

The Mainstream Is Not the Enemy: Maximising Audiences for “Disabled Voices”

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Abstract: The unique, powerful and compelling perspectives of people with disabilities have gone unheard by mainstream audiences for too long. In film and television, this lack has been traditionally blamed on broadcasters, distributors and audiences themselves, who are failing to fulfill their "moral obligation" to watch. But finding an audience for ‘disabled voices’ means a shift in priorities for those who produce disability narratives. Successful film and television producers prioritize ratings and ticket sales, study and analyze what kinds of stories work, and ensure their product has the best possible chance of reaching a wide audience. The producers of disability narratives need to do the same, prioritizing what an audience wants ahead of how people with disabilities are represented, who is making the representation and how it will impact on the “disability community.” I collaborated with three men with intellectual disabilities in the production of my PhD film in Australia in 2010. My aim was to create a comedy film that would appeal to a mainstream audience and give the strongest possible “voice” to my collaborators, a process that required an abandonment of the “us and them” mentality and the forging of a new model of collaborative authorship.

Key Words: comedy, collaboration, authorship

Introduction

Mainstream screen audiences are not easy to reach. They are fussy, highly critical and quick to switch off if they don’t like what they are getting (McNair, 2000; McIntyre, 2003). When it comes to films and television programs about disability, it is even harder to attract -- and maintain -- their attention. If they are not repulsed or jarred by images of people with disabilities eating, having sex and joking (Larsen & Haller, 2002), they are turned off by preaching, cause-driven narratives (Cottle, 1998) or distanced by inaccessible content that “refuses to concede to a non-disabled viewership” (Davies, 1997, p.65).

The result is that the many powerful and compelling voices of people with disabilities, those which offer unique and insightful perspectives on the disabled experience, go unheard. One can blame broadcasters for poor timeslots, distributors for not buying and audiences for not fulfilling their moral obligation to watch; but apportioning blame, and complaining that no one is watching when they really, really “ought” to, is not a practical solution.

Finding an audience for these voices means shifting priorities. It means, first and foremost, that film and program makers listen to their audience. Successful film and television producers prioritise television ratings and movie ticket sales, study and analyse what kinds of stories work, and make sure their product has the best possible chance of reaching their market. The makers of disability narratives need to do the same, prioritising what an audience wants ahead of how people with disabilities are represented in the story, who is making the representation and how it will impact the disability community.

The creative-practice component of my PhD, a comedy film entitled *Down Under Mystery Tour* (Noonan, 2010), took such an approach. As director, producer and co-writer, I used the traditional tools of storytelling – those which have been proven to appeal to mainstream audiences – to try to create a film that would engage and entertain, and still give the strongest possible voice to my collaborators, all of whom have intellectual disabilities. I believe the lessons of my experience can assist the future makers of disability narratives to forge new models of creative collaboration and connect with mainstream audiences.

Overcoming Burdens of Representation

Producers who set out to put disability narratives on screen are burdened with more than the creative, practical and logistical demands of making their product. Whether they have a disability or not, they are immediately weighed down by the baggage of decades of screen representation and the expectations demanded of them by external parties. Sometimes, particularly if the film or program-maker has a disability, this baggage is unintentionally self-imposed.

The burden of representation was initially used to describe the situation of black filmmakers, whose limited opportunities in film brought about a need to make every representation count, pushing minority issues and viewpoints to the forefront whenever possible because they might not get another chance (Hall, 1988; Mercer, 1994; Ross, 1996). This burden was seen as being creatively constraining, placing an inordinate amount of pressure on black filmmakers to create ideologically busy films and weighing down their characters with “issue baggage” (Cottle, 1998, p.306), casting them as spokespersons for a culture in its entirety (Mercer, 1990).

For those constructing and producing disability narratives, the burden of representation can unnecessarily limit and corrupt the storytelling process, putting them in a “tricky bind” – either they will be seen as faithfully representing their culture or “shirking their ethical duty by selling out” (Hyun Park, 2010, p.15). Instead of focusing on the creation of an engaging and entertaining narrative with rich and complex characters, producers (and the writers and directors who work for them) can find themselves constrained by voices, both internal and external, that shout: “You cannot make a disabled character do that!”

