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Tip sheet: Disability Inclusion in the Entertainment Industry

What's the Problem?

Film and TV have a history of being less than exemplary when it comes to showcasing diverse characters—characters with disabilities are no exception. While people with disabilities are the largest minority in America, the disability community still lacks major representation on TV.

According to a 2018 [study](#) by GLAAD, just 2.1 percent of scripted characters on primetime TV have disabilities in the 2018-2019 season.

Additionally, a Ruderman Family Foundation [study](#) found that a mere five percent of characters with a disability were played by an actor with an actual disability.

Occasionally, over the years, well-rounded characters who have disabilities, but aren't necessarily defined by them, have emerged on screen. Shows such as *Speechless* and *NCIS: New Orleans* feature true-life actors with disabilities playing characters with disabilities. They are making strides to increase visibility of people with disabilities while simultaneously making their characters authentic, shattering stigmas.

Although TV portrayals of people with disabilities are slowly increasing, it still trails behind portrayals of other minority groups.

People with disabilities make up a large percentage of the viewing audience and are wildly under-represented. The entertainment industry has a significant impact on how our society views various minority groups. An increase in diverse and accurate portrayals of people with disabilities in television could help to end stigmas and prejudice against people with disabilities.

Hollywood could certainly lead the discussion on disability inclusion and positively affect the lives of millions of Americans—both disabled and non-disabled.

By the Numbers

There are 1.2 billion people around the world living with a disability – the disability market is valued at more than \$1 trillion. In the U.S. alone, about 56 million people currently live with disabilities (about 20 percent of the population – and 25 percent of all American adults). 38 million have disabilities classified as “severe.” A big part of raising awareness and acceptance for people with disabilities is making their stories part of popular culture.

Unfortunately, the number of characters with disabilities on prime-time remain far short of reflecting reality.

In 2018, scripted prime-time shows on ABC, CBS, The CW, Fox and NBC only included 18 regularly-appearing characters with disabilities, an increase from 15 last year.

Adaptations, Transformations and ADA

For many decades now, the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) has had sweeping positive transformations across the United States. The transformations have been imperative for inclusiveness. For example, many years ago (prior to the passing of the ADA) there was a belief that ramps and curb-cuts would *never* be used. Once they appeared, so did wheelchair-users.

After the ADA, many film studios and Hollywood lots began to provide ramps and elevator access for wheelchair users. Lack of access is still a problem in many older buildings, but hopefully as new construction happens, and regulations change, persons in wheelchairs will have unrestricted access to any space.

Another example of transformation includes technology utilized by the deaf community. Their community has been using text-messaging systems for decades—now it is universally used by billions of non-disabled people for everyday communication.

Old businesses have had 26 years since the ADA passage to adjust their practices. In a field as creative as the television and film industry, innovations and adaptation would be easier than in other fields. Storylines can be adjusted, well rounded characters with disabilities could be featured in prominent speaking or non-speaking roles. There are many practical and cost-efficient ways that entertainment industry professionals with disabilities can be accommodated to work both on set and off. A well rounded and diverse work group can contribute to advancements not just in technology and infrastructure, but in the way in which we as a culture think about the disabled community.

According to the National Disability Institute, 50 million Americans who represent the under-tapped market have an aggregate annual income of more than \$1 trillion and

\$220 billion in discretionary spending power. It certainly makes financial sense to include them in the stories filmmakers are crafting.

What Can Hollywood Do?

There are many steps Hollywood can take to change to connect persons with disabilities with the entertainment industry. The non-profit organization RespectAbility has developed [an extensive toolkit](#) that cater to entertainment professionals to ensure they are as inclusive of people with disabilities as possible. Below please find ten key tips taken from this toolkit.

- **People with disabilities and their loved ones are your audience. 56 million Americans have a disability.**
- **People with disabilities have been erased by films and TV – and you can change that.**
- **Disability cuts across every demographic – gender, age, race, sexual orientation, etc.**
- **Portray characters with disabilities as successful members of the community.**
- **Give characters with disabilities a success story and showcase their skills in innovation.**
- **Think about the language that you use.**
- **Use your shows to inspire parents of children with disabilities to take full advantage of the success that early interventions can bring their children.**
- **Reach out to experts.**
- **Prepare tool kits and teaching guides on disability-related topics that connect to your shows.**
- **Ensure that people with a variety of disabilities have access to your products.**

Bottom Line

Entertainment is one of the most effective ways to influence public perception and advance social change—TV is America’s number one leisure activity. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that everyone over the age of 15 spends 2.8 hours a day watching television. It makes sense that the entertainment industry has the incomparable ability to help shape the way the world defines and views disability.

Resources

<https://www.respectability.org/hollywood-inclusion/>

<https://www.respectability.org/resources/Entertainment-Professionals>

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/hollywood-calls-inclusion-should-not-overlook-people-disabilities-guest-column-1094379>

<https://variety.com/2018/voices/columns/hollywood-people-with-disabilities-1202898254/>

<https://themighty.com/2018/11/representation-disabilities-tv-increasing/>

<https://variety.com/2018/film/news/disability-movies-tv-inclusion-1202713778/>

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/opinion-powell-what-hollywood-gets-wrong-about-disabilities_us_5a9ef0ffe4b0d4f5b66b1882

<https://deadline.com/2017/09/actors-with-disabilities-study-cbs-fox-lead-tnetworks-1202168339/>

<https://www.abclawcenters.com/blog/2017/04/18/exploring-the-rise-of-characters-with-disabilities-in-modern-television/>

<https://www.thinkinclusive.us/disability-representation-television/>

http://www.rudermanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/TV-White-Paper_7-1-003.pdf

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/tv/2017/11/09/glaad-study-finds-fewer-women-black-characters-tv/847285001/>

<https://www.bls.gov/news.release/atus.nr0.htm>