Volume V, Perspectives - A Peer-Reviewed, Bilingual, Interdisciplinary E-Journal
https://perspectives-jdmc.in/
eISSN – 2583 4762

# Politics of Technoableism: A Critical Review

**Ashley Shew's book**

***Against Technoableism: Rethinking Who Needs Improvement***

(Book Review)

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# Politics of Technoableism: A Critical Review

The use of cutting-edge assistive technology has been the highlight of the recent Paralympic event held in Paris. However, German Paralympic athlete Johannes Floors reflects on the misconceptions surrounding these advancements. When asked whether his bionic limbs grant him superhuman abilities, he counters, ‘It diminishes my achievements and reduces me to just my prosthetics’ (Hoock). Floors’ sentiments reflect ethical challenges posed by such narratives of technological determinism, as it risks discrediting the inherent identity and value of the disabled individual by attributing their capabilities primarily to technological augmentation. Ashley Shew’s in her book *Against Technoableism: Rethinking Who Needs Improvement (*2023)*,* addresses similar deterministic views regarding technology, where she critiques the ableist belief that technology holds the potential to eliminate disability. Ashley Shew is a professor of science, technology and society at Virginia Tech, with technology and disability being her primary areas of interest.  In her book, she describes herself as “a hard-of-hearing, chemobrained amputee with Crohn’s disease and tinnitus,” (29) and challenges media narratives that portray technology as a saviour or redeemer for disabled people.

In each of the six chapters of the book, which can be read independently as the book draws inspiration from crip aesthetics, Shew is highly suspicious of technology developments and its marketing. While scientific perspectives discuss how technology can facilitate the restoration of disabled bodies to a state of normalcy, Shew coins the term ‘technoableism’ to critique the idea that disabled or neurodivergent bodies need to be “fixed,” rather than be recognised and accommodated. She draws from various sources: personalised experiences, philosophers, multimedia blogs, social media and entertainment to formulate her critique of technoableism.

Early in the first chapter, Shew writes, “this is a book about the stories that disabled people tell that nondisabled people usually aren’t interested in,” (8) drawing focus on the limited understanding and skewed perceptions nondisabled people often have of the diverse experiences and needs of disabled individuals. The first chapter discusses how disabled individuals are often encouraged to centre their narratives around their origin stories or tales of how technology supposedly "saved" them. Shew rejects the idea that origin stories are central to the experience of disabled individuals — they are often framed as a “story of grief” that become impetus to show non-disabled bodies “how to really live.” According to her, this perspective is problematic because it reduces their identity to their physical disability, framing their personal narratives to the satisfaction of non-disabled expectations.

Chapter two includes her experiences meeting with other disabled people at the Amputee Coalition of America. She emphasises that disabled individuals are the true experts on disability and asserts that tech developers should consult them, as they are the primary users of technologies. Moreover, tech developments and marketing actively urge disabled individuals to subscribe to technology due to several underlying biases and assumptions. There is a widespread narrative that views technology as inherently progressive and beneficial, leading to the assumption that it can "solve" disability, however this perspective overlooks other challenges technology introduces, such as high costs, uncomfortable prosthetics and devices, and other practical difficulties. She posits that disability technology understands their bodies in limited ways and technologies like prosthetics and hearing aids are often more confining than liberating. In the later chapters she discusses at length how technologies can often create additional discomfort for them because the individuals they are meant to assist are rarely consulted during their development. Moreover, there are numerous types of disabilities, each requiring specific technologies and tailored support, which innovators often fail to consider. As a result, presenting technology as a saviour, when it may actually pose more challenges, could be a misleading assertion and such beliefs must be investigated and criticised.

In chapter three, she explores a variety of topics, including linguistic challenges like the use of the term ‘disability’ and the reclaiming of the word ‘cripple,’ representation of disability in popular media, and its intersectionality with race, gender, and sexuality, while framing disability as a socially constructed category. Expressing the gap between media narratives and actual experiences of using technologies like prosthetics and hearing aids, chapter four delves deeper into the prevailing narratives about technology and internalised ableism through anecdotes. While technology imposes standards of normalcy by replacing or augmenting disability through prosthetics or AAC devices, the chapter also facilitates a post-humanist debate where she argues that technology merely provides a functional approximation of natural bodily functions.

Chapter five focuses on neurodivergence which is based on a similar implication to embrace diversity in cognition and sensory processing. Technologies designed to help neurodivergent individuals often don’t line up with autistic experience. Many of these technologies are developed based on neurotypical perspective, which overlooks the unique ways in which neurodivergent individuals experience the world. For instance, devices or interventions that are intended to help with communication, sensory regulation, or social interaction may not be helpful or even may be counterproductive for some autistic individuals, as they may not account for the wide range of sensory preferences, cognitive styles, or communication methods within the neurodivergent community.

