

Synopsis: This paper explores what stories the media tell about people with disabilities, what kinds of television shows do not include people with disabilities, describes two new television shows created, produced, directed and starring people with disabilities and outlines steps for readers to take to create their own media featuring people with disabilities.

The Portrayal of People with Disabilities by the Media: Current Realities and New Possibilities

by Larry Rothstein, Ed.D

Blackbird singing in the dead of night

Take these broken wings and learn to fly

All your life

You were only waiting for this moment to arise.

--Paul McCartney/The Beatles

I am the co-founder and executive director of No Limits Media whose mission is to show the value and abilities of people with disabilities. As such, we are developing several new television series created, produced, directed and starring people with disabilities about their real lives and the real issues they face daily. Our hope is that these groundbreaking shows will also provide people with disabilities and able bodied people with a new view of this community.

These shows are vital because the media, in general, provides an endless stream of stories, both fictional and non-fictional, that fall into two familiar patterns: heartwarming stories of inspiration and stories of pity created largely to raise money for charities and medical research. This helps contribute to what is best described as widespread structural ableism.

There are multiple reasons for such an approach by the media. Historically, literature rarely focused on the humanity of people with disabilities. Instead, there was *Jane Eyre's*

Bertha Antoinetta Mason, the insane, howling wife of Edward Rochester; or the lame and loveless Laura of *The Glass Menagerie*; or the vengeful Captain Ahab of *Moby Dick*.

The movies tended to portray people with disabilities as inspirations. This is found in such movies as *Rain Man* with Dustin Hoffman as Raymond Babbitt, an autistic savant; *I Am Same* with Sean Penn as Sam Dawson who has intellectual challenges; *Forrest Gump* starring Tom Hanks who is also intellectually challenged; and Tom Cruise as a paralyzed ex-veteran in *Born on the Fourth of July*. All these lead roles were played by actors without disabilities. All were nominated or won Academy Awards.

Network and cable television have only a slightly better record in regards to telling stories about people with disabilities. In recent years, a few shows have a lead or supporting character with a disability. Freddie Highmore (no disability) plays an autistic savant physician on *The Good Doctor*; Micah Fowler, who has cerebral palsy, played a lead character on *Speechless* (cancelled); William Edward Fichtner's character on *Mom* is paralyzed but he is not. The A&E network ran a docudrama series until last year called *Born this Way* about a group of young people with Down syndrome.

Recently, the Ruderman Family Foundation and the Ford Foundation have issued reports in showing that fewer than three percent of all fictional characters on television have any kind of disability and ninety-five percent of those characters are played by able bodied actors.

The picture on the television news side may be even more dismal. Relatively few stories report on the difficult issues that people with disabilities face from the lack of jobs (only 20 percent work) to the high levels of violence perpetrated against this community (more than a million acts of murder, rapes, robberies a year according to the Department of Justice) and to unequal access to medical treatment (highlighted by the outbreak of the coronavirus) among many others.

Instead we have a host of stories that play on viewers' emotions.

I watch the *CBS Evening News*. Disability features are almost always the last story presented and usually on Friday by *On the Road* correspondent Steve Hartman. These stories are designed to end the week leaving viewers feeling good about the kindness of their fellow citizens or the ability of the person with a disability to overcome incredible odds to achieve some personal goal.

Two recent examples illustrate these approaches. This first story is about a little girl with autism who mistakes a young woman in a wedding dress for Cinderella. (see video clip)

This second story is about an African American boy who is missing most of his two arms but wants to play basketball. (see video clip)

So despite the usual week of depressing stories, CBS lets viewers start their weekend feeling there is hope in the world and that people with disabilities will overcome their problems with a little help from strangers who are just like the viewers. Often the CBS anchor, previously Jeff Glor and now Nora O'Donnell join in with a supportive comment and glistening eyes, showing viewers how much they too are moved.

Such stories are not confined to national news outlets. They are a staple of local news also. At a recent conference about the media's portrayals of people with disabilities a major Boston radio news assignment editor admitted the lack of coverage of the community except for charitable walks, runs, and swims (which are, of course, usually on weekends when news is slow). The station particularly covers, she said, events where celebrities are involved the most important of whom until this year was New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady. This is the kind of story she was talking about. (see video clip)

Again, Tom feels good about what he is doing, as do the weekend anchors, reporter and the participants.

The structural ableism of the media is not confined to what is shown but to what is *not* shown.

