists and scholars is that people who use screen readers face inaccessible design. Furthermore, in Canada, the high costs of these technologies are a major obstacle for many disabled people. Canada is one of the members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, whose data plans are the most expensive.[3] Since disabled Canadians are twice as likely to be in a low-income household than their non-disabled counterparts,[4] they are less likely to own a smartphone. Despite these obstacles, mobile videos produced by disabled people are increasing. However, we know very little about the experiences of disabled filmmakers, let alone those working in languages other than English. The main focus of disability and media scholars has been on issues of disability representation in the media, mostly in English-speaking contexts.[5] In the Western world, ableist media representations are still extremely present and fighting against them is routine to many disability activists. Considering the central role played by the media in the production of cultures, disability and media activists and scholars stress the importance of analyzing the media to understand how disability is defined and reproduced.[6] Katie Ellis and Gerard Goggin write that "media not only matter, in their pervasiveness and power; they play an important role in the power relations and shaping of disability."[7] This chapter aims to contribute to the emerging disability and media scholarship on the work of disabled people making mobile videos. This chapter also offers important insights to anyone interested in the work of disabled media makers and activists outside the Anglophone worlds. My analysis is based on my own experiences and observations as a disabled filmmaker, graduate student and activist in Montréal, Canada. My methodological and filmmaking choices reverberate with one value shared by many disabled academics, activists and artists—our personal experience is a valuable site of knowledge production. I will

explore some of the possibilities offered by mobile videos for challenging ableism and share some reflections on the pitfalls.

A New Weapon of Resistance in My Activist Toolkit

I became actively involved in the Montréal disability rights movement in 2006, which was just before the proliferation of mobile media technologies. At that time, I had a flip phone that I could only use to make phone calls. Most of my activism consisted of attending meetings and sitting on various committees. In 2009, I co-founded the disability rights organization Regroupement des activistes pour l'inclusion au Québec (RAPLIQ) with three other disabled activists. Unlike other established disability organizations, we did not have any funding. Therefore, we relied on our own personal resources. For example, instead of having an office and working together in the same physical space, we worked from our respective homes and communicated by email. As we were fighting our first battles, the use of mobile and social media was on the rise. We noticed that the Québec disability rights movement had not made much use of these new technologies to bring disability issues to the attention of the public and the media. We decided to be active on that front. In the first year of RAPLIQ's existence, I made a few videos, with the assistance of my filmmaker friend Joëlle Rouleau, about issues that RAPLIQ was working on. At the time, I needed Joëlle to make films for three main reasons: I did not own any filming equipment; that equipment was too heavy for me to carry alone; and I did not have her filmmaking skills. To shoot footage from my perspective, we tried to attach her camera to my wheelchair. However, the camera could not absorb the constant impact of the uneven sidewalks on my wheelchair. The footage was unsteady and shaky, and the risk of the camera falling from my wheelchair and breaking was too great. Furthermore, regulations prevented us from using our bulky equipment to film in spaces like the metro. It was clear that I needed to get a smaller device for shooting videos. When my flip phone contract came to an end in August 2011, I decided to get my first smartphone.

A few weeks later, I was denied access to a bus due to a ramp malfunction. As soon as the driver told me I could not get on his bus, I started filming discreetly with my smartphone without drawing attention to the device. After all, I was not holding a camera but a phone. I asked the driver a few questions about the ramp and the procedure in the event of a malfunction, something that has been a recurrent problem since I started using buses in 2002. For the first time, I was able to capture a situation I had previously experienced hundreds of times. As the event was unfolding, I already knew I would post my video online to denounce the bus' lack of access. It felt incredibly empowering. After the bus left, I embarked on a six-kilometer wheel to my home. On a quiet street that I had wheeled on thousands of times, I took out my phone again and resumed filming. I explained that the nights were starting to get cold in Montréal, making it harder to get around without proper accessible transportation. "It's only September 15, and my fingers are frozen already. The inaccessibility of buses is also a real problem for the safety of those who are excluded from them," I explained, my voice trembling because of the cold and the uneven ground.[8] The image was shaky, but the message was, I believed, quite powerful. Once at home, I put into practice the skills I'd learned while working with my friend Joëlle. I edited the video, added music to evoke a sort of nostalgia and repetition, added text on a black background to explain the issue, partially captioned the video and uploaded it on RAPLIQ's YouTube channel. I also posted it on my personal Facebook page. Without any sort of planning or assistance, I had just made my first short mobile video. To my knowledge, this video was the first visual piece of evidence made by a disabled person available online that documented the discrimination experienced by wheelchair users on city buses in Montréal. From that moment on, my smartphone became an essential weapon of resistance in my activist toolkit.

