Being other-wise: A tribute to the late Christopher Newell

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Abstract

This brief memoir is a personal tribute to the late Rev Canon Dr Christopher Newell AM (1964 ? 2008). Being the fourth year of the TJA prize in his honour, and nearly five years since Christopher?s unfortunate death, it seemed timely to again reflect on our relationship and the seminal contribution and challenge, as a person with disability, that Christopher made to the telecommunications industry and to inclusive customer service. I hope this will provide further insight into Christopher?s role and modus operandi as an agent of change; how he characterised himself as a ?critical friend? of the industry yet chose to enter into deep personal relationships with people who walked with him as he scooted along on his journey. In Christopher I found a deep conjunction of the personal and the professional, a priest and a professor, a saint and a rogue.

[Note: The views expressed in this paper are those of the author unless specifically referenced.]

Introduction

[5]The relationship between telecommunications technologies and people with disability continues to evolve rapidly. On the one hand, the remarkable innovation taking place with accessibility features for connected smart-phones and tablets (e.g. Apple?s VoiceOver feature) and assistive communications apps (e.g. Proloquo2Go), and the new features being added to the National Relay Service in Australia (cf. Telecommunications Universal Service Management Agency 2013[6]), are proving a boon to many people with disability. On the other hand, the increasing popularity of IPTV, video on demand and other streaming multimedia services in a high-capacity broadband world comes with significant technical challenges in providing consistent captioning and audio-description options across all devices and services. Then there is the nascent National Disability Insurance Scheme (now called DisabilityCare Australia) and its still uncertain relationship to telecommunications services as an important enabler, including for telework (cf. Hawkins 2011 [7]; Colmar Brunton Research and Deloitte Access Economics 2012[8]).

It is within these often ambiguous and ambivalent relations between technology and people with disability that Christopher worked. From a very early age his life seemed to be lived in relationship to disability and technology, particularly medical technologies. His father, Bishop Newell, relates:

> From childhood he suffered a form of asthma which increased in severity. The drugs which helped to keep him alive, affected his bones. Progressively he suffered increasing levels of pain necessitating more drugs in an attempt to control it. But he used this experience to help fashion his thinking and his caring. He knew what it was to be a person with a disability. Out of it all came a heart of compassion and a voice of advocacy for others with disabilities (Rt Rev P. K. Newell 2010 [9]).

Despite the many difficulties faced, Christopher went on to excel in his scholarship and academic achievements. In 1989 he was awarded a Master?s degree from the University of Wollongong for his thesis ? Australian Telecommunications and Disabled People?. In 1994 he completed his PhD at Deakin University analysing the social construction of two specific disability technologies: the wheelchair and the cochlear implant.

Christopher made significant critical and scholarly contributions to the fields of disability studies, medical ethics and technology development (cf. Goggin 2010 [10]). He served on numerous bodies, including the Australian Health and Medical Research Council. As Associate Professor in Medical Ethics at the University of Tasmania, he engaged students in the issues of patient care and bio-ethics. He became an intense activist for the rights of people with disability and in 2001 was awarded membership of the Order of Australia ?for service to people with disabilities, particularly through advocacy and research, to the development and practice of ethics and to health consumers.?

My own relationship with Christopher began around 1991 when we were two rather raw but hopeful consumer advocates asking a large Australian corporation, which supplied basic telephone services, to change the way it dealt with its low-income customers, on my part, and its disability customers, on Christopher?s part. In that year Christopher joined me on the Telstra Consumer Consultative Council (TCCC), which met regularly with senior management to discuss telecommunications issues for residential consumers. Christopher represented Disabled People?s International (Australia) (DPIA) and went on to become the TCCC Consumer Co-chair. In early 1995, I was asked to join the company and so I suppose our relationship changed in some ways. I was now one of *them*!

Of course, 1995 was a momentous year for disability rights and telecommunications in Australia. Telstra and people with disability challenged each other in the (now) Australian Human Rights Commission before Sir Ronald Wilson. DPIA, with Christopher advising, had joined the action begun by Geoffrey Scott in what is still regarded today as a defining moment for disability awareness in the Australian telecommunications industry (Geoffrey Scott v Telstra; Disabled People's International (Aust) v Telstra 1995[11]; cf. discussion by Bourk 2000 [12]). It has even been made the subject of one of 20 video clips marking the 20th anniversary of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Australian Human Rights Commission 2013). In 2005, Christopher moved to a wider telecommunications industry role, representing consumers on the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) Council and chairing the Disability Advisory Board of the (now) Communications Alliance.

In working for justice alongside people with disability, Christopher was motivated by its foundational basis: ? right relations? (cf. McCormick 2003 [13], 8), or as Christopher expressed it, ?respectful relationships? between differing groups ? such as the telecommunications industry and its disability customers. But Christopher went further than just talking about it, he actually entered into those respectful relationships himself.