This burden is built upon a misguided notion that a particular minority or culture has a “fixed and final property” (Mercer, 1990, p.63). It assumes that certain kinds of screen representations are positive and acceptable, and others are not. The negative representations, according to many writers, have traditionally had damaging impacts on people’s views of disability, “perpetuat[ing] mainstream society’s regard for people with disabilities” (Norden, 1994, p.1).

This viewpoint relies on deciding which representations are “positive” and which are “negative.” Traditionally, finding such a consensus has been contentious and problematic.

The Search for Positive Representation

Researchers in disability imagery have been consistently unimpressed by mainstream representations of disability. Their lists of recurring disabled characters and narrative arcs can be best summarised under the three broad categories of “victim,” “monster” and “hero” (Shakespeare, 1999, p.164).

The first of these categories, the disabled person as a victim, most often portrays characters as innocent, tragic, pitiable and pathetic; they are embittered individuals who must accept and overcome their disability (Longmore, 1987; Norden, 1994; Nelson, 2003; Cumberbatch & Negrine, 1992; Wolfson & Norden, 2000; Morris, 1996). This depiction relies on the presumption that disability is the diminishment of humanity, a burden on society and a separation and exclusion from the community (Longmore, 1987; Nelson, 2003; Bogdan & Biklen, 1977; Barnes, 1992). It dismisses complex problems of discrimination and social stigma in favor of an individual’s heroic and courageous overcoming (Longmore, 1987; Morris, 1996).

The narrative arcs of victim characters often involve their rescue by the wise, strong, non-disabled person, who helps the afflicted person come to terms with their disability (Morris, 1996), putting the responsibility and problem of the disability “squarely and almost exclusively on the disabled individual” (Longmore, 1987, p.71). When sexuality is addressed, it predominantly characterizes those with disabilities as dangerous sexual deviants, asexual or sexually incapacitated. If they are not physically incapable of a sexual relationship, they are not emotionally capable because of their own insecurities about themselves and their disability. They often require convincing, usually from a non-disabled person, that they can be a sexual being *despite* their disability (p.73). Films featuring characters with learning disabilities such as *Forrest Gump* (Starkey, Tisch & Finerman, 1994), *The Lawnmower Man* (Everett, 1992), and *Of Mice and Men* (Smith, 1992) present their protagonists as asexual, “incorruptible simpletons,” childlike fools whose appearance and naiveté underpin their identities. They are the innocents in a strange and tainted world (Kimpton-Nye, 1997, p.32).

Disabled lives are simply not worth living for many victim characters, as seen in films like *Million Dollar Baby* (Eastwood & Haggis, 2004). Death is often the merciful and necessary outcome, a decision ultimately made by the people with a disability themselves, who realise they are better-off dead than disabled (Longmore, 1987; Nelson, 2003; Morris, 1996).

The second broad category of representation is the disabled person as a monster: an evil, violent, sinister and subhuman creature. This representation has existed in cinema since its early days, with the freakish and deformed characters played by Lon Chaney in horror films of the 1920s (Wolfson & Norden, 2000). Evil villains like Captain Hook, Dr. No and Dr. Strangelove populate a long list of disabled characters that are often feared, loathed, pitied and avoided (Nelson, 2003; Barnes, 1992; Cumberbatch & Negrine, 1992; Sontag, 1978). These and other “warped and threatening villains” (Nelson, 2003, p.178) are generally crippled or deformed by their own doing (through “nefarious experiments”). They despise the world for the way they have turned out and seek vengeance through crime or destruction against the “normals” who’ve escaped the afflictions they have suffered (Longmore, 1987, p.67). Laughable characters who are objects of ridicule by the nature of their disability -- like Ricky Gervais’ *Derek* (Gervais,

2012) or Jim Carrey's character in *Me, Myself and Irene* (Farrelly, B., Farrelly, P & Thomas, B., 2000) -- also fit within this category (Barnes, 1992; Wolfson & Norden, 2000).

