

BLIND, DEAF, ACCOMPLISHED, AND DISCREDITED: HOW
HELEN KELLER'S LEGACY EVOLVED WITH NEW MEDIA

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Journalism
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

March 2024

An Abstract of the Thesis of

Alyson Johnston for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of Journalism to be taken June 2024

Title: Blind, Deaf, Accomplished, and Discredited: How Helen Keller’s Legacy Evolved with
New Media

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Helen Keller was born an able-bodied girl in 1880. At 19 months old, she lost her ability to see and hear. After her teacher, Anne Sullivan, taught her tactile sign language and Braille, she went on to graduate college with honors, write 14 books, and become a worldwide inspiration. This project analyzes the media coverage of Keller from 1888 to the present day and combines the fields of journalism and disability studies to investigate the representation of Keller’s life in media. While the literature review discusses invisible disability, fake news, conspiracy theories, ableism and inspiration porn, the project itself utilizes a qualitative inductive media content analysis, where the author built a book of codes, or themes, to analyze common patterns across all 71 pieces of media. Across 11 newspaper sources, 10 television sources, 25 TikTok sources and 25 X sources, coverage of Keller had more negative tones in new media that mentioned her, specifically TikToks and X posts. Additionally, this study notes the more recent trend of conspiracy theories online surrounding Keller’s “legitimacy” and even existence in society.

This project builds a body of work upon which future scholars can conduct sociological or anthropological research into why these trends have occurred.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank this thesis' primary advisor, Dr. Charlie Deitz, who agreed to mentor this project without a second thought. Dr. Deitz has been an invaluable source of knowledge, support and joy. I would also like to thank Dr. Beck Banks, who helped inspire this project with their class, *Social Media and Democracy*. Their support, even after moving across the country for work, is a gift. And to Dr. Kate Mondloch, this project's Clark Honors College advisor: thank you for being a steady support through this process.

To my parents, brother, family and friends — you are the reason I've worked so hard to accomplish this thesis. Thank you for your love, support and the hours you've spent listening to me talk about my friend Helen.

Finally, I would *not* like to thank Microsoft Word for deleting multiple pages of my thesis on two different occasions.

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Introduction

Helen Keller has long been an influential player in the realm of disability. Born in Alabama in 1880, Keller lost her sight and hearing at 19 months. After Anne Sullivan, a teacher for the deaf and blind, helped Keller to learn Braille and tactile sign language, Keller went on to attend Radcliffe College. She graduated with honors and went on to write 14 books, over 475 speeches,¹ travel to 35 countries, and co-found the American Civil Liberties Union.² Media coverage of Keller during her life focused largely on her life story and accomplishments; however, as media has evolved, the tone of coverage surrounding Keller has evolved as well. TikTok and X, two forms of social media that are newer to society than newspaper and television, have tended to discuss Keller more negatively than their older media counterparts. This thesis looks to analyze over 135 years of media coverage concerning Keller and hopes to serve as a basis upon which to build future research projects about Keller's media presence.

This project was inspired by social media's 2021 conspiracy theory surrounding Helen Keller, where users believe Keller was a "fraud" or even did not exist for a variety of reasons.³ While this was the original impetus for this project, this research does not study the reason behind this shift, but rather documents what led up to this change in media coverage.

¹ Blind, A. F. for the. (n.d.). *Books, essays, and speeches*. The American Foundation for the Blind. <https://afb.org/about-afb/history/helen-keller/books-essays-speeches>

² Smith, A. L. (2022, June 16). *Celebrating Helen Keller: Her life, her achievements, and her indelible influence*. ConnectCenter. <https://aphconnectcenter.org/advocacy/celebrating-helen-keller-her-life-her-achievements-and-her-indelible-influence/#:~:text=She%20was%20also%20a%20co,the%20Women's%20Hall%20of%20Fame.>

³ Stern, C. (2021, January 7). Bizarre Gen Z conspiracy theory that Helen Keller was a fraud who "didn't exist" takes off on social media - leaving older generations baffled. Daily Mail Online. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-9123327/Conspiracy-theory-Helen-Keller-fraud-DIDNT-EXIST-ignites-social-media.html>

Literature Review

When investigating the literature surrounding the question of how Keller's media legacy has evolved since her introduction into society, a handful of themes stood out. The main topics—invisible disability, ableism, conspiracy theories, fake news, and social media—all encompass the depth behind this movement questioning the reality of Helen Keller's disability and accomplishments. Additionally, the history of media is important to understand, as media coverage of Keller spans 136 years and various styles of media, print news, radio, television, and social media. Finally, Helen Keller's story and achievements will be laid out from primary sources, as well as through coverage from secondary sources, such as commentary from TikTok or editorialized coverage of Keller.

Invisible Disability

Kattari et al. define invisible disability as “someone who might not be assumed to be disabled at first meeting, such as individuals with chronic pain, traumatic brain injury, multiple sclerosis, HIV.”⁴ This defines Keller; though she may not have appeared outwardly disabled, she was both deaf and blind. Her fame and notoriety likely made some of the invisibility accompanying her disabilities opaque, but the true root of the definition remains. Though the definition above does not list blindness or deafness as an invisible disability, the inability to “prove” one's disability is true for deafness and blindness as well.

Additionally, if a disability is not physically obvious to an onlooker, there can be a pressure to prove one's disability to their audience. As seen with the modern conspiracy surrounding Keller and her disability, she and her disability fall into this definition as well.

⁴ Kattari, Shanna K., Miranda Olzman, and Michele D. Hanna. ““You look fine!” Ableist experiences by people with invisible disabilities.” *Affilia* 33, no. 4 (2018): p. 478.

This study about those with invisible disabilities facing ableism points out how disabled people not only have to prove their disability, but how their bodies are also often “policed” by those around them. When in public spaces, a 41-year-old woman named Ash faced this “policing” from others. “I rode public transportation all the time and I would need to sit,” she recalled in the 2018 study by Kattari et. al.⁵

“And sometimes I would sit in the disabled chairs if they were there because I would be in a lot of pain, especially when the train was crowded and people were jostling and stuff and that was really hard for me. And people would give me dirty looks or actually say something like, ‘What is wrong with you?’ you know, ‘Get out of that chair.’”

This ‘policing’ by onlookers and the need felt by disabled people to prove their invisible disability continues to exist in society.

The concept of “policing” can be related to Michel Foucault’s concept of biopower. Though Foucault referred to the concepts of biopower and biopolitics many times throughout his studies, his perspectives and definitions changed with times. A 2013 study from Kasper Simo Kristensen analyzes biopower through the lens of power as a means of production, meaning power creates objective truths, tangible objects, and reality itself.⁶

“In this framework biopolitics is a technology of power by which an individual subject can be modified and subjected both as individual (through particular biological qualities linked to sexuality and race) but also as anonymous member of a population (being a member of a biological continuum).”⁷

In this definition, we can understand how those with disabilities that hinder their ability to integrate into society may lack this concept of biopower Foucault theorizes about. As an individual, a disabled person may be subjected as an individual disabled person, but also when

⁵ Kattari, Shanna K., Miranda Olzman, and Michele D. Hanna. ““You look fine!” Ableist experiences by people with invisible disabilities.” *Affilia* 33, no. 4 (2018).

⁶ Kristensen, K. S. (2013). Michel Foucault on bio-power and biopolitics. Unpublished Master’s Thesis: University of Helsinki.

⁷ Kristensen, K. S. (2013). Michel Foucault on bio-power and biopolitics. Unpublished Master’s Thesis: University of Helsinki.

they are grouped together with other disabled people who lack agency. This continued policing of the body — this time in terms of production — harms people with both visible and invisible disabilities.

Another struggle accompanying invisible disabilities is the potential of barriers to disability services. Though individuals with ‘invisible’ disabilities (disabilities not visible to others) may not receive as much social stigma as those with more visible disabilities, “they are still exposed to forms of rejection, ableism, and discrimination. In fact, they may even have more trouble accessing support services than their visibly disabled counterparts due to being expected to prove their disability.”⁸

A visible disability carries its own struggles, and an invisible disability can carry different and oftentimes more subtle forms of ableism. The United States Census Bureau reported in the 2010 Census that 18.1% of all ages surveyed had a disability or impairment.⁹ From these statistics, it can be inferred that approximately one fifth of U.S. residents are currently living with a disability or impairment. There have been many instances where people who are legally disabled do not claim they’re disabled, though they meet the criteria of the Americans with Disabilities Act.¹⁰ Though this may be because of one’s ability to pass as able-bodied, it may also be due to the treatment facing people with invisible disabilities. “While passing may be seen as a privilege, it can also be a challenge for these individuals to find community and be validated by disabled people. The decision on whether to pass or not comes with not only personal implications of stigma and discrimination but also more societal and political implications of

⁸ Kattari, Shanna K., Miranda Olzman, and Michele D. Hanna. ““You look fine!” Ableist experiences by people with invisible disabilities.” *Affilia* 33, no. 4 (2018): p. 478.

⁹ Matthew W. Brault, “Americans with Disabilities: 2010,” Census.gov (U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, U.S. Census Bureau, July 2012), <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/2012/demo/p70-131.pdf>, 4.

¹⁰ Eyer, Katie. “Claiming disability.” *BUL Rev.* 101 (2021): 547.

outing themselves as disabled (Brune & Wilson, 2013).”¹¹ By looking at invisible disabilities through this framework, we are able to not only understand who Helen Keller was and what she may have experienced first-hand, but also how invisible disabilities are viewed presently. There are many people with both visible and invisible disabilities, yet ableism persists.

Ableism

Although ableism can be difficult to define, The Center for Disability Rights outlines the practice as one that can “devalue and discriminate against people with physical, intellectual, or psychiatric disabilities and often rests on the assumption that disabled people need to be ‘fixed’ in one form or the other.”¹² Gregor Wolbring argues it is most often used to describe the negative treatment of disabled people. “Every ism has two components. Something we value and something we do not. The subject of the isms can be negative or positive.”¹³ From this writing, it can be gathered that what is not valued by able-bodied people is a lack of ease or struggle to find adequate accommodations, which can in turn perpetuate this form of ableism. Additionally, the concept of “the other” and inherent difference is a facet of society that has caused harmful practices for generations.

While other forms of discrimination like sexism and racism are issues in every system and interaction, Wolbring (2008) argues “that ableism is one of the most accepted and widespread isms in society and works in conjunction with many other isms.”¹⁴ There is even

¹¹ Kattari, Shanna K., Miranda Olzman, and Michele D. Hanna. ““You look fine!” Ableist experiences by people with invisible disabilities.” *Affilia* 33, no. 4 (2018): p. 478.

¹² Smith, Leah. “Center for Disability Rights.” #Ableism – Center for Disability Rights, cdmns.org/blog/uncategorized/ableism/. Accessed 18 Oct. 2023.

¹³ Wolbring, Gregor. “The Politics of Ableism.” *Development, Suppl. Gender and Fisheries* 51, no. 2 (06, 2008): 252-258. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1057/dev.2008.17>.
<https://uoregon.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/politics-ableism/docview/216913330/se-2>.

¹⁴ Kattari, Shanna K., Miranda Olzman, and Michele D. Hanna. ““You look fine!” Ableist experiences by people with invisible disabilities.” *Affilia* 33, no. 4 (2018): p. 478.

ableism—consciously or subconsciously—built into the way various social media platforms operate. In 2023, Salmon et. al. interviewed 20 disabled content creators about their “goals, strategies, and challenges around posting activism content on social media” as they advocate for social change online.¹⁵ Researchers found that “visibility is essential for successful online activism, but that the pursuit of visibility requires disabled content creators to navigate additional challenges including social stigma, algorithmic suppression, accessibility issues, and a heightened risk of harassment.”¹⁶

Additionally, a 1992 article from the Chicago Tribune¹⁷ editorialized about the ableist nature behind Helen Keller jokes. Looking back on this article and seeing how it predates social media, we can see where these kinds of jokes and comments gained some of their roots within disability conversations today. “I heard a comedian tell yet another Helen Keller joke the other night. He got the expected laugh; the comics usually do. When he mentioned Helen Keller’s name, he rolled his eyes up into their sockets and flailed his arms about in a spastic motion” (Greene, 1992). These jokes are far from rare 30 years later, and the physical mockery of Keller embodies ableism.

Within the system of education, there are many instances where ableism exists. An example of this is given in Kattari et. al’s 2018 study mentioned above. Hayden, a 23-year-old woman with mitochondrial diseases receives accommodations for her disability, as she can become tired from handwriting notes in class. She discloses that her professor “said that she

¹⁵ Shruti Sannon et al., “Disability Activism on Social Media: Sociotechnical Challenges in the Pursuit of Visibility,” Proceedings of the 2023 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3544548.3581333>.

¹⁶ Shruti Sannon et al., “Disability Activism on Social Media: Sociotechnical Challenges in the Pursuit of Visibility,” Proceedings of the 2023 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3544548.3581333>.

¹⁷ Greene, B. (2021, August 10). Her life was not a joke. Chicago Tribune. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1992-05-11-9202110905-story.html>

doesn't allow computers in class, and if she let me use my accommodations in class then everybody would know I have a disability. She highly encouraged me to not use my accommodations in class so that people didn't know...I still did and was like, 'it's what you have to do, and maybe you can restructure your class so that it doesn't out students with disabilities for instance.'"¹⁸ This example of ableist behavior shows not only the ableist attitude of the professor, as she believed it would be bad for Hayden's classmates to know she was disabled, but also the ableist system within education that allows professors to make and enforce policies that explicitly out students with disabilities.

Inspiration Porn

The term inspiration porn "broadly refers to problematic and ableist representations of disabled people, and it has been suggested within disability studies that this term has resonance given its objectifying and dehumanizing qualities."¹⁹ A 2022 study connects inspiration porn to disability studies: "Disability studies scholars have suggested, largely implicitly, that it is because disabled people are objectified and devalued in 'inspiration porn' that the suffix 'porn' has resonance (Grue 2016)."²⁰ The study goes on to assert that instances of inspiration porn often hyperfocus on disabled people doing everyday tasks, such as reading, walking, or talking, and emphasizes how others should not take their own lives for granted.²¹ The study continues on to argue that:

¹⁸ Kattari, Shanna K., Miranda Olzman, and Michele D. Hanna. "'You look fine!'" Ableist experiences by people with invisible disabilities." *Affilia* 33, no. 4 (2018): p. 478.

¹⁹ Ryan Thorneycroft (2023) Pornographication: exploring the 'porn' in 'inspiration porn', *Porn Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/23268743.2023.2251493

²⁰ Ryan Thorneycroft (2023) Pornographication: exploring the 'porn' in 'inspiration porn', *Porn Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/23268743.2023.2251493

²¹ Ryan Thorneycroft (2023) Pornographication: exploring the 'porn' in 'inspiration porn', *Porn Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/23268743.2023.2251493

“Inspiration porn re-appropriates or re-contextualizes disabled people’s activities to serve the abled viewer. Young (2012, n.p.) suggests that inspiration porn serves the abled person by ‘put[ting] their worries into perspective’, and by reminding them that they are not disabled. In short, inspiration porn shames disabled people because it exceptionalizes and objectifies them for the benefit of the abled subject.”

Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories have been around for centuries. According to the *Smithsonian Magazine*, “conspiracies flourished in the 1820s and 1830s, when modern-day American political parties developed, and the expansion of white male suffrage increased the nation’s voting base.”²²

Social media, however, has fueled how conspiracy theories spread and enter the mainstream. A 2022 study examined how social media algorithms can perpetuate and disperse conspiracy theories, and researchers experimented with trying to reverse engineer that algorithm. Researchers had a TikTok user search conspiracy theory specific content, and the search quickly altered his media feed.²³ The videos selected by the algorithm to be shown to the user morphed from innocuous conspiracies into more politically charged content in the days to come, according to researchers. “For example, mixed in with a Sunday of heavy football content were anti-Joe Biden videos, as well as ‘my body, my choice’ anti-vaccination rhetoric.”²⁴

Though there is a gap in the available resources relating to the specific conspiracy theory of Helen Keller being fake, the concept of a theory rooted in bigotry is common. For example, Marjorie Taylor Greene made a 2018 Facebook post in which she said wildfires in California at

²² Mark R. Cheatham, “Conspiracy Theories Abounded in 19th-Century American Politics,” *Smithsonian Magazine* (Smithsonian, April 11, 2019), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/conspiracy-theories-abounded-19th-century-american-politics-180971940/>.

²³ Romer, Daniel, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. "Conspiratorial thinking, selective exposure to conservative media, and response to COVID-19 in the US." *Social Science & Medicine* 291 (2021): 114480.

²⁴ Romer, Daniel, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. "Conspiratorial thinking, selective exposure to conservative media, and response to COVID-19 in the US." *Social Science & Medicine* 291 (2021): 114480.

that time were “not natural and claimed people have seen ‘lasers or blue beams of light causing the fire’ from space,” according to a summary of the post from The Independent.²⁵ “She said the blazes could have been started by a natural gas company and the Rothschilds, a wealthy Jewish banking family that often features in such conspiracy theories.”²⁶ Though Greene now claims she did not know the family was Jewish, nor does she “know anything about the religion,”²⁷ the anti-Semitic conspiracy theory she claims to have *unknowingly* propelled gained traction.

The 2023 wildfires in Maui have proven to be a recent example of baseless conspiracy theories acquiring attention online. The Associated Press notes that there are claims of only blue items surviving the wildfires, allegedly occurring because lasers do not affect that color.²⁸ These theorists suggest that these “occurrences” suggest that the island was targeted by a “directed weapon energy attack.”²⁹ AP notes that there is no basis to support these claims, but these claims continued to gain traction for days after the disaster.

The internet has proven to be a place where discriminatory conspiracy theories can easily gain views and interaction, and research has found that these conspiracy theories can cross from television and radio to social media. “Another recent study finds a strong correlation between

²⁵ Shweta Sharma, “Marjorie Taylor Greene Offers Bizarre Defence for 'Antisemitic' Space Laser Theory,” The Independent (Independent Digital News and Media, February 17, 2023), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/marjorie-taylor-greene-space-laser-antisemitic-b2284095.html>.