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My first mobile videos pretty much overlap with my first experiences speaking with the mainstream media. When RAPLIQ started organizing protests and publishing press releases on newswires, radio and television journalists began interviewing me on a regular basis. We quickly noticed that it was much easier to get media coverage in the Anglophone media than in the Francophone media. On the morning of September 29, 2011, I was with RAPLIQ in the metro, protesting the inaccessibility of the underground transit system. A fair number of journalists from Anglophone media sources showed up. I decided to make a short video with my smartphone to briefly explain what was going on, and I pointed out the lack of Francophone media coverage of our protest.[9] I posted the video on YouTube and invited people to share it on social media. Journalists from Francophone media finally showed up to cover our direct action. However, it is difficult to know if my video had a direct impact on their presence that morning. Another problem we faced in terms of media coverage was that we did not have much control over what would be said and written about us. Through my interactions with journalists, I soon realized that many of them had a limited understanding of disability issues, and ableist language was the norm. For example, on numerous occasions, I was described as being "wheelchair-bound."[10]

Furthermore, I felt like some of the reporters were awkward with me. Chances are I was the first disabled person they had ever interviewed. In addition, these journalists were often working on tight deadlines and did not have time to dig into the complexity of our stories. Making our own videos turned out to be a strategy to gain media coverage, share stories ignored by the media and produce more representative stories countering ableist discourses.

Cripping Mobile Filmmaking

Despite the numerous advantages to shooting videos with my smartphone, there were some limitations. Filming in cold weather was difficult; my fingers would be numb after only a few minutes. The stability of the image was also an ongoing issue, as I was often in motion when filming. Wheeling on uneven sidewalks and streets made it almost impossible to shoot videos that did not feel like a rollercoaster for the viewers. I was also limited in terms of the length of the footage I could capture, because filming for long periods would drain my phone's battery. It was also a problem when I needed to use my smartphone to find information online or make a phone call, which was likely to happen when encountering obstacles. I could not record and make a call at the same time, so I had to interrupt the recording process.

In 2012, I bought a GoPro camera to address some of these issues. GoPro cameras are miniature high-definition cameras that can be mounted to a body part or a device. This extra portable video recording device was initially made for extreme-action videography.[11] D. Andy Rice suggests that the "company seems unaware of—or actively hostile to—the political possibilities of using the technology to represent the everyday lives of persons with disabilities."[12] None of GoPro's branded videos featured disabled people.[13] Therefore, it is not surprising that I had difficulty finding GoPro accessories that matched my needs as a disabled filmmaker. The main challenge I faced was finding a way to mount the camera somewhere on my wheelchair. I first experimented with this technique on a trip to Toronto with my friend Joëlle. I recorded footage of our strolls in the city, which included riding the subway and the buses. The image stability was much better than it had been with my smartphone, and I could record up to 60 minutes of footage. The camera was attached on my footrest structure, which was significantly lower than my eye level (Figure 18.1). However, I was not able to attach the GoPro by myself, because it required too much physical strength to do so. I eventually decided to mount the camera on my wheelchair's right handle, which is at shoulder level, to get a perspective that was closer to mine. This had the effect of including me in the camera frame. My right arm and shoulder occupied the left side of the frame, making me visible to the viewer. At first, I was not sure about this

