# Spectacle, Performance, and the Re-Presentation of Disability and Impairment Alison Wilde, Ph.D. University College Dublin, Ireland

**Abstract:** This article proposes the value of investigating audience interpretations as viewing performances to interrogate disabling discourses on popular television. In synthesising media and disability studies approaches, performances of identities are investigated, contextualizing the media as a crucial factor in forms of cultural identification, contributing to patterns of exclusion and inclusion.

**Key Words:** audience, performance, television narratives, exclusion

This paper arises out of three primary concerns. First, I have a long-standing interest in people's attitudes toward disability and the relationships between cultural representations and attitudes. Secondly, my work in media studies has stimulated my interests in ideas of the "active audience" and the dynamics of meaning-making. Finally my work in cultural studies led me to become dissatisfied with readings of disability within cultural studies texts, and their limited nature. These cultural and media studies readings are invariably based on individualistic or medical models of disability (Oliver, 1990; Barnes, Mercer, & Shakespeare 1999) where individual deviations from ascribed bodily norms are framed as "abnormal" against non-disabled forms of "normality." The individualistic, non-disabled centred assumptions, which pervade conventional media studies work on disability, limited as they are, tend to have insidious effects outside disability studies arenas, leaving individualist or deficit models of disability unchallenged.<sup>1</sup>

The import of these concerns into my work on disability and audience led to a reexamination of Disability Studies interpretations of media in relation to questions of audience
identity. Disability Studies literature has demonstrated how frequently disabled people are
misrepresented in mainstream media, teaching us much about how stereotypes are used to
convey messages about disabled people's difference (Barnes, 1992; Biklen & Bogdan, 1977;
Klobas, 1988; Kriegel, 1987; Longmore, 1987; Norden, 1994; Shakespeare, 1994). This work
provides a crucial corrective to conventional criticisms of art and media, but it also tends to be
quite partial or reductive, based on fixed meanings. Reflecting social models of disability, the
emphasis is placed on exploitative images and the lack of disabled people's participation in the
creation of images of impairments (Barnes, 1992). In doing so, a number of assumptions are
made about how depictions of media and disability are read.

Broadly, Disability Studies scholars seem to agree that there is "a problem of disability representation," that there is little cultural recognition of disabled lives and that disabled people need inclusion, both quantitatively and qualitatively in cultural industries as producers and as audiences. These points have been forcefully made by people involved in Disability Arts for many years.

Although there is much dissatisfaction about cultural imagery, there is little agreement on what the major problems of representation are, and what comprises a "good" portrayal. Despite shared political goals and cultural tastes, there is a wide range of views held by both activists and

academics about what representations of disability *should* be despite our shared visions (Shakespeare, 1999).

Cursory examination of people's interpretations of the same images reveals significant differences in interpretation, even where people's views toward disability are informed by similar political viewpoints. Critics of cultural representations of disability, for example Leonard Kriegel (1987), praises the depiction of Laura Wingfield in Tennessee Williams's Glass Menagerie (1965) as an example of the Realistic Cripple, where traits of ordinariness are privileged and disability often relegated to secondary status. This assessment reveals the gendered properties of such stereotypes and the gendered positioning of observers when contrasted with Deborah Kent's (1987) reading. Whereas the depiction of Laura seems "normal" or "realistic" to Kriegel (1987), Kent (1987) has argued that her lameness is fundamental to her painfully passive personality and self-deprecating attitudes to men. This Cinderella type of identity is commonly attributed to disabled women, with a range of impairments, across a range of media (Norden, 1994; Kent, 1987). Conflicts such as this underline a more significant issue of meaning-making; how different people engage with images in a variety of ways. It seems that gendered reading positions may have had much to do with differing interpretations, despite shared representational concerns. Indeed, I propose that gender is a major contributory factor to reading or viewing positions adopted by readers of cultural texts. Gendered reading positions were pivotal to the experiences of audience members in a research project (see below) on the reception of images of disability in TV and soap opera viewing. This data will be discussed in the remainder of the paper.

