

Neuroqueer digital heresies

[Slide text during intro] “Any future society that has embraced and been transformed by the neurodiversity paradigm would be distinguished by two fundamental qualities: it would be neurocosmopolitan and it would be neuroqueer... just as heteronormativity can be queered, so can neurotypicality: we can subvert, disrupt, and deviate from the embodied performance of being neurocognitively ‘normal.’ That’s neuroqueering”

- Walker, “Towards a Neuroqueer Future”

My presentation is a riff on Nick Walker’s neuroqueer heresies, applied towards thinking together about how we might form ethical imaginaries around digital interfaces.

[Slide text shown during part 1] What are the neuroqueer heresies? There is no normal. Normal is oppressive. We are failing. Difference and divergence is good. Care is complex.

Part 1: theory

First, here’s a way for us to think about different models of wellbeing:

1. The ways that we think socially and institutionally about wellbeing are troubled by a widespread deference to binaries (well / unwell), which are then purified (purged of outliers who cannot be categorised in a stable way as either) and then moralised – the “bad unwell” and the “good unwell”. There are symmetries here with narratives around blackness, immigration, and gender identity.^[1]
2. These binaries are mobilised (to be fair, usually without malice or intention for harm) by a professional class who manage risk and wellbeing, transforming the idea of difference into a neoliberal capitalist mesh: this is “diversity” for marketing brochures which can be appropriately aligned with “brand” and “image” and correlate to forms of need and deprivation which can be easily categorised, commodified and drawn into a logic of efficient service provision. Bad unwell people are not “easy” to help.
3. This is a model of care without complexity which deploys models of wellbeing which do provide meaningful benefit for certain cases, but serve to further marginalise, pathologise and economise divergent edge cases. It is important to be aware that this process of punishing outliers is initiated by our accounts of “wellbeing” and inscribed by narratives of successful care.

So there’s a very quick version of social critical disability theory. With this critical apparatus in place, I’d like to – taking a cue like Nick Walker does from Audre Lourde – take these new tools towards the process of dismantling the masters digital house. For the sake of this reflection, I’ll be focussing on

“digital” in reference to digitized communication and the software interfaces which overlay it. My argument is that “the interface” in the singular is an anti-diverse mechanism and that our implementation of that tool serves a homogenising agenda of containment for control of divergent body-minds.

The digital can facilitate spaces of divergence and experimentation but digitality can also facilitate homogenisation and economisation. On one hand, we can see a drive from the start of the internet age towards tools which streamline human communication and facilitate connectness.

Part 2: a neurodivergent digital aesthetic

Every design culture which produces digital tools (e.g. google, microsoft, amazon, and apple) has an aesthetic, a certain kind of visual, and an underpinning ethos which drives that visual presentation enshrined in interface design. These digital aesthetics are a sort of assemblage of cultural norms, notions of beauty and flow drawn out of the lifeworlds of particular kinds of body-minds. When a divergent body meets these assemblages, friction results. Everyone will have experiences with an interface that “just works” and also with interfaces which you find frustrating and disempowering. Claims of neurodiversity force us to appreciate that with respect to any enforced interface, process, built environment or user experience, there are a range of responses ranging from love, mild discomfort and irritation to panic, immobility and breakdown. This can be the case in an obvious way for something like stairs, but it can also be an effect of disability in the context of more intangible mismatches like those found in interface aesthetics. If I am correct about this suggestion that disability justice necessitates a pluralistic approach to digital interface(s), then when interface choices are homogenised and enforced, injustice is the result.

I’m one of the many users who have acute sensitivities to friction in user interface and process design. This is, in part, because autistic body-minds like mine are attuned by flow states and are carried forward by inertia. I often find interface and process design uncomfortable, confounding, and even panic-inducing. Working with a conventional medicalised understanding of disability, one might be expected to conclude that some aspect of this intrinsic functionality represents a form of impairment which needs to be pitied and accommodated through lowered expectations. “Poor Jeremy”, one might say, “just struggles to operate the computer. We should give him extra time to complete tasks.” Nevermind the possibility that a person might thrive and exhibit forms of expertise in a less authoritarian digital regime.

For the sake of this paper, I am concerned to highlight the symmetry between the ways that disability support and IT services work in large neoliberal organisations. I appreciate that this suggestion may seem a bit exotic or strange. I think that it is important to appreciate the ways that our awareness of inaccessibility is often suppressed. In the context of the digital, we can appreciate the ways that Zara Dinnen speaks of the “digital banal” as a way of pointing to “the condition by which we don’t notice the affective novelty of becoming-with digital media. In other words, “the way we use media makes us unaware of the ways we are co-constituted as subjects with media.” As Dinnen argues, the problem with our use of technologies is that we often don’t notice quite how much they shape us and our patterns of life – all the way down. The consequence of this is that we fail to grasp the *imperative* behind requests

for reform (often re-categorised as "complaints"). Organisational management practices in democratic societies can tend to be weirdly undemocratic (underwritten – I would argue – by distorted forms of natural theology) it can be top-down, homogenising, and driven by a commitment to efficiency. As a number of neomarxist theorists have observed, these neoliberal social formulations can also be powerfully hegemonic: automatically assimilating or obliterating proposed alternative futures as they arise.

