

Stigma or Empowerment? What Do Disabled People Say About Their Representation In News and Entertainment Media?

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Abstract: This paper asked people who identify themselves as disabled to evaluate the American media's presentation of disability. Disabled people internationally took an online survey on media representations. Respondents (N=390) say much of the American film, TV, and news representations of disabled people are problematic and disempowering.

Key Words: news, entertainment TV, film

Much content analysis for the past 30 years and more has revealed problematic media representations of disabled people and their concerns. Only a few media researchers have asked disabled people themselves what they think of media representations of their community or issues (Wilde, 2010, 2007; Pakman, 2008; Sancho, 2003). This survey of people who identify as disabled attempts to fill that void.

In the summer of 2010, an online survey of disabled people from around the world was taken to find out what disabled people think about their representation by the news and entertainment media. However, because the authors of this article are U.S.-based, primarily U.S. disability organizations were contacted to have their members take the survey. Several international disability organizations did send out the survey link, so survey respondents represented 18 countries (N=390). Although admittedly U.S.A.-centric, the disability issues and entertainment media evaluated in the survey are available in countries that have access to Hollywood films and TV, as they are available in many countries around the world, as well as online. The U.S. mainstream film industry alone releases 500-600 films each year, many of which are exported internationally (Motion Picture Association of America, 2011).

This survey is grounded in disability theory that examines dominant cultural discourses about disability to assess ableism or stigma within a variety of cultural representations, which could lead to the social oppression of people with disabilities (Garland-Thomson, 1997, 2011; Wendell, 1996; Makas, 1993). Disabled people receive messages about society's expectations of them through mass media representations such as the Supercrip narrative, which tells them to "overcome" a disabling condition, or to seek "cures" as in the Medical Model (Nelson, 2011; Haller, 2010; Titchkosky, 2008; Garland-Thomson, R. 2002; Hardin, Hardin, Lynn, & Walsdorf, 2001).

Media Content and Disability

Mass communication scholars have long known that media frames are imbued with cultural meanings. This knowledge is especially important when considering a social group like disabled people because they still experience many architectural, occupational, educational, and communication barriers that keep them from being able to fully

participate within society. Therefore, film, TV, advertising, and news images still provide many of the cultural representations of disability in many countries. A ground-breaking poll in 1991 assessed Americans' attitudes toward disability after the passage of the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The poll showed that Americans surveyed were less likely to feel awkward around disabled people after having viewed fictional television and movie presentations about disabled people (Louis Harris, 1991). These surveyed Americans were relying on information about the disability experience from mass media to form their views. Although surveys of the U.S. disability community have been done (National Organization on Disability, 2010), none have asked disabled people about their opinion of news and entertainment portrayals of their social group. In honor of the 20th anniversary of the ADA, the National Organization on Disability (NOD) surveyed the U.S. disability community. The NOD president Carol Glazer said:

“The disability rights movement lags behind other civil rights movements and we have to catch up. There is a role for everyone. Governments need to remove disincentives for disabled people so they can start to work. Businesses need to realize the enormous contributions workers with disabilities can make. Schools need to prepare students with disabilities sooner for the world of work. And Hollywood should routinely feature more disabled people in their TV shows and movies (NOD, 2010).”

It is these inequities in cultural representations from Hollywood TV and film producers that inform this research project – What do people who identify as disabled and who actively embrace disability rights think about film and TV representations of disability?

Kathryn Montgomery in *Targeting Prime Time* (1989) argues that advocacy groups, such as those for the disability community, are extremely concerned with their mass media depictions because of their potential to culturally demean them. She writes:

“To minorities, women, gays, seniors, and the disabled, television is a cultural mirror, which has failed to reflect their image accurately. To be absent from prime time, to be marginally included in it, or to be treated badly by it are seen as serious threats to their rights as citizens (p. 8).”

