Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) can revolutionize the lives of people who can’t speak and have other communication impairments, simply by giving us a voice. However, although the technology has existed for over 40 years, we are denied our voice by a combination of ignorance, lack of resources, widespread disregard for disabled people’s needs and damaging misrepresentation in the British media.

As a striking example of this ignorance, recently at my request my MP asked the Department of Health and Social Care for a figure on funding to support people who require access to AAC. Not only was it clear by the response that the term AAC wasn’t clearly understood at all (figures from NICE on hearing loss in adults and their assistive equipment was provided), the figures were also not held centrally and therefore the question impossible to answer. Moreover, it was shown that the response demonstrated an ignorant attitude towards cerebral palsy, ‘one in 10 [young people with CP] cannot use formal methods of augmentative and alternative communication because of cognitive and sensory impairments and communication difficulties’ This is simply not true, everyone regardless of level of impairment can use some form of AAC.

I feel that people without speech are generally less aware of disability politics with possibly one exception, which is the growing number of political autistic people. I find autistic people are starting to get political and vocal against organisations run by non-disabled people and this includes autistic augmentative and alternative communication users.

This is because non-disabled professionals, speech therapists and special school teachers, have a stranglehold over the provision of communication aids and the instructing in how to use them. They have set up organisations/charities to defend their own professional interests that treat disabled AAC users in the paternalistic way that we all recognise in the charities FOR disabled people. For example, while there is little awareness of the existence of AAC amongst potential users .and their parents, and an assessment process that is considered highly discriminatory by many disabled people and their families, the main AAC organisations seem more interested in promoting research opportunities for their professional non-disabled members than addressing the injustices facing disabled people without speech.

In the supposedly more accessible world of social media, we non-speaking disabled people are more often than not spoken for by family members and “carers” who profess to know what we want to say, belittling us as examples of what *I* call ‘inspiration porn’.

In conclusion, we AAC users need: -

* Fully funded, easy to understand system for acquiring AAC which is not prejudiced against those with learning difficulties.
* Comprehensive teaching of how to use communication aids.
* A collective political voice which is built around the social model of disability.
* An acknowledgement that we can speak for ourselves in the media and elsewhere.