DISABILITY MEDIA WORK

Opportunities and Obstacles

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palgrave
macmillan

Katie Ellis
Department of Internet Studies
Curtin University
Perth, Australia

Cover illustration: Détail de la Tour Eiffel © nemesis2207/Fotolia.co.uk

Printed on acid-free paper

To my dad

Preface

The idea for this book came in 2013 as I was researching representations of disability on Australian television and the technologies that people with disabilities were using to access this media. The majority of disability media-focused research takes either one or both of these approaches – representation or accessibility. I commenced an online survey of Australian television audiences with disability (see Ellis 2014a) and hoped to discover what impacts, if any, the switch to digital television was having on both representations of disability and the ways people with disability could access television. I wondered whether the increased programming available via an increased number of channels would improve representations and if the digital mode of delivery would result in an improved availability of accessibility features such as audio description and captions. Predictions that digital television could even facilitate the use of sign language and lip reading avatars were very exciting – this was something I believed warranted further investigation (see Slater et al. 2010). At the same time, I hypothesised that media convergence and television's transition to the internet could have both positive and negative effects on television audiences with disability (see Ellis 2014b; Ellis and Kent 2015). This was a new era of disability media research, a way of critiquing disability in the media beyond the identification of stereotypes such as fear and pity that had dominated the field for so long.

My survey ran for 3 months between September and November 2013, just as Australia was running its final simulcast period airing both analogue and digital television. A total of 341 people took part in the survey – 67.4 per cent were female and 32.6 per cent male. The responses were spread

across a range of ages and impairment types; however, the majority of respondents were between the ages of 22 and 34 and had mobility impairment.

In addition to questions regarding television representation and accessibility, the survey addressed emerging digital media and whether people had participated in this form of media themselves. One of the questions asked respondents if they had ever participated in the media themselves, either online, including blogging, or in the mainstream media – 212 people responded to this question. I discovered digital participatory media was changing the landscape of disability media and the respondents indicated they engaged more often with social media than in practices such as writing a letter of complaint. Significantly, more people (98) reported that they had commented on social networking sites or blogs relating to disability issues than those relating to non-disability-related social media (76). However, in the context of making media, more had been profiled or interviewed by the mainstream media (42) than had made their own videos or posted to YouTube (7).

In qualitative sections of the survey, and other interactions via email and telephone, I discovered a number of those who had participated in my survey were disappointed in the representation of disability in the media and, further, when they had attempted to engage with the media, and journalists in particular, they experienced broken promises, benevolent prejudice and, despite their own best intentions, had wound up participating in what they saw as problematic representations. This was also a concern when I interviewed media workers for this book:

> I have had reporters call me for interviews and [I've] been really clear about the importance of language (i.e. not using terms like 'wheelchair bound', not reporting the story as inspirational etc.). I have spent time clearly and slowly explaining all this to them. I have sent through journalistic guidelines on reporting about disability and language – and STILL had them release a story portraying disability as tragic or inspirational! It has gotten to the point now that I am very wary of giving my time to journalists.

However, other journalists recognised that, at times, it is not the individual journalist's fault – newsroom structures or style guides impact the representation of disability. Others still responded that the media is changing,

and through digital participatory media, they are able to bypass the media structure all together and tell their own stories, a strategy they preferred:

> I am very protective about my own story because I know I can write it better than anyone else and anyone else will tell it through the prism of their non-disabled experience and I'll most probably come out as 'inspiration porn'!

This book is a response to these insights and the changing media environment from which they emanate. The book takes the disability media discussion beyond representation and access by considering the employment of people with disability in the media and the continuation of disabling attitudes preventing more people being employed in the media on and off screen. Throughout the book, I investigate both the structural limitations that exclude people with disability from participation in the media workforce and the biographical stories of success and failure.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At Palgrave I thank Robyn Curtis, Felicity Plester, Shaun Vigil, Erica Buchman, Glenn Ramirez and the anonymous reviewers for their expertise and insights. At home I thank my family – Chris, Stella and Connor – for your love and support seeing through another book. On social media I thank the #criparmy – a fantastic, supportive and switched on community.

CONTENTS

'It's Hugely Important':
The Un/Employment of People
with Disability in the Media

Abstract This introduction prepares the reader for an analysis of the employment of people with disability in the media by introducing the broader topic of disability and un/employment and then narrowing the focus to the media industry. It is noted that, in general, people with disability experience lower rates of employment than people without, both in the larger workforce and within the media specifically. The chapter also situates the focus on media employment within and against other disability media concerns related to representation and access. The introduction finishes by outlining the aims and explaining the structure of the book.

