

## Book Review

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### A Review of: *Against Technoableism: Rethinking Who Needs Improvement*

By Ashley Shew, (2023) New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 148 pp. \$22.00, Hard Cover, ISBN: 978-1-324-03666-1

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**Abstract.** This review of *Against Technoableism: Rethinking Who Needs Improvement* by Ashley Shew provides an overview of the book's content, including its focus on the lived experiences of individuals and the social construct of disability. This review highlights the author's focus on allowing individuals to celebrate their diversity and disability instead of pressuring them toward normalcy. Although brief, *Against Technoableism* is an informative reminder for researchers to focus on the individual and not the technology.

Keywords: Ableism, disability, accessibility

From the beginning, Shew warns readers that her book will be bumpy and compares it to how her walker moves over a cobble sidewalk. Shew is an associate professor of science, technology, and society at Virginia Tech and communicates her story of disability and professional thoughts as an educator, researcher, and bioethicist. She shares her personal experiences of becoming disabled in a variety of ways including having cancer, after-effects of chemotherapy, below-the-knee amputation, hearing difficulties, tinnitus, and Crohn's disease. Through this lens, she reviews the regulations and lived experiences of individuals with disabilities. She also includes ideas related to ableist language and thinking "that disabled people are fundamentally flawed, unworthy of inclusion, broken or inadequate" (1, p. 4). This collection of short essays is a great introduction to disabilities for anyone and conveys Shew's platform that technologies for people with disabilities should be developed by or through the expert advice of people who are disabled

Shew begins with an introduction to disability including biases and stereotypical examples in society. Technoableism, a term she coined, is the "belief in the power of technology that considers the *elimination of disability* a good thing, something we should strive for" (1, p. 8). However, technologies are almost entirely developed by non-disabled individuals and, most often, without input from the individuals they are meant to help.

Shew focuses on bringing information to the non-disabled so they understand activism and *disability-forward* discussions, where the needs of people with disabilities are prioritized. The lack of effectiveness of a variety of technologies, such as prosthetics or applied behavior analysis for individuals with autism, is reviewed. Indeed, some assistive technologies do more harm than good or are not used for a variety of reasons including lack of comfort, time, or funding. Beliefs about technology by individuals with a disability are often contradictory to the ideas presented by the developers. Shew provides many examples of this including "the idea that disabled people all seek one perfect replacement technology" when they may require the use of multiple different technologies to manage in their current environment (1, p. 17). Additionally, developers often focus on creating natural-looking hand or leg prosthetics when a different tool is considered more effective in the situation such as a hook attachment, forearm crutch, rolling walker, or wheelchair

Shew compares two different existing models of disability in our society. The medical view of disability focuses on disability being abnormal and something to be fixed, much of which can be traced to the Industrial Revolution when a person's ability to work and contribute to the economy of society became paramount. The social view of disability believes that policies, structures, and technology should be adjusted instead of people with disabilities being made to work within the current

social condition where stigma and social and environmental barriers exist. Shew maintains that “disability is a social construct – a mismatch between the self and a world that was designed to cater to normative bodies and minds” (1, p. 21).

Stereotypes and specific archetypes related to disability that occur in media and entertainment are reviewed next. A variety of tropes – specific metaphors or themes – related to people with disabilities are discussed, including “pitiably-freaks” “bitter cripples”, and “inspirational-overcomers” (1). The last image is specifically focused on by Shew related to the belief that people with disabilities should be constantly looking for and excited about the next technology that is going to solve their problems. Shew suggests that this is an image created by the media and not a feeling that most individuals with a disability experience.

Shew continues with an examination of physical disabilities and varied experiences. Again, the discussion focuses on the lack of well-informed technology and researchers’ never-ending goal to develop the next most costly and advanced device, which they believe will solve all the problems of individuals with disabilities.

The discussion moves to neurodivergent diagnoses, primarily autism spectrum disorder and ADHD, which are mostly invisible and focus on differing neurological abilities or ways of thinking. Shew defines technology here wider than most including fidget spinners and Dungeons & Dragons, but also reviews the historical use of locked closets, gas chambers, and therapy. Shew identifies how people with invisible disabilities often act in a certain way – making eye contact although it causes them anxiety – to make others more comfortable based on social norms. Shew also examines applied behavior analysis, which proponents profess to be an evidence-based treatment for autism. However, adults with autism have a variety of critiques, including how it denies their ability to self-regulate, process emotions, and learn in a way that is natural for their brains.

Shew ends with a consideration of the future and projects an increase in people with disabilities as almost everyone will experience some sort of disability in their lifetime. Indeed, 15% of the current population has at least one form of disability. Therefore, buildings, airplanes, and other items should be designed with

disability in mind from the beginning – disability-forward – instead of retrofitting. Likewise, educational programs and technologies should be designed with disabilities in mind. When considering disabilities related to illness, body functionality, mental health, and learning, educators will find there is more variety in students than similarity. Todd Rose (2) discusses that when we design something for an average individual or toward normalcy, we end up not designing it for anyone.

Shew desires for society to allow individuals to celebrate their diversity and disability instead of pressuring them toward normalcy. This includes allowing people with diverging abilities to contribute to society based on those differences. Her ability to describe the lived experiences of individuals with a disability and the specific struggles they experience is both enlightening and appreciated.

I agree with her assertion that normalcy should not be the goal of assistive technologies, adjustments and accommodations. However, at times she seems to eschew technological advancement and the research process if it attempts to meet the needs of a majority in society. The research process of formulating ideas, completing research or experiments after approval from a review board, publishing findings in a peer-reviewed journal, and having the research community read and react to the information exists to propel us toward finding solutions for society in general. Indeed, there will always be individuals for whom the newest and most advanced technology is not the best fit, which prompts additional research and development. Shew maintains that “we need to look to intersectional, cross-disability communities for expertise” throughout the entire process (1, p. 131). Shew’s book is a reminder about many things related to diversity and education, including when we are researching or creating new technology, ask the experts – the person with the disability.

## References

- [1] Shew A. *Against technoableism: rethinking who needs improvement*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company; 2023.
- [2] Rose T. *The end of average*. New York: HarperCollins; 2016.