Disabled characters portrayed as monsters attack beautiful women who would normally reject them while villainous, disabled characters lust after "normal" women with "kinky, leering desires" (Longmore, 1987, p.72). Death, as in the case of the victim character, is ultimately seen as the only possible solution to these narratives. In cases where the monster is despised, it is a death that is just and deserved punishment. When we pity and sympathise with the monster, such as the grotesque human-insect hybrid in *The Fly* (Cornfeld, 1986) or the intellectually-disabled 'Master-Blaster' in *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (Miller, 1987), death is tragic, merciful and inevitable -- but it allows us to escape the associated problems that have led to his social exclusion and what might and can still be done to redress these problems (Longmore, 1987).

The third common category of representation is the disabled person as a hero. The heroic disabled character is a wondrous "supercrip" who triumphs over great odds with special gifts and powers (Nelson, 2003, p.177; Barnes, 1992; Thomson, 2001). These characters are sometimes compensated for their deficiency with extraordinary, superhuman characteristics (Dahl, 1993), either literally as in *The Six Million Dollar Man* (Bennett, 1972) or by way of natural intelligence as in *Ironside* (Chermak, 1967). Special gifts may be physical, spiritual, moral, mental or emotional but they often reflect an ability and willingness to cope with their affliction. Bitter, grumpy and self-pitying people with disabilities do not get gifts until they "buck up" and get over themselves (Longmore, 1987, p.71; Nelson, 2003). Civilian superstars, techno marvels and high-tech gurus (Wolfson & Norden, 2000) fall into this category, as do "never-say-die types who accept disability as a physical challenge and go out to conquer the world" (Klobas, 1988, p.1).

These three broad categories of representation are considered by many researchers to be one-dimensional, simplistic, and not representative of reality (Shakespeare, 1999). The dominant screen images show little resemblance to the actual lived experiences of people with disabilities (Wolfson & Norden, 2000) and represent a significant gap between people with disabilities and their screen counterparts (Klobas, 1988; Norden, 1994). Researcher Jenny Morris (1996) claims she could watch television and go to theatres for years without seeing her experience of disability reflected on the screen: "The general culture invalidates me both by ignoring me and by its particular representations of disability" (pp.84-5).

The majority of disability writers want more "realistic" images. They also want more "positive" images. But interchanging the two as if they are the same is problematic. There is considerable disagreement among disability researchers as to whose reality is "positive" and should be represented: unrealistic narratives to some are the lived experience of others (Pointon, 1997). For Meekosha (2000), the protagonist in the film *Hilary and Jackie* (Kent & Paterson, 1998), though criticised by disability imagery writers as a stereotypically-negative portrayal of the victim with a disability, was an accurate and affirming reflection of her own experience: "Her struggle, her rage, her contempt, her inevitable death... engrossed me... finally, there, indeed, on the silver screen, was a woman like me..." (p. 814).

For many writers on disability imagery, “positive” images are those that treat the disability as a secondary characteristic. The narratives do not seek to define a person by their disability – they just “happen” to have a disability (Morris, 1996, p.113). These portrayals show characters with disabilities that are as close to “normal” as possible: attractive, active, involved and competitive, and experiencing “normal” relationships (Longmore, 1987, p.78; Klobas, 1988; Nelson, 2003). “Positive” images are where people with disabilities show up as “normal people doing things that normal people do” (Nelson, 2003, p.183).

There are two major oppositions to this view. The first comes from writers who challenge the defining of normalcy and question who decides the definition: “If it’s hard to deny that something called normalcy exists, it’s even harder to pinpoint what that something is” (McRuer, 2006, p.7).

The second argument comes from those who, assuming normalcy can be defined, challenge its validation as the preferred way to live (Darke, 1998; McRuer, 2006). Images that position people with disabilities as needing and desiring normalcy is “the very illusion at the heart of the oppression of disabled people” (Darke, 1998, p.183). Seeking normal, sexually satisfying and attractive characters relegates those that cannot live up to that standard further down the scale of what is acceptable (Darke, 1999). This “fantasy of normality” further marginalizes people with disabilities because they are not able, in most circumstances, to imitate the images of normalcy or gain any benefit from any attempt to “normalize” them (Darke, 1999, p.13). McRuer (2006) criticizes what he calls “the hegemonic mode of representation” that seeks to elicit consent to the dominant economic and political ideologies of the time. This oppression, seen in “compulsory able-bodiedness” (p.198), proposes that able-bodied identities and perspectives are preferable and what we all ultimately seek. Striving for normalcy, he believes, reflects the ability to participate in capitalism: “Being able-bodied means being capable of the normal physical exertions required in a particular system of labor” (p.8).

