

Bionic Woman (2007): gender, disability and cyborgs

Margaret M. Quinlan and Benjamin R. Bates

Ohio University, USA

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This paper explores a representation of overlapping categories of gender, disability and cyborgs in *Bionic Woman* (2007). The television show *Bionic Woman* (2007) is a popular culture representation that uniquely brings together these categories. Three themes emerged from an analysis of blogger discourse surrounding the show. The themes reveal significant disempowering potentialities for women, individuals with and without disabilities and cyborgs. Conclusions and implications of these themes are offered.

Introduction

Bionic Woman (2007) is an American science fiction television drama. The series is a remake of the 1970s television series *The Bionic Woman* and based on Martin Caiden's novel, *Cyborg* (1972). The original *The Bionic Woman* (1970s) starred Lindsay Wagner as Jaime Sommers, a tennis professional nearly killed in a sky diving accident, but rebuilt similar to *The Six Million Dollar Man* (1974). As the result of her surgical implants, Jaime Sommers possessed augmented hearing, a strengthened right arm and enhanced legs, enabling her to run faster than a speeding car.

The new show preserves the same premise in a more contemporary setting. The series revolves around Jaime Sommers (Michele Ryan), a woman who was in a car accident that caused her to lose two legs, one arm and her unborn child. We learn in the premiere that her boyfriend, Will, implanted experimental medical devices to fix her and provided her with a new super-hearing ear and super-seeing eye, as well as a prosthetic arm and two legs. We also learn that Will staged the accident in which Jamie was injured. After he reveals this information to Jaime, he is killed under mysterious circumstances. While adjusting to her new bionic powers and raising her younger sister, Becca, Jaime begins to work for the shadowy governmental organisation that performed her surgery (see National Broadcasting Company (NBC) *Bionic Woman* website http://www.nbc.com/Bionic_Woman/about/). Her work there is unclear, but the organisation is dedicated to stopping rogue elements from destroying world civilisation. Shortly after joining the organisation, Jamie encounters her arch-nemesis, the evil cyborg Sarah Corvus, and realises

she must use her powers to save the world. And, like the original, this Jaime Sommers is faster, stronger and more powerful and, thus, better able to fight evil. According to Heath (2007), the first episode of *Bionic Woman* (2007) had over 13 million viewers, the largest number to view television during this time slot since the premiere of *The West Wing* (1999).

The purpose of this essay is to investigate the ways in which *Bionic Woman* (2007) uniquely brings together understandings of gender, disability and cyborgs by integrating disability and feminist theories with cybertheory. Haraway (1985), a leading feminist cyborg theorist, argued that we must attend to language, the body, and the ways discourse communicatively constructs our understandings of the self and other. Therefore, we argue that journalistic and blogger discourse surrounding media representations of gender, disability and cyborgs may have implications for how individuals come to understand these categories. Three themes emerged from this analysis: (1) distinctions between Jaime's old (normal) life and new (cyborg) life; (2) (hetero)sexualisation of the disabled cyborg body; and (3) technology as the answer to disability. The remake of this show can be uniquely addressed by perspectives from three bodies of literature: media representation of gender, of disability, and of cyborgs.

Review of relevant literature

Media representation plays a large role in how we construct reality. Although McQuail (1987) outlines the claims of strong and ideologically controlling media influence from the Marxist-inspired and the Frankfurt schools of criticism, and although Noelle-Neumann (1984) strongly argues for a direct effects model grounded in social-psychological research and quantitative methodologies, media representations may not have a simple linear relationship with the social construction of reality.

Rather than having direct effects on viewers' understandings, Condit (1989) and Dow (1996) argue that television texts are rhetorical entities, that they are persuasive texts. Condit (1989, p. 115) posits that television programmes introduce 'certain limited pieces of information to different ranges of audiences at different times.' That is, in the production of media, the decisions

made by media producers can limit the interpretive materials available to audiences by not selecting some materials and can encourage audiences to accept some information by making it more available. Not only do these become the most available materials to the audience members, Dow (1996, p. 7) claims that these selections ‘work to make some ideas, positions, and alternatives more attractive, accessible, and powerful to audiences than others.’ Although dominant understandings of issues and topics emerge from these media and are often reflected in the beliefs and attitudes of audience members (McQuail, 1987; Noelle-Neumann, 1984), audiences should not be seen as duped by the dominant culture. Audience members can, and do, provide resistant readings in which they have the opportunity to ‘resist, alter, and reappropriate the materials’ (Radway, 1984, p. 17) and in which ‘viewers have considerable control, not only over [the text’s] meanings, but over the role that it plays in their lives’ (Fiske, 1987, p. 74). Nevertheless, the additional cognitive energy and the strong commitments to these alternative constructions needed for successful resistance make it easier for the reader to accept the dominant perspective shown on television than to generate resistant readings (Condit, 1989). Moreover, when the audience is considered as a whole, the dominant messages encoded in a text are more likely to be decoded by the consumer than an emergent oppositional reading (Dow 1996; Fiske, 1987; Gitlin, 1982). As such, it is important to understand the dominant messages about gender, disability and cyborgs in the mass media.