In line with this, Dillon, Byrd, and Byrd perceived television as an instrument to change attitudes toward disabled people. They concluded that prime time television portrayal of disability might be more realistic if it could consistently integrate persons with disabilities into everything from news to sitcoms to talk shows (1980).

Government policies influence the disability rights movements. In the United States, for example, federal officials approved the early disability rights legislation, but it wasn't enforced, giving the message that this community's rights weren't truly important. These power elites in the U.S. government helped frame disability rights in its early days. Research by Olien, Tichenor, and Donohue (1989) found in news stories about conflict that the power elite helps form the media position, so the news media end up reinforcing the outlook of those who hold dominant power.

These problems of news misrepresentation and federal government framing affect the news coverage of disability issues because research has shown how the media often report on disability as a medical or social welfare problem (Clogston, 1990). In fact, Joe Shapiro, who wrote a book on U.S. disability rights history (1994), reports that the disability lobbyists for the ADA made little use of the media to push their ideas because they thought the media stories would continue to perpetuate stereotypes and hinder the public's understanding of disability rights (1993). For example, the disability community has long complained about one particular representation in the media – The Supercrip. George Covington (1988) believes it has been around since U.S. newspapers' penny press days. Ground-breaking news media and disability researcher John Clogston defined a Supercrip as the following: the disabled person is portrayed as deviant because of "superhuman" feats (i.e. ocean sailing blind man) or as "special" because they live regular lives "in spite of" disability (i.e. deaf high school student who plays softball). This role reinforces the idea that disabled people are deviant– that the person's accomplishments are “amazing” for someone who is less than complete (Clogston, 1993). Covington explains how the news media's Supercrip stories cause problems:

“Too often, the news media treat a disabled individual who has attained success in his field or profession as though he were one of a kind. While this one-of-a-kind aspect might make for a better story angle, it perpetuates in the mind of the general public how rare it is for the disabled person to succeed (1988, p. 1).”

In addition, Laura Mitchell asserts that the U.S. press misses important stories related to disabled persons because of their persistence in portraying them as inspirational "SuperCrips" or "helpless victims." Mitchell explains:

“The press misses the boat largely because of a narrow view that pigeonholes disabled people and makes subconscious assumptions about who we are and what we do. . . Insensitivity and stubborn ignorance characterize much press coverage of disability-related stories (1989, p. 19).”

Even in 2012, journalists still use the inspirational Supercrip image because they know that's what their news directors, editors, and audiences want.

In addition to the Supercrip news representation, other news media models of disability representation have also been identified from a seminal study of more than a dozen major U.S. newspapers (Clogston, 1990) and a 1995 content analysis of the media coverage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (Haller, 1999). These models of the news media representation of disability fit into either a traditional (stigmatizing) or progressive (empowering) category, although setting up this kind of dichotomy is understood as problematic. In applying the models to post-ADA news content, Haller's 1995 analysis did not force news stories into one category or another. A single news story may represent several models, and the headline (not written by the journalist) may reflect another model completely. In this survey, participants were allowed to select all models, if they felt all are represented in the mass media.

Clogston's traditional categories (1990) include the Medical Model, the Social Pathology Model, and the Supercrip Model. The Medical Model presents disability as an illness or malfunction and persons with disabilities as dependent on health professionals for cures or maintenance. The Social Pathology Model presents disabled people as disadvantaged and economically dependent on the state or society, and the support is considered a gift, not a right. The Business Model, Haller's added traditional category model, presents people and their issues as costly to society and businesses especially. Making society accessible for people with disabilities is seen as not worth the cost and as a burden to businesses, i.e. accessibility is not profitable (Haller, 1999).

Clogston's progressive categories include the Minority/Civil Rights Model and the Cultural Pluralism Model. The Minority/Civil Rights Model portrays people with disabilities as members of the disability community, which has legitimate, political grievances. In this model, people with disabilities have civil rights to fight for, just like other groups, and accessibility to society is a civil right. The Cultural Pluralism Model presents people with disabilities as multifaceted, and their disabilities do not receive undue attention. These people are portrayed in way that people without disabilities would be.

