Spatial Obstacles to Shared “Crip” & LGBTQ Cultures

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INTRODUCTION
Online communities are receiving praise for providing new frontiers to marginalized populations with disabilities and LGBTQ identities. They provide unique outlets to generate media from within the community, which in turn influences broader national discussions among the public, mainstream media, and officials. (Figure 1) Moreover, participation in online “Crip” and LGBTQ cultures presents safe forums for populations to overcome geographic boundaries and control the disclosure of identities. This aspatial conception of emerging online communities is thus said to unite marginalized identities and provide meaningful representation of community members. (Figure 1: The aspatial model of online community mediation)

AIM
The aim of this project is to revisit spatial applications of Crenshaw’s intersectionality concept to determine whether the spatial situation of LGBTQ and persons with disabilities impedes their ability to participate in online communities. The spatial component of stratification suggests that persons with disabilities and LGBTQ identities encounter unique challenges to livelihoods across place that are not captured when metropolitan norms are considered. I reconnect demographic and infrastructure analysis to find who is represented, who is excluded, and whether unique regional aspects of marginalization are overlooked in emerging national representations.

METHODS
To explore spatial situation of LGBTQ identities, persons with disabilities, and Internet accessibility, I draw from three national datasets. National datasets describing LGBTQ identities are fraught with problems. Issues related to stigma and the stifling of self-identification suggest severe underreporting in conservative and rural areas. And although ACS data are available at the county level, these only capture same-sex households. To address these shortcomings, I use national GSS dataset reports of LGBTQ “acquaintanceship reporting” to find whether different place types have varying LGBTQ composition. County-level tallies of disabilities were made available by the 2013 ACS. Using a spatial clustering “hotspot” analysis, I composed a national map to report which counties have disproportionately high levels of self-reported disabilities. Finally, I draw from the FCC’s National Broadband Map to identify all locations without any wireline Internet access. This allows all locations without Internet access to be matched with LGBTQ and disability populations.

The application of these three datasets allows researchers to identify the environments in which both populations live to verify whether either can participate in emerging online communities.

RESULTS
Spatial dimensions of Internet access National Broadband Map data demonstrate that the “Digital Divide” has persisted, as a pattern of rural exclusion describes Internet provision throughout Midwestern and Southern regions. Farms, specifically, present locations where LGBTQ acquaintanceship lags. All off-farm rural areas, however, are similar to metropolitan areas in composition.

Spatial distribution of disabilities Although disability prevalence is constant across most counties, rural Midwestern and Southern regions comprise “hotspots” where significantly high numbers are present. Spatial distribution of LGBTQ identities LGBTQ reporting suggests slightly greater, though not significantly different prevalence in metropolitan areas. Farms, specifically, present locations where LGBTQ acquaintanceship lags. All off-farm rural areas, however, are similar to metropolitan areas in composition.

CONCLUSIONS
The mediating role of online communities and representation is regionally-segmented. Figure 4 offers spatial context to depict how regional constraints limit who can participate and find representation. (Figure 4: Modified spatial model of online community mediation)

"I can’t come out": Disability and spatial structural inequality
The broadband gap in rural America suggests that, despite having disproportionately high prevalences of disabilities, people in those areas are frequently by-passed from participation in online communities. Physical intensive labor sectors and the absence of healthcare facilities present rural rights that are not prioritized by metropolitan users. Moreover, the promotion of pedestrian infrastructure to address mobility is pushed as a universal aim despite having limited national benefits. Media, officials, and planners that accept the online narrative of disability experiences reaffirm an urban bias in how they recognize and respond to disabilities. Addressing regional variation in mobility, job accessibility, health care, and official representation is necessary to capture distinctly rural phenomenon left out of the national narrative.

"I can’t come out": Disability and spatial cultural inequality
LGBTQ identities have a near-constant distribution across regions. Nevertheless, broadband gaps within rural America prevent participation from LGBTQ identities within those areas. Whereas persons with disabilities encounter structural obstacles, cultural and value-related challenges emerge among this group. The inability to find a partner or publicly display personal identities are made worse by stigma and increased sensibility. Although the emergence of online communities promotes dialogues of inclusion and LGBTQ policy reforms, rural places of isolation are overlooked by media narratives of social progress.

But while the emergence of online communities provides incredible opportunity for community formation, influence over public dialogue, and identity formation, the promise of online cultural formation and diffusion must address two central assumptions:

1. Participation: It assumes all who could in the community have the ability to participate in online platforms.
2. Representation: It assumes that the voiced experiences of online communities are representative of marginalized persons across place.

Within rural sociology, literatures address spatial contexts of inequality. The urban bias within political structures suggests that the ability to participate in national discourse and to benefit from infrastructure development prioritizes urban settings over rural ones. Consequently, rural problems related to joblessness, gender inequality, health, and mobility are left unaddressed by national policy and dialogue. I explore whether emerging online LGBTQ and disability communities allow for participation across places and representation of place-based livelihood obstacles that are outside of urban contexts.

Table 1: Distribution of LGBTQ acquaintanceship Location Type Respondents % of respondents with 0 or 0 LGBT acquaintances All places with population >50,000 338 156 47.3% Farms, specifically, present locations where LGBTQ acquaintanceship lags. All off-farm rural areas, however, are similar to metropolitan areas in composition.