Rather than focusing on individual struggles for normalcy, some theorists want representations to draw attention to the social structures which problematize disability (Darke, 1999). This argument aligns closely with the social model perspective of disability, which distinguishes between the biological reality of impairment and the notion of disability. The latter is an environment of attitudes and institutional structures that can be acted on, changed and improved: “One may have an impairment but in the right setting and with the right aids and attitudes, one may not be disabled by it” (Pointon, 1997, p.1). This view is in opposition to the medical model, which classifies disability as a biological fact, locating the problem within the individual and their impaired condition: “Lacking part or all of a limb, or having a defective limb or organ or mechanism of the body” (Oliver, 1996, p.22; Ellis, 2007). Disability studies traditionally favors the social model and rejects the medical model as wrong: “It is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation” (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, 1976, p.3).

Darke (1998) believes the victim narratives which emphasise an individual’s struggle to overcome their impairment can be classified in a genre of their own, which he terms “the normality genre” (p.184). This genre subscribes to the medical model of disability, ignoring

social elements of impairment and using traditional genre conventions to define and validate “normality.” This is done by emphasising the tragic medical nature of the main character’s impairment and building the narrative around their struggle for normalcy, a much superior state of being that is represented by all the other “normal” characters in the drama. Darke (1999) wants representations to focus on society and the realities of social integration (Longmore, 1987).

But other writers sit somewhere between the models: they have a problem with representations that focus solely on society and ignore the impairment altogether, thereby lessening the complexity of a person with a disability’s identity and creating a barrier to understanding the immense diversity of the disabled experience and its implications (Meekosha, 2000). Such a view aligns more closely with another approach to disability, one that wants to move away from a medical model versus social model perspective and take into account the distinction between what exists (“ontology”) and our ideas about what exists (“epistemology”) (Shakespeare, 2006, p.55): “People are disabled by societies and their bodies.” Even if all social oppression and discrimination were removed, writers of this view claim people would still suffer with impairments. This model, the critical realist approach, acknowledges that there is a reality outside of language, outside of social construction – “The acceptance of an external reality... there are objects independent of knowledge” (p.54). The critical realist acknowledges that bodies hurt, and are limiting and difficult, regardless of what is thought or said about them.

Other writers want to go further than merely acknowledging the existence of impairment in disabled identities: they want to celebrate it and draw attention to difference. McRuer (2006) likes self-proclaimed “supermasochist” Bob Flanagan, a performer with cystic fibrosis whose aggressive, in-your-face onstage act included nailing his penis to a wall (p.181; Thomson, 2001). Flanagan’s extreme imagery gave reassurance to those who were actually like him (“Look at me, I am like you”) but added the contingency that he may not be “like you” and, if so, he wanted to imagine a future that “might be something other than, different from, or beyond all of this” (p.183). Flanagan, like McRuer, questioned what normality really is, and if he was deemed to be abnormal, he saw that as a reason for celebration (p.186). The images ascribed to Flanagan as a young poster boy of cystic fibrosis sought pity for the lack of a cure and his implied untimely death, and revelry in the remarkable things he could do because of treatment: “normal” things like painting, sketching and playing drums (p.187). Flanagan’s adult reality exploded the poster child mythology and his transgressive representation demonstrated and rejoiced in alternative ways of being and surviving. According to McRuer (2006), Flanagan’s counter-hegemonic role “imagined cripp existence as atypical and reached for something beyond the world order” (p.194).

Similarly, Irish performance artist Mary Duffy, an armless woman with a hand attached directly to one shoulder, “exposes the body that has always been hidden, both shocking and compelling her viewers” (Thomson, 2000, p.335). Her naked performance on stage, accompanied by a soliloquy that explores the hateful and hurtful words she has encountered throughout her life, upsets the “dynamic of the stare” by “repeating in a kind of testimony the words of those that starers while forcing the audience to look at a classic image of female beauty bearing witness to its own enfreakment by those words” (Thomson, 2000, p.337). Her representation of self poses any questions of normality, what is appropriate looking, what constitutes beauty and what the truth of the body is (p.338).