Haller added two progressive models: the Legal Model and Consumer Model (1999). In the Legal Model, the media explains that treating disabled people in certain ways is illegal. The Americans with Disabilities Act and other laws are presented as legal tools to halt discrimination. The Consumer Model portrays people with disabilities as an untapped consumer group and reasons that businesses and society in general could profit from making society more accessible. If people with disabilities have access to jobs, they will have more disposable income and less need for government assistance. However, many times this empowering news representation does not appear in the media because journalists' predominant understanding of disabled people still resides in the Medical, Business and Supercrip Models (Haller, 2010).

Many of these media models can be tied to the attitudes and assumptions U.S. society has about people with disabilities. Legal disability studies Paul Miller connects some of these societal attitudes to people's fear of becoming people with disabilities themselves: "This fear is based on the notion that a disabled person's life is inferior to, and less precious than, an able-bodied person's life" (1993). These fears lead people to seek out stories of Supercrips, so they can "take comfort" and feel hope from the fact that Supercrips succeed "in spite of" a disability. The news media know their audiences and what they like and give it to them by making many stories about disability fit the Supercrip model. Even high school journalists know this is what the public wants, according to Laura Miller, whose survey of high school journalism students found that the majority of the students said they "would treat a person's disability as a news oddity, worthy of top placement in a news story" (1995). Interestingly, the students all had positive attitudes toward people with disabilities, but in terms of their news values, they had not been sensitized about non-stigmatizing ways to present people with disabilities.

Many of the news media stories about disability today are still similar to those criticized by Biklen in 1987: Reporters "typically cast in terms of tragedy, of charity and its attendant emotion, pity, or of struggle and accomplishment" (p. 81). Biklen found that the themes of news stories had become predictable as they focused on the angles of inspiration and courage.

Entertainment TV and Film and Disability

Many of the same stigmatizing media models also apply in entertainment TV and films. Those stigmatizing images have been in popular literature for centuries before TV and film existed. U.S. news media and disability researcher Jack Nelson (1994) explained two media images that come from popular fiction: the Tiny Tim-like character as a "sad, unlucky disabled person in need of pity and charity" and the Supercrip as a "courageous disabled person, celebrated for overcoming a disability and performing seemingly superhuman feats" (p. 59). UK disabled writer and activist Paul Hunt identified 10 common stereotypes of people with disabilities in media:

"1. The disabled person as pitiable or pathetic. 2. An object of curiosity or violence. 3. Sinister or evil. 4. The super cripple. 5. As atmosphere. 6. Laughable. 7. His/her own worst enemy. 8. As a burden. 9. As Non-sexual. 10. Being unable to participate in daily life (1991, pp. 46-47)."

Disability studies scholar Tom Shakespeare (1999) says these inaccurate stereotypes are dangerous because they "reinforce negative attitudes towards disabled people, and ignorance about the nature of disability" (1999, p. 166).

However, some scholars believe that wishing for the absence of negative stereotypes of disability in the media is the wrong direction to take. Wilde (2010) conducted focus groups with a variety of people with and without disabilities in the United Kingdom, asking them about soap opera representations of disability. She says, "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." Wilde believes that trying to have the media avoid stereotypes may lead to fewer characters with disabilities in media narratives:

"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 (2010)."

The disability community has long advocated for more diverse and complex disabled characters in films and TV; preferably played by disabled actors (Gilman, 2013). However, there are still so few non-stigmatizing narratives in the media to counter the negative stereotypes of disability, which many viewers could arguably believe. It is feared that the tired clichés would win out.