Gender

Scholars have attended to the ways media portray women (Arthurs, 2003; Balsamo, 1996; Dow, 1996; Hendricks, 2002; McKay & Covell, 1997; Moseley & Read, 2002; Saukko, 2006). Media representation often influences women’s beliefs about themselves, their behaviours and their social roles. For example, Balsamo (1996) found that media representations of female bodies tend to reinforce the dominant cultural order by sexualising female bodies as objects. McKay and Covell (1997) found that individuals shown sex image advertisements reported attitudes supportive of sexual aggression.

Arthurs (2003) claimed that, in shows such as *Sex and the City*, women choose to engage in heterosexually attractive behaviour. Moreover, these behaviours are recurring representations of gender that emerged in the late 1990s and continue to dominate today’s television schedules (Moseley & Read, 2002). Hendricks (2002) found that television exposure to body image content predicted body satisfaction in women, with women who diverge the most from the televised norm, either under- or overweight, most dissatisfied with their bodies. Similarly, Saukko (2006) found that media images construct normative notions of female bodies. Altogether, these studies agree that there is a dominant representation of women that is disempowering and marginalising and that sexualises women as objects. Each author called for alternative representations. Because *Bionic Woman* (2007) is

potentially an empowering representation, we believe it should be critically analysed.

The construction of one marker of difference – be it sex, race or sexual orientation – creates a form of political essentialism in which only one difference is held to make a difference at any time. The argument is often constructed, as Lloyd (2005, p. 37) puts it, because it ‘assumes not only that what unites the group is somehow intrinsic to it but what a group shares transcends history, culture, and geography’ (see also, McRuer, 1997). The difficulty with this perspective of one binary that overrides all others is that, even as it assigns political capital to the binary it emphasises, it detracts from the meaningful differences that may arise from other binaries that become de-emphasised in this construction. Lloyd (2005) later explains that the decision to privilege one binary as superseding all others forgets two things. First, it forgets that each individual body builds its identity not from a fixed ahistorical and acultural position, but from its own productive resources and historical conditions. Second, it forgets that identity is not simply fixed on one pole of a privileged binary but has ‘a kaleidoscopic nature’ in which ‘multiple fragments intersect to produce individuated subjects’ (Lloyd (2005, p. 51). Therefore, we turn to two other significant fragments in the *Bionic Woman* (2007): disability and cyborgs.

Disability

Other scholars have studied media representations of disability (Barnes, 1992; Berube, 1997; Donaldson, 1981; Haller, 2000a, 2000b; Hardin, Hardin, Lynn & Walsdorf, 2001; Harnett, 2000; Harris, 2002; Longmore, 1987; Mitchell & Snyder, 2001; Nelson, 1994, 2000; Smart, 2001; Snyder & Mitchell, 2001; Zola, 1991). Media may have a strong influence on how society views people with disabilities. Harris (2002, p. 144) argued that ‘many people have no contact with disabled people [and] so gain their knowledge of disability from mass media.’ Because most individuals do not have direct contact with people with disabilities, Makas (1993, p. 256) held that ‘many of us rely heavily on the technological media to serve as our interpreters’ for understanding people with disabilities.

This reliance on the mass media may create distorted views of disability because mass media often presents stereotypes of people living with disabilities. For example, Barnes (1992), Cumberbatch and Negrine (1992), and Longmore (1987) argue that the mass media usually portray people with disabilities as bitter, dependent or criminal, if the portrayal is meant to be negative, or as exceptionally courageous or winners of special compensatory gifts, if the portrayal is meant to be positive. Indeed, individuals with disabilities in the mass media are often shown only because they have a disability; all other personal characteristics are effaced in favour of a nearly exclusive focus on the individual’s disability (Makas, 1993). In particular, so-called courageous individuals with disabilities are those who supposedly overcome their disabilities. If they cannot, it is because there is something wrong with the individual (Zola, 1991); if they can, they are called special because

they live a regular life in spite of disability (Haller, 2000a). In addition to these stereotypes, Berube (1997) argues that portrayals of disability in the media are often riddled with errors presented as fact. If most people learn about disability from the media, and if those messages are filled with simplifying stereotypes and inaccurate information, it should not be surprising that many people will hold mis- or under-informed opinions about people with disabilities.