²⁶ Shweta Sharma, “Marjorie Taylor Greene Offers Bizarre Defence for 'Antisemitic' Space Laser Theory,” The Independent (Independent Digital News and Media, February 17, 2023), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/marjorie-taylor-greene-space-laser-antisemitic-b2284095.html>.

²⁷ Donald Trump, “Triggered with Don Jr.: Marjorie Taylor Greene A.k.a the Notorious MTG on the DC Swamp on Apple Podcasts,” Apple Podcasts, February 17, 2023, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/marjorie-taylor-greene-a-k-a-the-notorious-mtg-on-the-dc-swamp/id1667966135?i=1000600291012>.

²⁸ Phan, Karena. “Social Media Videos Push Baseless Conspiracy Theory That Blue Items Were Spared from Maui Wildfires.” AP News, AP News, 31 Aug. 2023, apnews.com/article/fact-check-conspiracy-blue-items-maui-wildfires-118319149774.

²⁹ Phan, Karena. “Social Media Videos Push Baseless Conspiracy Theory That Blue Items Were Spared from Maui Wildfires.” AP News, AP News, 31 Aug. 2023, apnews.com/article/fact-check-conspiracy-blue-items-maui-wildfires-118319149774.

conservative print and broadcast media use and higher rates of conspiratorial thinking, with acknowledgment that social media overlap is part of conspiratorial spread.”³⁰ A prominent example of this multi-media sprawl of conspiracies is the claims of fraudulence in the 2020 election. From Fox News³² to Twitter³³, Donald Trump and many members of the Republican Party promoted claims of tampering and fraud, leading to an inaccurate outcome. In turn, members of the American public believed this theory to be true and an insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, ensued. There are now lawsuits about the promulgation of these theories and hearings about the responsibility of those behind the theories, and this whole ordeal demonstrates the real-life consequences of conspiracy theories born on social media and television.

Based on this example, it is clear that conspiracy theories can play a tangible role in the political world they are born from. However, conspiracy theories can also have larger sociological impacts. Karen Douglas and Daniel Jolley found in their 2013 study³⁴ that “people who were exposed to anti-government conspiracy theories were less likely to want to vote than those who had read information refuting conspiracy theories.”³⁵ Additionally, another study by Jolley and Douglas found that “people who read about climate change conspiracy theories

³⁰ Grandinetti, Justin, and Jeffrey Bruinsma. "The Affective Algorithms of Conspiracy TikTok." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* (2022): 1-20.

³¹ Romer, Daniel, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. "Conspiratorial thinking, selective exposure to conservative media, and response to COVID-19 in the US." *Social Science & Medicine* 291 (2021): 114480.

³² Bauder, David, et al. "Fox, Dominion Reach \$787M Settlement over Election Claims." AP News, AP News, 20 Apr. 2023, apnews.com/article/fox-news-dominion-lawsuit-trump-2020-0ac71f75acfac52ea80b3e747fb0afe.

³³ Swenson, Ali. "False Claims of a Stolen Election Thrive Unchecked on Twitter Even as Musk Promises Otherwise." AP News, AP News, 24 May 2023, apnews.com/article/elon-musk-twitter-trump-misinformation-election-lies-5137a88a58eaaca0e45ba043db911d15.

³⁴ Jolley, D., & Douglas, K. M. (2013). The social consequences of conspiracism: Exposure to conspiracy theories decreases intentions to engage in politics and to reduce one's carbon footprint. *British Journal of Psychology*, 105(1), 35–56. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12018>

³⁵ Douglas, K. M. (2015, January 4). *Are conspiracy theories all bad?*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2015/01/04/are-conspiracy-theories-all-bad-17/the-negative-social-impact-of-conspiracy-theories>

(versus those who read anti-conspiracy material and those who read no material about climate change) expressed less intention to take action to reduce their carbon footprint.”³⁶ From these investigations, Douglas concluded that “conspiracy theories decreased social engagement because they left people feeling powerless, and there is also some evidence that conspiracy theories might influence people without them knowing it.”³⁷³⁸

Keller is far from the first public figure to be embroiled in social media driven conspiracy theories. A 2015 study by Helena Louise Dare-Edwards discusses the conspiracy theory of “Larry Stylinson,” the portmanteau relationship name for a relationship between Louis Tomlinson and Harry Styles, two members of former boy band One Direction.³⁹ Dare-Edwards describes how interactions between the two reposted across social media and broadcast on television were used by fans as “evidence” of their relationship.

Tomlinson publicly denied the theory in 2012, writing, “@skyleyridk Hows this , Larry is the biggest load of bullshit I've ever heard. I'm happy why can't you accept that [sic].”⁴⁰ The boy band split a year after Dare-Edwards’ study was published, and Tomlinson has gone on to comment how much the conspiracy theory damaged him and Styles’ friendship. In 2017, Tomlinson told The Sun that the Larry conspiracy theory “took away the vibe you get off

³⁶ Douglas, K. M. (2015, January 4). *Are conspiracy theories all bad?*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2015/01/04/are-conspiracy-theories-all-bad-17/the-negative-social-impact-of-conspiracy-theories>

³⁷ Douglas, K. M. (2015, January 4). *Are conspiracy theories all bad?*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2015/01/04/are-conspiracy-theories-all-bad-17/the-negative-social-impact-of-conspiracy-theories>

³⁸ Karen M. Douglas & Robbie M. Sutton (2008) The Hidden Impact of Conspiracy Theories: Perceived and Actual Influence of Theories Surrounding the Death of Princess Diana, *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 148:2, 210-222, DOI: 10.3200/SOCP.148.2.210-222

³⁹ Dare-Edwards, H. L. (2014). ‘shipping bullshit’: Twitter rumours, fan/celebrity interaction and questions of authenticity. *Celebrity Studies*, 5(4), 521–524. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2014.981370>

⁴⁰ Tomlinson, L. (2012, September 16). @skyleyridk Hows this , Larry is the biggest load of bullshit I’ve ever heard. I’m happy why can’t you accept that. Louis Tomlinson | X. https://x.com/Louis_Tomlinson/status/247381724760264704?s=20

anyone. It made everything, I think on both fences, a little bit more unapproachable. I think it shows that it was never anything real, if I can use that word.”⁴¹

However, the theory has persisted online, with users still referencing this conspiracy today, tweeting posts such as “idc what anyone says i will always believe in larry Stylinson [sic]”⁴² and “Enjoy this dose of #LarryStylinson to brighten your morning or evening. Spread kindness everywhere you go!”⁴³ in March of 2024.

This social media conspiracy surrounding a specific person (both Styles and Tomlinson individually and jointly) predates the conspiracy surrounding Keller by almost a decade, but the real impacts of such theories are evident in the loss of friendship between the two. Though these types of conspiracies exist largely online, the real-world impacts are tangible for those at the centers of such conspiracies.

The History and Development of Media

To understand how media coverage of Helen Keller occurred, along with its impact on Keller and the American populace, an in-depth look into the history of American news media is vital as background information. Before Johannes Gutenberg invented the moveable printing press in the 15th-century, “books were painstakingly handwritten and no two copies were exactly

⁴¹ Wootton, D. (2017, July 23). One direction break was painful... but it was Harry who wanted it, says Louis Tomlinson. The Sun. <https://www.thesun.co.uk/tvandshowbiz/4072018/louis-tomlinson-reveals-pain-of-one-direction-split-but-says-its-what-harry-wanted-as-he-opens-up-about-bands-future/>

⁴² Beth. (2024, March 9). IDC what anyone says I will always believe in Larry Stylinson. Twitter. https://twitter.com/luvbethmarie/status/1766581057501925741?s=42&t=aqUG_QWbRzPx3BmB8LinWA

⁴³ A loves Louis because he is my sunshine 🌻. (2024, March 5). *Happy Tuesday, My Lovely Moots! wishing you all a fantastic day ahead. enjoy this dose of #LarryStylinson to brighten your morning or evening. spread kindness everywhere you go!* 💙💚😊 [pic.twitter.com/qgiufbmxhg](https://twitter.com/qgiufbmxhg). Twitter. https://twitter.com/hogwartslois22/status/1764999126398235069?s=42&t=aqUG_QWbRzPx3BmB8LinWA

the same,” according to the University of Minnesota.⁴⁴ “The printing press made the mass production of print media possible.”⁴⁵ Once the printing press was utilized for newspapers in the early 1800s, publications started out small compared to today “Most newspapers had a small circulation and were staffed by a very small number of workers,” according to the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign Library.⁴⁶ “Even in the larger, urban newspapers, the owner of the paper would usually serve as the reporter and editor.”⁴⁷ In the late 1800s, when steam and coal power were brought to the printing technology which allowed them to put out thousands of papers per day, yellow journalism became a large factor in American life and global affairs. The U.S. Department of State defines yellow journalism as “a style of newspaper reporting that emphasizes sensationalism over facts.”⁴⁸ This type of journalism, especially its sensationalist nature, still exists in milder forms today.

According to the Pew Research Center, “In 2022, estimated total U.S. daily newspaper circulation (print and digital combined) was 20.9 million for both weekday and Sunday, down 8% and 10% respectively from 2021.”⁴⁹ This decline is reflective of a bigger trend — the Center’s 2022 study, *Total estimated circulation of U.S. daily newspapers*, shows that both

⁴⁴ [Author removed at request of original publisher]. “1.3 the Evolution of Media.” *Understanding Media and Culture*, University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing edition, 2016. This edition adapted from a work originally produced in 2010 by a publisher who has requested that it not receive attribution., 22 Mar. 2016, open.lib.umn.edu/mediaandculture/chapter/1-3-the-evolution-of-media/.

⁴⁵ [Author removed at request of original publisher]. “1.3 the Evolution of Media.” *Understanding Media and Culture*, University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing edition, 2016. This edition adapted from a work originally produced in 2010 by a publisher who has requested that it not receive attribution., 22 Mar. 2016, open.lib.umn.edu/mediaandculture/chapter/1-3-the-evolution-of-media/.

⁴⁶ Unlisted. “American Newspapers, 1800-1860: An Introduction.” History Philosophy and Newspaper Library, University of Illinois Urbana Champaign, www.library.illinois.edu/hpnl/tutorials/antebellum-newspapers-introduction/. Accessed 4 Oct. 2023.

⁴⁷ Unlisted. “American Newspapers, 1800-1860: An Introduction.” History Philosophy and Newspaper Library, University of Illinois Urbana Champaign, www.library.illinois.edu/hpnl/tutorials/antebellum-newspapers-introduction/. Accessed 4 Oct. 2023.

⁴⁸ “U.S. Diplomacy and Yellow Journalism, 1895–1898,” U.S. Department of State - Office of the Historian (U.S. Department of State), accessed May 3, 2023, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/yellow-journalism>.

⁴⁹ “Total estimated circulation of U.S. daily newspapers.” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (2022) <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/newspapers/>.

weekday and Sunday newspaper circulation peaked around the 1990s, began a mild decline shortly after, and then steeply declined around 2004.⁵⁰ However, print circulation was largely increasing from 1940 — the beginning of the Pew study — until its peak in 1990. This knowledge provides more ballast to examine the impacts of culturally important yellow journalism “news,” such as the Spanish-American War myth.

The Spanish-American War Myth refers to the role of yellow journalism in the start of the 1898 war.⁵¹

“In January 1898 the battleship USS Maine was sent to Havana, Cuba, to watch over American interests during the Cuban uprising against Spain. On the evening of February 15, 1898, an explosion on the Maine caused it to sink in the harbor, killing 266 of the crew on board. Although the exact cause of the explosion is still unknown, within days of the explosion, newspapers were blaming Spain. Evidence was misreported or even fabricated, published with large headlines and gruesome images, shocking readers,”⁵² the Library of Congress reports in their summary of yellow journalism’s role in the Spanish-American War.

These sensational stories, which had headlines like “SPAIN GUILTY!” and displayed gruesome drawings of the explosion, had an influence on the American populace. Other publications noticed the impacts of these stories. The New York Times wrote a scathing editorial on March 1, 1898, about the “shameless public lying” in the “yellow journals,” even suggesting that they should be suppressed: “It would be criminal negligence for the authorities to permit the public

⁵⁰ “Total estimated circulation of U.S. daily newspapers.” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (2022) <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/newspapers/>.

⁵¹ Walker, M. (2024, February 6). *The Spanish American War and the Yellow Press: Headlines & Heroes*. The Library of Congress. <https://blogs.loc.gov/headlinesandheroes/2024/02/the-spanish-american-war-and-the-yellow-press/>

⁵² Walker, M. (2024, February 6). *The Spanish American War and the Yellow Press: Headlines & Heroes*. The Library of Congress. <https://blogs.loc.gov/headlinesandheroes/2024/02/the-spanish-american-war-and-the-yellow-press/>

sale of the dangerous literary explosives which the yellow journals make and vend,”⁵³ the Library of Congress documented.

As technology progressed in the United States, radio was developed in the late 1890s,⁵⁴ and television followed in the late 1920s.⁵⁵ The media coverage surrounding Keller encompassed all these forms of media—newspaper, radio, television, and now computers and social media.

Fake News

The modern concept of fake news originated with the penny press, which had a goal of appealing to the masses, according to Iowa State University Professor Tracy Lucht.⁵⁶ Newspapers chose a “conversational” style of writing and published daily stories that focused on being entertaining, such as the Great Moon Hoax of 1835.

The Great Moon Hoax of 1835 was an early example of the penny press era’s period of sensationalized or untrue reporting. These discoveries were falsely credited to Sir John Herschel, a well-known astronomer of the time, and his fictional research partner Andrew Grant.⁵⁷

“Reports in the Sun, the New York newspaper founded just a couple of years before, described sightings of men with bat wings, unicorns, and bipedal beavers on the moon’s surface, leading to much speculation and vast newspaper sales in New York and in the rest of the relatively new nation.”⁵⁸

⁵³ Walker, M. (2024, February 6). *The Spanish American War and the Yellow Press: Headlines & Heroes*. The Library of Congress. <https://blogs.loc.gov/headlinesandheroes/2024/02/the-spanish-american-war-and-the-yellow-press/>

⁵⁴ “1890s – 1930s: Radio.” Elon University, [⁵⁵ “The History of Television.” The History of Television \(or, How Did This Get so Big?\), Cornell University, \[www.cs.cornell.edu/~pjs54/Teaching/AutomaticLifestyle-S02/Projects/Vlku/history.html\]\(http://www.cs.cornell.edu/~pjs54/Teaching/AutomaticLifestyle-S02/Projects/Vlku/history.html\). Accessed 5 Oct. 2023.](http://www.elon.edu/u/imagining/time-capsule/150-years/back-1890-1930/#:~:text=Italian%20inventor%20Guglielmo%20Marconi%20(pictured,more%20than%20a%20kilometer%20a way. Accessed 5 Oct. 2023.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

⁵⁶ Lucht, Tracy. “The Penny Press: C-SPAN Classroom.” C-SPAN, C-SPAN, 10 Nov. 2017, www.c-span.org/classroom/document/?7407.

⁵⁷ Young, K. (2017, October 21). *Moon shot: Race, a hoax, and the birth of fake news*. The New Yorker. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/moon-shot-race-a-hoax-and-the-birth-of-fake-news>

⁵⁸ Young, K. (2017, October 21). *Moon shot: Race, a hoax, and the birth of fake news*. The New Yorker. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/moon-shot-race-a-hoax-and-the-birth-of-fake-news>

The articles were never formally retracted, but on September 16, 1835, The Sun acknowledged that the reports were fake.⁵⁹

After the penny press era came yellow journalism, a style of newspaper reporting that hit its peak in the 1890s. The practice often employed sensationalist writing over reporting facts in order to sell newspapers.⁶⁰ “During its heyday in the late 19th century it was one of many factors that helped push the United States and Spain into war in Cuba and the Philippines, leading to the acquisition of overseas territory by the United States,” according to the U.S. State Department.⁶¹

The 20th century also saw instances of fake news. One famous instance of this false reporting occurred during the 1948 U.S. presidential election between Thomas Dewey and Harry Truman. On Election Day, November 2, 1948, many assumed that Dewey would best Truman in the election, as polls and pundits had reported Dewey would likely win the election.⁶² The Chicago Tribune was the first to report Dewey’s presumed victory, with the now famous headline “DEWEY DEFEATS TRUMAN” adorning their front page.

“The ink was hardly dry on 150,000 copies of the paper when radio bulletins reported that the race was surprisingly close. The headline was changed to DEMOCRATS MAKE SWEEP OF STATE OFFICES for the second edition. Truman went on to take Illinois and much of the Midwest in this whopping election surprise. Radio comedian Fred Allen noted Truman was the ‘first president to lose in a Gallup and win in a walk.’ The Tribune blamed the pollsters for its mistake.”⁶³

⁵⁹ Lucht, Tracy. “The Penny Press: C-SPAN Classroom.” C-SPAN, C-SPAN, 10 Nov. 2017, www.c-span.org/classroom/document/?7407.

⁶⁰ “U.S. Diplomacy and Yellow Journalism, 1895–1898,” U.S. Department of State - Office of the Historian (U.S. Department of State), accessed May 3, 2023, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/yellow-journalism>.

⁶¹ “U.S. Diplomacy and Yellow Journalism, 1895–1898,” U.S. Department of State - Office of the Historian (U.S. Department of State), accessed May 3, 2023, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/yellow-journalism>.

⁶² Jones, T. (2020, November 3). *Dewey defeats Truman: The most famous wrong call in electoral history*. Chicago Tribune. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/2020/10/31/dewey-defeats-truman-the-most-famous-wrong-call-in-electoral-history/>

⁶³ Jones, T. (2020, November 3). *Dewey defeats Truman: The most famous wrong call in electoral history*. Chicago Tribune. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/2020/10/31/dewey-defeats-truman-the-most-famous-wrong-call-in-electoral-history/>

Though the publication corrected its mistake, Truman was famously photographed two days later with the erroneous headline, cementing this 20th century instance of fake news into history.

