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ISSUES ON DISABILITY ADVERTISING IMAGING IN MEDIA

Introduction

It is true to say that the media is an extremely important part of our everyday life and as an industry has been critical in the dissemination of information to the mass population. However the influence that the media holds over society has not always been used to society's benefit, particularly in relation to disability, where the media has continued to add to the discrimination of disabled people. The media's contribution to disabled people's discrimination will be discussed through the following areas: the media reinforcement of impairment and the use of the medical model of disability, the media's creation and underpinning use of disabled stereotypes.

The role of media influences: media organisations and their employees, political agendas, the intended audience and current societal trends.

The Medical Model: The media throughout history has depicted disability through the use of impairment, where as Shakespeare (1999, pg. 164) points out in his article about disability in film "impairment is made the most important thing" and disabled characters are "objectified and distanced from the audience". The media has focused on portraying impairment through the influence of the medical model of disability, where disabled people's inability to interact in normal daily life is a direct result of their physical and/ or mental impairment. Charles Dickens "A Christmas Carole" is an example of this where the "crippled" child of Bob Cratchit, Tiny Tim, is defined by his disability and will only survive through medical intervention.

 However since the mid 1970's there has been much call from the disabled community for society to recognise disabled people as equals to non-disabled people, and to take responsibility for societies contribution to creating disabling environments. The call for adopting the social model of disability has seen vast improvements to establishing the human rights of disabled people and much has been set in legislation. However it appears that the media have been slow to take on the changes and all too frequently do not practice what they preach.

Use of Disabled Stereotypes

The media continue to enforce disability stereotypes portraying disabled individuals in a negative un-empowering way. In his 1991 study, Paul Hunt identified 10 stereotypes that the media use to portray disabled people: The disabled person as pitiable or pathetic, An object of curiosity or violence, Sinister or evil, The super cripple, As atmosphere, Laughable, His/her own worst enemy, As a burden, As Non-sexual, Being unable to participate in daily life. In 2006, the British Film Institute's

website breaks down this list into a series of film character examples for each stereotype, from the 1920s up to the present day. The BFI's examples include: the character of Colin from the Secret Garden - a character who falls into the stereotype of "Pitiable and pathetic; sweet and innocent; a miracle cure", the "sinister or evil" Dr No, with his two false hands, from the Bond film of the same name, Ron Kovic, the disabled war veteran in Born on the Fourth of July, who is portrayed as "non-sexual or incapable of a worthwhile relationship".

Shakespeare (1999) presents a potential reason behind the use of one of these stereotypes:

"The use of disability as character trait, plot device, or as atmosphere is a lazy short-cut. These representations are not accurate or fair reflections of the actual experience of disabled people. Such stereotypes reinforce negative attitudes towards disabled people, and ignorance about the nature of disability". In other words, the disability itself is often used as a hook by writers and film-makers to draw audiences into the story. These one-dimensional stereotypes are often distanced from the audience - where characters are only viewed through their impairment, and not valued as people.

The Role of media influences

What we see, hear and read in the media is often decided and influenced by a small group of decision makers. These editors, producers, programmers and budget-controllers are swayed by their own opinions of disability and what they believe will bring in audiences. Historically media examples containing disabled people have largely conformed to stereotypes. These decision makers may feel that they are taking a risk by portraying disabled people outside of the stereotypes which have historically "sold well".

Adding to this problem is the under-representation of disabled people in employment within the media. A 1998 report "Training and equal opportunities in ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5" (page 5) reports: "Progress was also uneven and generally slow in the employment of disabled people".

Ofcom's December 2005 report "The representation and portrayal of people with disabilities on analogue terrestrial television" reports that progress still remains slow. It cites a 2005 Skillset report, stating that there has been only very minor change in the employment rates of disabled people in the Broadcast Television sector. While a 2003 Labour Market Trends report estimated 19% of the working population to have a DDA-recognised disability, Skillset estimates that within the media industry, disabled people make up only 2.3% of the workforce. This under-representation of disabled people within the media workforce has obvious implications for the power of the disabled community to influence how it is portrayed within the media. This in turn has an effect on the community at large. Where the media holds a high level of influence over the perceptions of the general public, an under-representation or mis-representation of disabled people has large social implications.

Increasing the percentage of disabled people in employment within the media industry would be a large step towards removing stereotypes and empowering disabled

people in the general community. For example, the BBC's The Office, which is produced by a disabled person, uses a disabled character (also played by a disabled person) to address real social issues of disability in employment. Greenberg's drench hypothesis (Saito and Ishiyama, 2005) highlights the influence that positive examples have on society's perception of disability, stating that "one or two particularly salient programmes might dramatically affect our perceptions of disability and disabled persons".

The use of images, language and terminology related to disability

The language used in the media in relation to disabled people offers a good indication of whether social change has occurred. It is interesting to look at the fact that a lot of the language used still revolves around the medical model of disability. For example: "Plucky Kate stepping out to a new life" The Star, 2004. The use of the word 'Plucky' describes a girl who spent two years in a wheelchair. The article continues "But the future is now looking brighter. Katie is learning to walk again, following a year of straightening treatment."

A 2001 Scope article also highlights this continuing trend of newspapers to use negative language, portraying disabled people as sufferers of their own impairment. The article quotes an example from a regional newspaper, using words including: sufferer, courageous, condition, deterioration, plight, brave and normal (as in 'a normal school'). The terminology used in these and similar articles reinforces discrimination. Using negative, disablist language devalues disabled people and can create a negative self-image. Haller et al (2006, pg 62) confirms this:

"Even something as mundane as the words used to refer to a group is important because they have ramifications both for the self-perception of people with disabilities and what the general public believes about disability". The use of positive language and images - focussing on the people, rather than just the impairments - can help to improve both the public image and the self-image of disabled people.