It is this issue of meaning-making that is fundamental to debates on portrayals of disability. Accordingly, this article focuses upon how different people engage with images in a variety of ways. Although there have been a number of investigations of disabling imagery that focus on people's responses to and opinions of specific media (Cumberbatch & Negrine, 1992; Sancho, 2003) they have a tendency to focus on the limitations of the audience, but had little or nothing to say about the form, structure, and discourses of the media texts and how we interact with them.

Premised on individualistic methodologies toward disability (Oliver, 1990), these surveys tend to shift away from the limited character of portrayals toward snapshots of audience taste. This is in contrast to understanding positions towards the media as intersubjective, situated, and relational phenomena, shaping and being shaped by media, social context, capital, and access to cultural resources. Analyzing audience data from my own research project, it became increasingly evident that reception of media discourses varied over time and according to social context. Far from presenting a coherent picture of audience types and decoding practices (Hall, 1980), there were many ambivalent and contradictory understandings. The marked differences between individual and collective responses led me to focus on the uses of media in negotiations and performances of self and group identity, upon which the remainder of this paper is based.

The Research Project

The Audience

A multi-layered methodology was designed to capture the complexity of media interactions. This involved three main methods: textual analysis, focus groups, and diary keeping with a wide range of people. Participants included non-disabled and disabled men and women aged from 13 to 65, from a variety of social backgrounds.<sup>2</sup> There were seven discussion groups, most meeting a number of times over several months. All the groups were comprised of people sharing similar "significant" social groups and social categories, reflected in age, sex, class, and impairment status in particular. These were based in "everyday life" locations, at familiar places of work, study or leisure, so the meetings were accessible, convenient and conducive to comfortable forms of discussion. Both discussion groups and diarists were asked to consider interrelationships of gender, impairment and disability. The groups were comprised of: (1) young women from an independent school (The Powerpuff Girls); (2) young people from a segregated school, all disabled, male and female (The Monday Group); (3) a youth club group of mixed sex and impairment/non-impairment status (The Tuesday Group); (4) a group of non-disabled young men (The Lads), (5) a mixed-sex disabled group from a day center (The Friday Group); and (6) two groups of single-sex, nondisabled, social groups (The Men and The Women). Diarists were recruited from these groups, from Disability Now magazine (http://www.disabilitynow.org.uk/) and from snowballing.

Assuming that audience reception will reflect the ideological dominance of powerful groups, but is not *directly* determined by them, I set out to understand how media products and potential outcomes are located in complex patterns of media interaction. Neither abandoning materialist perspectives nor insights on the discursively constructed character of impairment, disability and normality, I used strategies based on Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998) Spectacle/Performance paradigm of media circulation. The following pages will demonstrate the value of this paradigm in understanding the impact of disabling discourses on cultural processes and social practices and vice-versa.

### Text, Audience, Context, and Performance

In order to gain a fuller understanding of how people interact with images of disability and impairment in media, participants' interpretations were linked to expectations of the reader inscribed within media texts. Analysis was based on how images of disability and normality made people *feel*, what they do with particular images, exploring how people's interpretations vary, taking account of text and social context. Examples of the roles that media images play in forms of cultural identifications are illustrated in the pages that follow, demonstrating some of the ways that media discourses contribute to patterns of exclusion and inclusion.

Taking a constructionist, relational view, both media texts and viewers' discussions were treated as "shifting constellations" (Grossberg, as cited in Alasuutari, 1999, p. 6) and as never being "completely outside of media discourse" (p. 6). Fundamentally, a recognition of the participants' ideas of themselves as the audience, *as performers*, was a foremost principle. Here, positioned as people who consume, interact with, and create culture, they demonstrate the significant ways that people locate themselves as performers within institutional regimes in their everyday practices.

Media analysis was synthesized with disability studies in order to place a social model of disability, impairment, and gender at the centre of analysis of audience engagements (as a politicized piece of work). Maintaining this interdisciplinary focus, I used two forms of media analysis: textual analysis and audience analysis. I began textual analysis with Hall's (1980) Encoding/ Decoding Model. However, the classification of readings as preferred, negotiated, or resistant was inadequate in grasping the complexity of audience interpretations, obscuring researcher assumptions, and oversimplifying the range of subjectivities that are brought into interpretative contexts. The encoding/decoding model did not account for the complex processes of agency in relation to a range of intersecting discourses in different social contexts. It was also somewhat limited in comprehending the complexity of disability and impairment images and other factors influencing interpretation from an increasingly media saturated society.