Television news is not immune from fake news, though there is a lack of peer reviewed research on the impacts of fake news being aired on television news. A 2020 study evaluated the current research surrounding fake news and various forms of media, and though television news was highly consumed, there was not much study into its interactions with fake news.⁶⁴

“Not only has interest in fake news clearly exploded in the past 2 years, but it has also far outstripped attention to TV news: A comparable count yielded just 329 articles published since 2017 containing either ‘television news’ or ‘TV news’ in their titles, while 708 articles contained ‘online news,’ 394 contained ‘Twitter’ or ‘Facebook’ and ‘news,’ and 556 contained ‘social media’ and ‘news.’”⁶⁵

Allen et. al. go on to posit that television news can be biased and framed in a polarizing light, which may lead viewers to agree with the implied perspectives of the news stations and their anchors.

Radio and its relationship with fake news has also been studied in modernity, specifically with its coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. A 2024 study by Durodolu et. al. analyzed how radio stations have dealt with broadcasting news amidst the growth of fake news on social media, and say they have used reputable sources such as the World Health Organization.⁶⁶

Additionally, the radio stations themselves are unhappy with the potential for fake news to infiltrate the air waves. “The radio station reporters agreed that transmitting fake news about

⁶⁴ Jennifer Allen et al., Evaluating the fake news problem at the scale of the information ecosystem. (2020). DOI:10.1126/sciadv.aay3539

⁶⁵ Jennifer Allen et al., Evaluating the fake news problem at the scale of the information ecosystem. (2020). DOI:10.1126/sciadv.aay3539

⁶⁶ Media Literacy and Fake News: Evaluating the Roles and Responsibilities of Radio Stations in Combating Fake News in the COVID-19 Era. (2024). International Journal of Information Management Sciences, 6(1), 33-49. <http://www.ijims.org/index.php/home/article/view/53>

COVID-19 should have consequences, and the station school quickly corrected the wrong information and offered an apology.”⁶⁷

Fake news today has become a cornerstone of media consumption, usually unbeknownst to users. Though there are many explanations of fake news with little consensus among definitions, Kavanaugh and Rich describe “fake news” as “newspaper articles, television news shows, or other information disseminated through broadcast or social media that are intentionally based on falsehoods or that intentionally use misleading framing to offer a distorted narrative.”⁶⁸ The conversation around fake news reached a peak during the 2016 presidential election.⁶⁹ A 2021 study noted that Generation Z — those born between 1997-2012⁷⁰ — “have never known a world without social networks and in which mobile connectivity is the order of the day.”⁷¹ This generation has been “shaped” by these new communication technologies,⁷² and the website TikTok is an example of a communication technology. Swenson’s 2023 AP article⁷³ pertaining to conspiracy theories being spread unchecked on Twitter also provides a solid basis upon which to understand fake news and its spread. The Associated Press hired an intelligence firm to study the most widely shared tweets concerning a “rigged election” after a 2023 CNN town hall; they

⁶⁷ Media Literacy and Fake News: Evaluating the Roles and Responsibilities of Radio Stations in Combating Fake News in the COVID-19 Era. (2024). *International Journal of Information Management Sciences*, 6(1), 33-49. <http://www.ijims.org/index.php/home/article/view/53>

⁶⁸ Kavanaugh, Jennifer and Michael D. Rich, *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2314.html. Also available in print form.

⁶⁹ However, for the purposes of this project, the author will examine fake news within the context of social media.

⁷⁰ Michael Dimock, “Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins,” Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, April 21, 2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>

⁷¹ Pérez-Escoda, Ana, Luis Miguel Pedrero-Esteban, Juana Rubio-Romero, and Carlos Jiménez-Narros. "Fake news reaching young people on social networks: Distrust challenging media literacy." *Publications* 9, no. 2 (2021): 24.

⁷² Pérez-Escoda, Ana, Luis Miguel Pedrero-Esteban, Juana Rubio-Romero, and Carlos Jiménez-Narros. "Fake news reaching young people on social networks: Distrust challenging media literacy." *Publications* 9, no. 2 (2021): 24.

⁷³ Swenson, Ali. “False Claims of a Stolen Election Thrive Unchecked on Twitter Even as Musk Promises Otherwise.” AP News, AP News, 24 May 2023, apnews.com/article/elon-musk-twitter-trump-misinformation-election-lies-5137a88a58eaaca0e45ba043db911d15.

found that “while Twitter has a system in place for users to add context to misleading tweets, the 10 posts, which collectively amassed more than 43,000 retweets, had no such notes attached.”⁷⁴

When the concepts of ableism and conspiracy theories combine with this type of spreading of fake news, it is evident how so many people come to believe in dangerous and harmful conspiracy theories and beliefs.

Social Media

The role of social media among teenagers has become more influential in the last decade, specifically with the recent advent and popularity of TikTok. The role of technology in teenagers' lives has also become more and more prominent.

TikTok stands on the shoulders of the social media platforms that came before it. YouTube, launched in 2005, was one of the first video sharing platforms on the internet.⁷⁵ As of June 2022, more than 500 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute.⁷⁶

TikTok grew to popularity on the heels of another video sharing app, Musical.ly.

“Indeed, it’s actually the second iteration of Musical.ly, an app that’s identical to TikTok in most major ways, and which was launched in 2014 by Chinese entrepreneurs Alex Zhu and Luyu Yang. Musical.ly was acquired for around \$1 billion in November 2017 by the Beijing-based tech company ByteDance, which already owned the popular TikTok, a Musical.ly equivalent (though in China, TikTok is called Douyin). In August 2018, TikTok absorbed Musical.ly, and all Musical.ly accounts were automatically migrated to TikTok.”⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Swenson, Ali. “False Claims of a Stolen Election Thrive Unchecked on Twitter Even as Musk Promises Otherwise.” AP News, AP News, 24 May 2023, apnews.com/article/elon-musk-twitter-trump-misinformation-election-lies-5137a88a58eaaca0e45ba043db911d15.

⁷⁵ Staff, B. (2024, March 8). YouTube. Encyclopædia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/YouTube>

⁷⁶ YouTube, & Google. (June 22, 2022). Hours of video uploaded to YouTube every minute as of February 2022 [Graph]. In Statista. Retrieved March 13, 2024, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/259477/hours-of-video-uploaded-to-youtube-every-minute/>

⁷⁷ Jennings, R. (2018, December 10). *TikTok, explained*. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/12/10/18129126/tiktok-app-musically-meme-criinge>

As of 2022, TikTok has over 1 billion users and is accessible in over 150 countries.⁷⁸ The National Library of Medicine reports that the app has been downloaded more than 200 million times in the United States alone.⁷⁹ According to Anderson and Jiang, smartphone ownership has become a staple of teenage life and culture: 95% of teens now report they have a smartphone, or at the very least, access to one.⁸¹ This near ubiquitous access has fostered more opportunity for online connection and entertainment: 45% of teens surveyed report they are online on a “near-constant basis.”⁸² The social media site TikTok, which identifies itself as “the leading destination for short-form mobile video”⁸³ describes its mission as “to inspire creativity and bring joy.”⁸⁴ TikTok is one of the main social media apps teenagers use for entertainment. According to a survey by Statista, as of 2022, “approximately 41 percent of users in the U.S. engaged with the popular social video app.”⁸⁵ Around 70 percent of respondents between the ages of 18 and 19 were using TikTok, according to the survey. Approximately 56 percent of respondents aged between 20 and 29 years old reported using TikTok⁸⁶.

⁷⁸ Li Gu, Xun Gao, and Yong Li, “What Drives Me to Use TikTok: A Latent Profile Analysis of Users’ Motives,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (January 2022), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.992824>.

⁷⁹ Admin, “TikTok Statistics - Everything You Need to Know [Mar 2023 Update],” Wallaroo Media, March 21, 2023, <https://wallaroomedia.com/blog/social-media/tiktok-statistics/>.

⁸⁰ Li Gu, Xun Gao, and Yong Li, “What Drives Me to Use TikTok: A Latent Profile Analysis of Users’ Motives,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (January 2022), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.992824>.

⁸¹ Anderson, Monica, and Jingjing Jiang. “Teens, social media & technology 2018.” *Pew Research Center* 31, no. 2018 (2018): 1673-1689.

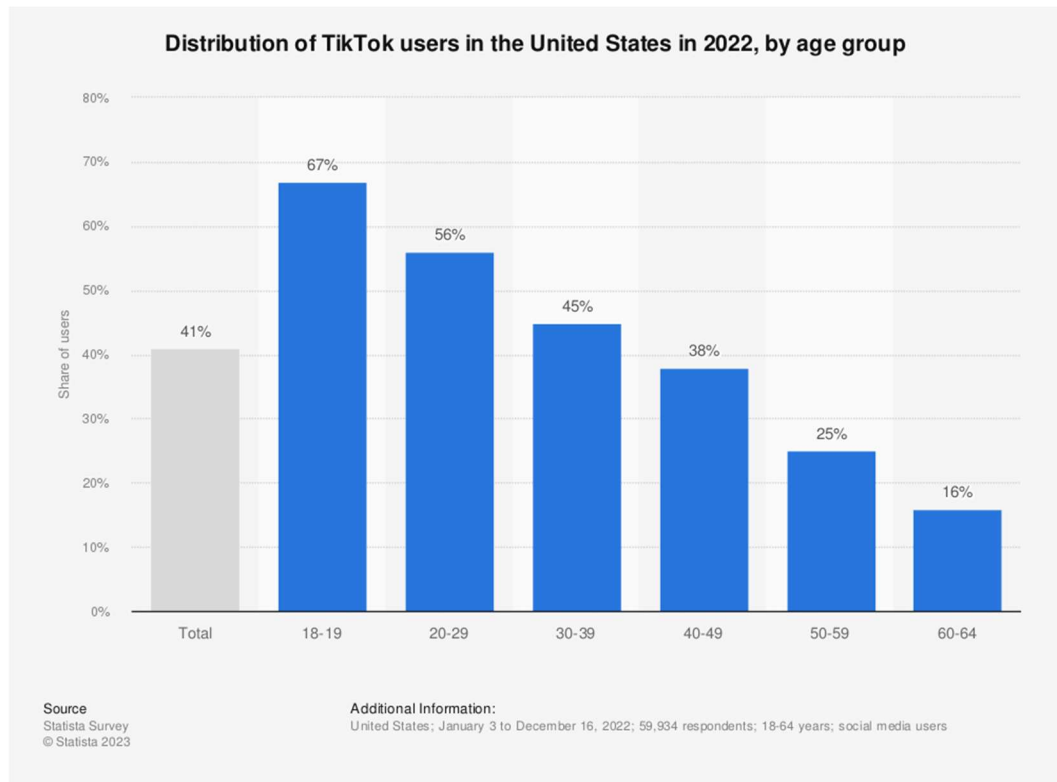
⁸² Anderson, Monica, and Jingjing Jiang. “Teens, social media & technology 2018.” *Pew Research Center* 31, no. 2018 (2018): 1673-1689.

⁸³ TikTok, “About: Tiktok - Real Short Videos,” TikTok (TikTok, 2023), <https://www.tiktok.com/about?lang=en>.

⁸⁴ TikTok, “About: Tiktok - Real Short Videos,” TikTok (TikTok, 2023), <https://www.tiktok.com/about?lang=en>.

⁸⁵ L Ceci, “U.S. Tiktok Users by Age 2022,” Statista (Statista, February 9, 2023), <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1095186/tiktok-us-users-age/#statisticContainer>.

⁸⁶ Statista, “U.S. Tiktok Users by Age 2022,” Statista (Statista, February 9, 2023), <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1095186/tiktok-us-users-age/#statisticContainer>.



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The National Institutes of Health National Library of Medicine conducted latent profile analyses with a sample of 384 TikTok users. Researchers identified four profiles, namely: 1) overall low motives, 2) overall medium motives, 3) overall high motives, and 4) escapist addiction and novelty motives profiles.⁸⁸ “The first three profiles reflect different levels of motivations across four motives (socially rewarding self-presentation, trendiness, escapist addiction, and novelty),” according to the study. This research pointed out the differences between the first three profile types and the escapist addiction and novelty motives profile — in relation to the Helen Keller conspiracy, users who believe and promulgate this belief, based on their actions, are likely escapist addiction and novelty motives profiles. The study notes TikTok users in the escapist addiction and novelty motives profile are motivated by their namesakes, and

⁸⁷ L Ceci, “U.S. Tiktok Users by Age 2022,” Statista (Statista, February 9, 2023), <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1095186/tiktok-us-users-age/#statisticContainer>.

⁸⁸ Li Gu, Xun Gao, and Yong Li, “What Drives Me to Use TikTok: A Latent Profile Analysis of Users’ Motives,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (January 2022), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.992824>.

not socially rewarding self-presentation or trendiness motives.⁸⁹ This theory that Keller is lying or faking her disability can be understood under the concept of an escapist addiction and novelty motive profile. Through this information about TikTok’s user base and overall usage, it is clear how influential this media form is.

Helen Keller

Helen Adams Keller was born on June 27, 1880, in Tuscumbia, Alabama.⁹⁰ A fully healthy child, she was the first of two daughters. Her father, Arthur H. Keller, was a Confederate Army veteran and newspaper editor — coincidentally during the era of yellow journalism — while her mother, Katherine Adams Keller, was an educated young woman.⁹¹ At 19 months old, Keller lost her hearing and sight due to a serious illness, which historians believe to be encephalitis, rubella, scarlet fever, or meningitis.⁹² At the age of six, Keller’s parents hired Anne Sullivan to help Keller learn to communicate.⁹³ Within a month, Sullivan broke through to Keller by teaching her a manual alphabet and showing her that things had names.

“Sullivan, age 20, arrived at Ivy Green, the Keller family estate, in 1887 and began working to socialize her wild, stubborn student and teach her by spelling out words in Keller’s hand. Initially, the finger spelling meant nothing to Keller,” HISTORY reports.⁹⁴ “However, a breakthrough occurred one day when Sullivan held one of Keller’s hands under water from a pump and spelled out “w-a-t-e-r” in Keller’s palm. Keller went on to learn how to read, write and speak.”

⁸⁹ Li Gu, Xun Gao, and Yong Li, “What Drives Me to Use TikTok: A Latent Profile Analysis of Users’ Motives,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (January 2022), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.992824>.

⁹⁰ Michals, Debra. “Biography: Helen Keller.” National Women’s History Museum, 2015, www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/helen-keller.

⁹¹ Michals, Debra. “Biography: Helen Keller.” National Women’s History Museum, 2015, www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/helen-keller.

⁹² Janet R Gilsdorf, Into Darkness and Silence: What Caused Helen Keller’s Deafblindness?, *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, Volume 67, Issue 9, 1 November 2018, Pages 1445–1449, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cid/ciy385>

⁹³ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2023, December 23). Anne Sullivan. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Anne-Sullivan>

⁹⁴ Editors, HISTORY. com. (2009, November 24). *Helen Keller meets Anne Sullivan, her teacher and “miracle worker”* | March 3, 1887. History.com. <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/helen-keller-meets-her-miracle-worker>

After continued schooling at the Perkins Institute for the Blind, and with Sullivan’s assistance, Keller attended Radcliffe College and graduated with honors in 1904.⁹⁵

“Even before she graduated, Keller published two books, *The Story of My Life* (1902) and *Optimism* (1903), which launched her career as a writer and lecturer. She authored a dozen books and articles in major magazines, advocating for prevention of blindness in children and for other causes.”⁹⁶

Keller authored 14 books and over 475 speeches and essays “on topics such as faith, blindness prevention, birth control, the rise of fascism in Europe, and atomic energy,”⁹⁷ according to the American Foundation for the Blind. Her 1903 autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, has been translated into 50 languages and remains in print, the AFB reports.⁹⁸

Arguably Keller’s biggest introduction into popular culture came with the 1962 Oscar-winning film, *The Miracle Worker*, which received five Academy Award nominations and two wins — Anne Bancroft (as Anne Sullivan) for Best Leading Actress and Patty Duke (as Helen Keller) for Best Supporting Actress.⁹⁹

The discussion around Helen Keller, especially in K-12 settings, is extremely important in shaping the discourse and perception of Keller and other disabled people. A 2020 TIME piece wrote about the often-untold accomplishments of Keller, writing “What scholars of disability point out is that when students learn about Helen Keller, they often learn about her efforts to communicate as a child, and not about the work she did as an adult. This limited instruction has

⁹⁵ Editors, R. (2024). Helen Keller. Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University. <https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/schlesinger-library/collections/helen-keller>

⁹⁶ Michals, D. (2015a). *Biography: Helen Keller*. National Women’s History Museum. <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/helen-keller>

⁹⁷ Blind, A. F. for the. (n.d.). *Books, essays, and speeches*. The American Foundation for the Blind. <https://afb.org/about-afb/history/helen-keller/books-essays-speeches>

⁹⁸ Blind, A. F. for the. (n.d.). *Books, essays, and speeches*. The American Foundation for the Blind. <https://afb.org/about-afb/history/helen-keller/books-essays-speeches>

⁹⁹ Staff, I. (2014). *The miracle worker*. IMDb. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0056241/awards/>

implications for how students perceive people with disabilities.”¹⁰⁰ Of the content schools do teach about Keller, few of them showcase some of her greatest accomplishments, according to TIME. “But they don’t learn that she co-founded the American Civil Liberties Union in 1920; that she was an early supporter of the NAACP, and an opponent of lynching; that she was an early proponent of birth control,” Waxman posits.¹⁰¹

Multiple states have adopted Keller into their schooling, but in 2018, the Texas Board of Education proposed a vote to remove Keller from their curriculum.¹⁰² The Washington Post reports that “Proponents said dropping the Keller lesson would save teachers 40 minutes.”¹⁰³

“The board also voted to keep in the curriculum a reference to the ‘heroism’ of the defenders of the Alamo, which had been recommended for elimination, as well as Moses' influence on the writing of the nation's founding documents, multiple references to ‘Judeo-Christian’ values and a requirement that students explain how the ‘Arab rejection of the State of Israel has led to ongoing conflict’ in the Middle East.”¹⁰⁴

However, the state later voted 12-2 to keep Keller in the curriculum.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ Waxman, Olivia B. “The Helen Keller You Didn’t Learn about in School.” Time, Time, 15 Dec. 2020, time.com/5918660/helen-keller-disability-history/.

¹⁰¹ Waxman, Olivia B. “The Helen Keller You Didn’t Learn about in School.” Time, Time, 15 Dec. 2020, time.com/5918660/helen-keller-disability-history/.