Keywords Disability employment · Media · Representation · Access

In 2009, a young woman named Cerrie Burnell began co-hosting the BBC's children's network, CBeebies. Blonde haired and blue eyed, she sang and danced with the same 'wide-eyed wonder at the world that young children have' (The Guardian 2011). However, she refused to use a prosthetic to obscure the fact she was born without the lower part of her right arm. Within a month, parents began complaining on the BBC website that Burnell was giving their children nightmares (Thomas 2009). Amid accusations it had 'gone overboard' in its attempt to include 'minorities'; the BBC suggested that these parents were projecting their own prejudices onto children. Burnell herself gave a number of interviews and,

in the process secured widespread support from the media and other viewers (Business Disability Forum 2013). Despite the controversy, she remained a popular CBeebies presenter and in 2011 was named by *The Guardian* in their list of the 10 best children's TV presenters (The Guardian 2011). She has gone on to report at the 2012 London Paralympics and write a number of popular children's books and plays encouraging disability inclusion. Back in 2009 she reframed the negative reactions as an opportunity for education:

> It can only be a good thing that parents are using me as a chance to talk about disability with their children. It just goes to show how important it is to have positive disabled role models on CBeebies and television in general. (Thomas 2009)

Later Burnell commented that she was not surprised people complained – she explained that as a drama student she would not bow to pressure to hide her impairment via a prosthetic arm in order to find work (Gilmour 2015).

With OfCom arguing 'increasing on-screen representation of people with disabilities could decrease prejudice towards people with disabilities and increase employment levels' (OfCom 2005), Burnell's experiences with both discriminatory attitudes and securing employment take on a particular significance. The issue of representation is compounded when we consider how many people with disability actually portray these disabled roles. When it comes to television drama, recent research puts the number of characters with disability being portrayed by disabled actors between less than 1 per cent (Breeden 2012) and 5 per cent (Woodburn and Kopić 2016) depending on the definition of disability used. A third study found that less than half of 1 per cent of dialogue spoken on television is by a person with disability (Raynor and Hayward 2005).

Yet while actors claim widespread industry prejudice against them, producers and casting agents protest they are unable to find suitably qualified people with disability for the roles. For example, when the popular American television programme *Glee* was criticised for casting non-disabled actor Kevin McHale in the role of Artie Abrams, who uses a wheelchair, Brad Falchuk, the executive producer of *Glee* claimed:

> We brought in anyone: white, black, Asian, in a wheelchair. It was very hard to find people who could really sing, really act, and have that charisma you

need on TV. But McHale excels as an actor and singer and it's hard to say no to someone that talented. (Brad Falchuk cited in Roth 2014)

Putting to one side *Glee*'s problematic representation of disability (see Smith 2009; Ellis and Goggin 2015; Broverman 2009), the lack of employment opportunities for actors with disability must be addressed. The ongoing protests surrounding *Glee* between 2009 and 2013 brought this issue into stark relief, particularly because during the same period R.J. Mitte, an actor with cerebral palsy, was cast in the role of Walt Jnr, a character with cerebral palsy, on *Breaking Bad*. Amid the *Glee* backlash, long-time actor Robert David Hall, famous for his role as medical examiner Albert Robbins on *CSI*, was often quoted as saying:

> I think there's a fear of litigation, that a person with disabilities might slow a production down, fear that viewers might be uncomfortable ... [but] I've made my living as an actor for 30 years and I walk on two artificial legs. (Robert David Hall cited on Media Smarts, no date)

Insurance costs are often cited as a reason not to hire people with disability as actors or as workers more broadly in media industries (Blake and Stevens 2004; Cavanagh et al. 2005). However, John Hockenberry, a journalist with disability, refutes the idea people with disability should be treated differently, or more carefully:

> I can tell you that you can send someone in a wheelchair – who is a paraplegic, for instance – to cover the funeral of Ayatollah Khomeini. You can do it. You can send him to cover the intifada and the West Bank and Gaza. You can send him or her to Bucharest (to cover the violent overthrow of the Ceausescu regime), and you do not have to worry about your reporter becoming a hostage, dead meat, or losing his or her nerve, any more than you have to worry about that with any other journalist. (John Hockenberry cited in Breisky 1994)

Hockenberry, who has worked as a foreign correspondent all over the world, has spoken of his 'wheelchair tactics' or the ways he was able to use his disability to his advantage while covering stories in war zones. For example, he states, 'It's shocking how invisible someone in a wheelchair can be. Soldiers just don't pay attention to you. In a curfew, when no one else is allowed on the street, I could just roll by. It's unnerving' (John Hockenberry

cited in Williams 1990). Also a disability activist Hockenberry initiated an important conversation about the representation of disability in film through his criticisms of *Million Dollar Baby* in 2005. Equally, his 2012 TED talk acknowledges the way disability is mainly associated with 'tragedy and fear and misfortune' in such as a way that it obscures almost any other narrative. Indeed, this TED talk offers an important counter-narrative that recognises masculinity, humour and consumerism in its portrayal of disability (see Hockenberry 2012).

On one level, these three opening stories concern three individuals who made it in the media. However, we recognise Cerrie Burnell, Artie Abrams and John Hockenberry as disabled because they have impairments – indeed this is what is generally focused on in definitions of disability. Their stories also illustrate the ways disability is experienced beyond the impacts of impairments. Experiences related to disabling attitudes and lack of opportunities intersect with the experience of impairment. However, they also broadly illuminate the issues surrounding media representations of disability – who should do it and how it should be done. Within the media workforce, people with disability face challenges securing employment as a result of negative attitudes as well as a reluctance to implement workplace accommodations. The previous stories also illustrate a combination of the three most common fears around the employment of people with disability generally and in the media specifically – fears around job performance, costs and the reactions of others.

