

Center for Disability Rights, Inc.

CDR Policy Position: Representation in Media

As a society, we look to media to better understand the world. Even though there are over 50 million disabled people in the United States, most people do not regularly interact with a person who is disabled. This means, for many Americans, their primary exposure to disability is through the media. This is why what the media has to say about disability is so important. There is a direct link between media representation and how people with disabilities are treated. Sadly, the media has not done a very good job of representing disability in a fair and truthful way.

Casting Disability is Done without Disabled People

Hollywood has a long tradition of excluding disabled people. Many casting directors will not even see a disabled actor in auditions. Even when casting roles specific to disability, actors with disabilities are left out of casting opportunities. Casting directors base their reasoning for not including disabled actors on a series of misconceptions, including the beliefs that: it is more expensive to hire a disabled actor, hiring disabled actors is not convenient, disabled actors cannot handle hectic work schedules or physically demanding roles, and making accommodations to the set or the project would be inconvenient and not worth the effort.

There are over 4000 self-identifying disabled actors registered with the Screen Actors Guild (SAG). These actors work, on average, five days a year. Many individuals have reported to SAG that they have experienced discrimination and prejudice in both auditioning and on set when they have been cast in a role. Many audition spaces are not even wheelchair accessible.

Disability Portrayals Have Long Term Negative Effects

Portrayals of disability tend to rely on harmful stereotyping. By telling stories of disability without consulting and including members of our community, the media perpetuates stereotypes and beliefs that range from comically inaccurate to dangerously problematic. Although the portrayal of disability by a nondisabled actor is often lauded by the nondisabled community – to the extent that it is referred to as “Oscar bait” – these performances have long-term negative effects on the disability community.

Portrayals of disability in film, television, literature, and other forms of consumed media, tend to induce pity or inspiration. These portrayals affect everything from how disabled people are treated in their everyday lives to the legislation that is passed in relation to disability. By treating disability as a defect, illness, or something that needs to be eradicated or cured, such portrayals perpetuate the ableist belief that life with a disability is somehow less than life without a disability, and often communicate the message that our lives are not worth living.

Rochester Office 497 State Street Rochester, New York 14608 (585) 546-7510 V/TTY (585) 546-5643 FAX
Edgerton Community Center 41 Backus Street Rochester, New York 14613 (585) 546-7510 V/TTY (585) 458-8046 FAX
Albany Office 99 Washington Avenue, Suite 806B Albany, New York 12210 (518) 320-7100 V/TTY (518) 320-7122 FAX
Geneva Office 34 Castle Street Geneva, New York 14456 (315) 789-1800 V/TTY (315) 789-2100 FAX
Corning Office 23 West Market Street, Suite 103 Corning, New York 14830 (607) 654-0030 V/TTY (607) 936-1258 FAX

At best, these stories perpetuate the idea that a disability is something for the disabled person to overcome through grit, willpower, and hard work, rather than something for society to accept as equal. They are counterproductive to disability pride, and to the political, cultural, and social goals of the Disability Community to create an inclusive society that supports and values the rights of all people. At worst, they devalue our lives and perpetuate the idea that disability should be erased.

Most Portrayals Rely on Negative Disability Tropes

Portrayals of disability tend to rely on a series of harmful tropes, or repetitive patterns that stereotype characters and stories in fictional forms of media. The most common are when people with disabilities are portrayed as burdens, pitiful, or inspirational. As a burden, the only acceptable recourse is for the disabled character to die. This happens when the character dies because of their disability, because they kill themselves, or because someone murders them as a form of “mercy killing.” Typically, the death of a disabled character has a profound effect on the main protagonist, thus both their death and their disability are used as a plot device, to propel the protagonist’s story forward. The “better dead than disabled” message sent out by these films goes against supporting real disability issues, such as the fight against assisted suicide. Without addressing the nuances that make assisted suicide so harmful to disabled people, films like *Million Dollar Baby*, *The Sea Inside*, and *Me Before You*, encourage nondisabled audiences to see suicide as a legitimate, and often expected, choice by those in the disability community.