In addition to these representations, disability scholars have examined how media represent the sexuality of individuals with disabilities (Chenoweth, 1993; Nemeth, 2000; Tilley, 1996; Quinlan & Bates, 2008; White et al., 1993; Zola, 1993). According to Nemeth (2000) and Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sells and Davies (1996), media and societal messages indicate that the American public fails to perceive people with disabilities as sexual beings. The public's general failure to perceive individuals with disabilities as sexual beings may be because, as Tilley (1996, p. 140) emphasised, an ableist society expects women to fit their gender role, which is 'defined by a traditional heterosexual marriage complete with children and probably a job.' This definition implies that a complete woman is married, employed and able to participate in all other major life activities. Moreover, many individuals with disability themselves accept these definitions and make themselves subject to these limitations (Asch & Fine, 1997). In contrast to the dominant representation as asexual, Quinlan and Bates (2008) analysed Heather Mills's performances on *Dancing with the Stars* and found that Mills emerged as a sexual subject, not the disabled object that many disability scholars would expect. This representation, however, is not the only possibility. For example, Fiedler (1978) and Norden (1994) each found an erotic potential for the disabled body: Fiedler found that, although individuals with disabilities had long been portrayed as asexual freaks, post-Sexual Revolution politics made them objects of kinky, read as abnormal, desire; Norden (1994) argued that individuals with disabilities are portrayed as either virginal innocents awaiting their sexual awakening by a more experienced (and able-bodied) partner or as excessively libidinal and lustful (usually following such sexual awakening). We agree with Cherney (2001, p. 166) that viewing the body of individuals with disability as either 'asexual or malignantly sexual extends a marginalizing wall protecting ableist views of the disabled body as other' and works to protect 'ableism as a legitimate social (and sexual) practice.' *Bionic Woman* (2007) may provide an alternative, and perhaps more positive, representation of disability. Moreover, because these themes are similar to the findings of media representation and gender, examining this artefact may provide richer understanding of images of women with disabilities, rather than examining these categories separately.

Cyborgs

In addition to being a woman and an individual with a disability, the bionic woman is explicitly a cyborg. Haraway (1991, p. 181) defined a cyborg as a 'cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of

social reality as well as a creature of fiction.' Fictional cyborgs, such as the bionic woman, are enactments of this synthesis of organic and synthetic parts (Haraway, 1991). There is much study of both real life and fictional cyborgs (Balsamo, 1996; Bostic, 1998; Consalvo, 2004; Springer, 1996; Tomas, 1995). Moreover, these representations call our attention to society's discomfort to our cyborg society (Gray, 1995), one in which changes in the human body contribute to technologies that engage and replace humans.

Feminist scholars interested in cyborg theory have asked how gender and bodies should interrelate as well as how bodies should or should not be enhanced. The implications of cyborg constructions for women have been developed by a number of feminist theorists (see Balsamo, 1996; Haraway, 1997; Kirkup, Janes, Woodward & Hovenden, 2000; Springer, 1996). In explaining these implications, Kirkup (2000, p. 5) asked 'Is it better to be a cyborg than a woman?' – a challenge to Haraway's (1991, p. 181) claim that she would 'rather be a cyborg than a goddess.' Kirkup argued that, although Haraway correctly chooses between becoming a forward-looking cyborg instead of an antiquated goddess on a virtual plane, Haraway fails to account for the here-and-now experiences of women. Haraway's initial argument implied that there was a choice between two forms of virtual existence – being a cyborg or a goddess – and Kirkup's response implied a choice between being a virtual cyborg or an actual woman. However, this argument does allow for being both, and in virtuality and actuality. Although cyborg theory is an ideal virtual orientation towards the body that claims to erase gender categories, actual cyborgs in the dominant representation are gendered and are understood by audiences to be gendered.

One cannot, therefore, simply appeal to a virtual ideal to ignore how cyborgs become gendered; one must look to how gender is performed by here-and-now cyborgs. Balsamo (1996) cited tensions between utopian possibilities and dystopian realities in her reading of cyborg women. Although technology enables us to reconfigure the body, old cultural standards prevail; cosmetic surgery allows women to better conform to female beauty standards, and women are harassed in cyberspace (Tomas, 1995). Representations of cyborgs have also focused on images of hyper-masculinity and reinforced cultural standards for men (Balsamo, 1996; Grosz, 1994; Kirkup, 2000; Springer, 1996). Indeed, Springer (1996) claimed that popular images of cyborgs are filled with gender contradictions demanding examination and that popular culture often promotes technologised bodies and degrades the inferiority of the bodies they replace, making essential the study of these bodies and their representations.

Although there has been substantial discussion of the intersection of gender and cyborgs, a smaller body of literature has explored the implications of cyborg constructions for disability. Cyborg theory has often been criticised for ignoring ability (Thomson, 1997). Some disability scholars, however, have discussed connections

between disability and cyborg theory (Cherney, 1999; Meekosha, 1999; Thomson, 1997; Wendell, 1996). Cyborgs are assumed to bridge the relationship between ‘normal’ bodies and technologies, but individuals with disabilities are often seen as illegitimate fusions of bodies and machines like wheelchairs, prosthetic limbs and cochlear implants (Thompson, 1997).

As such, Thompson (1997) claimed that individuals with disabilities who take on cyborg characteristics are considered to be an inferior form of cyborg. According to Cherney (1999), a cyborg was envisioned as an advantage for all humans but specifically as a solution to fix individuals with disabilities. Cyborg theory has traditionally assumed a fully functioning human and a fully functioning machine. However, it does not consider what happens when humans and machines are not fully functioning. Although scholars have investigated intersections of gender and cyborg as well as of disability and cyborg, considering all three together has potential for seeing overlapping contradictions and tensions, which may create new forms of cyborgs, and for seeing how dominant understandings of gender and disability constrain these representations. *Bionic Woman* (2007) is a good popular culture integration of gender, disability and cyborg.