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choice but I gave it a try. I made *Cripping the Landscape 1: Québec City*, my first mobile documentary shot entirely with my GoPro camera, without someone else's technical assistance.[14] It is a 13-minute video chronicling a 5-kilometre journey from Laval University to the Sainte-Foy train station in Québec City. As I wended my way to the train station, I exposed moments of danger. There was no accessible bus or accessible taxi. At some intersections, I was unable to reach the pedestrian crossing button (Figure 18.2). The number of obstacles was overwhelming. In turning the viewer's gaze towards Québec City's ableist landscape, I aimed to undermine the power structures that contribute to reinforcing the normalcy of these inaccessible public infrastructures. I chose the term "cripping" to indicate my position as a disabled filmmaker engaged in the uncovering of compulsory able-bodiedness in media representation and discourses about accessibility. According to organizers of the "Cripping" of Comic Con, the term "cripping" may be understood as a way for disability-identified people and their allies to assert control and social power, write Emily Hutcheon and Gregor Wolbring.[15] Carrie Sandahl defines cripping as "spin-[ning] mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions and exclusionary effects."[16] By making my wheelchair an integral part of my creative practice, and including my disabled body in the camera frame and therefore exposing its interactions with the ableist landscape, I engaged with crip aesthetics.[17]

Many of my reflections about *Cripping the Landscape 1: Québec City* occurred after the completion of the film. Every time I showed my video at an event, I received many positive comments about my filmmaking approach, including the appearance of my body in the camera frame. These comments had two different effects on me. On one hand, I felt validated as a filmmaker. It seemed like I had found a promising aesthetic. On the other hand, I felt wary, because some people argued that my video enabled them to experience the world as I experience it. In fact, when I watch my video, I have a different experience. There is a gap between what I shoot and what I feel. My video is certainly not a disability simulation, a practice I oppose as an activist and as a researcher. Disability simulations are regularly used to raise awareness about accessibility. For example, non-disabled people could be invited to spend a day in a wheelchair to better understand what it means to be a wheelchair user. Late disability rights activist, comedian and journalist Stella Young argued that "disability simulation fails to capture the nuance and complexity of living in a disabled body. And it certainly fails to give a deep understanding of systemic discrimination and abuse faced by disabled people."[18] I suggest that there is a thin line between disability

Figure 18.1 Screenshot from *Cripping the Landscape 1: Québec City*, directed by Laurence Parent (Québec: m.i.a media production, 2013), showing that when the camera is attached to the wheelchair's footrest structure the view is significantly lower than the user's eye level.

Figure 18.2 Screenshot from *Cripping the Landscape 1: Québec City*, directed by Laurence Parent (Québec: m.i.a media production, 2013), shows a pedestrian crossing button out of reach to a wheelchair user. A written caption on the image reads "Danger: Inaccessible pedestrian crossing button."

simulations and new creative filmmaking styles developed by disabled filmmakers. D. Andy Rice shares the story of a group of students in his disability studies and urban planning class at the University of California in Los Angeles. For their video project, Tomas, one member of the group who walked with a crutch, wore a GoPro camera on his chest and filmed his commute to the university from his home. "By repurposing wearable recording systems marketed to extreme sports enthusiasts, my case study suggests that persons with physical disabilities can shoot footage of their everyday lives that compels viewers to imaginatively embody an approximation of their phenomenological experience" Rice writes.[19] "In screening these shots in class as raw footage, we collectively experienced the striking sensation of moving at Tomas's everyday pace," he adds.[20] Even if Rice makes it clear that the use of a wearable camera by one of his students was done not to elicit pity but to develop empathy, I cannot help but feel the risk of falling into a disability simulation trap. However, Rice makes an interesting point about the potential of raw footage shot by disabled people to subvert the dominant aesthetic in mobile videos. "Representing duration in living with a disability, in the context of a social media economy that valorizes speed, can be both a politics of resistance and a means for creating new forms of cinematic empathy," he explains.[21] The creative approach developed by Rice and his students can definitely be considered as an important contribution to crip aesthetics.