There are many other works that confront and challenge notions of positive and realistic representations. Among them is John Callahan's animated TV series *Quads* (Callahan, 2001), which presents a funny and confronting account of a quadriplegic's life and ran for two seasons in Canada, Australia and Finland (Cosh, 2001, p.5). Documentary films have also added to the breadth and variety of representations. *Goodbye CP* (Hara, 1972) follows a Japanese man with cerebral palsy on the streets of Japan (Erickson, 2007), *My One Legged Dream Lover* (Olsen & Fowler-Smith, 1998) explores amputee fetish and *Keeping It Real* (Kabillio, 2001) follows gay, disabled comedian Greg Walloch on a concert tour (Carter-Long, 2010).

These opposing views of what represents "realistic", "positive" and "normal" depictions of disability point to what many researchers have written: it is not possible to agree on what a true representation is because there is "no universally true way anything can be represented" (Darke, 1998, p.183; McKee, 2000; Cumberbatch & Negrine, 1992).

If we acknowledge that it is not possible to have one "positive" or "normal" representation, the most sensible way forward for producers of disability narratives is to create a greater depth and variety of representations (McKee, 2000, p.424), actively building and improving the variety of what has been done to increase the number of different sense-making practices to which people might be exposed. This approach removes the constraints of the past, and prioritises originality and storytelling: "The only thing you can do to give the community a fair representation of itself is to provide a range of programs... it's about volume and it's about range... it's having enough types of programs to really accurately reflect the range of experiences inside a community" ("Executive Producer" in Cottle, 1998, p.305).

This, then, is the first of three core strategies I propose for enabling disabled voices to be heard by mainstream audiences: refuse to carry the burden of representation. Every possible representation fits into one or other stereotype, whether it is the helpless or the hero, the assimilated or the outcast. Producers of representations cannot afford to think in this way as they try to tell original, compelling and honest stories.

Abandoning the "Us and Them" Mentality

The creation of new and original disability narratives is not unproblematic. Many writers insist that the only way to achieve such a range and variety of representations is to give people with disabilities full control of the creative content and how they are represented, enabling content made by them and "not on their behalf" (Beatson, 1996, p.88). This view, particularly in disability arts, advocates and celebrates the notion of a distinct disability culture and echoes Charlton's concept of "nothing about us without us" (1988, p.4; Shakespeare, 2006, p.185; Jaeger & Bowman, 2005, p.111).

Many writers actively encourage a divide between disabled and non-disabled people on both sides of the camera. For them, it is morally outrageous that the majority of disability portrayals are played by non-disabled actors (Whittington-Walsh, 2002, Cumberbatch & Negrine, 1992, p.115). This position compares the use of non-disabled actors to white actors getting "blacked up" to play black roles (Harnett, 2000, p.27; Cumberbatch & Negrine, 1992; Lynch 1997).

Opposing this view are those who say acting is about pretence and it is therefore logical that such pretence be extended to non-disabled actors playing wheelchair users, people with cerebral palsy, people with blindness and all manner of disabilities (Cumberbatch & Negrine, 1992, p.115). You don't have to actually kill someone to play a murderer (Lynch, 1997, p.127). While some say real people with disabilities add authenticity for viewers (Beatson, 1996, p.88), others are not convinced that people with disabilities have an exclusive insight into disability. A non-disabled actor has the ability to connect with individual experiences of marginalisation, disempowerment and prejudice (Shakespeare, 2006, p.196).

The argument from within the film and television industries tends to be an economic one. While most producers and writers would generally prefer that disabled characters are played by actors with disabilities, such decisions are most often limited by access to studios, the availability of suitable actors, and opportunities for training and experience (Cumberbatch & Negrine, 1992; Morris, 1996). Producer David Puttnam (Davies, 1997a, p.54) cites two major difficulties when dealing with actors with disabilities in film: major films seek known actors for the purposes of risk minimization and commercial gain, precluding the severely disabled; film shoots are intense and labored processes that require stamina and it is unlikely that an insurance company would approve an actor with a disability if the risk is too great. Right or wrong, Puttnam believes these realities are the way the industry works: "It's very doubtful that an industry such as the film business would be likely to adapt itself in any way that would be specifically helpful" (Pointon, 1997a, p.54).

