



Disability Portrayal and the Media Today

by Erin

Erin has done her research in this first part of an ongoing series on Disability Culture. Check out installment one here and then TALK BACK in the [FORUM!](#)

"Erik Weihenmayer had just become the first blind man to climb Mount Everest, putting him on the 'Today' show and the cover of Time magazine. The sighted folks were inspired again. . ." Kathi Wolfe sarcastically wrote in the July 1st, 2001 Outlook section of the Washington Post (Wolfe, 1). Wolfe (a veteran of news media who had been living with blindness for many years) in no means meant to denounce Weihenmayer's incredible feat. Climbing Mount Everest is an incredible feat for anyone, even a twenty-five year old buff male athlete (no less a man who can't see). She did, however, attempt to make a point of the unfair media portrayal of those with disabilities. Historically, individuals with disabilities have generally fulfilled three stereotypical "roles" in the media, disabled innocence, disabled inspiration, and disabled evil (as was stated in [The History of Disability Portrayal in the Media](#), the first article in the series **Disability Culture**).

Times are changing, however. As disability culture continues to mainstream, the media face of those who are disabled continues to become increasingly realistic. While wonderful and noticeable progress has been made since Thomas Edison's 1898 *The Fake Beggar*, there are still snags in the fabric of media honesty and realism pertaining to disability. In this installment of **Disability Culture**, we will examine the state of portrayal of individuals with disabilities in television, print media, and cinema today.

Television's portrayal of individuals with disabilities has most recently been all-around positive. The ever popular TV series *The West Wing* unveiled a "shocking" secret in its early 2001 season. President Bartlet revealed his Multiple Sclerosis to the shock and underestimation of West Wing staffer Tony Ziegler (Bondi, 1). While many in the disability community were shocked and outraged by Ziegler's questions, they applauded the show. A very real disability affecting a very real man of power, with a very common reaction is a great step in portraying disabilities realistically. The media attention given to Christopher Reeve's paralysis and Michael J. Fox's revelation of his Parkinson's disease have also bolstered a positive, realistic, normal image of disability that suitable for societal consumption. Disney's made-for-TV movie *Tru Confessions* (which first aired in early 2002) also co-starred the roll of a teenage boy with a mental disability. The plot line was told through an "able bodied" twin sister's point of view and while slightly sugar-coated, *Tru Confessions* captures daily life of an individual with a disability without focusing on the disability itself.

One would think that honest, open global journalism would be a redemption from the stereotypical views of society with its scandalous breakthrough news and exposes. Sadly, a study entitled *News Coverage of Disability Issues in the fall of 1998* reported that "Almost seventy percent of the stories concerning disability had no identifiable source with a disability in it . . ." claims study author Beth Haller, concerning print media stories (Stothers, 1). Just what does this mean to us as readers? People with disabilities simply aren't being consulted on disability issues, or any other issues for that matter. "Print journalists are much more likely to used people with disabilities as



examples in their news stories rather than as sources." an article from The Center For An Accessible Society stated. This along with an alarming percentage of articles concerning disabilities that don't consult disabled women (the slight majority of the US population) leads to deserved concern. "The message that may be getting to the public . . . (is that) . . . people with disabilities can't speak for themselves." the 1998 study stated.

"After decades of stereotyped, often demeaning portrayals, has Hollywood gotten any better at showing the complexity of living with a disability?" This is question, posed by a 1997 article in MDA Publications, deserves an answer (Ivory, 1). The realistic view of disabilities seems simple. All the disability community asks is that we be portrayed as people who happen to have a disability. While many recent choice cinema selections have been lucky enough to have directors who understand this request, many movies still lack. The year 2000's Unbreakable starred Samuel L. Jackson as a man with osteogenesis imperfecta who in the end is revealed as evil and corrupt. His disability, in the eyes of many movie-goers, served as a vehicle for his rapidly degenerating morals. "Disability is in many ways one of the last stereotypes that's allowed to be there (on screen) front and center." commented Ann Fox of Davidson College's disability studies, "The person with a disability becomes a . . . (catalyst) . . . for us to feel good about ourselves and our sentimentality . . . so the person without a disability can feel first of all safe because they are 'normal' and . . . also enlightened."

According to a 2001 article from webzine iCan.com writer Nicole Bondi, movie studios still look at a disability role as an easy way to an Oscar. Bondi points out that it's worked in the past for classics such as Forrest Gump, Rain Man, and One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. Despite the pitfalls, the last several years have brought increasing growth to the maturity of the handling of disabled roles. Movies such as Notting Hill and The Replacements included characters in wheelchairs (Bondi, 1). These characters were neither essential to the plot or given special attention. They were simply people. The Replacements was also home to a deaf football player, and Four Weddings and a Funeral includes deafness and sign language. The fact that characters with disabilities are being added into movies as extras is extremely normalizing and encouraging. Recent feature films have also done a generally superb job at modeling the life of an individual with a disability. This year's I Am Sam proved to be well intended with intentions of mainstreaming disabled characters. Critically acclaimed A Beautiful Mind captured the life and genius of John Nash over a fifty year period (Duncan, 1). Viewers were able to take in the onset and battle of Nash's schizophrenia and experience it as though they themselves were Nash. "By using well-known events, such as the frantic build up of Cold War efforts to outpace Russian scientists, especially in the McCarthy era paranoia about 'sleepers' living in our midst . . . (the movie) . . . managers to suggest that Nash's suspicions and anti-social behavior might be rational reactions to irrational times." rightly quips Barbara Duncan in a recent article of Disability World. The situation certainly is looking up.

So just how has over a century of media lies and scattered truths affected us as disabled individuals? Is our self perception warped and self esteem damaged as a result of false images and stereotypes? We'll discuss this issue in the next installment of **Disability Culture**, Disabilities and Self Image.



Bibliography

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