The Bumpy Road to Anti-Ableist Mobile Video Practices and Social Media

Even though mobile video technologies undoubtedly open up new possibilities for disabled people, filmmakers and activists, they also raise important issues. Through my experience in Montréal, I have encountered or observed problematic practices that I will briefly explore here.

Increasingly, mainstream media relies on video footage shot by ordinary people who happen to witness newsworthy events long before journalists arrive at the scene. Rabia Noor writes that "citizen journalism holds potential benefits as a source of news. It proves to be useful to bring to the fore the stories that are inaccessible to professional journalists."[22] Thanks to the wheeling interviews I conducted for my doctoral research, I have shot more than 30 hours of footage in the streets of Montréal. I have collected an important amount of visual material that documents the exclusion of numerous disabled people in the city. In September 2015, a journalist working for a mainstream newspaper contacted me about a story on the lack of accessibility at construction sites

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in Montréal. She already knew me because of my work as an activist. I talked to her about my doctoral project and the interviews I had been doing over the summer. She asked me if I had pictures of some of the obstacles. I happily went back through my footage and sent her numerous stills from my videos. We agreed that I would be given a photo credit if the photos were published. The following day, I noticed that two of my photos were on the front page of the newspaper, but I was not given credit for the images in either the paper itself or the online version.[23] I contacted the journalist. She told me she would be able to make the change for the online version, but, due to legal reasons, they never credit people in the paper edition who are not employees of the newspaper. Even though I was thrilled that my work appeared in a mainstream newspaper, I felt uneasy about not receiving due credit.

A similar situation happened when I spent a day with a television team; the crew wanted to shoot a short documentary about my everyday experiences in the city. As they were struggling with the legal restrictions on filming on public transit, I told them about my filmmaking approach and how I use the GoPro. They enthusiastically decided to use this approach and ended up not giving me any credit for it. Disability activists are still fighting to have their expertise and work valued. This is particularly true in the media industry where disability activists are still underrepresented.[24] At the same time, they are also strategically producing mobile videos that increase their visibility in mainstream media—as I have done. For example, Katie Ellis, Gerard Goggin and Mike Kent explain how the UK disability activism movement used digital technologies—social media in particular—to advocate against the welfare and work reforms that affected disabled people.[25] They argue that the availability of YouTube videos made by disabled people and their allies have contributed to bringing these issues into the mainstream media. For example, in a report on the impacts of budget cuts, as well as on police brutality against disabled people, a mainstream British television station used a video posted on YouTube that depicted the police assault on Jody McIntyre during a 2010 student protest against tuition fee hikes. I think it is important to point out what seems to be a major difference between a mobile video shot by a "citizen journalist" at a specific event and a mobile video that required work and research for the maker. As a disabled filmmaker and an emergent scholar, I face a two-fold issue: I want my work to be available to the widest possible public, but I also want the value of my work to be acknowledged. This raises important questions about ethics and labor. Disabled people's creative approaches to filmmaking and media work are constantly at risk of being appropriated without credit by mainstream media. There is a danger in overlooking these issues as we—disabled activists, artists, scholars and allies—work tirelessly to get better media representation and access to media production.