Overall, Shew argues there’s a general discomfort associated with differences or disabled bodies, and encouraging disabled individuals to use technology often stems from a desire to make them conform to societal norms, rather than accepting and valuing their differences. The view that technology can solve the problem of disability posits it as an undesirable condition of life, when it is a very normal and predictable part of human experience. She terms it as technoableist thinking, which is an extension of ableist thinking which assumes disabled bodies as fundamentally flawed. Technoableist perspective also privileges the non-disabled body, setting it as a benchmark to be achieved by disabled bodies. Ableism manifests in many forms and in an age where one is at the crossroads with technology for nearly every aspect of life, one must be wary of technoableism where we reassert those biases which strive for elimination of disability through technology.

The question of inaccessibility and lack of infrastructure is also central to Shew's argument, as there's a perpetual desire to "fix" disability. For instance, the wheelchair, which is the universal symbol of disability, is actively being pushed to be replaced by exoskeletons and devices which are aimed at climbing stairs – which shows how disabled bodies are being expected to adjust to ways of mobility designed for normative bodies. According to Shew, the lack of social support, infrastructure and maintenance are some systemic barriers which prevent their integration into the society, and reinforces ableist bias. To express the biases inherent against disabled individuals, Shew talks about two different models of disability: medical model of disability and social model of disability. The social model of disability holds the social organisation accountable for not being inclusive to disabled individuals; and that their biggest barriers are those that come from social stigma and environment while the medical model of disability understands the disabled body as fundamentally flawed, which needs to be fixed. Shew argues that the medical model of disability must recognise that disability is a socially constructed category which was established relative to society's expectations and norms. Like technoableism, medical model of disability also reinforces ableist thinking promoting interventions that prioritise normalisation over inclusion and agency.

The last chapter is significant in terms of assessing the impact of technology on disability in the coming future. Shew critiques the technofuturists pursuit to bring about the "End of Disability," arguing that scientific advancements like eugenics will create alternative forms of disability and will enable even more exclusionary practices. This reminded me of the movie *Gattaca* (1997), a dystopian science fiction movie set in a near future where the state is obsessed with the perfect mental and physical well-being of the people. When bodies of certain individuals do not comply with a set genetic standard, they are to be deemed as "in-valids," "utero" or "abnormal," while the "valids" qualify for professional and high remunerating employment while in-valids are relegated to menial jobs. In the movie, one's genes determine their socio-political and economic integration into the society, casting people into newer forms of social hierarchies which are dependent on new biological categories.

Shew contends that one must be comfortable with disability being a normal part of life instead of a condition which is *outside the norm*. Health hazards induced by environmental changes, emerging new diseases like the COVID pandemic and changing weather patterns are already on a rise, and one should expect more disabilities and variation in human health. She hails that our future itself is disabled, there's uncertainty and one must strive hard to invest in infrastructure and embrace networks of care that recognize and celebrate diversity, than cure them.

Ashley Shew's subtitle to the book, "Rethinking Who Needs Improvement," offers a perspective into the discourse surrounding disability and the societal fixation on "fixing" or "improving" disabled individuals. The phrase challenges the underlying assumption that disabled bodies and minds are inherently flawed and need to be corrected using technological or medical intervention. It also prompts the reader to reconsider whose perspective defines "improvement," typically whether of social model of disability and the medical model of disability. According to Shew, improvement needs to be curated by shifting the discourse from viewing disability as a problem to be solved, to questioning the societal structures and ableist norms that marginalise disabled individuals. Finally, technoableism critiques how technology often serves these biases by promoting a narrative of normalisation rather than fostering inclusivity. By encouraging this critical reflection, Shew highlights the need to prioritise autonomy, agency, and the meaningful integration of disabled voices in defining technology and policy, rather than imposing narrow and socially constructed definitions of progress or improvement.

The book serves as an excellent introduction for those unfamiliar with disability studies. Shew's personal anecdotes, references, and journalistic writing style make her critique of ableism highly accessible to newcomers in the field. Society has long harboured a desire to control perceived aberrations, whether in sexuality, gender, or disability. This desire is rooted in beliefs that uphold heteronormative sexuality and non-disabled bodies as the ideal. Ashley Shew's work offers a critical intervention in disability studies, addressing how ableist thinking continues to resurface in new forms. Today, technology and its surrounding narratives have become modern tools for marginalising disabled bodies. Shew's book provides a much-needed critique of this discourse, serving as a significant contribution to the field.

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