I studied and used to work in government so I am an avid follower of political news. I flip from PBS to CNN to MSNBC to Fox (yes Fox) to listen to commentators. This is what I see: (see video clip)

A diverse collection of eight commentators of men, women, African Americans except there is no one who has a disability.

The invisibility of people with disabilities is not confined to news commentary.

I have been a fan of the game show *Family Feud* for many years. It was only recently that I realized that I had never seen a family who had someone with a disability. Strange, since nearly 56 million people have disabilities. So many, many families contain people with disabilities. And yet they never appear on game shows. My realization came only when I saw a promotion for the series that included someone with a disability--a blind young man in a wheelchair. I went on YouTube and found the show. It was from several years ago. (see video clip)

The exception proved the rule. Although the young man was funny and engaging, after his appearance on all the shows I watched there were no more people with disabilities.

This widespread exclusion is not only true of *Family Feud* but many other long running game shows Jeopardy (one blind contestant that I saw a number of years ago), *Wheel of Fortune*, *Price is Right*, *Cash Cab* etc. In fact, both *Buzzer* and the *Game Show Network*

feature reruns of decades old shows along with some new programming. Hours and hours of able bodied contestants every day of the week to the total exclusion of people with disabilities.

The problem of what isn't there is not only found on commercial television. Public television has almost no programming starring, featuring or aimed at people with disabilities. *The PBS News Hour* has only one correspondent with a disability that I know of, Miles O'Brien, a science reporter, who lost an arm a few years ago.

The exclusion of the disabled community extends to public television's children's programming. PBS Kids has only two shows with a cast member with a disability—*Sesame Street* after fifty years on the air finally introduced a Muppet character named Julia who has autism and the *Big Red Dog* features a dog with three legs called K.C. The series *The Odd Squad* is much more representative of the many other shows on PBS. (see video clip)

It series has a diverse cast, except for children with disabilities who apparently aren't odd enough.

And, of course, hundreds of thousands of hours of television commercials have no people with any form of visible disability.

Of course, there are reasons for all of this exclusion. Although they number 56 million people with disabilities are not seen as an economic demographic unlike African Americans, Hispanics and women, for example. People with disabilities also have little political power--few Senators and Congressmen and Congresswomen having disabilities. And, there are reporters and news editors with disabilities. Taken together, the media have very little incentive to increase the number of characters and stories about people with disabilities except for those that make able bodied people feel good.

In the face of a media landscape that exemplifies such structural ableism, No Limits Media is launching two series to begin to address this imbalance. Both have been created, produced, directed and will star people with disabilities. I might add that the music for these two series will be created and performed by students from the Berklee Institute for Arts Education and Special Needs.

The first series is called *Inclusion at Work* whose mission simple put is to help people with disabilities get jobs. The series is hosted by Nadine Vogel, a consultant to corporations in this area and the mother of two children with developmental disabilities and by Chris Waddell, a Paralympic champion and an NBC sports host. The show features companies who are leading the way in hiring people with disabilities as well as personal stories about those who are getting ahead in companies or founding their own businesses. A pilot episode will air on Bloomberg Television on November 7th, 2020. (see video clip)

We are also developing *Rolling Across America* hosted by Chris Waddell. Here Chris will travel around the country telling stories about the disability community and their real issues and achievements. (see video clip)

Despite the lack of programming for people with disabilities and the structural ableism that makes them invisible in many genres of the media, a new generation of young leaders with disabilities are receiving coverage and showing their value and abilities. Ady Barkan, who has ALS and can no longer speak except through a voice generated by a computer, is leading the fight for health care for all Americans. Greta Thunberg, who has Asperger Syndrome, galvanized the world around the need for climate change. (see video clips)

Here's what you can do to deal with the media's structural ableism. First, make yourself and your students aware of what the media shows and doesn't show. Next, create images that you find important and relevant. Take your cell phone and shot a story about your students with disabilities. Let them feel the power that comes with creating their own narratives and not the media's. Finally, upload these new narratives to No Limits Media. We will post on our website and on our Facebook page. Our website is nolimitmedia.org

It is time to end the tyranny of the media's image of people with disability. Let's start now.

Larry Rothstein is the co-founder and executive director of No Limits Media. He holds a doctorate in public policy analysis from Harvard's School of Education. He is dyslexic and struggled with spelling and learning foreign languages throughout his years in school.