Getting mainstream media attention when making mobile videos is also a challenge for disability activists. Here I am particularly interested in the work produced by what Axel Bruns calls a "produser." The term produser is a combination of "producer" and "user," which describes the reality of many amateur digital media users who have become both consumers and producers of media content.[26] Laurent Morissette, a disabled Montrealer who uses a motorized wheelchair, can be identified as a produser. He is also a board member of RAPLIQ and spokesperson for the organization. Since 2014, he has given numerous radio and television interviews to comment on disability issues mostly related to physical accessibility. Morissette regularly uses Twitter and Facebook to share his experiences of navigating Montréal's public transit system. On August 31, 2017, he posted a six-minute video on his personal Facebook page and on the Facebook group Transport mésadapté. In the video, he speaks directly to Philippe Schnobb, president of the Société de transport de Montréal, and demands better service after being denied access to a bus due to a broken ramp.[27] He shot the video while waiting for the next bus. Morissette faces the camera and seems to hold it with one hand. All we can see is his face and part of his upper body, since he holds his phone only a few inches away from him.

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On October 21, 2016, Mikael Theimer, a non-disabled man who works as a freelance photographer, posted a video on his Facebook page and the Transport mésadapté page.[28] Theimer implores Philippe Schnobb to improve paratransit service for disabled people. In the video, Theimer is with his friend Michel Pépin, a disabled man who uses a motorized wheelchair and relies on paratransit to get around. Theimer explains that they had been waiting for Michel's ride, only to be told that they had missed it. However, Theimer and Pépin had been waiting in the entrance of a building because it was cold and rainy outside. Like Morissette, Theimer faces the camera as he holds it in one of his hands. However, the distance between his body and the camera is greater than in Morissette's video, and Theimer's mobility allows him to change the camera's angles as he speaks, stands up and walks between the exterior and the interior of the building. For most of the video, Pépin can be seen in the background while he waits inside the building. Towards the end of the video, Theimer asks Pépin for his thoughts regarding the situation. In turn, Pépin invites the president of the Société de transport de Montréal to act. His intervention is short.

Overall, Morissette's and Theimer's stories have a lot in common. Where Morissette's and Theimer's videos set themselves apart the most is in terms of standpoints and number of views. Theimer embodies the figure of the young and healthy able-bodied white male, while Morissette's disability is obvious. Theimer's movements and speech match with bodily norms, while Morissette's do not. Furthermore, because of his career as a well-known photographer in the city, it is certain that Theimer has more contacts in the media than Morissette. The video posted by Theimer got the attention of the *Journal de Montréal*, the largest-circulating newspaper in Québec.[29] The fact that the newspaper article included a link to Theimer's Facebook video certainly boosted the number of views. Morissette's Facebook video got 335 views, while Theimer's got 8,699. The difference is significant. The *Journal de Montréal*'s article also included a quote from Theimer, who was, after all, the person telling the story. Pépin's presence was made secondary. Even though I believe Theimer genuinely tried to be a good ally to his disabled friend and the local disability community, his video fits with ableist representations of disabled people in the news, representations that are described and critiqued by disability activists and scholars. It is still common for media to privilege the voices of non-disabled people over those of disabled individuals to tell our stories.[30] It is important to note that as of today, Morissette's numerous videos documenting his experiences in public transit have not received any attention from the media, even though many of them are quite dramatic. For example, one video shows Morissette stranded in the harsh winter conditions of Montréal due to inaccessible buses. This brief comparison between Morissette's and Theimer's videos suggests that disabled people's stories made and shared on social media by disabled produsers are less likely to be covered by mainstream media than videos about the very same issue made by non-disabled people. Obviously, it will require further research to better understand the prevalence of this inequality.

Finally, as much as I believe in the power of mobile technologies and social media for disabled people to enact social change, I must acknowledge that my experience in the Montréal Francophone disability community suggests that mobile videos made by disabled French-speaking people are still scarce, even though a growing number of disabled French-speaking people now own smartphones. For example, on Transport mésadapté (Maladapted Transit), a Facebook group created in 2014 that has become a new space for disability activism in Québec, members prefer to share their stories about their experiences in the city's public transit system in writing.[31] Moreover, many disability rights organizations based in Québec are still resisting the emergence of digital disability activism. In the English-speaking world, many disability activists have shared videos about their lived experiences and organized campaigns on social media based in large part on the use of video. Even though these videos are mostly filmed in people's homes, they are often recorded on mobile phones and they are mobile in their dissemination through cyberspace.