And so, our friendship developed. It went from only formal, professional engagement to informal contact, having meals together, discussing issues other than telecommunications. Eventually, my partner, Julie, met Christopher and his partner. We even went to listen to him preach on a Sunday morning in the Hobart Anglican Cathedral. When Julie was undertaking her PhD research, Christopher was most encouraging, particularly in the tough times: he was a genuine priest and professor, at the same time.

?Being other-wise? in the title is meant as a double-entendre. It conveys, first, the sense of being aware of and open to others who are different from yourself, being wise to their presence. This was what Christopher was asking from corporates in respect of their disability customers. Second, it conveys the sense of a personal style of being different, confronting and contrary, resisting the status quo. Christopher had both this openness and personal style.

I remember wondering, when planning the award ceremony for the inaugural Christopher Newell Prize for Telecommunications and Disability in 2010, what venue to book to take Christopher?s family and others for dinner afterwards. So, I jumped online looking for restaurants near to the venue and when I saw the name of one such, called ?The Saint and Rogue? (2013) [14], I knew I had found just the right place for dinner in Christopher?s honour (at least after checking that it was wheel-chair accessible)!

The title also picks up the theme of one of Christopher?s major public lectures: ?From other to us: Transforming disability in Australia? (Christopher Newell 2005 [15]), which I was privileged to hear him deliver at the Centre for Public Policy, University of Melbourne. I want to explore this theme a little more with the warmest regard for those times of deep conversation when I would walk and Christopher would wheel or scoot(er) along the sidewalk in his ?chariot?. He was most chuffed that he could outpace me just by pushing a little harder on the accelerator and get to our destination well before me. Walking was such a disability in comparison, he would remind me!

?From other to us?

Christopher?s bone of contention was that service providers, whether government or commercial, would often treat people with disability as those other, special, customers who stand outside of the mainstream and whose needs only rate an afterthought. Stabile (2009) [16] gives a useful definition:

When I talk about the ?other? and ?othering,? I am not referring to the bare psychological process by which an individual establishes her identity by distinguishing between the self and other persons. Rather, I am talking about a process by which individuals and society view and label people who are different from them in a way that devalues and dehumanizes them ? if, instead of proceeding from a view of others as fundamentally ?not us,? we possessed an attitude of valuing others and as seeing them as not separate or other, our views on any number of issues of public policy might be very different (Stabile 2009, [16] 2).

Of course, in Australia today, ?issues of public policy? might include asylum seekers, Indigenous communities, GLBTI1 [17] communities, single parents, as well as people with disability.

Service providers can quite easily think of customers as ?other?. Things are often done ?to? customers, not ?for? them (better) or ?with and by? them (best). They can be impersonalised into ?systems?. They can be invisible in the spreadsheet calculations of averages and cost-benefits. They can miss out through the priority attention given to the majority rather than to the finely detailed and diverse ?long tail? (cf. Pozzi & Bagnara 2013 [18]). Sometimes industry may think it knows what?s best for ?them?, usually on the basis of what?s most efficient for the supplier, rather than listening to and taking a cue from their lived experience and adjusting systems and behaviours to suit. As the digital economy and prevalence of off-shoring grows, there is a danger that the customer becomes increasingly distant and virtual, rather than someone real with whom the quality of the relationship is foremost. Christopher would have been in his element today contributing to the recent renewed focus on improving customer service by Australian telecommunications service providers (cf. Australian Communications and Media Authority 2011 [19]). He argued that:

Disability is often conceptualised as a specialised, technical issue, the subject of policies to do with inclusion, special accommodations and government strategies that suggest ?we care?. Yet in order to transform disability in Australia we need to tackle our deep-seated fears, moral convictions and relationships. We need to seek to transform people with disability from ?other? outside of the moral community, to part of ?us?, the nice, normal and even natural (Christopher Newell 2005 [15], 1).

Christopher was perhaps right to focus his attention on the telecommunications industry, knowing that technology drives most developments, which are therefore often characterised as ?specialised, technical issue[s]?. Yet, he also knew that in providing the ability to connect across vast distances, and across various human barriers, telecommunications offers the means to build those ?relationships? that form and transform communities.

From us to other?

While Christopher?s ?From other to us? is an important and useful way for corporations to think about becoming inclusive of all their customers, I want to suggest that the concept has another angle that provides the basis for innovation in customer service, and communications products and services.

Awareness of the other underpins our awareness and acceptance of diversity. As Christopher might have put it one Sunday morning: a theology of creation-as-good, all parts of it, made in the Other?s image, whether red or yellow, black or white, male or female or anywhere in between, with ability or disability or anywhere in between. This was fundamental to Christopher?s ethics, his stand against utilitarian euthanasia, against abortion on the basis of genetic testing: that the different and the diverse are ultimately good and still part of ?us?.