In Queer studies, McRuer (1997) argues that a concentration on a single narrative or position that can be assigned to all gays and lesbians creates limited possibilities for understanding the multiple and shifting identities of actual gay and lesbian individuals. He notes that there has been such a focus on the ‘coming out’ story that this narrative has come to ‘signify the sole assertion of one’s [supposedly long-repressed] identity,’ but that the reduction of GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual) individuals to a unifying ‘coming out’ narrative fails to address how gay and lesbian identities ‘are interested by other arenas of difference’ such as age, class, race or other markers of advantage or disadvantage (McRuer, 1997, p. 36).

Method

To examine how viewers engage *Bionic Woman* (2007), we examined journalistic and blogger discourse. To do so, a Google Alert was set up to alert the first author and gather material relevant to *Bionic Woman* (2007). The search term ‘bionic woman’ was also entered into the America’s Newspapers database to retrieve articles published between 4 July 2007 (2 months before the premiere) and 1 November 2007 (1 month after the premiere). A total of 243 articles, 453 blogs and various promotional materials were analysed for emergent themes. The thematic approach used was inductive in nature and placed emphasis on the use of collected discourse to guide the creation of key arguments, concepts and theoretical contributions (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). The first step in the analysis process required recognition of recurring themes that emerged from observations and documents (Patton, 1990). Throughout the discourse collection process, new themes surfaced, requiring constant re-evaluation of the discourse. As themes flowed from discourse surrounding *Bionic Woman* (2007),

we constructed an understanding of a popular culture representation that uniquely brings together gender, disability and cyborgs. After themes were identified, representative exemplars were retained for closer reading. This reading of the discourse found three themes: (1) distinctions between Jaime’s old (normal) life and new (cyborg) life; (2) (hetero)sexualisation of the disabled cyborg body; and (3) technology as the answer to disability.

Analysis

The 1970s version of *The Bionic Woman* and the 2007 *Bionic Woman* addressed the role of women in society in different ways. The two versions reflect the times in America when they aired. *Bionic Woman* creator David Eick said in an interview that, in the 1970s, the Equal Rights Amendment, women’s liberation and similar issues were ‘in the zeitgeist and *The Bionic Woman* was the first television show where the female in the superhero show or in the action show was not the wife of or the girlfriend of or the mother of the guy.’ Whereas, in the 1970s, Eick thought the show’s ‘statement was very simple – See, women can do what men do’, but, in the present day, ‘here are a lot of different discussions being had now. It’s not so much can a woman do what a man can do? It’s if the answer’s yes, what does that mean?’ (Rubinoff, 2007). The show’s creator indicated that the bionic woman enacts more than a supportive familial role. The statement that the old version was simple implied that it lacks the complexity of the 2007 version. The 2007 version has a similar premise of a woman superhero but explores the affective implications of this premise. Some viewers may be pleased, others may resist, and still others may model to do what men can do. As these (bionic) women are constructed uniquely to be superheroes and fight evil, their expansion of the place of women may also spark conversations regarding what women are and what they can be.

Similarly, Keveney (2007), a writer for *USA Today*, commented that we judge men and women differently when we see them playing the same roles. Keveney quoted the executive producer who said, ‘In the old days, it was about “women can do everything men can do. ...” Today, it’s more about if we can accept that women can do what men can do, do we judge it differently?’ (Keveney, 2007, p. 02d) Although some reviewers suggest questions that the new version of *Bionic Woman* (2007) offers, they do not indicate the answers. Because these questions are not being answered directly in public discourse, it is the role of the critic to seek possible answers to these questions (Dow, 1996; McGee, 1990). Our analysis of blogger and online reviewers’ discourse surrounding *Bionic Woman* (2007) offers potential answers.

Distinctions between Jaime’s old (normal) life and new (cyborg) life

The first theme that emerged was the notion that Jaime Sommers, after her car accident and rebuilding as a cyborg (new Jaime), was different from Jaime Sommers before the accident (old Jaime). Old Jaime was portrayed as a normal woman with everyday relationship struggles and family

issues. After the accident, however, bloggers, reviewers and online commenters position the protagonist as wanting to return to her pre-bionic normal life. They portray new Jaime as distinct from old Jaime by providing evidence of the transitions she had to make as a cyborg. Britt Raybould (2007), on her blog *Bold Words*, said: ‘This new iteration uses the same basic premise. A “normal” woman, through a series of events, is “rebuilt” and ends up with super-human skills and healing abilities, courtesy of a shadowy government group.’ According to Raybould, old Jaime was a normal woman, but new Jaime is a cyborg and, as such, can no longer be normal, because a normal woman is never a cyborg. A super-human is more than human, but not necessarily better than human. Raybould appears to define normal as that which is given to us at birth by our parents through an organic process and in contrast to that which is constructed or rebuilt. Raybould, however, makes clear that Jaime’s new body was built by a governmental agency for unknown purposes, which may mean that her new life is unnatural and may even be designed for evil purposes. Jaime’s old life, in contrast, may be understood as natural, and therefore proper and moral.