UNEMPLOYMENT

People with disability experience higher rates of unemployment than the non-disabled population. Employer attitude, and predominantly their fears, are a major factor in the low employment levels of people with disability (Peck and Kirkbride 2001; Lengnick-Hall et al. 2008; Ameri 2014). These fears have been grouped into three categories – job qualification /performance concerns; costs associated with hiring people with disabilities; and the reactions /responses of others (Lengnick-Hall et al. 2008).

Both disability and media are diverse categories, yet the three fears listed previously can be seen to exist across the full spectrum of media – from newspapers, to radio, to television, to cinema and in many ways online. These fears are not unique to specific impairments either, with people with both physical and mental impairments experiencing discrimination arising from concerns regarding job performance, cost and the

reaction of others. This book takes a cross-disability, cross-media approach to the employment of people with disability in the media, drawing on examples from a variety of media forms and formats and from experiences of people with a variety of different impairment types. Two main aspects are introduced here – employer fear and pity and a lack of accommodation when employing people with disability.

Disability media studies have initiated an effective critique of media discourses of fear and pity surrounding people with disability and the disability experience. The cultural function of these discourses can also be seen in the lack of employment opportunities experienced by this group. Research both highlights the way potential employers fear additional costs associated with hiring a disabled employee (Peck and Kirkbride 2001) and the pity exhibited by other employers who wish to appear 'kindly' (Hayes and Macan 1997). While there may be some extra costs, these are not typically onerous and in only 3 per cent of cases exceed $1000 (Clark 1995).

The workplace or educational context can be accommodated to enable people with disability to complete tasks in a different way. For example, a BBC-affiliated report recommends adjusting the workplace environment to be more accessible, allowing flexible work hours and encouraging the use of assistive technology (Blake and Stevens 2004). A study of actors with disability who were seeking roles identified simple accommodations such as 'access to food; a nearby bathroom; large print scripts; having the director or production staff speak louder; assistance in walking long distances or climbing stairs; or a place to sit while waiting' (Raynor and Hayward 2009). Media educators also report the possibility equipment such as cameras can be adapted to suit the needs of students with disability (Dailey and Lattuca 2006).

Indeed, following the introduction of disability discrimination legislation in the 1990s, employers in a number of countries must make reasonable adjustments to ensure the accessibility of the workplace. A reasonable adjustment refers to a modification in work processes, practices or environment that allows a person with disability to complete their job in such a way to minimise the impact of their impairment. While this should allow greater access to employment and increase productivity for those with disabilities, the real or perceived costs associated with such accommodations can result in companies hiring lower numbers of people with disabilities and/or passing the costs on in terms of lower pay (Jones 2011). While it is illegal to discriminate on the basis of disability, media workers with disability, for

example, have found job descriptions can be exclusionary (John 1994). Similarly, actors in particular note the difficulties in proving they have been discriminated against in roles that require they 'make believe' (see Raynor and Hayward 2009; Jeff Berman cited in O'steen 1992).

Yet people with disability make up the largest minority group in the world – around 20 per cent of the population in Western countries (Ellis and Goggin 2015). As John Belluso, a playwright with disability who wrote for HBO's *Deadwood*, said in a 2005 interview: 'Everyone, if they live long enough, will become disabled . . . It is the one minority class which anyone can become a member of at anytime.' (John Belluso cited in Mckinley 2006). Taking into account the friends and family members of this 20 per cent, it's likely we will all encounter disability at some point in our lives, yet when it comes to the media, people with disability experience under employment.

A New Approach

The need to increase diversity across media forms, formats and among those tasked with creating the media is well recognised in media and cultural studies. It is also a popular topic among cultural commentators and audiences. Indeed, as mentioned previously, the representation of disability in media, entertainment and popular culture is relatively well established in disability studies, with a number of theorists drawing on this fertile area for analysis. However, when it comes to the *actual employment* of people with disability in media, entertainment and popular culture, the topic is significantly under researched despite significant recent media attention. By focusing on the *employment* of people with disability in media industries this book therefore addresses a neglected area of media diversity.

This issue of employment has, however, has been alluded to throughout foundational disability media analysis. For example, Martin Norden refers to actors with disability being both excluded from employment and forced to perform in only demeaning roles (Norden 1994). Some critique the tendency for actors without disability to portray the experience of disability onscreen (Ellis and Goggin 2015; Kuppers 2013; Smith 2009; Rodan et al. 2014). A number of theorists signal towards the importance of including people with disability in all levels of media production in order to change the image that comes to our screens (Barnes 1992; Colin Barnes et al. 1999; Hevey 1992; Ellis and Goggin 2015). A final line of enquiry considers the way actors such as Christopher Reeve and Michael J. Fox, who become disabled following a successful career, follow a familiar Hollywood trajectory

to embody the inspirational cure-seeking paradigm (Quackenbush 2011; Goggin and Newell 2004). This book foregrounds the importance of employing people with disability in the media by interrogating the trends in training and employment of people with disabilities in the media through an international examination of the self-representation of media employment by people with disability. It draws on insights offered through both mainstream and disability specific media and original interviews conducted as part of a 3-year project into disability and the media.