So, rather than transforming an ?other? into an ?us?, which sounds like a form of integration, I suggest we also need to recognise, respect and have a right relationship with the continuing ?other?, which is, of course, justice by another name. Christopher, through his work, wanted to put people with disability at the centre of communications developments (cf. Goggin 2008 [20]) and this type of thinking, in principle, is gaining recognition even in areas of high technology. I most recently heard it from Alice White, Chief Scientist, Bell Labs, which is one of the most renowned ICT research and development institutions in the world. White spoke about evolving from a linear commercialisation process, with the customer only at the end, to an ecosystem for innovation: ?Bell Labs has embraced an iterative cycle that firmly connects research to customers? (White 2011 [21], 10). Christopher might have had a wry smile seeing the inventive tradition of Alexander Graham Bell finally giving precedence to customer requirements rather than seeking to impose generic, ?normal?, solutions upon cultural and communications differences. Other examples, closer to home, of trying to give precedence to the user environment come from seeking to analyse and modify the Standard Telephone Service from the viewpoint of Indigenous communities and culture (Morsillo 2008 [22]) and seeking to design accessible telephone handsets for both home and mobile use (Morsillo et al. 2010 [23]).

Central to this inventiveness or innovation is the concept of dialogue, between individuals, who can walk and wheel together, but also between service providers and their customers. Sometimes it is called consultation, or community engagement, or deliberation, or public participation. But what is real dialogue?

A third way?

David Bohm, a famous physicist, in his little book,*On Dialogue* (1996), offered a new perspective on addressing difference and conflict by proposing a form of dialogue that is focussed not just on breaking down barriers through a two-way conversation but on creating something new.

...in a dialogue, each person does not attempt to make common certain ideas or items of information that are already known to them. Rather, it may be said that the two people are making something in common, i.e., creating something new together (Bohm 1996 [24]).

This is the essence of innovation, through collaboration, creating something new from the contributions of all, diverse, participants. The recognition that creativity arises at the interstices, the junctions, the orthogonal touch points between differing organisations, peoples, disciplines and so on. It comes about by dialogue, proper dialogue in the Bohm sense, of not talking at each other, not just listening to each other?s point of view, not trying to influence the other to our point of view, but both contributing to something genuinely new: an innovation, a solution, perhaps an improved communications device or customer service process. An initiative that incorporates, in this case, both disability and non-disability characteristics, but which does not diminish either.

Corporations often fuss over their stakeholder management strategies, which may involve only one-way messaging. Some may go to the next step of stakeholder engagement, which, similarly, is often based on an influencing model. Perhaps a few may recognise the desirability or even priority of innovation and take the next step towards a model of co-creation or co-production with their customers and stakeholders.

One of the challenges in getting to this point is often the different world views, different languages, different priorities and so on at stake between the corporation and the consumer or community. This highlights the need for negotiators, or brokers: people who stand between. Geoff Mulgan, Adelaide thinker in residence 2007-08, calls them ?connectors? in his opus on social innovation, calling out:

> ?the critical role played by the connectors in any innovation system ? the people and institutions which link together different people, ideas, money and power. If we stand back and look at the whole system of innovation and change it?s clear that they often play more important roles than the individual entrepreneurs, thinkers, creators, designers, activists and community groups, even if they are often less visible.? (Mulgan 2007 [25], 35).

Christopher was one of those ?connectors? who acted as a go-between, interpreting for those of us who do not have the language or lived experience of disability. He personified what I aspire to be as a ?connector?: someone who understands the ethical, engaged and innovative corporation and can represent it; understands the customer, the consumer, the community and can represent them; can listen for and understand what is at stake (i.e., the ?stake? in stakeholder); can translate between; can look for common ground; and can construct ?win-win? scenarios that are genuinely new (Morsillo 2011 [26], 3-4).

Conclusion

I want to respectfully suggest that the concept of the ?other? has a positive dimension in support of diversity and innovation. I also want to suggest that Christopher?s contribution to the telecommunications industry provides tremendous encouragement and inspiration to continue to build bridges across the divides, through friendship, acceptance and respect, working as an ethical broker, someone who can go-between. The advent of the National Broadband Network and DisabilityCare Australia, two of the largest public policy initiatives in Australia?s history, highlights the importance of the work still to be done to bring about ?right relations? between technology and disability.

Sometimes I could not agree completely with Christopher. He had his ?roguish? streak, occasionally wanting to ?put a bomb? (figuratively speaking, of course) under people he fiercely disagreed with. He seemed to have some absolutes in a world I thought wasn?t ruled by absolutes. Yet, this was part of my great respect for him. For example, he held the line on the right to life, interpreted in the most positive way as meaning the right to support and resources to have the best possible life one could have, no matter what the disability or other debilitating circumstances. He argued for better care, for better pain relief, with his own body challenging the inadequate state of the art in medical treatment, not to mention airline travel. He showed a compassionate way forward, an alternative to an easy, uncaring, unaware, way out. He would not let the system off-the-hook, not allow it to dismiss people with disability as ?not my problem?. Christopher was one of those people who stood in the breach and taught us what doing that means in practice. It was a privilege to know him.

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Endnotes

1. GLBTI. Gay Lesbian Bi Trans Inter sexual orientation

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