

Disability Representation in the Media and Popular Culture

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7dLTgMTMeKI>

Title Card: The Centre for Independent Living in Toronto and Our Accessible Media Lab Present *Disability Representation in Media and Popular Culture in Canada*

We invited six disability rights experts and activists with disabilities to share their views on the topic. This is some of what they said...

Title Card: Disability in Popular Culture

Michael McNeely (MM): How many superheroes do you know that have disabilities? And I'm not talking about the stereotypical trip superhero. I'm talking about Spiderman, I'm talking about Superman, and you know they're all men so that's a problem too. But I've never seen a person with a disability in a superhero movie and I'm just starting to get sad about it now.

Mari Ramsawakh (MR): One disability narrative that I see is the trope of the "miraculous cure" for disabled people. Oftentimes when disabled people are part of the storyline, the only time that really happens tends to be when their storyline ends with them being cured in some manner or ending with them either like passing or, you know, having some sad final ending that, you know, doesn't really depict anything positive about disability.

Kate Welsh (KW): The only thing they are is disabled and it's so focused on that and it's so focused on like "being disabled is bad" or "being disabled needs to be fixed" rather than the person being a whole thought-out character and also is disabled.

Janet Rodriguez (JR): The way we see the final product on screen is the result of somebody creating that image of a person with a disability. So the change needs to happen at the creative level and if the person is not aware of what disability is, what is living with disability, how varied our lives are, how diverse we are, how rich our lives can be, how much fun we can have regardless of our disabilities. They will pigeon-hole a person with a disability either as the deviant criminal killing everybody, or the super giggle person always making the bloopers and being the comic relief.

MM: We haven't really left those ideas behind. We haven't really moved on part that because if you're a character with a disability then you're the character with a disability. And you know, just to ask another question, I've never seen the with us, with all of us here together in one room. And if there was such a TV show we would probably be crying and we would probably be dead by the end of it. [group laughs]

Title card: Lack of People With Disabilities in Media

JR: I'm going back to who makes the casting call. So their ideal of what will work is what's leaving us not only outside of what we see in movies and what we see on the media, but also if they don't show us in commercials buying coffee or buying cellphones, which we all do, then when I go to have coffee there's gonna be a barrier.

Desiree Walsh (DW): What I've often heard from people in like "the biz" if you will, is there just aren't disabled people acting so we have to get Drake to play the boy in the wheelchair. And I

think that stems from actually a bigger of that like, generally, accessibility to theatre training and the arts just isn't largely accessible. So I think what happens, and I can speak from a comedy perspective, is lots of people - I have, I do know people who started out in stand-up comedy with a visible difference and then the scene is largely not all that accessible. So I think what happens is people start, and then they get excited and they're like "Aww, I can only get in maybe like 10% of the rooms, this is really hard, I think I'll go do something else."

KW: We are all affected in some way by disability either our family member, our co-worker, but for some reason in the media it just doesn't exist.

Title Card: Intersectionality

MR: Racialized disabled folks are often pushed out of conversations, often criticized for being "divisive" and for not putting disability first over their race. A lot of, even within the disabled community, a lot of white disabled activists have pushed against racialized disabled people bringing up how race actually affects those things. And we look at pop culture, even though we have things like *Special* and we're getting more of these narratives, they still often follow cis and white disabled people. For me, I have yet to actually see a character that represents my experience because I might get the disabled experience one place, the queer experience another place, but I have to go and get the racialized experience somewhere else.

Title Card: The Impact of Social Media

Samantha Walsh (SW): One of the things that I've noticed with social media is it's also been easier to find folks who are interested in doing things differently and creating different media. So I've had some success with finding body painting collectives that are interested in using different models or photographers who are interested in using different models, folks who are doing drawing classes who are looking for more diverse bodies, as opposed to the standard bodies that one would imagine. I'm not sure how we would have done it without those, sort of, worldwide platforms.

MR: The only way to get that experience is to create the opportunities yourself, and so with YouTube and streaming services, it allows us more opportunities to actually go and do it. And especially with things like phones having high-quality cameras in them making it more accessible to create that intent from your own home.

Title Card: Recent Media Trends Increasing Representation

SW: There seems to be more of a commodification of difference and I think in some ways that is exciting. So we're seeing diversity in advertising - so I'm thinking about the Dove campaigns. So it's great that we're using different bodies, we're talking about different bodies in the Dove campaign, but at the end of the day we're still selling lotion because everybody has to have soft supple skin. So the diversity of representation to some extent is really exciting for me, but then I'm sure there's more analysis that needs to be done around like why it is everyone would need soft skin? And thinking about: are we creating authentic representation or are we just letting more folks into the pit of insecurity?

KW: But I think another thing that is happening is making sure that the scripts in these films or in these TV shows are actually having these kinds of conversations that we're having right now. So, I was just watching *Orange is the New Black* this week and they actually used the word "ableist" in their conversation, and I was like "Oh they're talking about kind of a not great thing

but at least they're acknowledging it. At least they're talking about it in a way that is more nuanced and more complex."

DW: Often times I will see calls for women between the ages of 35 or...30 and 35, and even though I identify as that type of woman I will know that that's not "what I am". I can only go to calls that for "visibly disabled people." And one of the other thing I find really interesting is they're often only for financial institutions. Which is like fantastic, "yay financial institutions," but it always bothers me because disabled people do other things. Like, I like Cheerios, like yes I drink coffee, I like Cheerios. Why can't we be in other things? Why am I only going to the bank?

Title Card: Next Steps in Achieving Representation

MM: And so the more people with disabilities in any aspect of the production would go a long way, and so that means to some extent we need to think about how to make these positions accessible. Even how to get a Deaf person to help with sound editing or how to get a person in a wheelchair to do filmmaking where the camera is moving. I think those are very interesting challenges that are not necessarily impossible, but they're just different.

MR: When you think about writers and producers, they're not entry-level positions. Disabled people can't just show up and be a writer. They often have to, you know, everyone is expected to go through the same process where you start off as an assistant or on sound, on a camera, or something behind the scenes and those positions are often with 12-hour days, with inaccessible equipment, and oftentimes people just don't want to even think about ways they could make those things a little more accessible. It's often just kind of pushed off to the side and relegated as "Well, that's not work disabled people can do so let's just not even worry about it." When we talk about, "Oh, actors, writers, directors, we need more of these people," how are they supposed to get in the door? How are they supposed to get the experience and the knowledge to do those positions if they aren't even, they aren't allowed a foot in the door?

SW: If we all live long enough, we're all going to have the opportunity to be disabled and when we think about disability, often the understanding is a very permanent, very static experience, but really people are going to move in and out of the experiences of disability based on the environment that they're in and the way their bodies work.