A Critique of Social and Cultural Disability Theorisation

My approach in this book is influenced by a rich tradition of social and cultural disability theorisation – from the social model of disability as it makes a strict distinction between impairment of the body and disablement created in and by society (Oliver 1996), to the recognition that disability is implicated in our conception of both normalcy (Davis 1995) and ability (Campbell 2009), to cultural understandings which note the influence and shifting nature of values and attitudes and further recognise the cultural impacts of the experience of impairment (Snyder and Mitchell 2006). This book is influenced by critical disability studies and adopts a social, cultural and political approach to disability, recognising the intersection of these factors with impairment effects as they influence people with disability seeking employment in the media.

The media play a significant role in shaping people's opinions about a particular group. Research shows that even when people have personal experience with people with disability, negative media narratives about this group can have a detrimental effect on their interactions (Philo et al. 1994). Journalists interviewed for this book consistently commented on the importance of people with disability working in the media to change these statistics and cultural attitudes. As one journalist who had previously worked for the BBC explains:

> It's hugely important [that people with disability be employed in the media]. When non-disabled journalists tell stories about disabled people they view through the prism of their own experience so they usually depart from baseline negative. The story then ends up being negative and reduced to stereotypes. Only when disabled people are involved in telling stories about disabled people are we able to depart from this negative baseline.

Research into disability and the media has traditionally focused on identifying and classifying themes of representation or difficulties regarding access. While Barnes identifies 11 durable overlapping stereotypes (Barnes 1992), Longmore suggests that media images emphasise associations with asexuality, criminal behaviour and an inability to 'adjust' (Longmore 2003). Darke traces stigmatisation back to an emphasis by the media on 'normality' where disability is portrayed as the 'basis of otherness' (Darke 2004). Indeed, people with disability have been stigmatised against through television representation and, just as importantly, a lack of alternative formats and accessibility measures has denied them access to the medium itself (Goggin and Newell 2003). With the recent proliferation of participatory media, theorisation has identified a further strand of analysis – the potential for the media to act as a powerful ally in shifting prejudices about disability and who should talk about it (Ellis 2010; Haller 2010; Rodan et al. 2014; Ellis 2015). By comparison, employment is significantly under researched.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

This book is intended to be a short, accessible introduction to an area of research that is in critical need of attention. I draw on the most up-to-date disability research exploring disability media work as well as report on a significant amount of primary research conducted in the preparation of this book, including interviews with people with disability working in the media in various capacities as well as media studies academics and non-disabled media workers. I also offer content analysis of mainstream media interviews as well as disability blogs. Disability is at the forefront of media, yet employment opportunities for people with disability in print, broadcast and digital media are scarce. At the same time, some people with disability have found success. This book looks specifically at the employment opportunities for people with disabilities in the media to call for further research in this area.

Chapter 2: The Media Industry Is Competitive and Cut-Throat: Taking a Subject-Centred Approach to Media Education. This chapter offers an investigation of education, training and employment of people with disability in the media industry. The chapter discusses the experiences of students with disability studying for a career in the media and identifies the role teachers and potential employers have on whether students seek employment in this industry. The chapter reports on interviews with

media studies lecturers and tutors regarding their views on how disability inclusive the media is and how they have accommodated students with disabilities in their classrooms.

Chapter 3: From Newsrooms to Now Media: Employing Disabled Journalists. The chapter begins by outlining prior research into this topic, illustrating the continuation of fears associated with costs, performance and the reactions of others. It draws on research from quantitative assessments of actual numbers of disabled employees in newsrooms in the 1980s to qualitative assessments of biographical experiences in the mid-2010s. Although most of the literature on this topic was published during the 1990s, there is little to suggest attitudes have changed considerably. The chapter recognises the disruptive influence of digital media and finishes by exploring the self-representations of disabled journalists through blog posts, mainstream media interviews and oral history. While discriminatory fears persist, these journalists also recognise benefits to being a disabled journalist, particularly in a digital media environment.

Chapter 4: The Industry's Response: From Broadcast to Alternative and Community Media. This chapter turns to disabled broadcasting to consider radio and television in particular. It focuses on the industry's response to the low employment levels of people with disability in the media. These responses include industry level incentives and community-based media. This chapter continues to report findings through interviews with disabled journalists and alternative media makers and draws similarities with the reported experiences of two Australian disabled media personalities – Adam Hills and Nas Campanella. The chapter finishes by introducing the changing television environment and the ways this has led to a renewed interested in disability diversity incentives, research and employment.

Chapter 5: A Collective Phew: Disability Acting. This chapter continues the focus on disabled actors. The issue of actors with disability has received significant attention in recent years, with new research appearing on this topic and bloggers with disability pushing this agenda forward. The chapter draws on academic research from both media and theatre studies and insights obtained via media interviews with disabled actors including Eileen Grubba and Peter Dinklage who at times also work as advocates for the employment of people with disability in the media.