¹⁰² McGaughy, L. (2018, September 14). Texas Board votes to eliminate Hillary Clinton, Helen Keller from history curriculum. Dallas News. <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/education/2018/09/14/texas-board-votes-to-eliminate-hillary-clinton-helen-keller-from-history-curriculum/>

¹⁰³ Girma, H. (2018, September 20). Texas voted to remove Helen Keller from its curriculum. here’s ... The Washington Post. <https://www.thelily.com/texas-voted-to-remove-helen-keller-from-its-curriculum-heres-why-its-crucial-she-stay/>

¹⁰⁴ McGaughy, L. (2018, September 14). Texas Board votes to eliminate Hillary Clinton, Helen Keller from history curriculum. Dallas News. <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/education/2018/09/14/texas-board-votes-to-eliminate-hillary-clinton-helen-keller-from-history-curriculum/>

¹⁰⁵ Boyette, C., & Holcombe, M. (2018a, November 14). *In reversal, Texas Board votes to teach students about Helen Keller, Hillary Clinton*. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/14/us/texas-curriculum-hillary-clinton-helen-keller-trnd/index.html>

Methodology

This thesis uses a qualitative media content analysis method. This style of comparison will simplify comparing pieces of media that were published on vastly different dates. Content analysis can be defined as “a research method that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences,”¹⁰⁶ with the data analyzed pertaining to Keller and her role in culture. These sources will be coded into various sections by the author with her background knowledge from the literature review as well as her own experiences with disability. A 1990 book on using content analysis defines coding as an inference made by the researcher. “These inferences are about the sender(s) of the message, the message itself, or the audience of the message.”¹⁰⁷ The content analysis will be qualitative, meaning the author will use grounded, inductive reasoning, “by which themes and categories emerge from the data through the researcher's careful examination and constant comparison.”¹⁰⁸

To accurately compare newspaper, television and social media, a thorough analysis will be done on all 71 pieces of media. While doing a close reading or viewing of each source, the context around each source will be evaluated as background information.

The media being analyzed was sourced from the Helen Keller Archive by the American Foundation for the Blind; the Google search engine; and social media search tools. Each piece of media evaluated for this thesis concerns Keller, with topics ranging from her life story to the conspiracy theory questioning her existence. Newspaper media was sourced from the American Foundation for the Blind’s Helen Keller Archive and Google searches for “Helen Keller news.”

¹⁰⁶ Weber, R. P. (1990). *Basic Content Analysis* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

¹⁰⁷ Weber, R. P. (1990). *Basic Content Analysis* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

¹⁰⁸ Wildemuth, Barbara and Zhang, Yan. “Qualitative Analysis of Content - University of Texas at Austin.” *Qualitative Analysis of Content*, University of Texas, 16 Nov. 2008, www.ischool.utexas.edu/~yanz/Content_analysis.pdf.

Television sources were found from YouTube, where users uploaded archived footage, as well as streaming services with full episodes of television shows. These modern television sources were identified by searching “Helen Keller television references” on Google. Content from social media, such as TikTok and X posts, were found from Google and the respective social media sites themselves, using the phrase “Helen Keller.” There were 71 total sources analyzed for this content analysis.

This method was recommended by the University of Washington Health Sciences Library, as their institution suggests that researchers use subject headings and key words to locate sources.¹⁰⁹ The term “Helen Keller” was the key word used to collect this data, and all 71 newspaper, television, TikTok and X data acquired were found under that search term.

Once the sources were acquired, the author read and analyzed each piece of media following the earlier stated rules of qualitative content analysis. After a piece of media was analyzed, the author “coded” the work, highlighting key themes or subjects of each work. Once each piece of media was coded, the author reread each source and made note of similarities in the coding between sources. Then, a “code book” was created to show the full list of different codes, or themes, that each piece of media encompassed and shared.

This first step — simply coding each source — is known as creating an open code, as the codes were actively being created in a grounded method unique to the material analyzed. The codes were not based on any previous published research, but rather from the author’s own analysis. After the codes were created, the second wave of organizing and grouping codes

¹⁰⁹ Staff, U. of W. (2024, January 12). *Library guides: Finding qualitative research articles: General strategies*. General Strategies - Finding Qualitative Research Articles - Library Guides at University of Washington Libraries. <https://guides.lib.uw.edu/hsl/qualres>

“close” this code book, leveraging open codes to reanalyze and work toward building themes that cut across all material.

Once the code was closed and sources were linked based on their similar code notation, the author made observations as to which sources are similar and how they vary form of media. From there, larger conclusions about the portrayal of Keller in the media were discerned based on the code for each source and its focus, and can be found in the results and discussion sections.

Findings

Introduction

By analyzing 71 sources using a qualitative coded analysis, this project builds a robust codebook of themes, or codes, present in this media. Of these 12 codes — Achievements, Empowerment Stories, Humanitarian Perspectives, Dismantling Conspiracies, Misrepresentation of Disabilities, Sensationalism, Controversial Perspectives, Disability Stereotypes, Ableism, Inspiration Porn, Misogyny and Weaponization of Identity — Ableism and Controversial Perspectives were the codes with the most snippets from these 71 sources. These codes were dominated by snippets from TikTok and X, two new forms of media compared to television and newspaper.

For the Controversial Perspectives, Misrepresentation of Disabilities and Disability Stereotypes codes, the author will offer their own counter, based on research for this project, to these mistruths and misrepresentations.

Analyzed Sources

This study examined 11 newspaper sources, 10 television sources, 25 TikTok sources, and 25 X — known formally as Twitter — sources. Sources beginning with 1 originate from print or online newspapers. Sources beginning with 2 are culled from broadcast television. Sources beginning with 3 originate from TikTok. Finally, sources beginning with 4 come from X. An annotated bibliography can be found in the appendix section.

Codebook

After reading through all 71 sources, the author clustered the motivations that emerged from the posts into 12 categories, each being the name of their main theme.

These codes are:

1.1.1 Achievements

Positive narratives highlighting Keller's achievements and overcoming challenges.

1.1.2 Empowerment Stories

Instances where media emphasizes Keller's empowerment and impact on others.

1.1.3 Humanitarian Perspectives

Depictions of Keller's philanthropy and advocacy work.

1.1.4 Dismantling Conspiracies

Media that actively looks to expel the narrative that questions Keller's disabilities and subsequent legacy.

1.2.1 Misrepresentation of Disabilities

Instances where the media inaccurately represents Keller's disabilities.

1.2.2 Sensationalism

Dramatized or sensationalized portrayals that deviate from Keller's experience with disability.

1.2.3 Controversial Perspectives

Media content earnestly challenging Keller's legacy or questioning her authenticity.

1.3.1 Disability Stereotypes

Instances where Keller is portrayed in a manner reinforcing disability stereotypes, such as laziness or “faking” a disability. Often, but not always, in the form of satire.

1.3.2 Ableism

Portrayals that exhibit harmful misunderstandings of disabled people or a lack of nuance when discussing the lives of disabled people or Keller.

1.3.3 Inspiration Porn

Media focusing excessively on Keller's perseverance or accomplishments.

1.3.4 Misogyny

Instances where Keller’s gender is stereotyped or insinuated to be a fault.

1.3.5 Weaponization of Identity

The use of Keller as a means to an end for the person mentioning her.

Below is each code, their description, and three to four citations from each code to serve as a small sample of each code.

With this codebook having now been completed and closed, the following explanation will study the cross-connections between codes and sources and further analyze the similarities between media.

1.1.1 Achievements (41 citations from 19 sources, including 1A, 1B, 1C, 1D, 1E, 1F, 1H, 1I, 2C, 2E, 2G, 2I, 3C, 3F, 3G, 3J, 3R, 4M, 4W)

This section includes sources coded as having positive narratives highlighting Keller's achievements and overcoming challenges. Eight of the 11 newspaper sources had appearances in this category. Most early newspaper sources focused largely on Keller's accomplishments and breakthroughs, as was the focus of articles at the time.

This code used 72.7 % of all newspaper sources (8/11), 40% of all television sources (4/10), 20% of all TikTok sources (5/25), and 8% of all X sources (2/25).

An 1888 news clipping about Keller (1A), sourced from the Helen Keller Archive, reads:

"In a surprisingly short time Helen completely mastered the notion that objects had names, and that the finger-alphabet open up to her a rich avenue of knowledge."¹¹⁰

The highlighting of Keller's achievements continues with more modern newspaper articles, as a 2015 TIME article highlights. "She is most often remembered for proving that people with disabilities can achieve success and live independently."¹¹¹

Television sources about Keller also highlighted her accomplishments in their coverage. This newsreel from 1961 (2E) narrates a silent clip of her, saying, "Helen Keller with her companion Evelyn Seide, calls on President Kennedy at the White House."¹¹²

Social media posts also echo Keller's accomplishments in the years after her death. A 2023 TikTok (3G) speaking against the modern theory that Keller was faking her disability points out Keller's ability to learn from Anne Sullivan. "So, then Anne Sullivan taught the rest of the world and Helen Keller that communicating is possible for somebody who is blind and

¹¹⁰ Unlisted. (1888, May). Helen Keller newspaper notices . Internet Archive.
<https://archive.org/details/helenkellernewsp01unkn/page/n41/mode/2up>

¹¹¹ Cohen, S. (2015, June 26). Helen Keller: The disability advocate's forgotten radicalism. Time.
<https://time.com/3923213/helen-keller-radicalism/>

¹¹² Pathé, B. (1961). President Kennedy meets Helen Keller (1961). YouTube.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqHdEPaUP6w&ab_channel=BritishPath%C3%A9

deaf,”¹¹³ the speaker says. Only two of the 25 X sources contained mentions of Keller’s accomplishments, with one 2024 post (4M) mentioning her time on the vaudeville circuit and the other sharing one of her famous quotes.

“The only thing worse than being blind, is having sight but no vision. -Helen Keller [sic] Let that sink in for a second. Helen Keller was not only blind, she was also deaf. Yet she was an author, advocate, and leader because she had a vision. Have a vision, then get to work.”¹¹⁴

1.1.2 Empowerment Stories (26 citations from 10 sources, including 1C, 1D, 1E, 1G, 1H, 1I, 2D, 3N, 3S, 4M)

This code highlights instances where media emphasizes Keller's empowerment and impact on others. This code referenced 54.5 % of all newspaper sources (6/11), 10% of all television sources (1/10), 8% of all TikTok sources (2/25), and 4% of all X sources (1/25).

A 1954 article (1D) mentions her work to help the disabled community. “She helped organize the American Foundation for the Blind, and she has traveled to every continent to speak of the need for teaching the blind and the deaf-dumb to help themselves.”¹¹⁵

Additionally, in a 1948 televised speech from Keller (2D), with her voice translated by Polly Thompson, her teacher after Anne Sullivan, Keller says:

“It makes me proud to see how you are overcoming difficulties. I know every step of the road you are taking, and I rejoice at your cheer and determination of the obstacles you meet are many. Hold fast to the ideal your teachers are planting

¹¹³ @paunchypeach, A. (2023, October 20). The fact that this is even an argument.... TikTok. https://www.tiktok.com/@paunchypeach/video/7292104106661907755?_r=1&_t=8k03yyUZeFX

¹¹⁴ Berry, K. (2024, February 18). #vision the only thing worse than being blind, is having sight but no vision.-helen Kellerlet that sink in for a second. Helen Keller was not only blind, she was also deaf. yet she was an author, advocate, and leader because she had a vision.have a vision, then get to work. Twitter.

https://twitter.com/kevinberrynm/status/1759353870214422749?s=42&t=aqUG_QWbRzPx3BmB8LinWA

¹¹⁵ Okon, M. (1954, July 4). HELEN KELLER: “The Unconquered.” Newspaper article written about Helen Keller. July 4, 1954. <https://www.afb.org/HelenKellerArchive?a=d&d=A-HK02-B221-F03-006>

in your heart. I pray you go after life's struggles and adventures. You will raise a banner for the brave who follow you.”¹¹⁶

Moving ahead in time, a 2015 newspaper source (1H) put Keller’s legacy into perspective by noting her often forgotten history. “But Keller’s true legacy also includes a commitment to socioeconomic justice, which she saw as instrumental to improving the lives of people with disabilities.”¹¹⁷

Finally, a 2023 TikTok (3S) reflects Keller’s legacy of empowerment, as a young woman who is deaf and blind, like Keller, shares her story: “Hi, my name is Lupita. I am deaf blind. I am a participant at Helen Keller National Center.”¹¹⁸

1.1.3 Humanitarian Perspectives (27 citations from 11 sources, including 1C, 1D, 1E, 1F, 1G, 1H, 1I, 1K, 2E, 2G, 3F)

This code reflects depictions of Keller's philanthropy and advocacy work. This code referenced 72.7 % of all newspaper sources (8/11), 20% of all television sources (2/10), 4% of all TikTok sources (1/25), and 0% of all X sources (0/25).

A 1992 opinion article from The Chicago Tribune (1G), which is speaking out against comedians making jokes about Keller, emphasizes her philanthropic work. “She was an ardent opponent of fascism prior to World War II, and worked with soldiers who were blinded after that war broke out.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ B, E. (1948). Helen Keller speech: 1948. YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmQKWNjmt7M&ab_channel=ErinB.

¹¹⁷ Cohen, S. (2015, June 26). *Helen Keller: The disability advocate's forgotten radicalism*. Time.

<https://time.com/3923213/helen-keller-radicalism/>

¹¹⁸ Services, H. K. (2023, September 16). Today is global Usher Syndrome awareness day!. TikTok.

https://www.tiktok.com/@helenkellerservices/video/7279398580664913198?_r=1&t=8k05ONyIG02

¹¹⁹ Greene, Bob. “Her Life Was Not a Joke.” Chicago Tribune, 11 May. 1992, www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1992-05-11-9202110905-story.html

An article from The Independent, a New York based “free, progressive monthly newspaper, online news site and weekly radio show,”¹²⁰ discusses how Keller’s legacy has been called into question (1K), mentions Max Wallace's biography, “After the Miracle: The Political Crusades of Helen Keller.” His work documents Keller’s humanitarian work with poverty and disability. “Keller was cognizant of the relationship between poverty and disability — and indeed, acutely aware of her privilege.”¹²¹

Next, a 2015 TIME article highlighting Keller’s forgotten accomplishments further discusses her study of poverty and disability. “She noticed the close relationship between disability and poverty, and blamed capitalism and poor industrial conditions for both.”¹²²

Finally, a 2021 television clip from PBS’ American Masters program (2G) also depicts Keller’s legacy of philanthropy. “Helen would go on to write articles for “The Call,” a New York City socialist newspaper. It’s women's pages regularly discussed birth control, wages for women workers, and childcare.”¹²³

1.1.4 Dismantling Conspiracies (33 citations from 17 sources, including 1G, 1I, 1J, 1K, 3A, 3C, 3E, 3G, 3L, 3N, 3S, 3V, 4C, 4F, 4I, 4O, 4U

Citations in this code highlight media that actively looks to dispel the narrative that questions Keller’s disabilities and subsequent legacy. This code referenced 36.4% of all newspaper sources (4/11), 0% of all television sources (0/10), 32% of all TikTok sources (8/25), and 20% of all X sources (5/25).

¹²⁰ Staff, Independent. (2000). *About Us*. The Independent. <https://independent.org/about-us/>

¹²¹ Stein, Jessica Max. “Hellen Keller’s Forgotten Radicalism.” The Independent, The Independent, 20 Sept. 2023, independent.org/2023/09/hellen-kellers-forgotten-radicalism/.

¹²² Cohen, S. (2015, June 26). *Helen Keller: The disability advocate’s forgotten radicalism*. Time. <https://time.com/3923213/helen-keller-radicalism/>

¹²³ PBS, A. M. (2021a, October 5). Helen Keller studied socialism | becoming Helen Keller | american masters | PBS. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=imtMkJR8GMc&ab_channel=AmericanMastersPBS

A 2023 article from The Independent comments on the current conspiracy theory about Keller's existence (1K). The author cites a recent book that is aimed at restoring Keller's legacy in culture. "Fortunately, scholar and disability advocate Max Wallace restores Keller's legacy as an empowered, independent thinker and activist in his new biography, *After the Miracle: The Political Crusades of Helen Keller*."¹²⁴

Additionally, a 2023 TikTok from @paunchypeach is a direct response to the TikTok trend of debating Keller's existence. "If you're somebody who falls into that trap of thinking that Helen Keller, one, wasn't real or, two, she didn't accomplish the things that she accomplished, I immediately assume that you do not have critical thinking skills."¹²⁵

Next, a 2021 TikTok from @actuallyautistickatie (3L) is yet another response to the Keller conspiracy trend online. "When you're out here saying there's no way she could have done these things, you're telling disabled people that you don't think that they are capable."¹²⁶

Finally, a 2021 X post (4U) also responds to the conspiracy trend, commenting on how these new platforms can be influential to young users. "The ease at which teens who use TikTok were convinced that Helen Keller was fake should act as a sobering wakeup [sic] call illustrating how easily our children can be indoctrinated."¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Stein, Jessica Max. "Hellen Keller's Forgotten Radicalism." *The Independent*, The Independent, 20 Sept. 2023, [independent.org/2023/09/hellen-kellers-forgotten-radicalism/](https://www.independent.org/2023/09/hellen-kellers-forgotten-radicalism/).

¹²⁵ @paunchypeach, A. (2023, October 20). The fact that this is even an argument... TikTok. https://www.tiktok.com/@paunchypeach/video/7292104106661907755?_r=1&_t=8k03yyUZeFX

¹²⁶ @actuallyautistickatie, K. (2021, March 19). Because my HK videos are getting traction again... TikTok. https://www.tiktok.com/@actuallyautistickatie/video/6941550780101004550?_r=1&_t=8k046dTBxLG

¹²⁷ Whatserface, A. (2021, February 25). The ease at which teens who use TikTok were convinced that Helen Keller was fake... Twitter. <https://x.com/AmieWohrer/status/1364949356789575687?s=20>

1.2.1 Misrepresentation of Disabilities (23 citations from 18 sources, including 1A, 2I, 3A, 3C, 3D, 3F, 3H, 3I, 3J, 3N, 3Q, 3X, 3Y, 4B, 4H, 4P, 4T, 4X)

This code references instances where the media inaccurately represents Keller's disabilities. This code referenced 9.1 % of all newspaper sources (1/11), 10% of all television sources (1/10), 44% of all TikTok sources (11/25), and 20% of all X sources (5/25).