Progress in the variety of U.S. media narratives about disability is occurring a bit, because entertainment TV and film is more audience- and advertising-driven. In 2000, a U.S. cartoon show featured a wheelchair-using 8th grader, Pelswick, as the main character of the show of the same name. Created by quadriplegic cartoonist John Callahan, the Pelswick character illustrates how some TV images of disabled people are shifting to more equal and mainstream representations and some Hollywood production teams are learning to diversify representations (Haller, 2010). A number of animated shows on U.S. TV have characters with disabilities. Even though people with disabilities do not appear to participate in the creation of the shows, the storylines demonstrate knowledge of disability issues. For example, *South Park* on Comedy Central, *Family Guy* on Fox, and *Rick and Steve Happiest Gay Couple* on Logo all have main or recurring characters with disabilities, and people with disabilities praise these characters because they subvert the usual disability stereotypes (Mallet, 2007). Other countries are following this lead. Ireland launched an animated series starring a girl with Down syndrome, which is voiced by a woman with Down syndrome, Aimee Richardson (Down Syndrome Daily, 2011). In New Zealand, its Ministry of Social Development is funding the Unique Extras agency, which hopes to place actors and models with disabilities on television (Powley, 2012).

For example, *South Park*, the irreverent animated show featuring four foul-mouthed primary-school boys, occasionally spotlights their schoolmate Timmy, a wheelchair user with garbled speech. Timmy was voted "The Greatest Disabled TV Character" in a poll by BBC's Ouch! Jimmy, who uses crutches, is another disabled character who sometimes teams with Timmy. The U.S. disability magazine *New Mobility* reports on the popularity of Timmy among disabled voters at BBC Ouch!:

“With his jagged teeth and can-do spirit, Timmy appears at first glance to uphold the condescending disability stereotypes that are gradually fading from mainstream entertainment. But like everything else in *South Park*, he's actually challenging preconceptions, toppling taboos, and weaving his uniqueness into the fabric of the show (Shannon, 2005).”

Ouch! said Timmy got the vote because of his “badass” activities on the show, including being lead singer of Timmy and the Lords of the Underworld, joining the notorious “Krips” street gang, and being at the center of a *South Park*'s debate over “Do the handicapped go to heaven?” (Shannon, 2005). Mallett (2007) explains that *South Park* resonates because it “satirizes struggles over ontological categories.”

Disability on network TV in the United States received more visibility in 2004 when Josh Blue, a comedian with cerebral palsy, won the NBC network's *Last Comic Standing*. Physical difference depicted on reality shows illustrates that it has staying power with the development of *Little People, Big World* on the channel TLC in 2006. The reality show follows the lives of the Roloff family, which has two parents and one son who are little people and three children who are average-sized. The show focuses on the father Matt, an entrepreneur and little people advocate who has diastrophic dysplasia, and mother Amy, a preschool teacher who has achondroplasia, as they live their lives

with their four children on their small farm in Oregon. TLC says that *LPBW* is “the most comprehensive television documentary ever about the lives of little people” (Lee, 2006).

The show, which ended its sixth season in 2010, has received high ratings for TLC (Crupi, 2006). However, although most praise the show for its matter-of-fact portrayal of little people’s lives, some little people advocates worry that it may encourage voyeurism. Dan Kennedy, the father of an LP daughter, writes, “Every little person is intimately familiar with the supremely unpleasant experience of being the subject of scrutiny. *Little People, Big World* lets viewers satisfy the need to stare: It’s voyeurism without the fear of being caught” (2006, March 24).

Hollywood films have had the same mixed history of both stigmatizing and empowering content. While the disability community despised the 2001 film *Million Dollar Baby* for its depiction of assisted suicide for the main character when she gains a disability, and the disability community loved the 1986 film *Children of a Lesser God*, which netted the first Academy Award to a deaf actor (Haller, 2010). Disability images have experienced ups and downs in Hollywood in recent years because it could not seem to let go of stigmatizing stereotypes, even when it also embraces empowering filmic narratives that depict more realistic disability experiences.