It was particularly difficult to draw clear lines between the positions of incorporation and resistance to "dominant ideology," an issue complicated further by the lack of consensus on what should be considered as "dominant" disabling ideology. Even when clearer distinctions were drawn between incorporated and resistant positions in often "disordered" or differentiated audience responses (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998), such distinctions would do little to answer other questions that emanated from the data. One fundamental question arose: how and why do disabled people and non-disabled people invest their identities differently, often enthusiastically, but sometimes in (ostensibly) contradictory ways, in what seems to be a "normality genre" (Darke, 1998).

I used Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998) Spectacle/Performance paradigm in order to seek answers to increasingly important questions of media identity I emphasized the need to consider issues of performativity, in contextualized, relational ways. Focusing on the investments sought and made with media, spectator identities, cultural representations, and outlooks can be investigated in a dialogical manner. Focusing on audience engagements, viewers or readers are located in a view of media and everyday life as interwoven, where spectacle and performances are seen as virtually inseparable within increasingly media-saturated society and diffused audiences. Abercrombie and Longhurst propose that this novel form of performativity, facilitated by mass communications, results in the virtual elimination of cultural distance between performers and audience, whereby two simultaneous processes have occurred: the world has been constructed as "spectacle" and individuals have become constructed as narcissistic performers.<sup>3</sup>

Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) assert that "narcissism is the treatment of the self as spectacle," where people perceive themselves as "performing for an imagined audience" (p. 95) in all aspects of everyday life, seen as a vital facet of the ongoing construction of self-identities. Simultaneously, other social practices or "spectacles," including those from the media, are continuously informing these reflexive "self trajectories" (Giddens, 1991 as cited in Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998, p. 95). It is argued that this spectacle/performance dyad fuels a desire for increased "knowledge/visibility as a basis for performance" and the consequent "media drenching" creates greater interaction and discussion of media events. In turn, emotional attachments are sustained or increased, informing individual or "secondary performances" (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998, p. 178). It is argued that viewing performances are fundamentally related to emotional attachment and constructive of individual identities, which

increases the desire for new knowledge via media resources, perpetuating the spectacle/performance cycle.

The exploration of emotional questions is fundamental to the enterprise of understanding disability in terms of socially constructed "difference" and immediate or wider relational contexts. It is proposed that depictions of impairment and disability should be explored as "narcissistic performances." This acknowledges ambivalence and contradictory forms of spectatorship, varying over time and context, shedding light on the social conditions shaping individual interpretations.

Broadly speaking, data in this study was separated into two types of discussion; critical, ostensibly more objective discussion of soap operas, and referential talk that was linked more obviously to the participants' personal experiences (Leibes & Katz, 1993). Excerpts from diaries and focus groups will now be examined as a means of exploring the articulation, negotiation, and re-constitutions of collective and more personal selves, focusing primarily on referential talk, where "people bounce effortlessly backward and forwards between their own world and the world of the soap opera" (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998, p. 111). These performances of viewing selves reveal significant attitudes towards concepts of social care, dependency, and cultural competency.

## **Viewing Performances**

Viewing, Group, and Self Identity

One of the most significant dimensions of the data was the difference found between performances of self in group contexts and ostensibly contradictory self-expressions in diary entries (by the same people). For example, the non-disabled women's' group discussions on disability and impairment were rarely referential, focusing mainly on critical comments, demonstrating a very caring approach to depictions, questioning images of disability:

Diane: Every single baddy's got some impairment problem. Like Mini-Me from Austin Powers.

Nicole/Olive: Yeah.

Sally: You know, you go and you get, you're supposed to be scared aren't you? That's the whole thing.

Implicitly assuming the morally educative and identificatory resources of soap operas, The Women seemed to find few depictions which addressed preferred dimensions of their collective self directly, other than the character Kerry Weaver:

Sally: Oh, I've just thought of a woman. Now she is sexy. The woman in E.R.

## Laughter/agreement

Olive: And she's disabled and she's a main character...now that's the way forward. You get a strong main character who has a disability there before the issue and you just play their character against the rest of the characters.

Diane: And she was a bitch for ages wasn't she?