A 2000 South Park episode titled *Helen Keller! The Musical* (2I) depicts its characters putting on their own version of the famous play *The Miracle Worker*. The students' lines are "How can she talk if she can't hear? This is absolutely pointless!"¹²⁸ Keller could speak despite her deafness, and many other deaf people can speak with their disability.

Additionally, a 2023 TikTok from Michael Knowles (3A), a contributor to The Daily Wire, shows him and fellow contributor Brett Cooper debating if Helen Keller was "faking it." Knowles believes she was real, but those around her were faking her abilities. He says, "Yeah and like she also didn't think she had this special friend who Helen Keller would communicate with a friend by like, hand massages or something and then..."¹²⁹ Anne Sullivan was her teacher, not a "special friend," and the "hand massages" he mentions are tactile sign language.

Moving to X, a post from 2024 (4H) also fails to accurately reflect Keller's disability. "Helen Keller was basically just a human thermometer..someone stuck her hand in some hot water and she made a noise"¹³⁰ Sullivan put Keller's hand under a water pump and then spelled the word 'water,' which helped Keller to learn the word.

¹²⁸ Parker, T., Stone, M., & Goodman, D. R. (2000, November 22). South Park - Helen Keller! The Musical. episode.

¹²⁹ Knowles, Michael. "I've Been Told Is This a Very Hot Topic of Debate." *TikTok*, The Daily Wire, 12 Apr. 2023, www.tiktok.com/@notmichaelknowles/video/7221282448800222507?_r=1&_t=8jGGZzZK1Yw&social_sharing=1

¹³⁰ Nonsense, C. (2024, February 18). Helen Keller was basically just a human thermometer..someone stuck her hand in some hot water and she made a noise. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/NAZANAZANAZAN/status/1555487474423562241>

Finally, a 2023 X post (4T) further exemplifies this misrepresentation of Keller’s disability. The author writes, “If you disagree you are Helen Keller (fake and retarded)”¹³¹ The term “retarded” was a common term to describe mentally disabled people and has since fallen out of favor with the disabled community.

1.2.2 Sensationalism (10 citations from 8 sources, including 2H, 3C, 3D, 3K, 3O, 3P, 3Q, 3Y)

This code represents dramatized or sensationalized portrayals that deviate from Keller’s experience with disability. This code referenced 0 % of newspaper sources (0/11), 10% of all television sources (1/10), 28% of all TikTok sources (7/25), and 0% of X sources (0/25).

A 2013 episode of *Family Guy*, *Giggity Wife* (2H), shows three of the show’s characters visiting Keller’s old school. The clip cuts to a “flashback” of Keller, where she is pretending to be blind and deaf. Once the teacher comes back, Keller snaps back into her state of disability. *Family Guy* shows a cartoon of Keller flailing her arms, opening her eyes wide, and making guttural noises to act “disabled” again.¹³² The extreme exaggeration of Keller’s disability is a case of sensationalism.

Moving to social media, a 2022 TikTok (3K) shows a woman dressed as Helen Keller for Halloween. The main woman in the video is wearing a white dress, black sunglasses, a hat, and a bracelet with a piece of paper reading “HOW TO SIGN 101.” She is playing cup pong, a party game where players must bounce a ball into a plastic cup from the other side of the table. The woman begins tapping a stick over the cups, as if the stick were a white cane for the blind, and

¹³¹ Maggie. (2023, November 11). I should get paid 1 million dolllars a year to teach yoga class and to poast. . Twitter. <https://x.com/maggiieg12/status/1723561643991249394?s=20>

¹³² Goldberg, A., Zuckerman, D., & MacFarlane, S. (2013, January 27). *Family Guy - The Giggity Wife*. episode.

then throws the ball into the cup.¹³³ Her exaggeration of Keller's disability for a Halloween costume demonstrates her sensationalized disability in modern culture.

Additionally, a 2023 TikTok from Jack Mac (3P), a Barstool Sports employee who says that the story of Helen Keller is "one of the most dubious stories in history of the world." Mac shows viral TikToks poking fun at Keller, highlighting a clip of a fake audio of Helen Keller "singing" *Style* by Taylor Swift, and her "voice" is just yelling and guttural sounds.¹³⁴ This exaggeration of her voice is an example of the sensationalism around Keller's true abilities.

Finally, in a 2023 TikTok (3Y), a man begins by stating that a quote from Helen Keller helps him through hard times. As the quote comes on screen, the man pretends to speak as Helen Keller, saying his favorite quote by Keller is "Nfdhegs fkduebeidd ndudgtyyon wtqritnggf!" He is speaking incoherently and yelling guttural noises.¹³⁵ Again, the sensationalized version of Keller's voice is an exaggerated version of what her voice sounded like in television and audio clips.

1.2.3 Controversial Perspectives (79 citations from 32 sources, including 1I, 1J, 1K, 2H, 3A, 3B, 3C, 3F, 3H, 3J, 3L, 3M, 3O, 3P, 3Q, 3R, 3T, 3U, 3W, 3X, 4A, 4D, 4E, 4F, 4G, 4J, 4K, 4Q, 4R, 4S, 4T, 4Y)

This code represents media content earnestly challenging Keller's legacy or questioning her authenticity. Being the second most cited code, this code referenced 27.3% of all newspaper

¹³³ Whitmire, D. (2022, October 29). *HELEN KELLER WHO????!! #POV @deywhitmire*. TikTok. https://www.tiktok.com/@deywhitmire/video/7160117437277932846?_r=1&_t=8k044xp1vAJ

¹³⁴ Mac, J. (2023, November 13). I don't know man. It just don't add up? @jackmacbarstool. TikTok. https://www.tiktok.com/@jackmacbarstool/video/7301193200948202798?_r=1&_t=8k04LwHjhFu

¹³⁵ @ez_stargaze, E. (2023, August 31). Always gets me through the day! #helenkeller #laugh #motivationalvideo #motivation #goingtohell #canceled #jokes #shinegang #laughter. TikTok. https://www.tiktok.com/@ez_stargaze/video/7273613387857366318?_r=1&_t=8k07PWhorAB

sources (3/11), 10% of all television sources (1/10), 64% of all TikTok sources (16/25), and 48% of all X sources (12/25).

A 2021 Daily Mail article (1I) lays out the modern theory questioning Keller’s legitimacy. “The outlandish conspiracy theory has been earning momentum among Gen Z for some time, with teens insisting that the author and activist — who was blind and deaf and lived from 1880 to 1968 — 'didn't exist' or was at the very least a 'fraud.’”¹³⁶

Next, a 2022 TikTok (3X) also demonstrates this conspiracy theory. This video shows a man asking a young woman to describe one thing she can’t stop thinking about. She responds with:

“I lay awake at night and I think about Helen Keller and how there's no way that she was real. She was blind and deaf and they say that she wrote books and flew a plane. And not that she wouldn't be able to do it but like how would she have ever learned how to read a book or even write a book because she's blind and deaf, she has no sense of what's going on at all. She is a bot created by the government. Do not be fooled by Helen Keller.”¹³⁷

A 2021 X post (4F) is another example of this theory surrounding the legitimacy of Keller’s existence. X user Daniel Kunka shared his experience with learning his nieces and nephews do not believe Keller was real. “I am on a text chain with my teenage nieces and nephews along with my mom (their grandma) and today my mom asked them if they knew who Helen Keller was... And their response was that Helen Keller was a fraud who didn't exist.”¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Stern, C. (2021, January 7). Bizarre Gen Z conspiracy theory that Helen Keller was a fraud who “didn’t exist” takes off on social media - leaving older generations baffled. Daily Mail Online. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-9123327/Conspiracy-theory-Helen-Keller-fraud-DIDNT-EXIST-ignites-social-media.html>

¹³⁷ @utopiapills, L. (2022, October 19). Make your day. TikTok. https://www.tiktok.com/@utopiapills/video/7156124359264947499?_r=1&_t=8k07afdAlva

¹³⁸ Kunka, D. (2021, January 5). *Guys, something insane happened to me today. I am on a text chain with my teenage nieces and nephews along with my mom (their grandma) and today my mom asked them if they knew who Helen Keller was...and their response was that Helen Keller was a fraud who didn't exist.* Twitter. <https://twitter.com/unikunka/status/1346602536904523777>

The X account @HAKisfake (referencing Helen Adams Keller) further exemplifies this perspective around Keller, but was published in 2013, about a decade before the TikTok source cited above. One of their X posts reads, “Helen Keller is a disgrace to history. She's a faker! Was* #helenkellerisfake”¹³⁹

1.3.1 Disability Stereotypes (31 citations from 23 sources, including 1A, 1C, 2H, 2I, 3B, 3C, 3D, 3F, 3I, 3O, 3P, 3Q, 3R, 3U, 3X, 4A, 4F, 4G, 4P, 4T, 4V, 4X)

This section contains instances where Keller is portrayed in a manner reinforcing disability stereotypes, such as laziness or “faking” a disability, and often, but not always, in the form of satire. This code referenced 18.2 % of all newspaper sources (2/11), 20% of all television sources (2/10), 48% of all TikTok sources (12/25), and 28% of all X sources (7/25).

In a Boston Globe article from 1913 (1C), the author equates Keller to a magical figure while she’s speaking. This constitutes a disability stereotype, as she is being compared to an other-worldly figure when she is in fact simply speaking. The author writes, “It was as if some mystical oracle had spoken, for there was something impressive and almost awe-inspiring in the thoughts she uttered and in the curious, sonorous tone in which the words were spoken.”¹⁴⁰

A 2023 TikTok (3F) shows a different disability stereotype used when speaking about Keller. The video’s narrator describes Keller’s success as “impossible” for someone who is disabled, feeding into the cultural stereotype that disabled people rarely accomplish things, or at

¹³⁹ Helen Keller is fake. (2013, December). *Helen Keller is fake (@hakisfake) | twitter*. <https://twitter.com/hakisfake>

¹⁴⁰The Boston Globe. (March 25, 1913). Newspaper account of lecture Helen Keller gave in Boston in 1913; Includes quotes from her speech. Newspapers.com. Retrieved February 18, 2024, from <https://www.newspapers.com/article/the-boston-globe-newspaper-account-of-le/29282371/>

least, are superhuman when they do. “Impossible that Helen Keller was fucking this smart, this advanced, there's no way possible in hell,”¹⁴¹ the original post said.

Another TikTok from 2023 (3R) shows this same misunderstanding of disability. The man speaking in the video says he doesn’t understand how Keller could learn what things are if she couldn’t be told what these things mean. He says, “How do you learn Braille if no one can like teach you what the Braille means.”¹⁴² Of course, Keller learned Braille after learning words through tactile sign language from Anne Sullivan, but the stereotype that disabled people struggle to learn is present in this TikTok.

Finally, a 2024 X post (4A) shows another misunderstanding of disability, and yet another stereotype surrounding disabled people. The author writes, “I’ve never believed Stephen Hawking was real. Obviously a real person but the super genius thing I’ve never believed. I think it was propaganda similar to Helen Keller.”¹⁴³ The stereotype that disabled people cannot accomplish these feats and instead must be fake is reflected in the author’s disbelief in both Keller and Stephen Hawking.

1.3.2 Ableism (85 citations from 42 sources, including 1A, 1B, 1C, 1D, 1E, 1F, 1G, 1H, 1I, 1J, 1K, 2F, 2H, 2I, 3B, 3C, 3D, 3E, 3F, 3I, 3J, 3K, 3L, 3N, 3O, 3P, 3Q, 3U, 3V, 3X, 3Y, 4A, 4D, 4E, 4F, 4I, 4N, 4P, 4T, 4U, 4V, 4X)

¹⁴¹Dixon, C. (2023, January 28). #helenkeller #cap #fraud #notreal #nope #yessir #greenscreenvideo. TikTok. <https://www.tiktok.com/@carld32323/video/7193943906193526059?q=helen%2Bkeller%2Bisn%27t%2Breal&t=1707806707742>

¹⁴² Santagato, J. (2023, February 18). *Was Helen Keller real? We dove into some conspiracies....* @joesantagatoshow. TikTok.

https://www.tiktok.com/@joesantagatoshow/video/7201500991529684266?_r=1&_t=8k04oxcefoh

¹⁴³ Collett, Hunter. “I’ve Never Believed Stephen Hawking Was Real. Obviously a Real Person but the Super Genius Thing I’ve Never Believed. I Think It Was Propaganda Similar to Helen Keller..” *Twitter*, Twitter, 8 Jan. 2024, twitter.com/huntercollett55/status/1744415891943498016?s=20.

This code contains portrayals that exhibit harmful misunderstandings of disabled people or a lack of nuance when discussing the lives of disabled people or Keller. This code, the most cited of all 12, referenced 100 % of all newspaper sources (11/11), 30% of all television sources (3/10), 68% of all TikTok sources (17/25), and 44% of all X sources (11/25).

A news article from 1954 (1D) writes about Keller's life and accomplishments ahead of her 75th birthday. While the author is largely praising her achievements, they also describe Keller in a dehumanizing tone. "For the next few years she lived a wild, animal-like existence, grunting when she wanted something and falling into rages when she couldn't make herself understood."¹⁴⁴ The use of the phrase "wild, animal-like existence" — one not attributed to a source and thus implying it is the author's perspective — shows how the author may view Keller as less than a human being. Though the piece later goes on to laud Keller's growth and ability to communicate, this language is ableist.

Another TikTok posted in 2023 (3Q) reflects the ableist perspectives that exist in modern media surrounding Keller's life and legacy. In this video, a man interviewing a young woman asks her to make him laugh to earn \$20. The young woman says, "Why did Helen Keller's dog run away?" When the interviewer asks her why, the young woman says, "You would too if your name was..." and then makes loud unintelligible guttural noises and stiffly moves her arms.¹⁴⁵ Keller's dog was named Et Tu, and she was able to pronounce his name. The implication that Keller could not speak coherent words is ableist and incorrect, as she could speak well enough for her interpreters to understand her.

¹⁴⁴ Okon, M. (1954, July 4). HELEN KELLER: "The Unconquered." Newspaper article written about Helen Keller. July 4, 1954. <https://www.afb.org/HelenKellerArchive?a=d&d=A-HK02-B221-F03-006>

¹⁴⁵ Shawaf, S. (2023, January 7). *That escalated quickly at the end*. TikTok. https://www.tiktok.com/@saifshawaf/video/7185959384676093190?_r=1&_t=8k04f28MKvz

The X account “Helen Keller if Fake” (4D) also exemplifies ableism. In 2013, the account posted “For everyone learning about Helen Keller in school just know she was blind, deaf and useless. #helenkellerisfake”¹⁴⁶ The word “useless” to describe a disabled person is extremely ableist, as it implies Keller is of no value to society.

1.3.3 Inspiration Porn (42 citations from 12 sources, including 1A, 1B, 1C, 1D, 1E, 1F, 1G, 1H, 1K, 2A, 2D, 4M)

This section reflects media focusing excessively on Keller's perseverance or accomplishments. This code referenced 81.8 % of all news sources (9/11), 20% of all TV sources (2/10), 0% of all TikTok sources (0/25), and 4% of all Twitter sources (1/25).

The 1913 Boston Globe (1C) article highlights Keller’s accomplishments, but also hyper-focuses on the inspirational qualities of her story. The article describes Keller’s life, saying, “It is a wonderful story. Nothing just like it has been preserved to the world. Mrs. Macy said it proved that “a mentally sound child is compelled by some inward force to express itself.””¹⁴⁷ By saying that Keller’s story is “wonderful” and “nothing just like it has been preserved,” the author is emphasizing the inspirational aspect of Keller’s life to a certain degree. This undermines her accomplishments by putting more emphasis on her inspirational qualities.

A 1900 article by the Asheville Citizen-Time (1B) also focuses on the inspirational aspect of Keller’s story. The author writes:

“A girl with a mind like that could do anything. After reading an authenticated incident like this visit one seems to wonder that Helen Keller entered Radcliffe with flying colors, passed in advanced Latin with credit and in advanced Greek, which her tutor regarded as her star subject

¹⁴⁶ Helen Keller is fake. (2013, December). *Helen Keller is fake (@hakisfake) | twitter*. <https://twitter.com/hakisfake>

¹⁴⁷ The Boston Globe. (March 25, 1913). Newspaper account of lecture Helen Keller gave in Boston in 1913; Includes quotes from her speech. Newspapers.com. Retrieved February 18, 2024, from <https://www.newspapers.com/article/the-boston-globe-newspaper-account-of-le/29282371/>

with the "B" that means an honor. The examination paper were given her in the Braille raised point system and the answers she wrote upon a typewriter, in the use of which she is an expert. Her teachers say that while at snap questions she has no more aptitude than the majority of her fellow students, when she has time enough she greatly outstrips them in the quality of her work.”¹⁴⁸

This sentence also that overemphasizes the inspirational side of Keller’s life. Though it does showcase her accomplishments, the phrase “A girl with a mind like that could do anything” shows the inspirational nature of this article. Since the paragraph starts off highlighting the inspirational nature of Keller’s story, the list of achievements that follow verifies that inspirational claim.

Additionally, a 2015 TIME article (1H) recounting Keller’s accomplishments also demonstrates the often-inspirational tone behind media concerning Keller. The author writes, “In 1933, TIME described Keller as a ‘blind-deaf mute who has become a highly educated and intelligent young woman.’”¹⁴⁹ Saying Keller “has become” highly educated after mentioning her disability insinuates an inspirational tone. It is the truth, and it is inspirational, but this emphasis on the inspirational qualities of her achievements, rather than the achievements themselves, constitutes inspiration porn.