When people with disabilities have played major roles in film and television narratives, they have most often appeared in specialist disability programs and documentaries that rarely reach mainstream audiences – content that even people with disabilities are "tired of seeing" (Mulhern, 1995: 131). My documentary *Unlikely Travellers* (Noonan, 2007), which starred six people with intellectual disabilities, was broadcast to more than 600,000 people over three nights on ABC-TV in Australia in 2007 (OzTAM, 2007). It finished fourth out of the five program choices that night. Millions of mainstream viewers preferred instead to watch *Surf Patrol* (more than double with 1.5 million viewers), *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* and *America's Next Top Model* (OzTAM, 2007).

When people with disabilities have appeared in fictional narratives on film and television, many of the resulting works have also failed to reach the mainstream. Despite adopting the populist sitcom format, *House Gang* (Mason, 1996), an Australian program featuring three housemates with intellectual disabilities (Anderson, 1997), ran for only two seasons on Australian public broadcaster SBS (Williams, 1997). The critically acclaimed film *Struck By Lightning* (Farrant & Charatsis, 1990), featuring a cast of actors with disabilities, was not a box office success by any means and is among the "least remembered" of Australian films (Williams, 2008).

Nevertheless, there has been some progress, particularly in recent years. Mainstream American programs like *The West Wing* (Wells, 1999) and *Breaking Bad* (Gilligan & Johnson, 2008) have both featured recurring characters played by actors with disabilities. Michael J. Fox, who has Parkinson's disease, has had numerous guest starring roles in *The Good Wife* (King, M., King, R. & Zucker, 2009), *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (David, Garlin & Polone, 2000), *Rescue*

Me (Serpico, 2004) and Boston Legal (D'Elia, 2004) and recently starred in his own sitcom that deals specifically with his disability, *The Michael J. Fox Show* (Fox, Gluck & Laybourne), in 2013.

The use of more actors with disabilities goes only so far in addressing problems of representation. Many writers believe that only when people with disabilities make the films and programs themselves can we escape the baggage of the misrepresentations of the past and create “real, interesting disabled characters and fresh, exciting stories about disability” (Sutherland, 1997, p.20; Safran, 1998a). Writers in this tradition claim it is possible for filmmakers without disabilities to have insights into disability but they are more likely than not to “warp the images to fit preconceived notions” (Wolfson & Norden, 2000, p.297). For Gill (Shakespeare, 2006, p.185), the trappings of disability grant membership to an exclusive, inescapable club: “Non-disabled people, no matter how much they love us, do not know the inside experience of being disabled. Moreover they are in a position to escape the stigma.”

But an approach which relies on improved representations from authors with disabilities presumes that authorial control, whether as director, writer or producer, will necessarily produce a different text. It implies that a person with a disability will have full control of the meaning of the text he creates and the representations he makes within it. This view has long been discredited: “A text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (Barthes, 1996, p.213). The viewer is the interpreter of a film’s meaning, not its creator.

For this reason and others, Darke (1997, p.14) rejects the idea that people with disabilities will necessarily do a better job of representing themselves as creators of programs. Firstly, some of the so-called “negative” representations perpetrated by non-disabled film and program makers are a real, lived existence for many people with disabilities. If they were to tell their own stories on screen, it is unlikely their representations would differ significantly from those of non-disabled storytellers (Sutherland, 1997, p.14). Secondly, people with disabilities are as equally socialized as non-disabled people to see disability as a negative, individualized problem which focuses on personal tragedy and triumph. Such narratives, which reduce broader complex social problems to simplistic and easily-solvable personal journeys, already dominate disability narratives (p.20).

Other writers argue that letting people with disabilities make the shows themselves is problematic because they make shows that do not reach wide audiences, they either completely exclude non-disabled people or the content is unappealing to the mainstream because it lacks quality or suffers from the burden of representation (Cottle, 1998, p.306).