The attachments that were expressed with Kerry were on the basis of her personality and attitudes and her Return (Nochimson, 1997) from bitchiness, rather than other ontological similarities, such as impairment or sexual identities. Their collective engagements were made primarily on the basis of group reassurances of normality. Significantly, Kerry was a disabled character<sup>4</sup> from a medical drama rather than soap opera. Renowned for her independence, she was an active, if ostensibly uncaring, mediator of social care, rather than a recipient. Unusually, she was depicted as someone with an excess of cultural competency and social capital.

Conversely, participants' diary entries usually focused on depictions that were framed as abnormal. Caroline (nondisabled) wrote:

"If there is a sickness/death/dying storyline then I will turn it off because it makes me anxious. I watch T.V. sometimes for the normality of it, just to laugh for five minutes."

## Normality, Disability, and Impairment

The search for normality was also true for other groups. The Powerpuff Girls, for example, had widely differing collective and personal views of concurrent teenage pregnancy narratives with Sarah Lou of *Coronation Street*, and Sonia of *Eastenders* (Wilde, 2004). Sarah Lou, as the more conventionally attractive figure was the preferred focus for group discussions of teenage pregnancy whereas the comparatively "ordinary" figure of Sonia was a primary point of identification and reassurance, particularly in articulating their own, ostensibly more private, carnal concerns. One disabled male diarist, Peter, also felt able to disclose more personal feelings of abnormality in his diary. He wrote:

"Images of disabled people in soaps invariably make me feel worse about myself because they accentuate a negative sense of difference: the disabled person/character exists by virtue of their disability or impairment, and seems to exist for that reason alone."

These negative feelings of difference were inextricably linked to discourses of dependency and cultural competency and were, for him, a prime concern in watching portrayals of disability and impairment soap opera.

In sharp contrast, the disabled adults (Friday) group acquiesced to stereotyped impairment portrayals more readily than any other group, often seeing them as natural rather than constructed. Here they are discussing Chris Tate of *Emmerdale*:

Andrew: I suppose if you are in a wheelchair permanently you can't upset people can you? Because you need their help.

Sonny: No, you easily get very frustrated.

Andrew: I think it's a fairly realistic approach, though, I think. Er, you see him

sometimes having difficulties with the chair, and getting frustrated. Er...

Jack: Mmmm. I think it's a hard world.

Here, the specific positioning of the character's narrative as an individualized problem is received transparently by men within the group. Although this group often referred to themselves as a homogenous group, defined primarily as owners, if not victims, of acquired impairments, the structural or cultural sources of their shared experiences and their negotiations of disability were rarely confronted directly, being taken on as personal attributes of their impairment experience.

The biographical disruptions (Bury, 1982) they were articulating were elaborated almost exclusively in terms of diminished physical functions. These performances of self were located in a "common-sense" body hierarchy, where the construction and performance of a good impairment identity appeared to be their major responsibility and their primary point of identification with the group and myself. Dependency, here, was taken as a given. Cultural competencies were seen as diminished, usually indexed to their previous (nondisabled) lifestyles. They expressed low expectations of social care, as their naturalized opinions towards their own positions of inferiority or subordination indicate. Depictions of disability provided no basis for performances of group identity, most engagements being performed in counter- identification to non-disabled characters that challenged heteronormativity.

Conversely, The Monday Group's approach to impairment and disability was politicized and collective. "Resistance" to dominant images was very direct for these disabled young people and often addressed in terms of absences, rather than accuracy. They discussed how they would depict impairment and disability concerns in a more playful fashion:

Alice: Just good looking disabled people. (*Group agreement and laughter*)

Oliver: Disabled pensioners over the edge. (*Group Laughter*) Although I think we'd have to have some arguments and stuff. (*Group laughter*) I don't know why there's, I don't know why there is like, they don't put up with disabled people's differences. It's a shame really because people just like, it's like shutting the mouth, sort of, isn't it?

Ruth: They're not getting close enough. They want to show them doing more things.

They're always struggling.

Alison: 5 What don't they show then?

Ruth: They never show them going down the shop for a pint of milk which is everything. We can do that. They're always showing people who are in a wheelchair and so forth, not somebody who's like, got cerebral palsy.