Chapter 6: Digital Disability Media Disclosure: The Business of Blogging and Web Series Diversity. This chapter moves to the changing media environment to consider the new opportunities brought about via

people with disabilities' participation in digital media. From blogs to web series, this chapter explores the new forms and formats of media and the position of disability, and disability media as a trans-global movement for democratic communication. This chapter also undertakes a content analysis of disability blogs and web series to discover whether the creators of this media self-identify as journalists or broadcasters and whether this is in fact the ultimate goal of participatory online disability media.

Chapter 7: Disability Participation in the Media: New Directions for Research. The final chapter draws together key themes that run throughout the book related to fear, pity, inspiration and the idea that disabled media workers occupy an ironic position. It is true the media offers a problematic image of disability, yet disabled media workers are ironically expected to integrate into this industry while also working as cultural revisionists, offering news perspectives and promoting previously unseen media approaches to disability. The chapter shares the insights of disabled media workers – the research participants for this project – and considers their advice for other people with disability seeking a career in the media. Five key themes related to media work as a disabled person emerged – love of the work, disclosure, technology, training and the business model characterising a new era in media work. These can be described as both words of optimism and words of caution. Throughout, the chapter expresses despair that in researching this book no significant new findings have been discovered to suggest there has been a change in attitude since the 1990s when the last major cycle of disability-related media work research took place despite the media as an industry having changed so much.

While this research largely focuses on the Western context, it is vital to extend this research to consider media in the developing world where the unemployment of people with disability is significantly higher.

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The Media Industry Is Competitive and Cut-Throat: Taking a Subject-Centred Approach to Media Education

Abstract This chapter focuses on the significant role of media education as part of a broader discussion of the employment of disabled media workers. It reports both a review of the literature and presents original findings of a study of media educators, and draws on the self-representations of disabled media students regarding this topic. Research in this area yields two significant findings. Firstly, that disabled students are discouraged from entering the media workforce due to a lack of resources and disabling attitudes. The second perspective, however, recognises that reasonable accommodations can be made – the research suggests taking a subject-centred approach to learning by acknowledging the necessary skills a student must acquire as an inclusive strategy reflective of the reality of a diverse student population.

Keywords Disabled students · Reasonable accommodations · Media workforce · Media education

This chapter takes a cross-disability, cross-media approach to the topic of media-based education and training. While it is true the media is a diverse industry – people studying drama with the hope of becoming actors undergo a different educational experience to those studying to become a journalist, filmmaker or other behind the scenes production-based roles – there are some similarities. This chapter draws on the insights of two main groups – current and ex media workers who are

teaching people in higher education to become journalists, and those who have undergone such media or performing arts training, including people with disability. The chapter begins with a review of the literature around students with disabilities participating in a media-based education, focusing on journalism and the performing arts, before moving on the report findings of my studies of media educators.

EDUCATORS' ATTITUDES AND BARRIERS TO TRAINING

Gerard Goggin, Christopher Newell and Sue Salthouse's 2002 research into people with disability working in or training to become part of the Australian screen industry reveals important insights regarding the impact of industry and tertiary attitudes around disability. Although diverse pathways to entry may exist, people with disability felt they had to work harder than their non-disabled counterparts to even get a consideration. This is a common observation around the inclusion of minority groups within the workforce and education. For example, a study of disabled job applicants discovered a bias against applicants who disclosed their disability (Ameri 2014). Goggin and Newell report people with disability are discouraged from entering the media workforce due to lack of resources and structural barriers related to disabling attitudes and limited resources. This discouragement is thought to begin at the training level because there is a perception among industry and educational figures that people with disability cannot compete in a fast-paced environment (Goggin and Newell 2003).

Previous research has found educators hold particular views about the functional abilities of media professionals and question whether people with disability can meet the physical and mental requirements. When educators hold disabling views that disabled students are unsuited to a career in the media, students reported feeling discouraged from seeking a career in media (John 1991; South 2003; John 1993). For example, Jeffrey Alan John (1993) begins his analysis of media students with disabilities being integrated into student media and the broader industry with the observation that disability media studies literature has focused on four areas of concern when it comes to employing people with disability in the media – opportunities, job performance, profiles of working professionals and, finally, a discussion of the newspaper's role in shifting public attitudes about disability and therefore potentially improving employment possibilities.

However, John's focus is on student media in particular and the barriers experienced by disabled students in this environment. John observes that student media, like the broader media industry, is time- and cost-driven (John 1993) and outlines the barriers disabled students face within student media as predominantly cost- and experience-based. For John, student media outlets and productions provide important stepping stones into the media industry; however, with extremely tight budgets to deal with, 'student media managers, like trained professionals, can be reluctant to deal with a potential student employee whose presence might involve purchase or adaptation of facilities' (John 1993). In addition, student media managers are often inexperienced and may hold preconceived ideas about what a disabled person can and cannot do. John acknowledges that this is a continuing problem even for trained professionals. He suggests a number of strategies for student media managers to be more inclusive of disabled students in student media such as accessible environments and availability of technologies. He acknowledges the impact of stigma against disabled students, describing attitudes as a 'far bigger problem' (John 1993). Susan Band and Vivien Freakery also quote a non-disabled third-year student's belief that disabled peers could not keep up with the demanding pace of their course requirements:

> A course like ours...has to move at a certain level, so it has to have a certain dynamic, to move through a certain rhythm – it's a hard course, you know, and I am sure they would have difficulty keeping up with the sort of course that we do. (Band et al. 2011)

I also spoke with a screen production lecturer who described a disabled student's experience with similar negative attitudes:

> I got [a disabled student] work as an assistant on a more advanced group of student's film. The feedback from the group was that they never wanted to work with her again. I was told (in a round about way) that due to her (what I would call minor) physical disabilities, she was a little clumsy, and that was seen to be/was a safety hazard on set and also slowed the group down considerably.