Finally, a 1954 article about Keller’s life (1D) demonstrates the concept of inspiration porn. The article reads, in part, “Anyone who looks into her face, hears the hard-wrought words, watches her hand grasp eagerly at the letters spelled into it, will find it difficult to whine again at fate and not be ashamed.”¹⁵⁰ In this instance, the author is leveraging the inspirational nature of

¹⁴⁸ Asheville Citizen-Times. (October 19, 1900). Helen Keller begins attending Radcliffe College of Harvard University at age 20 in 1900. Newspapers.com. Retrieved February 18, 2024, from <https://www.newspapers.com/article/asheville-citizen-times-helen-keller-beg/47398849/>

¹⁴⁹ Cohen, S. (2015, June 26). *Helen Keller: The disability advocate’s forgotten radicalism*. Time. <https://time.com/3923213/helen-keller-radicalism/>

¹⁵⁰ Okon, May. “HELEN KELLER: ‘The Unconquered.’” *Newspaper Article Written about Helen Keller*. July 4, 1954, American Foundation for the Blind, 4 July 1954, www.afb.org/HelenKellerArchive?a=d&d=A-HK02-B221-F03-006.

Keller's story against those who complain about their own lives. This implication that Keller's life has been so difficult, and her achievements so fought for that others shouldn't feel down on themselves fits the description of inspiration porn, as it focuses more on Keller's inspirational qualities more than anything else.

1.3.4 Misogyny (8 citations from 7 sources, including 2H, 2I, 3D, 3R, 3W, 4D, 4R)

This code represents instances where Keller's gender is stereotyped or insinuated to be a fault. This code referenced 0 % of newspaper sources (0/11), 20% of all television sources (2/10), 12% of all TikTok sources (3/25), and 8% of all X sources (2/25).

The 2013 Family Guy episode *Giggity Wife* (2H), which shows three men visiting Keller's school, also uses misogynistic writing. "Tonight I want to go out and just get wasted. And not one of these campus bars. I want to get wrecked by a townie."¹⁵¹ The episode depicts Keller as faking her disability, and the one topic she talks about while appearing non-disabled is about having sex with men. It is misogynistic that the only thing she would talk about is her desire for men, rather than her studies, interests or friends.

The 2000 episode of South Park, titled *Helen Keller! The Musical* (2I) also uses the word "bitch" to describe Keller. Cartman, the show's main character, is trying to communicate with Keller from beyond the grave. He says, "Speak to me Helen. Let me be your voice. Come on, you blind bitch! Channel your spirit through me!"¹⁵² Again, the use of the word "bitch" to describe Keller is misogynistic and demeaning.

¹⁵¹ Goldberg, A., Zuckerman, D., & MacFarlane, S. (2013, January 27). Family Guy - The Giggity Wife. episode.

¹⁵² Parker, T., Stone, M., & Goodman, D. R. (2000, November 22). South Park - Helen Keller! The Musical. episode.

Finally, the X account “Helen Keller is Fake” (4D) also demonstrates the misogyny that can be used to describe Keller. A 2013 tweet reads, “Women made up Helen Keller's "achievements" to make women look like they had historical figures.”¹⁵³ The insinuation that Keller was made up “by women,” is, firstly, untrue, and secondly, demeaning to women. Women *do* have historical figures — Susan B. Anthony, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, to name three of many — and the insinuation that Keller was made up for women is misogynistic.

1.3.5 Weaponization of Identity (29 citations from 20 sources, including 1G, 2J, 3C, 3K, 3O, 3P, 3Q, 3T, 3W, 3Y, 4B, 4E, 4H, 4L, 4N, 4P, 4S, 4T, 4V, 4X)

This code reflects the use of Keller as a means to an end for the person mentioning her. This code referenced 9.1 % of all newspaper sources (1/11), 10% of all television sources (1/10), 32% of all TikTok sources (8/25), and 40% of all X sources (10/25).

This code is similar to the aforementioned code of ableism, but the two are distinct in the specific contexts in which they mentioned Keller. Weaponization of identity specifically looks to mention Keller to serve the author’s own purpose *and* often includes ableist language, whereas ableism does not use Keller for a specific purpose.

A 2021 episode of Saturday Night Live (2J) mentioned Keller in a joke. In the Weekend Update segment, which often covers the news of the week, they mentioned the news of a Helen Keller Barbie doll. “Mattel is releasing a Helen Keller Barbie doll,” comedian Colin Hanks said. “Just remember not to let her drive the Barbie Corvette.”¹⁵⁴ Obviously, Keller cannot drive —

¹⁵³ Helen Keller is fake. (2013, December). *Helen Keller is fake (@hakisfake) | twitter*. <https://twitter.com/hakisfake>

¹⁵⁴ Jost, C., & Che, M. (2021, May 22). Saturday Night Live - Anya Taylor Joy, Lil Nas X. Weekend Update. episode, NBC.

and neither can a doll version of her — but the use of Keller as a joke for the sole benefit of Saturday Night Live shows how her identity has been weaponized for the benefit of others.

Additionally, a 1992 article by Bob Greene of the Chicago Tribune (1G) also demonstrates how Keller’s identity has been weaponized by comedians. “Sometimes it seems that this is destined to be Helen Keller’s legacy-to be a punchline,”¹⁵⁵ Greene writes. This is exactly what happened in the 2021 Saturday Night Live episode.

Moving to social media, a 2024 X post (4N) writes, “Simply put, Helen Keller had more sense than most die-hard Liberals.”¹⁵⁶ This is an example of how Keller’s identity has been weaponized by those simply using her name as the butt of a joke or to prove a point. In this instance, the X post author implies that Keller doesn’t have any sense, but still has less sense than liberal voters today. Keller did not have any mental disabilities and was able to communicate despite her physical disabilities; therefore, this weaponization of her identity does not make logical sense for the author’s argument.

Another X post from 2024 (4P) also uses Keller’s name to defend the author’s political opinions. “If you think Biden is cognitively alert enough to run the country,” the author writes, “you have the self awareness of a sedated Helen Keller.”¹⁵⁷ Again, the invocation of Keller’s name to prove a political point is an example of weaponizing her identity for an ulterior motive.

¹⁵⁵ Greene, Bob. “Her Life Was Not a Joke.” *Chicago Tribune*, 10 Aug. 2021, www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1992-05-11-9202110905-story.html.

¹⁵⁶ Nerpin, C. (2024, February 18). Simply put, Helen Keller had more sense than most die-hard liberals. pic.twitter.com/mvdp2puapl. Twitter.

https://twitter.com/chrisnerpin/status/1759261314298286181?s=42&t=aqUG_QWbRzPx3BmB8LinWA

¹⁵⁷ Cousin_Chet. (2024, February 13). If you think Biden is cognitively alert enough to run the country, you have the self awareness of a sedated Helen Keller. pic.twitter.com/textfyjcxkq. Twitter.

https://twitter.com/cousin_chet/status/1757525511801090474?s=42&t=aqUG_QWbRzPx3BmB8LinWA

Discussion

Codes that could be seen as positive portrayals of Keller — Achievements, Empowerment Stories and Humanitarian Perspectives were largely dominated by newspaper sources. Of the 19 sources coded as “achievements,” 42.1% (8/19) were newspaper sources. Only one of the 11 newspapers sourced analyzed for this thesis were labeled as “opinion” pieces, and many of the “hard” news stories focused largely on stories of her life and accomplishments.

Empowerment Stories had ten sources coded in its section, and 60% (6/10) sources were from newspapers. Again, this coverage was more focused on the facts of her life rather than the opinions of the author, so it’s logical that these sources would speak about her accomplishments and empowerment of disabled people.

Humanitarian Perspectives followed the same trend; 11 sources were cited in this code, and 72.7% (8/11) were newspaper sources. Again, this is likely due to the “hard” news angle of these older newspaper stories, as these types of articles tended to focus on the facts of Keller’s life.

As the codes turn toward more negative representations of Keller — Misrepresentation of Disability, Sensationalism, and Controversial Perspectives — newspapers are less heavily featured in these categories/themes.

Misrepresentation of Disabilities has 18 items noted within this code, and only of these 18 sources is a newspaper article. TikTok sources comprised 61.1% (11/18) of the total sources cited as misrepresenting disabilities. The next highest percentage of sources came from X, with 27.8% (5/18) of sources cited coming from this other social media platform. Together, these two social media sites comprised 88.9% of the examples of Misrepresentation of Disability.

Sensationalism followed this same trend as well. Though no X sources were found to fit this description of sensationalism, 87.5% (7/8) sources in sensationalism came from TikTok sources.

Controversial Perspectives reflected this pattern, with 50% (16/32) sources originating from TikTok and 37.5% (12/32) sources being from X.

The trend of social media sites portraying a more negative opinion of Keller could be attributed to the passing of Keller — since she is no longer alive, her achievements are no longer as relevant in the news. Additionally, since she passed in 1968, the generations that largely use social media were born after she passed. This distance between her death and present day could contribute to the lack of positive representation. It could also, and just as likely, be due to the algorithmic nature of these sites as well as the lack of editorial standards in these platforms.

The final group of codes — Disability Stereotypes, Ableism, Inspiration Porn, Misogyny and Weaponization of Identity — focus on the media coverage of various aspects of Keller's identity rather than her accomplishments. Her gender, her ability, and her role in popular culture are the focus of these codes, and though these codes are often more negative in their representation of Keller, they focus on aspects of her life that are out of her control.

The sources featured in the Disability Stereotypes code were very social media heavy: 52.2% (12/23) sources in this code were from TikTok, and 30.4% (7/23) sources came from X. Both newspaper and television sources had 2 sources (8.7%) each.

Ableism, the most heavily cited code, was more diverse than other codes discussed, with 26.2% (11/42) being newspaper sources, 7.1% (3/42) being television sources, 40.5% (17/42) being TikTok sources, and 26.2% (11/42) being X sources. This broader array of sources demonstrates how ableism has not been limited to a certain period of time — sources spanning

135 years demonstrated ableist perspectives. Discrimination against disabled people is not a novel concept, and this code reflects just how much the practice of ableism still exists for disabled people today.

The category of Inspiration Porn was more unequal in its representation among sources, however — 75% (9/12) of sources were newspaper articles. These bodies of work largely highlighted Keller's achievements, but also heavily portrayed the inspirational nature of Keller's life.

The Misogyny code also lacked diversity in its sources, as no newspaper sources were coded as such. Of the seven sources, two came from television, (28.5%), three from TikTok (42.9%), and two came from X (28.5%).

Finally, there were 20 sources used in the Weaponization of Identity code. Only one newspaper source (5%) and one television source (5%) were sorted into this category, while eight sources were from TikTok (40%) and 10 were from X (50%). This code was more social media heavy than others, and this could be attributed to users on social media invoking Keller's name in contexts outside of her life and accomplishments. For example, multiple X posts in this category described other people, or groups of people, as similar to Keller to prove a point.

From the author's perspective, this shift to more negative coverage of Keller could be due to the landscape of social media. Posts about Keller being a fraud, though factually untrue, get likes and views on these sites. As the popularity of these posts grow, social media algorithms may promote similar content to users who liked the original posts, and this is how these theories may spread. However, posts are not only shown to those who have proven themselves to enjoy the material — it can also pop up in the social media feeds of those who have no idea of this

conspiracy. Because of this new spread of conspiratorial information, more views could come for these conspiratorial posts, spreading the conspiracy.

This project is meant to build a body of work, not to answer questions as to why media has trended toward questioning Keller's legitimacy. This project was created in the hopes of serving as a prelude to a larger study, perhaps serving as a basis upon which to examine the root causes of why Keller's perception and legacy has changed in recent years. Scholars in years to come could use this data to generate a sociological study to analyze why Gen Z social media users have taken so strongly to this "Helen Keller is a fraud" theory. Researchers could use surveys to examine attitudes toward Keller and others with disabilities. This work is an attempt at a launching point for a future study looking into the "why" behind these media trends, whereas this study is simply looking to the collect and code this data.

Limitations

This research project analyzed 71 sources. That number was adequate for the size and scale of this particular study, but this number of sources was limiting. In projects that build off this one, a large sample size would provide a wider array of themes and media analysis.

Secondly, this study was conducted through an inductive qualitative content analysis. This method requires the researcher to produce themes and codes from their own understanding of the research. While this author conducted extensive background research and cited over 100 sources in this project, other scholars may disagree with the interpretation of the data. To ameliorate this limitation, the author suggests that future studies utilize a deductive methodology or analyze hard statistics. The codes generated from this novel work can be used in a broader

study now that the author has generated verifiable codes. This project exists as a tool that can now be used by future scholars, even if they disagree with these assertions.

Finally, a large portion of this project analyzes social media. As discussed earlier, algorithms on social media platforms dictate a large portion of what social media users consume. Though social media sources for this search were made on TikTok and X search engines, the algorithm of the author could have influenced the search results in an undetermined manner. However, using the native search engines on these social media apps was the most practical way to source TikToks and X posts.

Annotated Source List: Codebook

Print/Online Newspapers:

- Source 1A¹⁵⁸: This magazine article from May 1888 was published in *The Swiss Cross*, a “monthly magazine of popular science.” Found on page 40 of 208 in this archive of news articles about Keller, this piece describes Keller as “A second Laura Bridgman,” another deafblind woman. The article cornices the eight years of Keller’s life so far, detailing her work with Anne Sullivan, her teacher. The piece finishes by saying “Enough has been said to indicate the remarkable powers of this unfortunate child, and to give basis for the belief, that if her training is continued in a wise direction, and with a proper appreciation of the value of detailed and accurate investigation, the world will be able to read in the life of Helen Keller a most momentous psychological lesson.”
- Source 1B¹⁵⁹: This article from 1900 details Helen Keller’s first weeks at Radcliffe College, which merged with Harvard University in 1999.¹⁶⁰ This account tells of her classes, her exceptional intellect, and her enthusiasm to learn.
- Source 1C¹⁶¹: This article was published in 1912 in the *Boston Globe*, and recounts Keller’s speech at Tremont Temple with the aid of Mrs. Macy (Sullivan).

¹⁵⁸ Unlisted. (1888, May). *Helen Keller newspaper notices*. Internet Archive.

<https://archive.org/details/helenkellernewsp01unkn/page/n41/mode/2up>

¹⁵⁹ Asheville Citizen-Times. (October 19, 1900). Helen Keller begins attending Radcliffe College of Harvard University at age 20 in 1900. Newspapers.com. Retrieved February 18, 2024, from <https://www.newspapers.com/article/asheville-citizen-times-helen-keller-beg/47398849/>

¹⁶⁰ Unlisted. (n.d.-b). *History: Radcliffe: From College to Institute*. Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University. <https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/about-the-institute/history>

¹⁶¹ The Boston Globe. (March 25, 1913). Newspaper account of lecture Helen Keller gave in Boston in 1913; Includes quotes from her speech. Newspapers.com. Retrieved February 18, 2024, from <https://www.newspapers.com/article/the-boston-globe-newspaper-account-of-le/29282371/>

- Source 1D¹⁶²: This newspaper article from July 4, 1954, details Keller's accomplishments and daily life before her 75th birthday.
- Source 1E¹⁶³: This 1955 article from the Palladium-Item of Richmond, Indiana, celebrates Helen Keller's 75th birthday, and recounts her accomplishments in a glowing review of her life thus far.
- Source 1F¹⁶⁴: This 1968 obituary for Keller recounts her final days, as well as recounts her life with Anne Sullivan.
- Source 1G¹⁶⁵: This newspaper article was published in the news section of the Chicago Tribune on May 11, 1992. Bob Greene wrote a piece about how Keller has been used as the punchline of many jokes he'd heard, both in his daily life and at comedy shows.
- Source 1H¹⁶⁶: This TIME article from June 26, 2015, discusses the frequently overlooked activism of Helen Keller, including her commitment to socioeconomic justice and political action. Keller was a socialist, and she advocated for pacifism, suffrage, birth control, and civil liberties.

¹⁶² Okon, May. "HELEN KELLER: 'The Unconquered.'" *Newspaper Article Written about Helen Keller. July 4, 1954*, American Foundation for the Blind, 4 July 1954, www.afb.org/HelenKellerArchive?a=d&d=A-HK02-B221-F03-006.

¹⁶³ Palladium-Item. (June 27, 1955). "Helen Keller, America's 1st Lady of Courage, Marks 75th Birthday". *Newspapers.com*. Retrieved February 18, 2024, from <https://www.newspapers.com/article/palladium-item-helen-keller-americas/29283284/>

¹⁶⁴ The Greenville News. (June 2, 1968). Obituary for Helen Keller after her death in 1968 at age 87. *Newspapers.com*. Retrieved February 18, 2024, from <https://www.newspapers.com/article/the-greenville-news-obituary-for-helen-k/29283673/>

¹⁶⁵ Greene, Bob. "Her Life Was Not a Joke." *Chicago Tribune*, 10 Aug. 2021, www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1992-05-11-9202110905-story.html.

¹⁶⁶ Cohen, S. (2015, June 26). *Helen Keller: The disability advocate's forgotten radicalism*. Time. <https://time.com/3923213/helen-keller-radicalism/>

- Source 1I¹⁶⁷: This Daily Mail article from January of 2021 covers the onset of the ‘Helen Keller is a Fraud’ theory. The article outlines the original video questioning what Keller accomplished and cites the now-deleted 2020 video as saying: “It's time for the lies to end.”
- Source 1J¹⁶⁸: This article from Medium, published on January 21, 2021, discusses how the author believes skepticism should be taught in schools. He cites Helen Keller as an example of a conspiracy theory that school-aged children may know of, given its TikTok popularity. By presenting these children with the controversy, explaining it to them, and showing them hard evidence, he believes they will learn critical thinking skills.
- Source 1K¹⁶⁹: This newspaper article ran in the *Indydependent* in September of 2023. They are a “free, progressive monthly newspaper.”¹⁷⁰ The article outlines Keller’s accomplishments, and introduces Max Wallace's biography, "After the Miracle: The Political Crusades of Helen Keller," which the *Indydependent* says aims to “restore Keller's legacy as a committed socialist and political activist.”

¹⁶⁷ Stern, C. (2021, January 7). Bizarre Gen Z conspiracy theory that Helen Keller was a fraud who “didn’t exist” takes off on social media - leaving older generations baffled. Daily Mail Online. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-9123327/Conspiracy-theory-Helen-Keller-fraud-DIDNT-EXIST-ignites-social-media.html>

¹⁶⁸ Smith, D. (2021, January 21). *Start teaching students to be skeptical thinkers*. Medium.