A strong sense of disabled pride pervades their performances of collective self. In the presence of their (non-disabled) teacher, their viewing performances proceeded in a "real," rather than "ludic" form (Liebes & Katz, 1993) with brief, guarded, reactive answers to questions. In the sessions when the teacher was absent, their ideas for alternative soap opera narratives were enthusiastic, loud, more radical (and playful) than any other group, usually through their reversals of the normality/disability dualism. They challenged conventional depictions of incompetency and dependency repeatedly, each time they met.

The "resistant," counter-identificatory, readings of this group were made more comfortable through processes of mutual aid, by the exclusive group membership of disabled people. Sharing similar life histories of disability, they had a variety of things in common. Spending considerable time in a "special school," is likely to have contributed to the feeling of being an outsider, a theme that dominated their discussions of collective self.

Stereotyping, Narrative Placement, and Processes of Group Identification

It is noteworthy that none of the young disabled group members made any sustained references to particular characters of soap operas, making no particular identifications or disidentifications (McNay, 2000) with any soap opera characters, apart from brief counter - identifications with older characters such as Dot Cotton (Eastenders), as a figure of fun. This contrasted sharply with the viewing performances of other groups of young people. The Lads tended to make strong counter-identifications with a range of female characters, disidentifying with disabled characters and the soap opera genre as a whole. As previously suggested, the "sense of self as a performer under the constant scrutiny of friends and strangers" (Lasch, 1980, p. 9) seemed to contribute to collective performances of identification with figures who were closer approximations to cultural ideals of body and gender performance. So, rather than express or highlight fears of personal inadequacy, the group discussions demonstrated a preference for using hegemonically normative characters. These were discussed as relatively unproblematic, symbolic resources, to negotiate moral and ethical issues and related identities, simultaneously strengthening homophilic ties.

The figures which formed the basis for discussions of moral discourses and performances of group identity were all non-disabled, with the exception of Kerry Weaver. Further, textual analysis revealed that these preferences were linked to the existence of significant narrative inequalities. That is to say, core non-disabled characters are found everywhere whereas disabled characters are rarely found outside the topical narrative level (O'Donnell, 1999). Thus, characters with impairments were almost always discussed in terms of political messages rather than in terms of personal pleasure or reassurance. This was particularly clear in the Tuesday Group. As a mixed gender and disabled/non-disabled group who had very varied experiences and perceptions, Mark Fowler, a character with HIV, from *Eastenders*, was the focus for many conflicts on disabled people's rights to lead "normal lives," including heated debates on sexuality and parenting. These discussions of disability issues strengthened the divisions within the group that were based primarily on performances of disabled or non-disabled selves, providing no clear points of contact for the group as a whole.

I have proposed the need to consider issues of performativity, in contextualized, relational ways. Using examples from the audience data, issues of cultural capital, cultural resources, and people's capacities for "cultural conversion" seem scant and few disabled people found any form of cultural capital in mainstream depictions of impairment and disability, other than personal reassurances and information gleaned from medical dramas. This genre seemed to afford disabled women more opportunities to perform competent impairment identities, occasionally providing material for critical reflection on the relationship between their own impairments and disabling processes (Wilde, 2004).

Examination of people's viewing performances has revealed crucial aspects of engagement and viewer identity. It has shown that the problem of representation is not just a matter of "negative" stereotypes, of bad personality attributes. Analysis of the interactions between texts and viewers has suggested that issues of diversity and multi-dimensionality are of far more significance in the forging of emotional attachments to portrayals of disabled people. Few, if any people engaged with soap opera depictions of characters with impairments, due to narrative inequalities. Seen as "issues," portrayals of disabled people tend to remain "fixed." Moreover, the placement at the topical level encourages people to turn off from any explicit political messages being conveyed (Gavin, 2000). Rather, participants engaged more with non-disabled figures who reflected recognisable aspects of themselves, particularly as changeable personalities, adapting to a fluctuating range of circumstances.

Crucial narrative inequalities seem to play a fundamental role in the stereotyping of disabled people. Synchronically and diachronically, analyses of disabled characters invariably reveal that characters with impairments are far more likely to be found in supporting or subsidiary roles (Wilde, 2004). Typified by the over-population of disabled characters in the meta-narratives, this point was forcefully made in the group counter- identifications of younger disabled participants:

Beth: [ ] it's got to be dramatic. (*Group agreement*)

Oliver: Yeah, no disability or a major one.