Similarly, Kelly West, in her review of *Bionic Woman* (2007) on the Cinema Blend website, wrote on 11 September 2007 that

‘Jaime Sommers (Michelle Ryan) is a fairly normal (though strikingly beautiful) woman. Her mother is dead and her father is out of the picture so she’s left to look after her teen-aged sister, Becca (Lucy Hale) ... We also learn that Jaime is a bartender and dating a professor/Bionic scientist, Will (Chris Bowers).’
(West, 2007)

According to West, a normal woman is a parent, gainfully employed, heterosexual and attractive. By implication, any woman who is not a parent, employed, heterosexual and attractive is most likely not normal. After the accident, Jaime’s normal status is taken away from her. She loses her baby in a car accident, which takes her away from the proper enactment of being a parent. In addition, Jaime’s boyfriend was killed after he provided Jaime with bionic replacement parts, preventing Jaime from becoming pregnant again by her boyfriend.

After the accident, Jaime was seen by bloggers, reviewers and commenters as having difficulty adjusting to her new self as a bionic woman. Viewers believed that Jaime wished to return to her normal life before the accident. Jones (2007) said on the Criticize This reviews website: ‘With Will’s help, Jaime escapes the confines of the secret facility and attempts to resume her pre-accident life, but finds it challenging given her new powers.’ After Jaime’s ‘disability event’, viewers believed that Jaime could not return to normality, and, even if she attempted to return, the challenges would be nearly insurmountable. The overall discourse implied that any disability is enough to severely limit a return. In *USA Today*, Keveney (2007, p. 2d) wrote, ‘Jaime wants to go back to her old life, including a

bartending job and a younger sister. But when self-absorption leads to disaster in connection with a mission, “she has a wake up”, Ryan says. “It’s the moment she realizes there’s no going back”.’ The notion of wanting to return to life before the accident is a common theme in literature portraying people who have experienced a traumatic event (i.e., rape, accidents, divorce, war). As a person with disabilities, Jaime Sommers cannot go back to work or fully parent in the same way. Moreover, Keveney (2007) in *USA Today* implied that Jaime’s attempt to return to normalcy was an act of self-absorption. Individuals with disabilities are expected to accept their new being, not expect accommodations that would allow them to live a more normal life as they did previously. An individual with a disability who wants accommodations is depicted as selfish, self-involved and unable to see the effect their calls for their accommodation has on others.

In addition to being accused of selfishness, Jaime was seen by viewers as upset about becoming disabled and angry at those who rebuilt her. Jones (2007) wrote:

‘Sommers is understandably freaked and angry when she realizes she’s now half woman, half machine. Not to mention the fact that the mysterious organization that’s reluctantly provided her these new parts wants a piece of the action. Their plan – to make her into their latest cyborg soldier after the last one they experimented on, Sarah Corvus (Sackhoff), turned against them ... and is now functioning as a rogue agent.’

It appeared that viewers believed that Jaime was angry with her changed body. Jaime was also angry with her boyfriend for forcing this change on her. Being angry is a coping strategy that some individuals with disabilities use after experiencing a disabling event. Yet, unlike the rogue Sarah Corvus, who is mad at the institution responsible for her cyborg body, Jaime had not made the same inferential leap and is judged by the audience to be angry at the cyborg body itself. Jaime Sommers was allowed to be upset at herself and her boyfriend as individual agents and still remain heroic. However, should Jaime become angry at the institution, as Sarah did, this viewer’s reading of the show’s narrative implied that Jaime too would become a villain.

To avoid this so-called misdirected anger, viewers believed that Jaime had to undergo self-discovery to cope with her new circumstances. Keveney (2007, p. 2d) stated: ‘Michelle Ryan, the updated Bionic Woman, says success ultimately depends on the character’s humanity and relationships, not any superpower ... At the core, it’s a young woman’s journey of self-discovery.’ A news release from the Seven network (enews.com) in Australia said: ‘Ultimately, it’s Jaime’s journey of self-discovery and inner strength that will help her embrace her new life as the Bionic Woman.’ It was not Jaime’s superpowers that allowed Jaime to cope, but her humanity. These statements imply that all people with disabilities need to recover their humanity (i.e., seek inner, not physical, strength). If Jaime Sommers were to fail

in this journey, these viewers would assign the fault to Jaime's lack of fortitude. Interestingly, all of the pressure to adjust is on Jaime, viewers do not appear to see an obligation on the part of her boyfriend (while he was still alive) or the governmental agency to help. This demand for the person with a disability to experience self-discovery and recovery obviates responsibility that members of the community have for accommodating individuals with disabilities.