A number of film and disability studies scholars have critiqued many of those clichéd, stigmatizing, or negative images of people with disabilities over the years (Enns & Smit, 2001; Longmore, 1987;; Norden, 1995; Whittington-Walsh, 2002;). In fact, one disability and film studies scholar began a research agenda into film depictions because he saw little resemblance between actual people with disabilities and the characters with disabilities in the movies (Norden, 2001). Also, some disability studies scholars now acknowledge the power of inaccurate or stigmatizing film images to add to the oppression of people with disabilities. UK disability studies scholar Colin Barnes says that the social model of disability’s notion of society’s barriers causing “a disabling environment and culture” also includes film images. They lead to “the devaluing of disabled people through negative images in the media – films, television and newspapers” (2003). This history of negative media stereotypes of disability has hampered the disability community’s interaction with media, and it was therefore crucial to survey people who identify as having disabilities on their current opinions about the media.

Methodology

The survey was developed and pre-tested in the spring of 2010, after the review of several other surveys of people with disabilities (Pakman, 2008; Special Olympics, 2003; Hahn & Belt, 2004) and the literature about media attention and disability issues (Haller, 2010). The survey enables people with disabilities to identify themselves as such. We wanted the survey to include all individuals who identify as having impairment(s) and/or disabilities, but we did not force them to choose one monolithic definition as Siebers argues for a "complex embodiment" that recognizes the differences among people with disabilities (2008).

Data Collection

The respondents in this study were people with disabilities around the world. However, as noted, many more U.S. people with disabilities were contacted to take the survey. Initially, this survey included people with disabilities only in North America about U.S. media. However, because it was accessible online, we opened it up to anyone worldwide who wanted to take it. We contacted potential respondents by sending the survey link to people at 31 U.S. and Canadian disability-related organizations or groups as well as at least two officers at all 50 U.S. Independent Living Centers. A few of the groups are the Down Syndrome Association of Los Angeles, Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund in California, Disability Rights Promotion International in Canada, and the Disability Studies in the Humanities listserv, which has members worldwide. The survey also did ask identity-related questions, but those are not explored in this article. Due to the promotion of the survey to disability-specific groups, participants who did not identify as having a disability probably did not take the survey, and the few people without disabilities who took the survey may have been acquaintances or family of people with disabilities who received the link to the survey. Another limitation of the survey was that someone with an intellectual disability may have needed assistance in taking the survey; the researchers would have provided that assistance, but were not contacted. Researchers did provide assistance to several visually impaired respondents, whose screen readers could not access the survey. With these limitations, the respondents skewed toward those with physical, mental health, vision or hearing-related impairments.

As this was an online survey, we followed a convenience sample approach to ensure that the respondents were chosen on the basis of their affiliation with disability organizations and their listserves and email communications. The data were collected through Survey Monkey, a survey website, which was programmed to avoid multiple responses from the same individual participant. The respondents were assured of the confidentiality of both respondent and organization identities.

A total of 430 respondents started the survey, and 359 completed the survey with a response rate approximately 83.5%. Among 430 respondents, 390 were people with disabilities. 29.7% (n=116) of them were born with disabilities, while 70.3% (n=274) of them acquired the disabilities later. For the current study, we analyzed the data of only the respondents who identified themselves as having disabilities.

Among the 390 respondents, the average age was 47.31 ($SD = 13.91$), ranging from 18 to 82 years old. Males made up 26.7 % (n=104) of the respondents, 52.6% (n = 205) of the respondents were female, and 81 respondents did not identify their sex (20.7%). Participants represented a variety of races and ethnicities, but the majority were Caucasians (66.9%, n=261), followed by respondents of African descent (3.8%, n=15). People who identified themselves as having two or more ethnicities represented 3.1% (n=12) of the respondents; 1.5% (n=6) of the respondents were of Asian descent. Additionally, 1.3% (n=5) of the respondents were of Hispanic and/or Latino descent; 0.8% (n=3) were American Indians and/or Alaska Natives, and 0.5% (n=2) were Native

Hawaiians and/or Other Pacific Islanders. Eighty cases (20.5%) did not disclose their ethnicities.