Andrew: And then it's gone.

It is of considerable significance that few participants question these placements, indicating a naturalization of disabled people as events to be resolved.

Regarding data as performances has illuminated some of the ways that audiences use media. In particular, these examples of soap opera viewing demonstrated how people use characters and narratives to negotiate their own perceptions of, and identifications with, normality and abnormality. These interpretations and viewing performances have varied significantly between group and private contexts. In nearly all cases engagements with characterisations of disabled people seemed to be marginal to these performances and negotiations of self. Nearly all referential discussions of disability and impairment were performed in terms of counter or dis-identification (McNay, 2000) or in critical talk of pathological images. Portrayals of disability contributed very little to the cultural capital of any of these participants, having little or no value as a resource for collective or self-identity,

providing little pleasure and reassurances of fears. Remaining within the terms of the negative/positive debate seems to disable us further (notwithstanding the existence of explicitly malicious genres, such as the comedy of Jim Davidson and the late Bernard Manning. The avoidance of some stereotypes, suggested in some broadcasting manifestos<sup>7</sup> will limit disabled people's roles and viewing opportunities further. Disabled characters should float freely between stereotypes and multiple roles, interwoven on all narrative roles, just as non-disabled people do. Our place within media narratives should be everywhere, affording us the same range of stereotypes as non-disabled people, as angels, heroes, villains, and so on.

If narrative inequalities were redressed, disabled characters would be provided with a greater range of roles and greater fluidity. This way, the degrees of implication that are offered to the audience would be increased. Alongside the counter or dis-identifications, which are currently made with disabled figures, greater narrative equality is likely to encourage more sympathy and empathy with characters with impairments and the messages they are conveying. In turn, portrayals of disability will become increasingly referenced to viewers' own lives, strengthening social and personal identifications with normality and providing reassurances for feelings of abnormality. Hence, like the majority of non-disabled characters, dimensions of likeability (Sancho, 2003) will be optimized, providing recognition for disabled peoples lives and identificatory resources for both disabled and non-disabled viewers. Disabled characters receiving widespread audience approval have often been cast in ambiguous or even negative roles. These include abrasive leading characters such as Kerry Weaver of E.R and Gregory House of *House*, both medical dramas from the U.S. The benefits of people with fluctuating personality characteristics are clear. The viewing performances of the participants in this project have suggested that viewers do not make simple identifications on the basis of impairment or disability status, or indeed, by gender, class, ethnicity or sexuality. Significant aspects or personal identity reflected in television images undoubtedly have a part to play in processes of identification. But how people are depicted on television is of greater significance. Viewers are more likely to seek images that reassure them of their own normality or against private feelings of abnormality, whatever they may be.

Overall, this article has demonstrated how portrayals of disabled people are usually universally read as abnormal others, interpretations that have been performed in a variety of contexts. Focusing on viewing as performance, it has also illustrated some of the ways that characterisations are used to strengthen or weaken cultural identifications and to articulate, negotiate or maintain patterns of exclusion and inclusion between people.

Interdisciplinary, or intertextual, approaches to media such as this are likely to provide us with greater insights into strategies for representational change. Moreover, they have much to offer in understanding significant cultural discourses in the professions and elsewhere, particularly in examining how media contribute to the structuring of social relations (Warner, 2006) and in perpetuating, of challenging the misrecognition (Fraser, 1996) of disabled people as "other."

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>For example, in Fenichel's (1999) work (as cited in Hall & Evans, 1999) which uses psychoanalytic theory to reiterate old myths of masturbation and blindness.

<sup>2</sup>Care was taken to recruit people from different socioeconomic backgrounds and localities, including young people from a fee-paying school and comprehensives, lesbians, and one black

person (in a predominantly white area).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>This is seen most obviously in the saturation of television schedules with "Reality TV" programs.

<sup>4</sup>This was before her hip dysplasia operation, in Series 12, "Out on a Limb."

<sup>5</sup> All references to Alison are myself as the group moderator.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup>See note 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup>Examples of these can be found in Broadcasters Disability Network, at: <u>www.media-</u> disability.org/.