The information program *Link* (ATV Central, 1976), which ran for more than five years on the ATV network in Britain, is regarded as being the first dedicated disability program with creators and presenters with disabilities (Davies, 1997, p.65). Davies claims that *Link*’s problem, and ultimate failure, was that it refused to concede to a non-disabled viewership: “They [made] no bones about the fact that it waste[d] no time giving explanations that would make the program more accessible for non-disabled people” (p.65). Davies also wants to assign blame to the broadcaster for the show’s demise and the failure of its successor, *One in Four* (BBC Television, 1986), which tried hard to reach a wider, non-disabled audience. Both shows, he

claims, failed to find consistent audiences because they were marginalized in the programming schedules (Davies, 1997). This argument presumes that better placement in the schedule (ie. prime time) by the broadcaster might have attracted audiences (the non-disabled included) and, by extension, enabled the show to succeed. According to McKee (2004), such an argument presumes that the “passive masses” will watch whatever they’re given (p.86). The view of some writers suggests that if programs about disability by people with disabilities were forced on primetime audiences, they would watch them without question. But McKee, referring to empirical research, suggests this is not the case. Popular audiences do not passively accept the programs they are given. The failure of disability programs to reach audiences is not the fault of broadcasters or the scheduling. For McKee and others, audiences are not watching because they don’t like the content.

Whether behind or in front of the camera, the problems of an exclusively-disabled approach are often the same: poor quality content and limited ability based on a lack of opportunity, training and experience. Many argue that societal and institutional barriers, including discrimination, restrict the opportunities for people with disabilities to work only on specialist disability programs; they are disadvantaged by poor training (Mulhern, 1997) and are not given the experience required to tell engaging screen stories for the mainstream (Pointon, 1997a). This argument is similarly used for marginalized, under-qualified actors with disabilities and it is a vicious, closed circle (Cumberbatch & Negrine, 1992; Morris, 1996): actors and program creators with disabilities can only improve with experience but they need experience to be given the opportunities.

A commonsense approach, and a third core strategy for producers of disability narratives of the future, combines the benefits of training and experience with the unique perspective of disability, bringing non-disabled people and people with disabilities together in a constructive and safe collaborative environment.

New Models of Collaboration

A collaborative approach, partnership and alliance between people with disabilities and those without, seeks better quality content without lessening the powerful and unique qualities of the “disabled voice” (Shakespeare, 2006). It envisages situations where experienced, non-disabled filmmakers can use the tools of their craft -- their knowledge of story construction, technical production and audience engagement – to make entertaining screen content in collaboration with actors and filmmakers with disabilities, who may have a voice but not the experience or the tools to make themselves heard.

Principles of emancipatory research, a type of research in which people with disabilities are empowered, have relevance here (Barton, 2005). Although it is broadly defined as research that “should be controlled by disabled people as part of a broader process of empowerment” (Zarb, 1992, p.51), it is seen by many writers as a process which empowers people with disabilities by “using the knowledge and expertise of the researcher towards this end” (Barton, 2005, p.318) and aims to have people with disabilities and researchers “use their expertise and skills in a common cause” (Oliver, 1996, p.102).

Shakespeare (2006) supports the broad principle of emancipatory approaches and welcomes the notion of putting people with disabilities at the center of analysis but he has problems with what he sees as a “writing out of non-disabled people” (p.186). This is because it presumes people with disabilities exist in a vacuum and diminishes the multi-layered connection between disabled and non-disabled people: (a) disability is permeable in that it can happen to a non-disabled person at any stage of their lives and its severity can lessen or worsen; (b) impairment and disability is only part of the identity of a person and may not be the dominant factor in their lives; they may identify and affiliate with other aspects of their identity (ie. sexuality, religion) above their disability; (c) non-disabled people are a desirable and necessary part of the lives of most people with disabilities, whether they are parents, workmates, friends or siblings. “Only the most separatist disabled activist chooses to socialize or work exclusively with other disabled people” (p.186).

Shakespeare (2006) wants to move beyond the suspicion around non-disabled researchers by recognizing that having a disability does not necessarily equate to an automatic insight into disability. Indeed, one person’s lived experience “may actively mislead them to the nature of disability” (p.195). The diversity of disability types (someone with one impairment may have as little insight into someone else’s impairment as a person without any impairment), the skills and knowledge of experienced researchers, and the ability to connect with individual experiences of marginalization, disempowerment and prejudice means non-disabled researchers have as much to offer and do. Their contribution has helped develop disability studies to the status it currently enjoys (p.196).