<https://medium.com/educate-pub/start-teaching-students-to-be-skeptical-thinkers-1aeab2a3a984>

¹⁶⁹ Stein, Jessica Max. “Hellen Keller’s Forgotten Radicalism.” *The Indydependent*, The Indydependent, 20 Sept. 2023, indydependent.org/2023/09/hellen-kellers-forgotten-radicalism/.

¹⁷⁰ *Indydependent*, Staff. “About Us.” *The Indydependent*, The Indydependent, indydependent.org/about-us/. Accessed 6 Feb. 2024.

Television:

- Source 2A¹⁷¹: In this footage from 1954, Keller is shown reading Braille, communicating via ASL finger spelling with her second teacher Polly Thompson, and speaking with the translation of Thompson due to Keller’s struggle to “speak normally.” Keller says, “It is not blindness or deafness that bring me my darkest hours. It is the acute disappointment in not being able to speak normally. Longingly I feel how much more good I may have done, if I had only acquired normal speech. But out of this sorrowful experience I understand more clearly all human striving, thwarted ambitions, and infinite capacity of hope.”
- Source 2B¹⁷²: A clip of Keller and Thompson from 1955 shows Keller bringing Thompson her forgotten breakfast dish — the voiceover says Keller enjoys waiting on Thompson in the comfort of her own home, as when she is in unfamiliar surroundings, others wait on Keller. Keller goes outside to feel the weather and reads her Braille thermometer. She then goes for a walk on her property guided by a 1,000-foot handrail where she can walk safely.
- Source 2C¹⁷³: This 1928 clips shows Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan communicating. Keller’s hand is placed across Sullivan’s face — a finger on Sullivan’s nose, one on her lips, and Keller’s thumb on her throat. She then repeats the phrase she feels on Sullivan’s lips: “I am not dumb now,” she says while smiling.

¹⁷¹ Channel, H. K. (1954). Helen Keller speaks out. YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ch_H8pt9M8&ab_channel=HelenKellerChannel

¹⁷² Channel, H. K. (1955). Breakfast with Helen Keller. YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x98TVzpyQgI&ab_channel=HelenKellerChannel

¹⁷³ Keller, H. (1928). Helen Keller & Anne Sullivan (1928 newsreel footage with open captions and audio description). YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XdTUSignq7Y&ab_channel=DescribedandCaptionedMediaProgram

- Source 2D¹⁷⁴: This is a 1948 speech from Keller— her monotone voice translated by Miss Thompson — to a group of disabled students. Keller says, “Hold fast to the ideal your teachers are planting in your heart. I pray you go after life's struggles and adventures. You will raise a banner for the brave who follow you.”
- Source 2E¹⁷⁵: In this 1961 news clip, Helen Keller met President John F. Kennedy. Her companion, Evelyn Seide, was at her side. She previously had met Grover Cleveland, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, William Taft, Woodrow Wilson, Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson.
- Source 2F¹⁷⁶: In this preview of the 2021 Helen Keller episode of PBS’ *American Masters*, the show explains her connection to Alexander Graham Bell. Though he’s famously known for inventing the telephone, he was a supporter of oralism, which asks deaf people to communicate through lip reading and oral speech, rather than sign language.
- Source 2G¹⁷⁷: In another clip from the same episode of *American Masters* as Source 2F, the episode focuses on Keller’s socialist legacy. After meeting John Macy, Anne Sullivan’s new husband, she joined him in political activism and wrote articles for “The Call,” a New York City socialist newspaper.

¹⁷⁴ B, E. (1948). Helen Keller speech: 1948. YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmQKWNjmt7M&ab_channel=ErinB.

¹⁷⁵ Pathé, B. (1961). President Kennedy meets Helen Keller (1961). YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqHdEPaUP6w&ab_channel=BritishPath%C3%A9

¹⁷⁶ PBS, A. M. (2021, October 5). Keller’s use of Oral Communication | becoming Helen Keller | american masters | PBS. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJMS0JUzNI0&ab_channel=AmericanMastersPBS

¹⁷⁷ PBS, A. M. (2021a, October 5). Helen Keller studied socialism | becoming Helen Keller | american masters | PBS. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=imtMkJR8GMc&ab_channel=AmericanMastersPBS

- Source 2H¹⁷⁸: In Family Guy season 11 episode 11, The Giggity Wife, Brian Griffin and friends visit Harvard University. They come upon a spot where Helen used to eat lunch, and the show flashes back to a cartoon of Keller in school. She says she wants to go out to a bar and get “wrecked” by a townie. Her friends are shocked that she’s “gotten away” with faking being blind and deaf, and Keller says she’s been doing it since she was eight years old. When the instructor walks by, the cartoon of Keller flails her arms, widens her eyes, and makes loud guttural noises. The teacher walks away.
- Source 2I¹⁷⁹: In season 4 episode 13 of South Park, titled *Helen Keller! The Musical*, the group of students must come up with a new and engaging way to portray the play *The Miracle Worker*. They cast a disabled student as Helen, but he leaves the play to chase after his disabled turkey (which was being used as Helen’s pet). An older man steps in to play Helen while Timmy is gone, and, in the end, the disabled turkey does a trick for the audience and the crowd is overjoyed.
- Source 2J¹⁸⁰: In the last episode of Saturday Night Live’s 46th season, Weekend Update anchor and SNL Head Writer Colin Jost said, “Mattel is releasing a Helen Keller Barbie doll. Just remember not to let her drive the Barbie Corvette.”

¹⁷⁸ Goldberg, A., Zuckerman, D., & MacFarlane, S. (2013, January 27). Family Guy - The Giggity Wife. episode.

¹⁷⁹ Parker, T., Stone, M., & Goodman, D. R. (2000, November 22). South Park - Helen Keller! The Musical. episode.

¹⁸⁰ Jost, C., & Che, M. (2021, May 22). Saturday Night Live - Anya Taylor Joy, Lil Nas X. Weekend Update. episode, NBC.

TikTok:

- Source 3A¹⁸¹: This TikTok, which is an excerpt from a Daily Wire YouTube video.¹⁸² Michael Knowles and Brett Cooper, both conservative commentators, were playing a game called “Wild Questions and Real Drinks,” where they answered questions by moving their drinks to either the “yes” or “no” side of the table between them. Knowles asked, “was Helen Keller faking it.” Knowles moved his drink to the “no” side, while Cooper moved hers to the “yes” side. Knowles clarified that he didn’t think Keller was faking it, but rather her “special friend” Anne Sullivan whom Keller would communicate with via “hand massages.” Cooper said that, though she thinks Keller was a real person, she isn’t “sure” about all the stories told about her.
- Source 3B¹⁸³: This clip from The LOL Podcast shows a girl, who appears to be between 20 and 30, discussing her opinions on Helen Keller. “Helen Keller supposedly is this 100% blind and 100% deaf woman. You know how she supposedly flew a plane. I genuinely believe that she was meant to be some like inspirational story to prove to like kids in school that they can do anything they put their mind to. But I’m convinced that she was not 100% blind and 100% deaf. There’s no way”.
- Source 3C¹⁸⁴: In this TikTok, a man and a woman (both seemingly in their 20s-30s) are trying to convince their parents that Helen Keller was a “fraud.” The daughter says, “how could a blind and deaf person write multiple books,” and “she’s not real.”

¹⁸¹ Knowles, Michael. “I’ve Been Told Is This a Very Hot Topic of Debate.” *TikTok*, The Daily Wire, 12 Apr. 2023, www.tiktok.com/@notmichaelknowles/video/7221282448800222507?_r=1&_t=8jGGZzZK1Yw&social_sharing=1

¹⁸² Knowles, Michael. “Wild Questions and Real Drinks with Brett Cooper | Yes or No.” *YouTube*, The Daily Wire, 8 Apr. 2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=occ2aZOWKBg&ab_channel=MichaelKnowles.

¹⁸³ The LOL Podcast. (2023, June 27). *What do you guys think? Real or fake #thelolpodcast*. TikTok. https://www.tiktok.com/@thelolpodcast/video/7249492038150966574?_r=1&_t=8jGGdk7d9Ba&social_sharing=1

¹⁸⁴ Golden, M. (2023, October 16). *this may be my most controversial tiktok so far #viral*. TikTok. <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZT8sC6hdB/>

The mom responds with “her teacher broke through the barricade,” and the daughter responds with “the teacher was fake. I’m just saying Helen Keller was a fraud.”

- Source 3D¹⁸⁵: In this TikTok from May 2023, the original poster is pretending to try to teach Keller about compound sentences, and he slowly makes each question easier as “Helen,” played by him, doesn’t respond. In the end, he relents and says, “I don’t speak blind.”
- Source 3E¹⁸⁶: This TikTok from 2023 shows the original creator with a picture of Keller reading “THIS WOMAN she was not real.” The creator says the people who are promoting the “Helen Keller is a fraud” trope are being ableist and not thinking critically about the issue.
- Source 3F¹⁸⁷: “Impossible that Hellen Keller was fucking this smart, this advanced, there’s no way possible in hell. We’re all old enough to admit at this point Helen Keller was bullshit. Obviously, she a real person, but I really feel like she’s more of a parrot, she was told to do certain things. There was no way this lady was telling the fucking truth and saying that she was talking to her. Why was she the only one that could talk to Helen Keller? She can’t talk to nobody else but her! This is a lie. She is a fraud!”
- Source 3G¹⁸⁸: Originally posted in October of 2023, this video comments on user @paunchypeach’s surprise to see that Gen Z thinks Helen Keller was a fraud. She

¹⁸⁵ baby_spice_cj. (2023b, May 23). *TikTok: @baby_spice_cj*. TikTok.

https://www.tiktok.com/@baby_spice_cj/video/7228674284904811818?q=helen+keller&t=1707797320225

¹⁸⁶ @usedwaffle, P. (2023, August 27). *all hate to the original creator!!!*. TikTok.

<https://www.tiktok.com/@usedwaffle/video/72836126242216223?q=helen+keller&t=1707797320225>

¹⁸⁷ Dixon, C. (2023, January 28). *#helenkeller #cap #fraud #notreal #nope #yessir #greenscreenvideo*. TikTok.

<https://www.tiktok.com/@carld32323/video/7193943906193526059?q=helen%2Bkeller%2Bisn%27t%2Breal&t=1707806707742>

¹⁸⁸ @paunchypeach, A. (2023, October 20). *The fact that this is even an argument....* TikTok.

https://www.tiktok.com/@paunchypeach/video/7292104106661907755?_r=1&_t=8k03yyUZeFX

says that she learned through Anne Sullivan’s help, and that there are millions of deafblind people in the world who communicate the same way Keller did.

- Source 3H¹⁸⁹: In this 2023 video from @thattuktksound, Hannah responds to a video (Source 3G) and explains that she believes Helen Keller did not write or say her own quotes. She says, “And if you think I'm crazy for saying this, you've never really thought about this.”
- Source 3I¹⁹⁰: In this TikTok from August of 2023, deaf TikTok user Scarlet May spoke about how a random girl came up to her, asked her how she knew ASL, and after she told the girl she was deaf, the girl said she was like Helen Keller. Scarlet May is not blind.
- Source 3J¹⁹¹: This video from Lawrence Johnson, who has 89.7k followers on TikTok as of February 19, 2024, has nearly 88k likes. He says he believes Keller was a real person, but there’s no way she flew a plane and wrote books while being blind and deaf. He also questions how she could even write books if she could not see.
- Source 3K¹⁹²: Posted October 29, 2022, this TikTok shows what appears to be a Halloween party. The main woman in the video is wearing a white dress, black sunglasses, a hat, and a bracelet with a piece of paper reading “HOW TO SIGN 101.” She is playing cup pong, a party game where players must bounce a ball into a plastic cup from the other side of the table. The woman begins tapping a stick over the cups,

¹⁸⁹ @thetuktksound, H. (2023, October 27). *making it very clear that millenials are gonna millenial #helenkeller #conspiracytiktok #genz #conspiracy*. TikTok.

https://www.tiktok.com/@thetuktksound/video/7294841663900421406?_r=1&_t=8k03bXbtWQd

¹⁹⁰ May, S. (2023, August 2). *Imma Helen Keller my way out of this conversation @scarlet_may.1*. TikTok.

https://www.tiktok.com/@scarlet_may.1/video/7262836833833258282?_r=1&_t=8k03sbMNSRf

¹⁹¹ Johnson, L. (2024, February 1). *Who let Helen fly the plane though? #helenkeller @lawrencejohnson*. TikTok.

https://www.tiktok.com/@lawrencejohnson/video/7330729331645369643?_r=1&_t=8k03tymVYeh

¹⁹² Whitmire, D. (2022, October 29). *HELEN KELLER WHO???! #POV @deywhitmire*. TikTok.

https://www.tiktok.com/@deywhitmire/video/7160117437277932846?_r=1&_t=8k044xp1vAJ

as if the stick were a white cane for the blind, and then throws the ball into the cup. Onlookers seem shocked, while the girl dressed up as Keller stands proud.

- Source 3L¹⁹³: @actuallyautistickatie, who has 137.7k followers on TikTok as of February 19, 2024, gives her take on the “Helen Keller Conspiracy” in this 2021 video. She roleplays a conversation between a Hellen Keller denier and a Helen Keller believer, and the denier says that their opinion doesn’t hurt anyone because “it’s just a TikTok joke.” Katie, as girl #2, says that these “jokes” can be hurtful to disabled people because it can send the message that the Helen Keller denier does not believe they can accomplish these types of things.
- Source 3M¹⁹⁴: In this 2023 street interview from Revelo Project on TikTok, the interviewer asks a man who appears to be in his 30s if he believes in Helen Keller. The man says he thinks it would be rude not to, but he doesn’t believe she can do very much. He then asks the interviewer if she’s still alive — the interviewer says yes, he believes so — and the man says he wants to find out the truth because he doesn’t “like liars.”
- Source 3N¹⁹⁵: This TikTok, posted December 30, 2020, is from a user named McKenzie. Her bio reads “Purple eyed albino,” and “Legally blind.” She says that, as a blind person, she does not think the Helen Keller conspiracy on TikTok is funny, and in fact is similar to her experience of having people not believe she is truly disabled.

¹⁹³ @actuallyautistickatie, K. (2021, March 19). Because my HK videos are getting traction again... TikTok. https://www.tiktok.com/@actuallyautistickatie/video/6941550780101004550?_r=1&_t=8k046dTBxLG

¹⁹⁴ Project, R. (2023, September 26). The Helen Keller Conspiracy #helen #keller #fake @reveloproject. TikTok. https://www.tiktok.com/@reveloproject/video/7283316909876170030?_r=1&_t=8k049xTy9HO

¹⁹⁵

- Source 3O¹⁹⁶: In this “sketch comedy” TikTok from Vinny LoCasto in July of 2022, he pretends first to be Anne Sullivan teaching Keller to make a “guh” sounds. He imitates Keller with a very guttural voice. Then, he acts as another person asking Keller what she’s doing, and he responds — as Keller — “Oh, I’m fucking writing my book.”
- Source 3P¹⁹⁷: This November 2023 TikTok comes from Jack Mac, whose TikTok bio says he works for Barstool sports. He says that “The streets are finally talking about Helen Keller and they feel safe in doing that. It’s been that way for the past year or so. And that is because the story of Helen Keller is one of the more dubious stories in the history of the world.” He goes on to claim three times that Keller developed a British accent, but this author can find no credible sources that verify this information.
- Source 3Q¹⁹⁸: In another on the street interview, Saif Shawaf interviews a young woman. He is holding a sign reading “MAKE ME LAUGH TAKE \$20,” and the young woman says, “Why did Helen Keller’s dog run away?” He asks why, and she responds with “You would too if your name was...” and then makes loud unintelligible guttural noises and stiffly moves her arms.
- Source 3R¹⁹⁹: In this 2023 podcast clip from The Joe Santagato Show, him and another man discusses the “conspiracy theory” of Helen Keller. They discuss her books, her plane fight, and her hitting Anne Sullivan during their early lessons.

¹⁹⁶ LoCasto, V. (2022, July 25). Biggest lie ever told #fyp #skit #funny #sketchcomedy @vinnylocasto. TikTok. https://www.tiktok.com/@vinnylocasto/video/7124435635670207790?_r=1&_t=8k04E19XgDr

¹⁹⁷ Mac, J. (2023, November 13). I don’t know man. It just don’t add up? @jackmacbarstool. TikTok. https://www.tiktok.com/@jackmacbarstool/video/7301193200948202798?_r=1&_t=8k04LwHjhFu

¹⁹⁸ Shawaf, S. (2023, January 7). *That escalated quickly at the end.* TikTok.

https://www.tiktok.com/@saifshawaf/video/7185959384676093190?_r=1&_t=8k04f28MKvz

¹⁹⁹ Santagato, J. (2023, February 18). *Was Helen Keller real? We dove into some conspiracies...* @joesantagatoshow. TikTok.

https://www.tiktok.com/@joesantagatoshow/video/7201500991529684266?_r=1&_t=8k04oxcefoh

Santagato says “I just can't really like wrap my head around her becoming so intelligent that she wrote 14 books, flew a plane and beat the fuck out of the person who taught her how to do that.”

- Source 3S²⁰⁰: In this 2023 TikTok from The Helen Keller National Center, a young woman named Lupita shares her story of having Usher Syndrome and being deaf and blind. She receives resources and education at the Helen Keller National Center.
- Source 3T²⁰¹: Posted January 13, 2024, a woman named Cecilia Perez, who says she is a nurse, talks about “locked in syndrome.” She says this is a disease where the only part of your body you can move is your eyes, and you must communicate by blinking. She says that prior to learning about this, her worst case scenario would be living like Helen Keller — in total darkness and silence. She then clarifies that she doesn’t believe Helen Keller is real, and the caption on her video says, “No, I will not elaborate.”
- Source 3U²⁰²: This TikTok from February 16, 2024, shows a girl driving and remaining silent while text is shown on screen. She doesn’t believe Helen Keller was both deaf and blind and still accomplished her notable feats. The TikTok reads, in part, “Uhhhh THERE AINT NO Way you will ever gaslight me into thinking this Lady did All this?”