(Hetero)sexualisation of the disabled cyborg body

In *Bionic Woman* (2007), the second theme that emerged was the heteronormative sexualisation of the female body. Richard Clune (2007), writing for News Corp. (news.com.au) in Australia, was the only author we found who claimed that Jaime was not flaunting her sexuality. He said: 'It's great to have someone who isn't flaunting her sexuality. She's sexy, but she doesn't use that, she's very grounded.' However, most of the blogs portrayed the female characters, Jaime and her antagonist, Sarah Corvus, in highly (hetero)sexualised ways.

First, some individuals emphasised Jaime Sommers as being 'hot' and having attractive body parts. Harnick (2007), writing for *Pipe Dreams* (bupipedream.com), the Binghamton University student newspaper, wrote: "Bionic Woman" has all the makings to be NBC's next big hit. There's a strong [and hot] female lead, lots of action and seeds of an underlying season-long plot.' It appeared that viewers would accept Jaime as the hero because she was both strong and attractive. If Jaime was unattractive, viewers may have believed that she could not be the bionic woman. Additionally, if she was weak and attractive, she would not be able to be the hero of the story. These general judgements from viewers were supplemented by writers who described specific body parts that make her attractive. For example, McKenzie (2007), in the *National Post* (communities.canada.com) in Canada, wrote: 'Michelle Ryan is "beautiful". Hot, yes, but also beautiful. She has these great green eyes, and a moon face like in some Picassos when shown straight-on.' McKenzie may have needed to use both adjectives because each draws out a different kind of attraction that one can feel towards Michele Ryan. His choice of the word 'hot' points to fiery passions heterosexual men should feel, but the term 'beautiful' may have allowed him to point to standards of art – that Ryan can be admired much like a painting by great artists – which all men and women can admire.

Some people talked more frankly about body parts they found attractive. Some writers on online forums about the show commented on Michele Ryan's breasts. Hamish (2007) said on the bit-tech forum (forums.bit-tech.net): 'its ok, im mostly watching for boobs though they managed to get a thoroughly excellent Michelle Ryan cleavage shot in the second ep :cool: .' Another person who posted on the Geek Monthly blog (geekmonthly.com), Ryuji (2007), wondered: 'Will she have machine guns in her breasts? Watch out Austin Powers.' Some viewers may have been drawn in by Jaime's beauty, but these viewers may also feel

that he or she can look, but not touch, because the character is capable of hurting him or her. The writers' reference to *Austin Powers* and the fembots – characters who shot bullets from guns hidden in their breasts – displayed this danger.

Cal commented on Hibberd's (2007) TV Week blog (tvweek.com/blogs) regarding aspects of Jaime's body that he found unattractive. Cal said: 'She's a fat faced fat assed hog.' Six Million Dollar Man, a different writer on the same blog, claimed that he would engage in sexual intercourse with Jaime's character. He said: 'She's hot. I'd hit it!!' In these two quotations, Jaime was being compared to an animal (i.e., a hog) whose only purpose was to be degraded. The other commenter said that he would have sex with this science fiction character. His screen name, Six Million Dollar Man, may imply that the writer feels the need to become equally bionic to be able to have intercourse. After all, he may need to compensate for his own biological inadequacies to be able to attract this bionic woman.

These voyeuristic fantasies, however, are countered by some bloggers, reviewers or commenters who contended that Jaime did not have control over her own body and sexuality. Maggie (2007) on her Bootstrap Productions blog (bootstrap-productions.blogspot.com) commented:

'[T]he main character is a total victim the whole way through, with no agency at all – zero – about her home life ... her job, where she's meaningless ... her body before the accident, since she has accidentally gotten pregnant; her body after the accident, where she's turned into a Borg without her permission; her life after the accident.'

Maggie accused the producers of framing Jaime as a victim. Maggie held that, when Jaime lost control over her body, she also lost control over other aspects of her life, home and job. Schmevil (2007), commenting on the Rivkat blog (rivkat.livejournal.com), even accused the producers of technological rape, writing: 'Yes he's crossing the boyfriend/husband material line! So considerate. Girls love it when their guys do things to them in their sleep ... don't they? Maybe it's just me.' For Schmevil, Jaime could not say no and was expected to live with her violated body. Similarly, victims of rape have their bodies violated without consent, but are expected to live with the consequences. Nevertheless, despite this technological rape, Sommers was expected by viewers to be grateful.

Technology as answer to disability

The third theme that emerged from the discourse was connected to Jaime's bionic body and similar themes found in disability studies literature. First, viewers offered the assumption that individuals with disabilities should be grateful to technology for restoring them to 'normal'. An anonymous commenter responding to Aaron Miller's online review on the *Louisville Courier-Journal* website (courier-journal.com/blogs) ridiculed Jaime for not being

grateful for being saved by her boyfriend and these new technologies, writing: ‘Summer [sic] should have been grateful to be alive ... and more confused than lashing out as a tortured soul.’

Although the viewer learns in the first episode that the accident in which Jaime was almost killed was staged (and that, therefore, Sommers was justifiably angry that someone nearly killed her for the purposes of unauthorised, exploitative scientific experimentation), many viewers failed to realise that Jaime was not upset with her prostheses per se. Although one could read Jaime as being angry because she was manipulated and forced into a situation where she would need prostheses, most viewers read Jaime as being angry for becoming disabled.