Other disability writers support this view, seeking “new traditions of inclusive research” (Dowse, 2009, p.150). They reject the broad assumptions that non-disabled researchers and people with disabilities are oppositional, homogenous and unequal groups and claim that an “us and them” approach has limited both researcher and researched in intellectual disability research (p.150). They emphasise a merging of skills, mutuality and collaboration that promise new forms of co-produced social knowledge, highlighting the importance of listening, acknowledgement and collaboration in the seeking of voice and representation (Goggin, 2009, p.11).

Such collaboration has already occurred in Australian film, most notably with *Dance Me to My Song* (De Heer, 1998), which starred and was co-written by performer Heather Rose, who has a disability. Working with celebrated (and non-disabled) Australian filmmaker Rolf de Heer, Rose played in-front and behind camera roles and had creative input (Duncan, Goggin & Newell, 2005, p.157). The resulting film is confronting and “demystifying,” “systematically dismant[ling]” traditional images of disability (p.156). But such representations and collaborations are not common in Australian cinema.

Although he focuses on biographical narratives, the work of Booth (1996) is particularly relevant here for its discussion of storytelling collaboration between writer/researchers and subjects with intellectual disabilities. He suggests collaboration requires, and often demands, that a skilled storyteller (whether they have a disability or not) uses tools of manipulation and construction to tell the best possible story and reach the widest possible audience. Although he refers to printed texts in the form of biographical accounts, his work has relevance for all

narratives, including films and television programs. He sees no problem with a level of manipulation to effectively tell the stories of those who can't, people who have learning difficulties and have difficulties in communicating these stories. Indeed, he believes the narratives of people's lives should be absorbing and readable, drawing readers in on an emotional and intellectual level, and if they're not, they've failed their subjects. Narrative researchers, novelists and filmmakers who "cannot take the reader with them are wasting their time" (p.252).

The Future for Disability Narratives

For too long, the makers of films and television programs about disability have ignored the needs of the audience. Instead, they have focused on the needs of academics, disability imagery experts and members of the disability community who want representations to fit within their definitions of "positive" and "realistic." They have been told they cannot create certain disabled characters, cannot use non-disabled actors to play disabled roles, and cannot tell disabled stories if they are not disabled themselves. In the end, they either give up because it is too hard or make compromised narratives that lack the elements necessary to reach mainstream audiences. Consequently, powerful and engaging stories that speak of the disabled experience either fail to get made or fail to get heard.

Only when the producers of disability narratives put their audience first will things begin to change. It is a road rarely-travelled and it is not without great challenges. In addition to creating an original and engaging product, they must navigate the burden of representation, break down divisive attitudes, balance exploitation and manipulation in a commercialism-driven world and create a space for genuine, constructive collaboration that brings together people of different talents, recognizes and utilizes their strengths, and accepts their limitations.

With patience, experience and co-operation, the road ahead can be forged. Weinberg (Wolfson & Norden, 2000) says the continued intermingling between people with and without disabilities has the effect of minimizing the perceived differences between them and diminishing the stereotype of "disabled as different". Representation, he says, has improved over time as a result of "the increasing level of social interaction among people with disabilities and able-bodied people" (p.299).

If these new models of collaboration take place, people with disabilities will develop the skills and expertise to initiate, perform in, and control screen projects as actors, producers and directors. When this happens, the "disabled voice" will be widely accessible and high-quality narratives about disability will reach and engage audiences. The diversity between "us and them" will be something to be celebrated.

Michael Noonan, PhD's doctoral thesis, which included the production of a feature film, was entitled "Laughing and Disability: Comedy, Collaborative Authorship and 'Down Under Mystery Tour'" and was awarded at Queensland University of Technology in Australia in December, 2010. He previously directed and produced the feature documentary *Unlikely Travellers*, which won the IF Award for Best Documentary in 2007 and screened on ABC-TV

(Australia) to a prime-time audience of more than 1.8 million people. He currently teaches film and television at the University of Monterrey in Nuevo León, México.

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