The 390 respondents in the current study were from 18 countries. The U.S. respondents represented 65.4% (n=255) of the respondents, followed by 5.6% (n=22) of the respondents from Canada. Another 1.3% (n=5) of the respondents reported that they were from the United Kingdom, 0.8% (n=3) were from Germany, and 0.5% (n=2) were from Australia and Vietnam respectively. These twelve countries each had only one respondent participating in this study: Albania, Costa Rica, France, Iran, Ireland, Jamaica, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, New Zealand, Nigeria, and Sweden.

Many types of disabilities were represented among the respondents. The listed disabilities that had no responses were people with Down syndrome and people with HIV or AIDS. The most represented disabilities were wheelchair use, arthritis, polio, cane users, those with depression or anxiety disorders, allergies and asthma, visual impairments and/or blindness, back injuries and cerebral palsy. Respondents could report multiple disabilities on the survey.

Limitations

The study had limitations with the research and sampling methods. First, the survey research of the media forces respondents to select from predetermined categories and cannot explore *how* the respondents watch or read the media. Therefore, the current study cannot detect why people with disabilities perceive media representations as unrealistic or negative or how they would like themselves to be fairly portrayed by mass media. Second, survey research can test only correlation. Because of the correlational nature of the surveys, we cannot identify any causal relationships between any of the variables tested. Third, we used a convenience sampling instead of random sampling method, and doing so affected the generalizability of the findings across the target population world-wide. Although a convenience sample is never ideal, we argue this was an acceptable sample, considering the difficulty of acquiring a complete frame list of all the people with disabilities.

Measures

Respondents indicated the extent to which they agree or disagree with the following statements about the media's representation of disability issues on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Perceived realism:

- In general, mass media accurately portray the lives of disabled people.
- In general, mass media provide objective information for the public to learn about people with disabilities.
- In general, mass media gives enough coverage about disability issues.

- In general, mass media's representation of disabled people reflects how they are in real life.

The Cronbach's alpha for this index was .889.

Medical model: "In most news stories you read about disability issues, disability is presented as an illness dependent on health professionals for cures or maintenance."

Social pathology model: "In most news stories you read about disability issues, disabled people are presented as disadvantaged who must look to the state or to society for economic support, which is considered a gift, not a right."

Supercrip model: "In most news stories you read about disability issues, disabled people are portrayed as superhuman, inspirational, or 'special' because they live with a disability."

Business model: "In most news stories you read about disability issues, disabled people and their issues are presented as expensive and costly to society and business especially."

Minority/Civil rights model: "In most news stories you read about disability issues, disabled people are presented as members of a 'community' or social group, which is deserving of civil rights."

Legal model: "In most news stories you read about disability issues, disabled people are presented as having legal rights, in which they may need to sue to guarantee those rights."

Cultural pluralism model: "In most news stories you read about disability issues, disabled people or their issues are portrayed as able-bodied people would be, as a multifaceted people whose disabilities do not receive undue attention."

Results

The overarching research question was, how do people who identify as disabled evaluate the American media's presentation of disability? This is a broad question. To better capture people with disabilities' opinions on media representation of disability, we asked the respondents to evaluate American film and TV programs' representation of people with disabilities, news media's coverage of disability issues, and the overall media representation of people with disabilities.

We asked the respondents to evaluate 38 recent American film or TV programs, such as the 2009 movie *Adam* and the TV shows *House*, *Lost*, and *South Park*. Among all the programs evaluated, the top five programs that were most viewed by people with disabilities were *Extreme Home Makeover* (75%), *House* (62%), *Finding Nemo* (62%), *Little People, Big World* (62%), and *Monk* (59.2%). On the 1-7 survey scale of

stigmatizing to empowering, all 5 were closer to the empowering end of the scale, with *Little People, Big World* being viewed as the most empowering. See Table 1.