Robert (2007), commenting on the bit-tech online forum (forums.bit-tech.net), believed that Jaime was made better than before but had to confuse fantasy and reality to do so. He compared Jaime, a science fiction character, with actor Christopher Reeve. He wrote: ‘First, she was ungrateful that not only was her life saved, but she was made better than ever? Too bad it was wasted on her rather than Christopher Reeve.’ Robert falsely lumped individuals with disabilities together. In reality, Jaime’s need for prosthetics after an accident is very different from Reeve because he was a real person, not a science fiction character. Also, Reeve’s assistive technology did not make him bigger, faster or stronger; it merely allowed him to live. Robert’s comparison was offensive even to Superman because Robert was unable to separate his judgement of the ‘real’ disabled from the ‘reel’ disabled. Furthermore, in real life, there is no technology that would have allowed Reeves to walk, let alone run faster than a speeding bullet.

Jaime, another commenter on the bit-tech forum (forums.bit-tech.net), argued that the bionic woman should not hate her partner because he replaced her limbs. She said: ‘I think my major gripe with the first episode is that the woman that gets her limbs replaced suddenly hates her partner simply because he replaced her limbs. I mean, wtf [vulgarity], I would be happier to have some uber [superior] artificial limbs than nothing.’ Although one should not embrace the idea that all individuals with disabilities always live happy, fulfilled lives, one must also avoid this blogger’s error of assuming that individuals with disabilities who do not seek out advanced technology embrace a life of nothing. There are many people (with and without disabilities) who live in between this false binary of everything and nothing. Also, the idea that all prostheses lead to relief is simply false; individuals with amputations may experience irritations, phantom limb or chafing, all of which demonstrate that prostheses are not a panacea.

Although prostheses are not perfect solutions, most reviewers, bloggers and commenters in our analysis argued that individuals who have limbs replaced with prostheses

should be relieved to receive prostheses and grateful to modern medicine. In perhaps the strongest objection to the Bionic Woman’s portrayal of Jaime’s anger, Richard Leis (2007) wrote in a review on his Frontier Channel website (frontierchannel.com): ‘Modern medicine is marvelous.’ He further posited:

‘We know from experience that most people in pain, experiencing great suffering, or nearing death, will, no matter what their prior belief system, embrace relief. Relief is so obviously joyful that relief as horror as depicted in fiction simply rings false, yet writers go back to the same dark well over and over again.’
(Leis, 2007)

Leis says that writers of *Bionic Woman* (2007) misunderstand the joys of prosthetics. Because Jaime did not celebrate her bionic renewal, Leis argues that the writers misrepresent a cure for disability. Leis’s argument perpetuates the belief that individuals with disabilities are indebted to modern technology. This indebtedness further disempowers individuals with disabilities in that they should be grateful to medicine and technology rather than holding any negative feelings towards their disabling event.

Conclusions and implications

We believe that *Bionic Woman* (2007) uniquely brings together representations of gender, disability and cyborgs. Our analysis of journalistic and blogger discourse found three themes that revealed significant disempowering potentialities for individuals. The first was Jaime’s old life versus her new life. There were several components to this theme. The first subtheme was that Jaime’s new life was not normal. This component reminded us that bodies of individuals with disabilities are often compared to bodies of so-called normally functioning individuals without disabilities (Snyder & Mitchell, 2001; Thompson, 1997). Therefore, individuals with disabilities are often compared to ideal standards and disempowered because, outside the world of science fiction, individuals with disabilities often cannot meet these standards. The second subtheme was that a normal woman is not a cyborg. Instead, a normal woman is an individual who is married, has kids, and is employed. For women with disabilities, there is pressure to fit within these gender roles (Tilley, 1996). Since Jaime lost her boyfriend and her unborn child and could not return to her pre-cyborg life, she became an ‘abnormal’ woman. Individuals with disabilities often face a double strike if they are a woman with a disability (Chenoweth, 1993). Jaime became superhuman, which also means she is not quite human. Similar to Garland Thomson’s (1997) claim that replacing the term ‘abnormal’ with the term ‘extraordinary’ does not emancipate individuals with disability, changing the image of the individual from abnormal human to superhuman still works to make them Other (Bates, 2005). Moreover, in this representation, individuals with disabilities, because they are viewed as not normal, are expected to want to return to normalcy (Thompson, 1997). Cyborged individuals with disabilities

in this representation were expected to be new and improved. However, it was unclear from the series and the discourse whether Jaime Sommers was pleased with her new bionic status. The third subtheme indicated by bloggers, reviewers and commenters was that Jaime was expected to go through a period of self-discovery and find her humanity through inner strength, yet she was also called self-absorbed when she attempted to do so.