Another disabled journalised student published an article in *The Huffington Post* which described students and faculty members in the

journalism school where she was enrolled as 'being unaware' about what it is like to live with disability (Okobokekeimei 2013):

> Some students and faculty members . . . assume I am not here for journalism. They might also presume that I cannot do journalism or be a part of the [college] community because I am not normal, like them. Also, I fear they could ridicule, judge and discriminate against me . . . This could prevent me from partaking in extracurricular activities, pursuing career opportunities or taking any journalism courses. (Okobokekeimei 2013)

Okobokekeimei encourages fellow disabled students to make their presence and needs known both to faculty members and fellow students. To return to John, he agrees that faculty members have a key role to play in overturning disabling stigma against disabled students.

EMPLOYEE ACCOMMODATIONS?

Yet while there is much research to suggest faculty members hold an unconscious bias against students with disability in media training programmes, there are also notable exceptions where educators have embraced the notion of reasonable adjustment and devised innovative accommodations allowing media students with disability to complete their course requirements (Dailey and Lattuca 2006). In an article for the *Journalism and Mass Communications Educator*, broadcast journalism professor Rocky Dailey describes his experiences accommodating a disabled student in his photojournalism class as an example of student-centred learning. He describes his first reaction to hearing the student who uses a motorised wheelchair had enrolled in his class as:

> . . . there was no way Steven could complete my course. The physical requirements put on a broadcast news photojournalist can be demanding, and it just did not seem possible for him to do even the basic assignments. (Dailey and Lattuca 2006)

However, doing this unit was a degree requirement and Dailey was compelled by law and university policy to find a way to give the student opportunity to do this or a substitute unit. Dailey sought the advice of the university's disability office and some rehabilitation engineers to devise a way to accommodate the camera the student needed to learn to use. As is the case in production-based industries, Dailey found a creative solution.

He realised field cameras could be adapted with remote controls in the same way as studio-based cameras:

> Studio cameras have remote controls for the zoom and focus on the cameras. These controls are wired to the camera and come down on the arms of the pedestal so the camera operator can adjust these settings while holding on to the pedestal arm. Why couldn't we use similar equipment on a field camera? A studio camera is basically a field camera without a record deck, so we could rig those focus and zoom controls to his wheelchair in a way he could easily access. I would still need to set up the camera on the tripod and adjust the white balance and iris, but he could get some real hands-on experience with the camera. (Dailey and Lattuca 2006)

In her response to the paper, Lisa Luttuca suggests diversity is the norm of most college-aged populations these days and encourages more media educators to take a subject-centred approach to teaching and learning by focusing on what skills they wish their students to acquire. Such an approach, Luttuca argues, holds both teachers and students accountable. She concludes her assessment of Dailey's accommodations with a celebration of diversity and inclusion:

> Welcoming diversity to the college commons does not require we lower our standards. It requires instead that we find ways to promote the learning of students who come to us with different backgrounds, skills, abilities, preparation, and life experiences. Like Rocky, we will not always find the task is easy, but we will-if we accept the challenge-find that in most cases, it is possible. (Dailey and Lattuca 2006)

The importance of accommodations was also apparent in a recent study of disabled media students. In 2016 Melissa Sgori emphasised the importance of accommodations and called for better faculty training, curriculum review and strategies to assist disabled students transition to the media workforce. Sgori conducted face-to-face interviews with disabled media students and asked them to submit media artefacts outlining their experiences in media education. She acknowledges that very little is known about disabled media studies students but highlights their importance as a subject for analysis because they can be potentially instrumental in changing what has been recognised for a number of years as damaging media representations.

Sgori's three interview subjects, all of whom were male with visible disabilities working in broadcasting, reported a 'supportive postsecondary

environment'. In a contradictory finding, however, Sgori notes these students also reported limited accommodations, minimal job seeking support, and no preparation for the discrimination they would go on to experience in the media industry. As a result, these students developed a high degree of self-efficiency (Sgroi 2016).

The importance of accommodations also emerges in studies of performing arts students. Band et al. note actors with disability 'are rarely considered for roles where disability is not the focus' (Band et al. 2011) and acknowledge that while acting is a difficult industry to break into and the majority of actors do not become 'stars', competition is compounded for people with disability who are put at a disadvantage due to structural and attitudinal barriers. Disabled actors experience extra challenges that extend all the way back to education and training.