We asked the respondents to evaluate 16 relatively older American TV programs and films, such as *Frida* (2002), *Sesame Street* (1969-present), and *The Station Agent* (2003). The top five older programs and films that were most viewed by people with disabilities were *Rain Man* (86.4%), *A Beautiful Mind* (77%), *Sesame Street* (77%), *Dumb and Dumber* (68.2%), and *Children of Lesser God* (59.5%). All these entertainment programs, except for *Dumb and Dumber*, were seen as empowering. Interestingly, *A Beautiful Mind*, *Sesame Street*, and *Children of a Lesser God* all scored as having even more empowering representations than *Little People, Big World*. *Dumb and Dumber* was viewed as highly stigmatizing people with disabilities. See Table 2.

The respondents also evaluated the news media coverage of 68 disability issues, which were selected based on a content analysis study by Haller (2003). The issues' topics included health care access, access to legal services, Medicare funding, special education segregation, and voting access. On a scale from 1 (minimum/poor coverage) to 7 (enough/balanced coverage), respondents say that American news media poorly cover disability issues. Only two issues, autism and the Terri Schiavo case, received a rating of 4 or above, indicating enough coverage.

The results suggest the disabled survey respondents perceive that the news media don't give enough or balanced coverage to most disability issues overall. Only 8 disability issues scored a 3, meaning they were seen as being covered a small amount. They were AIDS/HIV, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), assisted suicide/euthanasia, blindness issues, children with disabilities, closed captioning - access to TV/Internet content, disabled veterans issues, and health care access and costs. Other questions asked about general evaluation of representations in entertainment and news media, and most respondents reported that the news media do not cover disability issues enough, present the "real life" experiences of people with disabilities, or accurately present people with disabilities in entertainment programs. Also, the majority of the respondents preferred that disabled actors play disabled characters. In the area of online media, respondents indicated they are embracing some forms more than others. Most have Facebook pages (68%), but only 12-13% have disability related websites or blogs.

The study also asked the respondents to assess the media's overall representation of people with disabilities in general. On a scale from 1 to 7 (1 means not realistic at all and 7 means very realistic), the respondents indicated that the media's overall representations of people with disabilities were not realistic ($M=1.95$, $SD = 1.08$). We also asked the respondents to rate how news media frame disability issues in general. The most prevalent frames they reported were ones considered more stigmatizing (the Medical model, the Social Pathology model, the Supercrip model, and the Business model). The respondents said they did not think the news media frame disability using progressive models (Minority/Civil Rights model, the Legal model, and the Cultural Pluralism model). See Table 3 for the means.

Discussion

The survey results illustrate what some people who identify themselves as people with disabilities think about their representation in U.S. news and entertainment media. The survey aimed to provide information that disability advocates can use to open a discussion with U.S. media producers and journalists about the problems with the disability representations within news and entertainment media.

Some of the results clearly match previous content studies of media. Only 31% of survey respondents reported being interviewed by the news media. A content analysis in 2002 found that only about 30% of U.S. news stories had a person with a disability or disability organization as a source (Haller, 2003).

Interestingly, but not unexpectedly, the survey respondents had not seen many of the more recent entertainment media with disability content, as current media have much more options ever, with as many as 800 cable TV channels in 2010 in the United States, and Hollywood releases more films each year – 206 films were released in 1988 as compared to 633 in 2008 (The-numbers.com, 2010). In addition, the average age of respondents skewed older at 47; this age group is sometimes viewed as being busy with job and family and may have less time for media consumption.