Disabilities in sports

The participation of individuals with disabilities in sports and recreation has a long history. At first sports and recreation were seen as an educational and rehabilitation tool. Competition was less of a factor than involvement. Later with the introduction of the Paralympics games, Special Olympics, and other organizations, more emphasis was placed on competition. Here is a timeline with some examples of the history of sports and individuals with disabilities. Some important dates to remember are:

1939 - George T. Stafford published Sports for the Handicapped in 1939. Stafford's book was written for the educator and to break the assumption that only "normal individuals" could participate in sports or games that require physical activity.

1949 - The first Annual Wheelchair Basketball Tournament was played in 1949. Wheelchair basketball had been played in a variety of forms since 1945. The year 1949 saw the first wheelchair games that included several teams in the tournament format.

1956 - In 1956 the first Blue-Gold All-Star Football Game was played in Delaware. The game featured the state's best high school football players and was played to raise funds and awareness for children with cognitive disabilities. The All-Star Football Game is still held today with the same goal of raising awareness.

1951 - Eddie Gaedel played the second game of a Major League Baseball double-header between the St. Louis Browns and the Detroit Tigers in 1951. Standing at only 3'7", Gaedel came into the game to pinch-hit and gained first base with a walk. While being a little person is not considered a disability, the fact that Eddie Gaedel was different is why he was added to the Browns lineup.

1960 - The first Paralympics were held in Rome, Italy directly following the 1960 Olympic Games. 400 athletes from 23 countries participated at the inaugural event in 8 different sports. The 8 sports included 57 separate events with the United States taking 43 total medals.

1968 - The International Special Olympics were founded by Eunice Kennedy Shriver in 1968. Soldier Field in Chicago, Illinois hosted the first games with 1,000 disabled athletes from 26 states and Canada participating.

1975 - The first wheelchair entrant to the Boston Marathon was allowed to compete in 1975. Bob Hall, who had post polio disabilities, finished the race in 2 hours and 58 minutes.

1976 - In 1976 the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared that persons with disabilities have the right to participate in sports and physical education.

1977 - The Winter Special Olympic Games made their debut in 1977 and were held in Steamboat Springs, Colorado. Athletes competed in a variety of skiing and skating events.

1978 - Congress passed the Amateur Sports Act or (Public Law 95-60) in 1978. The act required the United State Olympic Committee to encourage the inclusion of disabled individuals in amateur athletic programs and competitions that able-bodied athletes participated in.

1984 - Neroli Fairhall, of New Zealand, was the first paraplegic competitor to participate in the Olympic Games. Fairhall competed in the archery event where she finished in 35th place.

1990 - Jean Driscoll won her first of eight Boston Marathons in the Women's Wheelchair Division. Born with spina bifida, Driscoll has competed in numerous wheelchair racing events and was named #25 in the "Top 100 Female Athletes of the 20th Century" by Sports Illustrated for Women.

1993 - On September 4th Jim Abbott pitched a no-hitter for the New York Yankees against the Cleveland Indians. He also won a gold medal with the 1988 United States Olympic team. Abbott was born with only one hand but went on to have a long Major League Baseball career amassing 87 wins.

2005 - The movie "Murderball" was released in 2005. A documentary film about quadriplegic rugby players, "Murderball" won several awards including the

Documentary Audience Award. The movie follows a team of wheelchair rugby players in their quest to compete in the Paralympic Games in Athens, Greece.

Conclusion

Disabled people over the years have been marginalised within and through the media. These areas are as follows:

- The media still tends to use the medical model of disability
- The focus is on the impairment more than the individual
- Disabled people are under-represented both in terms of employment in the media & portrayal in the media
- Lots of media forms are inaccessible and broadcasting tends to be at inaccessible times
- Mainstream media do not recognise the disabled art, media culture

Though the media are beginning to change, it is evident that much more work is needed by the media industry and the disabled community, where both need to work and learn from each other. Particularly mainstream media learning from the disabled media and arts sub culture. Sutherland (1993) states: "that the very fact that previous representations of disability have been narrow, confused and unimaginative leaves the way open for disabled writers and film makers. Through setting polices and codes of practice it will re-enforce these media changes. Currently this has been recognised in the Disability Discrimination Act, the Disability Equality Duty, the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities & the council of Europe's Disabled Persons Action Plan 2006-2015. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. So let us teach what we preach and treat all people with due respect.

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A great many government organizations, charities, advocacy groups, consulting firms and media organizations are expending enormous amounts of resources because they all agree with the premise that media are a powerful educator for cultural values and attitudes. Social learning theory, cultivation and media dependency theory all support that premise, as does a body of work in the rehabilitation literature. In the small world of advertising the results of this study suggest that images of people with disabilities in advertising are a bigger part of the overall advertising environment than they were in 2001 despite the difficulties associated with contextual elements in an ad, and the public outrage/civil suits. But if we compare the appearance rate for AI advertising, as part of the total advertising environment, to the percentage of adults classified as disabled in the total U.S. population based, people with disabilities are very much under-represented (1.7% from this study as compared to 12% according to the 2009 Disability Compendium). If equal representation is the goal, we are not there yet. If acceptance of the use of disabled portrayals in general product advertising on the part of the advertising industry is the goal, then much progress has been made.

Key words: *disability, advertising, image, media, disabled portrayals*