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In the United States, we can think about the #LiveOn campaign, which was developed by the Center for Disability Rights based in the state of New York.[32] The campaign was a video series that aimed to prevent suicide among disabled people. Disabled people themselves were invited to record their stories with a smartphone and post them online to help their peers. In Canada, Project Value was created in the wake of the new Canadian bill legalizing assisted suicide.[33] With their smartphone or other recording devices, disabled Canadians recorded stories explaining why their lives have value. Even though Canada is officially a bilingual country, all stories posted on this initiative's Facebook page were in English.[34] This imbalance can probably be explained by the fact that the call for videos was solely in English. This speaks to the existing divide between Anglophone and Francophone communities in Canada, as well as the greater access available to English-speaking disabled people to share their stories across large audiences, which include non-Anglophone people who are able to communicate in English—such as myself. Videos produced by Francophones do not travel as much. I experience this difference myself every time I share a video in French. I know that it will not be seen and shared by my English-speaking friends and colleagues who have no knowledge of my mother tongue. Of course, there is a potential for collaboration between Francophone communities in countries such as France, Belgium, Haiti and numerous African countries. However, these collaborations are in their infancy and cannot be compared with the existing flow of communication and knowledge sharing among disabled people in English-speaking communities.

Conclusion

Katie Ellis and Gerard Goggin ask the question: "What is the potential of new digital technologies and cultures to establishing a more diverse, rich, and just media?"[35] It is with this question in mind that I wrote this chapter. Like numerous disabled people around the world, the proliferation of mobile media has radically changed how I engage with disability activism and filmmaking.[36] This question also influenced deeply my work as a researcher. In fact, for my doctoral project, I conducted wheeling interviews with 23 disabled people in New York City and Montréal. GoPro cameras were mounted on my wheelchair and on the participant's wheelchair (if they had one). Since the interview component was central to my project, I also used two audio recorders to get better sound quality. The complexity of my filmmaking equipment forced me to address several technical issues and challenges along the way.[37] Through trial and error, the participants and I figured out which devices and arrangements would best suit our needs and abilities. The filming became a shared responsibility with the participants. Together, we cripped methods and filmmaking.

In this chapter, I shared some of my experiences with mobile video from my perspective as a Francophone disabled filmmaker, activist and graduate student living in Montréal, Canada. I explored some of the possibilities offered by mobile videos and social media to challenge ableism, as well as some of the pitfalls I encountered and observed along the way. As previously mentioned, to date, outside the Anglophone worlds, very little research has been conducted (or published) on disability and the media. Considering the relationship between media and culture, this gap is alarming and needs to be addressed. The Anglophone literature about disability and media is clear—obstacles preventing disabled people from engaging with filmmaking persist. The issue here is not so much about finding ways to accommodate disabled people but to support those who are engaged in cripping filmmaking and mobile media. The Disability Visibility Project (DVP)—founded by disabled activist and media maker Alice Wong, who is based in San Francisco—is a great example. DVP is an "online community dedicated to recording, amplifying and sharing disability stories and culture."[38] This kind of online community still does not exist in the Francophone world. In Canada, Accessible Media Inc. (AMI), a not-for-profit media

organization producing accessible television content, aims to "establish and support a voice for Canadians with disabilities, representing their interests, concerns and values through accessible media, reflection and portrayal."[39] AMI-Télé, the French-language channel of AMI, was launched in 2014. Despite the channel's commitment to covering disability issues and producing accessible content, all decision makers, such as directors and producers, are non-disabled. This is reflected in the content: many stories promote ableist representations of disability. A lot of work needs to be done in my community to uncover these power relations and to recognize disabled people as media makers. As disabled media makers are showing us through powerful projects such as the Disability Visibility Project, it is time to crip filmmaking and media making in general. En français aussi.

Acknowledgments

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