Another reason respondents viewed older media more often and found them to be more empowering may be because of the content itself. Some of “the firsts” happened in that older entertainment media – for example, *Children of a Lesser God* (1986) was the first time a deaf actor starred as the main character in a major Hollywood film. The 1988 movie *Rain Man* was the first major Hollywood film to address the topic of autism with big-name actors – Dustin Hoffman and Tom Cruise. The TV show *Sesame Street* has always been ground-breaking for its diverse and inclusive cast. In 1993, the children’s show added a 9-year-old girl, Tarah Lynn Schaffer, who used a wheelchair because of osteogenesis imperfecta (Duckett, 1993).

In addition, many current media programs with disability content are somewhat of a “mixed bag” in terms of representation. For example, the TV show *Glee*, which began on U.S. TV in 2009, has drawn controversy for casting a non-disabled actor to play its wheelchair-using main character (Davis, 2009). On the other hand, it has been praised for hiring an actress with Down syndrome to play a continuing character on the show (Dean, 2010).

Finally, older entertainment media and news coverage were broadcasted during a time when disability rights were gaining traction in U.S. society, and the media took notice (Covington, 1988). Major laws passed such as the Rehabilitation Act in 1973, which outlawed discrimination at any place that receives federal money, and the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, which tried to combat discrimination against people with disabilities in all aspects of U.S. society. In the late 1970s, the U.S. disability rights movement became cohesive via protests about the lack of enforcement of the Rehabilitation Act (Barnartt, 2008). From this, a few major American newspapers ran

articles framing people with disabilities as a "new" minority group pressing for rights (Barnartt, 2008). Even advertising began embracing disability imagery in the 1980s. Longmore says TV ads with people with disabilities illustrated that advertisers no longer feared that "nondisabled consumers will be distressed or offended" (1987, p. 77). All these factors converged, we surmise, to give the U.S. entertainment industry the idea from the 1980s forward that featuring disability topics and disabled actors in their content would be OK.

However, some increased acknowledgement of disability issues in the news and a few added disabled characters on TV never gained true momentum. U.S. journalists have ignored or distorted many of the important civil rights issues facing people with disabilities for decades (Johnson, 2003; Haller, 2010). As for U.S. entertainment programming, as recently as September 2010, the inclusion group for disabled performers, I AM PWD, found that "scripted characters with disabilities represent only one percent of all scripted series regular characters — six characters out of 587 — on the five broadcast networks." Out of those six characters, only one is a disabled performer. I AM PWD says these data reflect the lack of employment opportunities for disabled performers, and it confirms the findings of our survey, in which people with disabilities say they want disabled performers to play disabled characters in TV and film. Therefore, the lobbying of journalists and the U.S. entertainment industry clearly needs to shift into high gear. Hopefully, this survey data will provide crucial data for those efforts.

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Table 1

Rating of recent entertainment programs as stigmatizing or empowering

<u>Program</u> <u>(n=390)</u>	<u>Means on stigmatizing (1) to empowering scale (7)</u>
<i>Little people, Big world</i> (2006-2010)	5.32
<i>Finding Nemo</i> (2002)	4.97
<i>House</i> (2004-present)	4.60
<i>Monk</i> (2002-2009)	4.59
<i>Extreme home makeover</i> (2003-present)	4.2

Table 2

Rating of programs as stigmatizing or empowering

<u>Program</u> <u>(n=390)</u>	<u>Means on stigmatizing (1) to empowering scale (7)</u>
<i>Sesame Street</i> (1969-present)	5.66
<i>Children of a lesser god</i> (1986)	5.48
<i>A beautiful mind</i> (2001)	5.33
<i>Rain man</i> (1988)	4.54

Table 3

Evaluation of models of representation in media

<u>Model</u> <u>(n=390)</u>	<u>Means on rarely represented (1) to often represented (7)</u>
Supercrip model perspective	5.34
Medical model perspective	5.33
Social Pathology model perspective	5.29
Business model	5.10
Legal model perspective	3.35
Minority/Civil Rights model perspective	3.02
Cultural Pluralism Model perspective	2.27