- Julia Turner (Editor)
- John Swansburg (Deputy Editor
- Rachael Larimore (Managing Editor)
- Allison Benedikt (News Director)
- Dan Kois (Culture Editor)
- Anthony DeMaio (Publisher)

January 11, 2016

Dear Slate Editors and Readers,

On November 12, Slate published a "news article" by David Auerbach that is replete with misrepresentations, omissions, and distortions. We understand Slate to be a progressive source of information and feel the editors need to be aware of these misrepresentations.

David Auerbach distorted the positions of many individuals with disabilities and their families and attempted to discredit the work of many committed educators, researchers, and organizations involved in disability studies and disability work across the country. In addition, David Auerbach has continued to tweet a steady stream of these misrepresentations since the release of the article. He is using the Slate article as a basis for his forum.

The article alleges a conspiracy involving top officials in the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, multiple foundations, a single university, and U.S. Senators and Governors. This is an odd accusation. Researchers at a variety of universities are studying a variety of issues involved in supported and independent typing. We do so openly and without conspiracy of any sort.

Slate devoted considerable space and resources to the topic of the Augmentative and Alternative Communication form referred to as facilitated communication (FC) or supported typing, but if the editors at Slate had fact checked David Auerbach's article, they would have realized this was an editorial and not objective reporting. We fully understand First Amendment Rights, and applaud you for allowing editorials of any sort. We support you in this effort and welcome challenges. The dilemma here is that this particular article was not presented as an editorial. That was dishonest. We have always acknowledged research both supporting and challenging people who type. That is how research moves forward. To utterly disregard and dismiss empirical evidence is not acceptable for Slate and its editorial board.

Below are some egregious falsehoods found in the story and Mr. Auerbach's follow-up tweets:

Auerbach alleges 16 professional organizations have issued statements against the use of facilitated communication, yet he seems to misrepresent many of these statements. For instance, The ASHA National Joint Committee's Communication Bill of Rights (http://www.asha.org/NJC/bill_of_rights/) takes no position on people who type to communicate. It states:

> "All people with a disability of any extent or severity have a basic right to affect, through communication, the conditions of their existence. All people have the following specific communication rights in their daily interactions."

This is followed by 15 points, all of which support all efforts in response to communication needs. Slate Editors could have quickly assessed this basic claim. Similarly, the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities does not have any position on supported typing other than respecting the

dignity of the AAC user (http://aaidd.org/education/education-archive/2015/12/09/default-calendar/alternative-communication-strategies#.Vo1-gv5IguQ).

Slate has allowed a violation of basic trust between a dishonest editorialist and audience. This is frustrating for those of us who regard honesty as important in our efforts.

The few cites presented by David Auerbach that actually do condemn FC/supported typing actually misrepresent facilitated communication as does the accompanying photo. The photo is a direct effort to suggest physical manipulation. A succinct definition is as follows:

What is Facilitated Communication?

> Facilitated communication is an approach within the arena of AAC that supports motor planning and expressive and receptive language development for people who experience severe communication struggles. *Facilitation* refers in part and most visibly to initial physical support provided at the hand or arm by a second, nondisabled person. The support serves to stabilize and slow the gestures of the person with communication struggles. The physical touch appears to allow the person with communication struggles increased control over intentional gesturing including toward communication devices or keyboards. Within the approach, alongside the physical support, the person with disabilities is introduced to expressive language through the use of visual symbols including spelling words for meaning.
>
> The initial stabilization through physical support counteracts profound sensory integration, proprioceptive, motor movement and planning, and anxiety struggles that are recognized as part of the of the life experience for those on the autism spectrum (Donnellan, Hill, & Leary, 2012; Kanner, 1943; Oppenheim, 1977; Torres et al., 2013) but which have until recently been largely ignored or dismissed in the research literature as peripheral to the presumed centrality of intellectual and social deficiencies (Mirenda, 2008). Thus, many people who are now receiving physical support to successfully access communication systems were previously adjudged to be too intellectually incapacitated to engage in interactive language contexts. With independent access of communication systems as the goal, visible (physical) support is withdrawn as an individual becomes increasingly organized and planful in her or his movement as well as expressive language.

The video "Axel" described in David Auerbach's editorial fundamentally misrepresents the documentary. For instance, the documentary does not, as the article claims, focus on facilitated communication. The film was one of two videos funded by the National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC) – a group whose purpose is to ensure that students with the most significant cognitive disabilities achieve increasingly higher academic outcomes and leave high school ready for post-secondary options. These videos are widely available online for free and can be found at: http://www.ncscpartners.org/multimedia

Lisa Brady, highlighted on page 3, was fired from her job, not because of whistleblowing related to the Axel film as claimed by Auerbach. Ms. Brady was fired prior to her whistleblowing claims for reasons of workplace disputes with colleagues. Her cases, both the original and whistleblowing, and all of her appeals with the DOL, DOE, and DOJ have been ruled unfounded. This information is available online and includes school board minutes and court case findings related to the reasons she was fired. Auerbach evidently failed to research her case and her credibility. Instead he misleadingly focused on her false claims.

SWIFT Center technical assistance, since its inception in 2013, has not, does not, and will not include facilitated communication. Mr. Auerbach could have learned the facts about the SWIFT Center's work at Swiftschools.org rather than choosing to misrepresent the work.

A young middle school student is named in the article directly. Mr. Auerbach suggested that his language and communication is not authentic. Contrary to the claims of the article, this young man types without physical support on an iPad. His words are completely his own Had Mr. Auerbach made any attempt to reach out to the family or interview this child he would have known this. Instead he chose to ridicule a 13 year old and his family by name.

He also references a "scathing assessment" of the pilot program in Maryland. The actual assessment, *publically available*, is *not* scathing, but rather recommends ongoing participation in the program and highlights its successes.

Individuals presented in this article as independent and credible sources in fact have a 25 year history of attempting to discredit FC users and preventing people from having the right to express themselves. These critics are also opposed to school inclusion which allows students with and without disabilities to join one another in general education classrooms with supports.

Mr. Auerbach's ongoing follow-up tweets continue to make the above false claims as well as malign many others such as Melody Musgrove, former Director of the Office of Special Education at the US DOE, who Auerbach claimed resigned from her job because of his exposure of the FC cover up at the federal level. In fact, Musgrove left her position some time before the article was published because of significant family issues.

Mr. Auerbach was repeatedly directed by those he interviewed to review current research and theories related to movement differences, communication, and individuals with autism. He was also encouraged to interview individuals with autism who type independently and their families. Instead he promoted an anti-inclusion agenda that prevents the freedom of expression for individuals who communicate differently and fabricated a national conspiracy theory.

We hope that in the future Slate reporters are held to a higher standard of factual reporting (or are identified as editorialists). In the meantime, we expect that you will retract this article and apologize for the damage it has caused in the lives of individuals, their families, and the people throughout the country who support them.

Sincerely,

Chris Kliewer, Ph.D.
University of Northern Iowa
kliewer@uni.edu
(319)273-7185

Judy C. Bailey, M.Ed.
Consultant on Communication & Positive Behavior Supports
Centreville, VA, 20120-1122

Lisa A. Keller, MS, CCC/SLP