Rarely are disabled characters fully fleshed out, three-dimensional human beings. Characters with disabilities often do not have any type of control over their own bodies, their relationships, or even their lives. We do not often see disabled characters in relationships, and many depictions uphold the myth that disabled people cannot be sexual or have sexual relationships. These characters do not have the autonomy to express their sexual orientation, their gender identity, or anything else. We never see individuals with disabilities living, working, and enjoying themselves in their communities, with or without attendant services or the many other services and supports that allow many in our community to live fulfilling lives. In fact, nearly every depiction of disability in the media revolves around erasing the disability and nothing else.

Documentary Can Be Just as Harmful

Disability portrayals extend beyond narrative film. Documentary film about disability, while more willing to include actually disabled people in the filmmaking process, can be equally as problematic. With documentaries, many people with disabilities are often not allowed to speak for themselves. This happens when the filmmaker chooses to speak to friends, family, and caregivers, who tend to speak for the disabled person, as though they have no actual voice. This also happens in many news stories or human interest stories that revolve around disability.

Additionally, many documentary films that explore disability are voyeuristic. By offering glimpses of the most personally intimate moments of disabled lives, these documentaries tend to be more exploitative than educational, relatable, or instructional. Since documentaries are largely guided by the filmmakers’ vision of a certain topic, when these films are made by non-disabled filmmakers, it is common for disabled stories to invoke feelings of inspiration and pity.

This is because these filmmakers often only have other media portrayals to go off of and not actual lived experience as a person with a disability.

Disability is Portrayed as Inspiring or Pitiful in the News

Even when stories about disability are in the news they tend to follow a similar trajectory to how disability is portrayed in film or on television. Some of the most common stories revolve around disabled people being inspirational, courageous, and brave. “Inspiration porn”, stories where disabled people are inspirational or courageous for doing everyday things, is widely distributed in the news. Inspiration porn also establishes the dominance of non-disabled people over those with disabilities. Many of these stories feature heroic non-disabled people helping “poor” disabled people by asking them to prom, helping them get something off a shelf, or eating. As well-meaning bystanders film the “heroics” (without the consent of the disabled individual) and these videos instantly go viral, news stations eat these stories up, and paint these individuals as true heroes, while disabled people are considered lucky to have their assistance. Portrayals like this perpetuate the paternalistic myth that people with disabilities are without agency and are nothing more than recipients of the officious charity of others.

It can be hard for some disabled people, especially those who are people of color, to completely ignore these stories. Because there is so little visibility for disability in the media, these individuals feel like they must accept any story that features a disability in their further marginalized community, as it is often the only story these communities have. Even in tragic news stories, such as those where people of color have been murdered by the police, if the individual has a disability, which is actually common in majority incidents, the victim’s disability is brushed over or ignored completely.

Changing Media Representation Involves Community Integration

Slowly, as people are beginning to understand disability, and as disabled people become more visible in their communities, media is beginning to change how it represents disability. Fighting the institutional bias that keeps disabled people in nursing homes and other institutional settings, will help to make great strides towards integrating disabled people into their communities. The more visible disability is, the greater potential for more accurate and less harmful stories about disability. Right now, disabled people are still not visible enough in the world, and when they are, they remain excluded from Hollywood, along with other marginalized groups.

In order for the media to get disability representation right, disabled people need to be more involved not only in their community, but also within the media. This means disabled people need to have access to educational opportunities that allow them to study areas such as film, acting, television production, communication, writing, and journalism. Disabled people need to be included in front of and behind the camera. They need to be writing their own stories, and these stories need to move beyond simply being “disabled stories.” The lives of people with disabilities go beyond the disabilities themselves, and in order for society to change the way it sees disability, the narrative around disabled lives desperately needs to change. When disabled people are truly included in the media, only then will representations change, and only then will disabled people have access to the support and integration they need.

Institutionalization Plays a Significant Role in the Experience of Disability

For many people with disabilities, institutionalization or the threat of institutionalization is a significant danger. Institutionalization can be a form of non-judicial incarceration, where people with disabilities are subject to abuse, neglect, and coercion by providers who are functionally immune from punishment. The fear of institutionalization is real, potent, and ever-present in the Disability Community, and many people with disabilities have experienced great tragedy and heartbreak because of being forced into institutions and when seeking to escape from institutions. It is a grave oversight to tell stories of disability without raising the specter of unnecessary institutionalization and the institutional bias that continues to stalk our community today.

The Center for Disability Rights, Inc. (CDR) is a non-profit service and advocacy organization devoted to the full integration, independence and civil rights of people of all ages with all types of disabilities.