In 2005, Band and Freakery conducted a series of training workshops for educators within the performing arts in the United Kingdom to raise the issue of disability inclusion through accommodations and address ways to remove barriers to education. Evaluation of the course revealed several areas of concern for practitioners seeking to improve their inclusive practices. Prior to the course, their participants – who largely consisted of teachers from drama schools – had felt uncomfortable around the issue of disability disclosure, perceiving it to be a 'sensitive' issue. Drawing on this study, Band et al. acknowledge that while it is generally accepted that students with disability will be included in education, within the performing arts sector staff are dubious as to whether people with disability can work with non-disabled people. The researchers identified the impacts of both accommodations and attitudes arguing that barriers to inclusion related to a lack of resources, the need to adapt buildings, and a lack of leadership and professional development regarding how to facilitate the inclusion of students with disability. Finally, staff expressed concerns regarding 'the struggle to accommodate disability within a standard of excellence without compromising that standard' (Band et al. 2011). This notion that disability inclusion will compromise standards is a theme that reoccurs in the literature surrounding both media employment and the employment of people with disability generally. However, Luttuca's recommendations around subject-centred learning could go some way to mitigate this.

Band and Freakery's 2011 study of students with and without disability and their teachers within the performing arts sector discovered a fear that standards of excellence would be compromised affected

students' experience in two ways. First, some teachers did not plan to accommodate disabled students in advance, instead preferring to respond spontaneously (Band et al. 2011). While Band et al. report both positive and negative consequences of this approach, literature within education and disability studies suggest instead students with disability should be accommodated in advance (Alltree and Quadri 2007). Studies show that when education is designed to be accessible to disabled students, the entire student population benefits.

Secondly, some students believed they were held to a lower standard than their non-disabled peers. Several tutors noted a period of adjustment until they felt comfortable to demand the same standard of 'discipline and rigor' they expected of their non-disabled students (Band et al. 2011). Tutors with experience of disability, however, did not need to go through this period of transition. According to Band et al., teachers questioned whether disabled students had been held to the same standard throughout their careers:

> Several tutors...questioned whether in a teaching situation disabled students in general are sufficiently used to being told 'that's not good enough', whether they are perhaps more used to receiving positive comments...Students in our sample emphasised that judging their work by standards less than those applied to non-disabled students would 'do the disability case no favours'. (Band et al. 2011)

This concern is reflected by Australian actress Kiruna Stamell who recounts her experiences being both patronised and challenged in her early education and her desire to be held to the same standard as her non-disabled peers:

> The problem was that the teacher would never correct me, she used to patronise me and, worse still, just ignore me. She'd correct the other students, but if I was not doing something well, she'd say, 'Very nice', and just go on with the lesson. I'm pleased to say I eventually found a teacher willing to teach me and challenge me, recognising I was able to make a contribution to the arts. (Kiruna Stamell interviewed in Hill 2007)

This relates to the social pressure to be 'kindly' towards people with disability and the resulting benevolent prejudice experience by this group identified by Hayes and Macan (Hayes and Macan 1997). To return to Band et al., the researchers discovered this attitude also had an effect on

how the disabled students' non-disabled peers perceived their presence in the classroom. For example, while non-disabled students may profess to welcome more students with disability in the classroom, they did not believe these students could keep up with the fast pace of the performing arts and the requirements of a 3-year course (Band et al. 2011). However, overwhelmingly, Band et al.'s research reflected a desire for a new (aesthetic) model of disability where the unique qualities of inter-actions between performers with and without disability where recognised as complementary.

For the time being, however, as Band et al. explain, this vision is an ideal rather than reality. They urge educators to ensure disabled students are supported to succeed through inclusive environments and attitudes and conclude by calling for a 'recognition [and] reconceptualization of excellence' (Band et al. 2011). The research so far suggests experiences while in education and training are vital in deciding whether a disabled person goes forward and pursues a media career. Likewise, the attitudes and perceptions of educators are recognised as integral as to whether a disabled student ultimately purses the 'ironic' position as media worker and potential cultural revisionist (Sgroi 2016).

A Study of Media Educators

Methodology

A significant amount of the published literature investigating the low employment levels of people with disabilities in the media draws on the experiences of disabled students seeking training in this area. Education and training is an integral part of whether a person finds success in the media, and both actors and journalists for example are encouraged to constantly update their skills and engage in professional development.

In an attempt to learn more about why people with disabilities were not working in the media, I conducted a qualitative study of university educators specialising in journalism, and film and television production. The people I spoke to worked across Australia as lecturers or tutors either full- or part-time. All had either previously worked or continued to work in the media, as freelance journalists or independent filmmakers. This research took place in a university context that values diversity. Student

populations are diverse and alternative pathways to gain entry to university are available for poorly represented groups such as people with disability.