We would have to appreciate how the seemingly innocuous "Microsoft Teams" (and I appreciate that it even feels silly to mention it in a paper like this) is a political instrument driving behaviour management, exclusion and surveillance. The flip side of my claim around the tacit nature of the formulations and social demands embedded in platforms and interface design is that the effects on human outliers of these formulations are vastly underestimated, even suppressed. So, we may want to say that an interface is inconvenient, but we would never allow the suggestion that in some of these hegemonic formulations it causes *trauma* and that the active perpetration of trauma through social systems is a form of oppression. Can we allow for the ways that the enforcement of a digital interface can cause trauma? Why do we defend our institutional choices around platform and interface so fiercely? I see this institutional reluctance as a form of opposition to Queerness.

Part 3: neuro-queering the digital

In trying to forge an alternative digital imaginary, I turn to Nick Walker (and a fair few other disability justice activists) who call for the work of neuro-queering. This will ultimately require changes on the level of our ontological convictions in order to allow for changes in process and social organisation of work. These are all underpinning changes which will *allow* us to account for pluralisation and diversity.

A neuro-queer digital has a plurality of interfaces which carry culture, cognition and difference in various ways. There might be a "cozy" choice here for everyone. This requires modular tools and customisation against centralising forms of aggregation. This is because, I would argue (along with other indyweb activists) that the more individual features you stack together which share a particular aesthetic, the more hegemonic that aesthetic becomes. Promoting digital tool modularity, especially with third-party / standards based access to data and application backend, is a digital accessibility practice inasmuch as it enables end-users to make choices regarding tools that work best for them.

In a related way the hacker/maker community has been a safe haven for neurodivergent techies for years now (myself included) in part because of the accessibility difficulties presented by mainstream options. Accessibility through hackability requires a developer to expose the guts of their system for modification, potentially beyond their own imagined purposes. The utter baseline here is a good API and open-source code, but one can go much further, collaborating with end-users around experimentation and design, presenting early beta with rough edges, and supporting end-user communities to "push back" and make requests.

This sounds simple enough, but it leaves me wanting to ask the question of why most HEI organisations have gone in the opposite direction – adopting expensive proprietary, highly-integrated third party platforms which are selected in the context of covert high-level product adoption processes. And asking this question presses us into wider issues of structural change which are a prerequisite for meaningful digital accessibility.

I want to suggest that two major blocks to the kinds of organisational culture which can support digital experimentation, open tools, and modularity are hierarchy and beurocratisation. The role of the IT Manager (and I say this as someone who has occupied this vocation) as it has evolved is to standardise and streamline management of IT infrastructure. Seen in this way, the key objective here is to maximize interlocking of tools so that costs can be aggregated and potential expense of risks minimised. This results is a push for outsourcing, the enforcement of tool homogeneity and surveillance of end-users towards maximally programmatic rule-sets. If we use the definition of accessibility I've defined above, this role can become an agent of digital inaccessibility and a barrier to disability justice. To give another example, in a more complex way, the "Digital Accessibility Specialist" (or the end-users who are co-opted to function as a free proxy for this role) can be made into compliance engineers. If you're handed the Microsoft model, do you embrace it and seek to make it as good as it can possibly be for your users? This will have the result of further enforcing the hegemony of those tools.

There is a lot of exciting work emerging in creative firms around leaderless teams and more collaborative forms of deliberation around process and design. The digital justice challenge here is to shift the focal point of IT accountability back to *all* end-users and enable the cultural changes which support such a shift. Costs and liability can be minimised, but if narrow minded cost-benefit calculus drives process, there's an inevitable hit on creativity, flexibility, end-user satisfaction, productivity (though it is important to be transparent about how such a thing is measured) and ultimately wellbeing for disabled staff. To head towards a concluding point: we cannot undertake these forms of digital life without the requisite political and cultural shifts towards digital justice. Much hinges on what sort of "wellbeing" we imagine and who we imagine it for.

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1. cf. Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (U Minneapolis Press, 2015), "Patriarchal white nation-states and universities insist on producing cultural difference in order to manage the existence and claims of Indigenous people. In this way the production of knowledge about cultural specificity is complicit with state requirements for manageable forms of difference that are racially configured through whiteness," xvii. ↩