²⁰⁰ Services, H. K. (2023, September 16). Today is global Usher Syndrome awareness day!. TikTok. https://www.tiktok.com/@helenkellerservices/video/7279398580664913198?_r=1&_t=8k05ONylG02

²⁰¹ Perez, C. (2024, January 13). Helen Keller is not real. No, I will not be elaborating. #nursesoftiktok #helenkellerisfake. TikTok.

https://www.tiktok.com/@cecilia_dela/video/7323608966058069279?_r=1&_t=8k05sQhxrRq

²⁰² @freakingdorito, freakindorito. (2024, February 16). Did helen keller even exist? Whos making up her history here??? #helenkeller #latenightthoughts #conspiracy #romanempire #showerthoughts #fyp #amiwrong. TikTok. https://www.tiktok.com/@freakindorito/video/7336058406454971694?_r=1&_t=8k06mVLnilm

- Source 3V²⁰³: In this TikTok from October of 2023, a user named Amy responded to Audrey’s video (Source 3G). Amy says she used to be a sign language interpreter and has interpreted tactile sign language before. She has worked with deaf blind people, like Keller, who use this method to communicate, and Amy emphasizes that this style of communication and learning works for many deaf blind individuals. She concludes my saying “If you're actually interested in learning about it, rather than, you know, doubting an entire community's existence, I urge you to do so — it's fascinating.”
- Source 3W²⁰⁴: In this 2021 TikTok, user Leela O’Leary (@lmaoitsleelo) is seen repeatedly punching a pillow, and the text on the video reads “when I see Helen Keller in hell.” The caption to the video reads, in part, “Lying b*tch.”
- Source 3X²⁰⁵: This TikTok, posted by user @utopiapills in October of 2023, shows a now deleted viral video from @shamelesscloutchaser²⁰⁶. @utopiapills does not say anything in this video, but rather lets the @shamelesscloutchaser video speak for itself. The young girl in that video says there is no way Helen Keller was real. She clarifies that it’s “not that she wouldn't be able to do it but like how would she have ever learned how to read a book or even write a book because she's blind and deaf.” She finishes by saying “She is a bot created by the government. Do not be fooled by Helen Keller.”

²⁰³ @amyflhr, A. (2023, October 25). #stitch with @audrey a lot of Helen Keller discourse on my FYP lately & as a former interpreter I HAD to go off on this rant.. TikTok.

https://www.tiktok.com/@amyflhr/video/7294041952838962478?_r=1&_t=8k06pvxeIJu

²⁰⁴ O’Leary, L. (2021, November 5). Lying b*tch #fyp @lmaoitsleelo. TikTok.

https://www.tiktok.com/@lmaoitsleelo/video/7027182409275739398?_r=1&_t=8k07MNaZdso

²⁰⁵ @utopiapills, L. (2022, October 19). Make your day. TikTok.

https://www.tiktok.com/@utopiapills/video/7156124359264947499?_r=1&_t=8k07afdAlva

²⁰⁶ shamelesscloutchaser, S. C. C. (2024, February 20). Profile of @shamelesscloutchaser. TikTok.

<https://www.tiktok.com/@shamelesscloutchaser>

- Source 3Y²⁰⁷: This TikTok from August of 2023 shows user @ez_stargaze with text that reads “One quote that always gets me through the toughest days...” The video then cuts to a picture of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan and begins to play loud guttural noises while showing “Nfdhegs fkduebeidd ndudgtyyon wtqritnggf!’ -Helen Keller” as the quote in question.

X/Twitter

- Source 4A²⁰⁸: This X post was uploaded on January 8, 2024. The author writes “I’ve never believed Stephen Hawking was real. Obviously a real person but the super genius thing I’ve never believed. I think it was propaganda similar to Helen Keller.” The text is accompanied by a GIF of a man in a tinfoil hat giving a thumbs up.
- Source 4B²⁰⁹: This X post is from January 6, 2024. The twee is responding to a picture of Eddie Griffin, a comedian, and the response, in part, reads “NO ONE, ABSOLUTELY NO ONE is responding to him. They’ll turn into Helen Keller.” The account’s bio reads “I apologize for tweets I may hv made out of ignorance. I hope since then I've shown I've grown as a person. Unless it's abt R.Kelly then I still mean that shit [sic].”²¹⁰ R. Kelly has been convicted of child sexual abuse in Chicago.²¹¹

²⁰⁷ @ez_stargaze, E. (2023, August 31). Always gets me through the day! #helenkeller #laugh #motivationalvideo #motivation #goingtohell #canceled #jokes #shinegang #laughter. TikTok.

https://www.tiktok.com/@ez_stargaze/video/7273613387857366318?_r=1&_t=8k07PWhorAB

²⁰⁸ Collett, Hunter. “I’ve Never Believed Stephen Hawking Was Real. Obviously a Real Person but the Super Genius Thing I’ve Never Believed. I Think It Was Propaganda Similar to Helen Keller..” *Twitter*, Twitter, 8 Jan. 2024, twitter.com/huntercollett5/status/1744415891943498016?s=20.

²⁰⁹ la Estrella, Dulce. “They’ll Turn into Helen Keller.” *Twitter*, Twitter, 6 Jan. 2024, twitter.com/_dulceria_/status/1743746098823397488?s=20.

²¹⁰ la Estrella, Dulce. “X Account of Dulce La Estrella.” *Twitter*, Twitter, 7 July 2018, twitter.com/dulceriastrella/status/1015647778628886528.

²¹¹ Savage, Mark. “R. Kelly: The History of His Crimes and Allegations against Him.” *BBC News*, BBC, 24 Feb. 2023, www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-40635526.

- Source 4C²¹²: This X post from January 10, 2024, the author writes “if you don’t think helen keller was real you’re ableist btw [sic].”
- Source 4D²¹³: This X page is titled “Helen Keller is fake.” Their bio reads “Official anti-helen keller page [sic].” The page was created in December of 2013, has 27 tweets original tweets, and each tweet discusses Helen Keller and her life. Their tweets include From December 5, 2013: “Women made up Helen Keller's "achievements" to make women look like they had historical figures.” From December 1, 2013: “For everyone learning about Helen Keller in school just know she was blind, deaf and useless. #helenkellerisfake.” And from December 4, 2013: “I hate Helen Keller and she's a fake! #helenkellerisfake.”
- Source 4E²¹⁴: In this viral Twitter thread from 2021, Daniel Kunka, a screenwriter, explains how his nieces and nephews said that “Helen Keller was a fraud who didn't exist.” He details how they wonder "How could someone be deaf and blind and learn how to write books?" He also said, “My nephew admits she probably existed but was probably only one or the other.”
- Source 4F²¹⁵: This is a two-part tweet. The original post is from Steve Peters, whose bio reads “Post Apocalyptic War Lord 🏠 us.” In response to a video of Stephen Hawking speaking, Peters wrote “Stephen Hawking was FAKE.” Then, Anthony

²¹² Bella/lavender. “If You Don’t Think Helen Keller Was Real You’re ABLEIST BTW.” *Twitter*, Twitter, 10 Jan. 2024, twitter.com/cpapsapphic/status/1745182745901650181?s=20.

²¹³ Helen Keller is fake. (2013, December). *Helen Keller is fake (@hakisfake) | twitter*. <https://twitter.com/hakisfake>

²¹⁴ Kunka, D. (2021, January 5). *Guys, something insane happened to me today. I am on a text chain with my teenage nieces and nephews along with my mom (their grandma) and today my mom asked them if they knew who Helen Keller was...and their response was that Helen Keller was a fraud who didn't exist.* *Twitter*. <https://twitter.com/unikunka/status/1346602536904523777>

²¹⁵ Cruz, A. (2024, January 12). *Obviously a fraud. reminds me of that Helen Keller Horseshit.* 🤪. *Twitter*. <https://twitter.com/AnthonyCru62145/status/1745664403855278497?s=20>

Cruz responded to his tweet with “Obviously a fraud. Reminds me of that Helen Keller horseshit. 🤡”

- Source 4G²¹⁶: This is another multi-part tweet. The original post says, “Something I heard today: “That whole Helen Keller story sounds suspicious.” 2024 is gonna [sic] be fun!” The next tweet is from Alix, whose bio reads “I’m ALX, Executive Producer of The Benny Show. I started growing on X during the 2020 election until I was deplatformed [sic] under the previous regime. I was then reinstated by Elon Musk one hour after Donald Trump was brought back. Since then, I have: - Met Donald Trump at Mar-a-Lago, Twice.” He responds to that tweet with, “Helen Keller Deniers, 2024 is our year.” Next, a twitter account with calling themselves “The Master of Violence,” writes, “I’ve been saying this for years!! Right on. More people need to wake up to the reality that she was a marxist [sic] fraud along with her "translator" who was actually Helen Keller's handler.”
- Source 4H²¹⁷: Published February 18, 2024, the user @NAZANAZANAZAN tweeted “Helen Keller was basically just a human thermometer..someone [sic] stuck her hand in some hot water and she made a noise.”
- Source 4I²¹⁸: This tweet from November 26, 2023n from 22-year-old Rosie, reads: “there's something so deeply sad and cruel about the conspiracy that helen keller [sic] didn't do the extraordinary things she did. that deaf-blind people cannot experience

²¹⁶ Violence, T. M. of. (2024, January 1). *I've been saying this for years!! right on...* Twitter. <https://twitter.com/GuyvesL/status/1741634281829462029?s=20>

²¹⁷ Nonsense, C. (2024, February 18). Helen Keller was basically just a human thermometer..someone stuck her hand in some hot water and she made a noise. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/NAZANAZANAZAN/status/1555487474423562241>

²¹⁸ Rosie. (2023, November 26). *there's something so deeply sad and cruel about the conspiracy that helen keller...* Twitter. <https://x.com/roramdin/status/1728903231970095591?s=20>

life to the full extent that others do - that it is so unbelievable it must be mythos. it makes me very sad.”

- Source 4J²¹⁹: This tweet from “Jae” in September of 2016, reads “i am so convinced helen keller [sic] is a conspiracy and everyone argues w me until they really think about it.”
- Source 4K²²⁰: This three-part thread from @bblackgoldd, posted in December 2017, reads: “Helen Keller conspiracy thread:” “Her teacher just wanted clout. She ain't know shit.” “Fin.”
- Source 4L²²¹: This tweet from “Raya,” posted February 18, 202, reads: “Nothing interest me these days excepts money. Anything outside of that, I’m Ray Charles & Helen Keller.”
- Source 4M²²²: This tweet from Kevin Berry, posted February 18, 2023, he writes: “#vision / The only thing worse than being blind, is having sight but no vision.-Helen Keller / Let that sink in for a second. Helen Keller was not only blind, she was also deaf. Yet she was an author, advocate, and leader because she had a vision. / Have a vision, then get to work.”

²¹⁹ Jae. (2016, September 9). I am so convinced Helen Keller is a conspiracy.... Twitter.

https://twitter.com/jaelynfernell7/status/774398354944057345?s=42&t=aqUG_QWbRzPx3BmB8LinWA

²²⁰ @bblackgoldd. (2017, December 16). Helen Keller conspiracy thread:. Twitter.

https://twitter.com/bblackgoldd/status/942233808333627392?s=42&t=aqUG_QWbRzPx3BmB8LinWA

²²¹ Raya. (2024, February 18). *Nothing interest me these days excepts money...* Twitter.

https://x.com/z_baby4/status/1759391168868102331?s=20

²²² Berry, K. (2024, February 18). #vision the only thing worse than being blind, is having sight but no vision.-helen Kellerlet that sink in for a second. Helen Keller was not only blind, she was also deaf. yet she was an author, advocate, and leader because she had a vision.have a vision, then get to work. Twitter.

https://twitter.com/kevinberrynm/status/1759353870214422749?s=42&t=aqUG_QWbRzPx3BmB8LinWA

- Source 4N²²³: In response to tweets about the recent death of Alexey Navalny, a known political opponent of Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chris Nerpin — the author of this tweet — wrote “Simply put, Helen Keller had more sense than most die-hard Liberals.” This was in response to a perceived criticism of conservatives’ reaction to the death. The tweet included a GIF of Steve Carell in *The Office* wearing sunglasses and waving his hands.
- Source 4O²²⁴: This user, with the screenname “Felonious Brandon,” wrote: “the problem with people who don’t believe in Helen Keller is simply that they didn’t grow up in Alabama. I think we did a section on Helen every year between 2nd and 7th grade. I’ve been to the house she was born in like five times. She lived 40 minutes away from Bear Creek.”
- Source 4P²²⁵: This tweet from February 13, 2023, is another political tweet that references Helen Keller. @Cousin_Cheta writes: “If you think Biden is cognitively alert enough to run the country, you have the self awareness [sic] of a sedated Helen Keller.” Included in the tweet is a gif of a car driving up and over a curb, and then driving on grass.
- Source 4Q²²⁶: Posted on December 31, 2020, Alyssa Burnell on Twitter wrote: “2021 goal is to get concrete evidence that helen keller is fake.”

²²³ Nerpin, C. (2024, February 18). Simply put, Helen Keller had more sense than most die-hard liberals. [pic.twitter.com/mvdp2pucpl](https://twitter.com/mvdp2pucpl). Twitter.

https://twitter.com/chrisnerpin/status/1759261314298286181?s=42&t=aqUG_QWbRzPx3BmB8LinWA

²²⁴ Felonious Brandon. (2024, February 16). The problem with people who don’t believe in Helen Keller is simply Twitter.

https://twitter.com/wildenian_thot/status/1758726571584524791?s=42&t=aqUG_QWbRzPx3BmB8LinWA

²²⁵ Cousin_Cheta. (2024, February 13). If you think Biden is cognitively alert enough to run the country, you have the self awareness of a sedated Helen Keller. [pic.twitter.com/texfyjcxkq](https://twitter.com/cousin_cheta/status/1757525511801090474?s=42&t=aqUG_QWbRzPx3BmB8LinWA). Twitter.

https://twitter.com/cousin_cheta/status/1757525511801090474?s=42&t=aqUG_QWbRzPx3BmB8LinWA

²²⁶ Burnell, A. (2020, December 31). *2021 goal is to get concrete evidence that helen keller is fake*. Twitter.

<https://x.com/AlyssaBurnell/status/1344881824326164480?s=20>

- Source 4R²²⁷: On March 17, 2022, user @stevielan posted: “i have beef with a lot of people when i get down to hell but the first one i’m fighting is helen keller. fake ass bitch [sic].”
- Source 4S²²⁸: This July 2021 tweet from verified user Chris Hardman reads: “Things that I believe are fake: - Space / - Helen Keller / - Evolution / - The Earth being millions of years old / - Joe Biden's Presidency / - The Pandemic / - That raw animal products are bad / - The financial system” His bio reads: “Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints | Hardman Holistic Performance | Triathlete | Keep on Chooglin”
- Source 4T²²⁹: This tweet from November 2023 is from a user calling themselves “Maggie.” Maggie writes: “I should get paid 1 million dolllars [sic] a year to teach yoga class and to poast [sic]. If you disagree you are Helen Keller (fake and retarded).”
- Source 4U²³⁰: This 2021 tweet from verified user @AmieWohrer comments on the newfound conspiracy around Keller’s life: “The ease at which teens who use TikTok were convinced that Helen Keller was fake should act as a sobering wake up call illustrating how easily our children can be indoctrinated. #ANewWoke” Her next reply to that tweet reads: “...and it should also illustrate why we should raise the voting age considerably.”

²²⁷ Stevie. (2022, March 17). I have beef with a lot of people when I get down to hell but the first one I’m fighting is Helen Keller. fake ass bitch. Twitter.

https://twitter.com/stevielan/status/1504489556149616643?s=42&t=aqUG_QWbRzPx3BmB8LinWA

²²⁸ Hardman, C. (2021, July 26). Things that I believe are fake:. Twitter.

<https://x.com/chhardman/status/1419876770971414529?s=20>

²²⁹ Maggie. (2023, November 11). I should get paid 1 million dolllars a year to teach yoga class and to poast. .

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²³⁰ Whatserface, A. (2021, February 25). The ease at which teens who use TikTok were convinced that Helen Keller was fake... Twitter. <https://x.com/AmieWohrer/status/1364949356789575687?s=20>

- Source 4V²³¹: In response to Tom Suozzi winning the election for the House seat of former Representative George Santos, The Hill posted a tweet²³² saying: “#BREAKING: Democrats flip Santos’s New York House seat in high-stakes special election <https://trib.al/WFhVtYN>.” User @galex70 responded: “Helen Keller could have seen this coming. / Goooo MAGA! [sic] / 🙄”
- Source 4W²³³: On February 16, 2024, an account calling themselves “The Interpreter Connection” posted: “Helen Keller joined the vaudeville circuit as a lecturer. She, with Annie by her side, became a celebrity among celebrities. #helenkeller”
- Source 4X²³⁴: On the morning of February 16, 2024, Edward Snowden tweeted “It’s all so fucking senseless,”²³⁵ which Twitter users in his replies believe to be about the assassination of Alexey Navalny. Twitter user @markaduck responded three hours to Snowden three hours after that tweet, saying “Helen Keller’s significant other,”
- Source 4Y²³⁶: This January 2022 tweet from @alexeyebrows reads: “I just saw a bumper sticker that said, “Honk if you think Helen Keller was a fraud” and my god did I hold that horn.”

²³¹ Jes. (2024, February 13). *Helen Keller could have seen this coming.* . Twitter.

<https://x.com/galex70/status/1757611147954467029?s=20>

²³² Hill, T. (2024, February 13). #BREAKING: Democrats flip Santos’s New York House seat. Twitter.

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²³³ Connection, T. I. (2024, February 16). *X-forwarded-for - http: MDN*. Twitter.

<https://x.com/TheInterpreterC/status/1758554884419330467?s=20>

²³⁴ @markaduck, M. (2024, February 16). Helen Keller’s significant other: Twitter.

<https://x.com/markaduck/status/1758567521504866581?s=20>

²³⁵ Snowden, E. (2024, February 16). It’s all so fucking senseless. Twitter.

<https://x.com/Snowden/status/1758515793942507712?s=20>

²³⁶ @alexeyebrows, cejas. (2022, January 7). I just saw a bumper sticker that said, “Honk if you think Helen Keller was a fraud”. Twitter. <https://x.com/alexeyebrows/status/1479508101669613572?s=20>

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