The second theme discovered in the discourse was the (hetero)sexualisation of the disabled cyborg body. The disability literature indicates that individuals with disabilities are rarely perceived as sexual because of a narrow definition for whom proper sexual relationships are reserved (Nemeth 2000; Zola, 1991) or, if they are perceived as sexual, it is often as a fetish (Fiedler, 1978; Norden, 1994). Because Jaime's bionic limbs look real, her disability becomes invisible. Indeed, according to many bloggers, reviewers and commenters, Jaime fits the standard ideal of beauty, an idea firmly rooted in ableist notions, and, because she fits, sexual interest in her need not be seen as abnormal. The first subtheme was the tension between Jaime being strong, vulnerable and beautiful. Similarly, Arthurs (2003) indicated that women have recently been shown the tensions between being strong, beautiful and vulnerable. A second subtheme was that bloggers, reviewers and online commenters focused on Jaime's breasts, arms, face, buttocks and her performance of push-ups. Although, Haraway (1991) argued that the cyborg offered a gender-neutral position, Gray (1995) contended cyborgs always have a gender. Similar to Quinlan and Bates's (2008) analysis of Heather Mills's performances on *Dancing with the Stars*, Jaime's body was fragmented into parts to praise or degrade her.

The third subtheme was that bloggers, reviewers and commenters on the show were critical of Jaime's lack of control over her own body. Longmore (1987) pointed out that individuals with disabilities are often portrayed as lacking control. Similarly, women, individuals with disabilities and cyborgs are each judged by how they deviate from what we consider normal. As Jaime becomes a more 'normal' woman, she becomes less a cyborg and less an individual with disabilities. As Jaime becomes more of a cyborg, she becomes less of a woman, and less of an individual with a disability. Although the producers never developed Jaime as an individual with a disability, we believe that had the producers chosen to represent Jaime as an inferior woman, but a strong individual with disabilities and cyborg, she could not be the protagonist of the series. In this discourse, it is evident that one can never be a woman, an individual with a disability and a cyborg at the same time and the producers have to make a choice on how to portray their character. Additionally, *Bionic Woman* (2007) reinforces this argument by indicating that Jaime cannot have control as a cyborg or as a woman. Regardless of which of these dimensions becomes central to her identity, Jaime is already without control. Thus, the choice becomes being a woman or being an individual with a

disability or being cyborg, and all of these are always bad choices in this show's world.

The third theme was technology as the answer to disability. The first subtheme was that Jaime's only choice was to die or to use advanced technology. However, the irony was that she did not have a choice because her operations were performed on her while she was unconscious. Jaime did not have a choice to live as an individual with a disability. The implication of this theme was that Jaime was better off dead than living as a person with a disability. As Haller (2006, p. 113) claimed, some individuals hold the attitude that living with a disability is a 'fate worse than death.' The second subtheme was that prostheses are seen as relieving disability. However, we know that prostheses are not a panacea. The discourse surrounding *Bionic Woman* (2007) demonstrated a strong commitment to prostheses as repairs to the body. Its failure to address the social and cultural aspects of prostheses indicates the strong commitment society has to the biomedical model, even at the expense on alternative perspectives of how to live a fulfilling life as an individual with a disability (Jordan, 2004). The third subtheme was that Jaime was expected to be grateful for being rebuilt. Bloggers, reviewers and commenters saw Jaime as being selfish for feeling sorry for herself and being upset with her boyfriend. As Thompson (1997) indicated, individuals with disabilities are often expected to want to be returned to normalcy. Donaldson (1981, p. 415) claimed that individuals with disabilities are often portrayed as having 'some sort of stress, trauma, overcompensation, character flaws or bizarre behavioral tendencies.' Because individuals with disabilities are portrayed in this way, viewers may see prostheses as the only response; they have heard few other messages in popular discussions regarding how individuals with disabilities can respond to their disability event. This demand for gratitude tries to force individuals with disabilities to be thankful not only for their prostheses, but also for the disabling event that caused the need for the prosthesis.

As seen in *Bionic Woman*, when women, individuals with disabilities and cyborgs are presented, an individual body can only perform one of these roles at any one time. These choices in presentation reveal how *Bionic Woman* functions as a rhetorical entity; it chooses to present information and images of gender, disabilities and cyborgs as discrete categories only. This denial of space for overlap excludes the lived experience for many individuals with disabilities who want to be individuals with disabilities and women at the same time. We believe that an individual can be a woman, an individual with a disability and a cyborg at the same time, and that television can offer a rhetorical text that presents these images together. Therefore, we believe that media representations must become complex and creative enough to perform all three concurrently. If media representations present overlapping images, rather than discrete ones, they will present materials to the audience and allow audience members to see this complexity as the dominant message, not force them to invent resistant readings that capture this complexity. Although

representing various embodiments and performances of gender, disability and cyborgs may challenge producers' assumptions about what viewers want to see and dominant patterns of representations of individuals within these categories, we believe that audiences, producers and others are ready for multidimensional characters in complex enactments and that the bigger risk is in reproducing old images for fear of the consequences of offering new ones.

Address for correspondence

Margaret Quinlan,
School of Communication Studies,
Ohio University,
Athens,
Ohio 45701,
USA.
Email: quinlan.margaret@gmail.com.

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