Following the methodology outlined by Lengnick-Hall et al., the research participants were first asked industry level questions and were invited to comment on their perceptions of how inclusive the media was to employing people with disability. This allowed the research participants to comment on the media industry broadly rather than their own classrooms. However, I altered this methodology then to ask a second series of questions that did relate specifically to the educational environment in which the person being interviewed taught, their experiences with disabled students, and any concerns they had about these students succeeding in the industry. The semi-structured and open-ended style of questioning allowed research participants to elaborate on issues that interested them in ways the researchers did not anticipate. For example, almost all research participants suggested they did not have any experience with disability at the beginning of the interview, but as the interview progressed they actually found they had a lot of experience to draw on, either personally, in the industry or in the classroom. Their observations showed disability is everywhere, it is a normal part of life. Some reflected on their own impairments within the context of a related concern – ageing.

The industry level questions covered the following issues – job history; general experience with disability; how proactive they believed the media industry to be in hiring people with disability; reasons why people with disability are not hired; how the industry could be persuaded to hire more people with disabilities; why some outlets were more proactive than others; the importance of leadership; and the benefits of disabled media workers. Questions related to classroom experiences of disabled students addressed numbers, accommodations, in/accessible environments and concerns.

These interviews were coded to establish key themes. These themes relate to the media as a 'fast paced' industry intolerant of difference, an unwillingness for disabled people to disclose the impacts of their impairments, the notion that people with disability should be considered as 'just people' but a recognition also that disabled people have unique perspectives that could attract new audiences and therefore make 'business sense'.

Findings

Industry Intolerance of Difference

The media has a reputation of being a fast-paced, cut-throat and competitive industry where people must respond quickly to uncompromising deadlines and unexpected situations. As discussed in the previous chapter, the three greatest factors influencing whether a disabled person will find employment relate to costs, performance and attitudes. Despite evidence to the contrary, there exists a perception that disabled people cost more because of a need to implement accommodations. Similarly, there are concerns around a disabled person's ability to complete the requirements of the position. Finally, the reactions of others – including other employees as well as clients – deter employers from hiring disabled employees. These concerns pervade the media industry and are also evident at the training level.

Most of the educators, journalists, editors and filmmakers I spoke to described an industry that was unwilling to accept physical difference, both behind the scenes and in front of the camera. Three key themes emerged in this context. Firstly the notion that journalism in particular requires a speedy response to breaking stories and that editors would be reluctant to hire a person with disability for fear they 'wouldn't be able to get up and run to a car accident quickly' for example. Related to this is a perceived concern that in the media you are expected to just 'turn up and do your job'. An ability to cause minimal fuss was seen as an inherent job requirement, particularly in an industry where employment relied on 'word of mouth'. However, both of these concerns rely on a lack of understanding about what people with disability can do, and the accommodations that can be implemented without prohibitive cost or time. The third theme, however, is concerned with the reaction of others, and particularly the audience. There is a fear that people with disability may alienate sections of the audience, thus impacting how much money can be made. As a broadcast journalist explained:

> Unfortunately in commercial media, the visual aspects of commercial media, to be brutally honest, they want attractive, pretty, sexy people on air. I think the commercial media is afraid of disabled people because they challenge the viewer's beliefs, and security and safety about themselves and how they feel about themselves, which is a great disservice because that's all aesthetics.

Adjectives such as deadline-driven, field-based, active, physical, fast-paced, cut-throat, and competitive were used to describe the industry. Journalists were described as needing to be 'hands-on, independent, able-bodied people able to work fast', 'fit physically and mentally' and 'fast-moving, hyper-competitive workers'. One journalist noted that in journalism you were expected 'to work fast and unassisted to a deadline, often multi-tasking and multi-skilled with different tools and technologies.' This is an interesting observation because, as I discuss in the next chapter, people with disabilities are expert users of technologies which enable them to work quickly and unassisted – they are also often early adopters. However, the experience of disabled workers suggests that it is often the employer who does not make assistive technology available.

The requirement to respond quickly to stories, and the necessity of being able to drive, were regularly highlighted. Michele Hackman describes the experience of a senior reporter with a disability convincing her editor to reimburse her transport costs:

> Elizabeth Campbell, [is] now a veteran reporter for the Fort Worth Star-Telegram. While she never faced outright discrimination, she did need to coax editors into accommodating some of her unique needs. They were unwilling to hire Campbell a driver, for example, until she pointed out that the paper reimbursed other reporters by the mile when covering stories. (Hackman 2016)

Hackman herself describes relying on Uber as a 'cheaper [. . .] easier . . . to hail' (Hackman 2016) transport option. Participants in my research also equally acknowledged that often reporters could ride along with a photographer for example – this observation challenges the perception that journalists must be able to drive. As I discuss in the next chapter, this has been an ongoing misperception about the inherent job requirements of a reporter for over 20 years (John 1994).

Disclosure

Many respondents could not recall ever working with a person with a disability in the media. For some this was a case of never being made aware of a disabled person on set or in the newsroom; however, for others it was a clear recollection that no one had ever identified as having a disability. Several research participants agreed that in many

cases this could simply be a matter of disclosure. There is a perception that disabled journalists and crew members would be more likely to be employed if they did not disclose their disability. Only one editor I spoke to remembered anyone disclosing disability at the interview stage. The editor had hired this applicant who worked in the newsroom for a year. The journalists who did remember working with disabled colleagues commented that these colleagues did not regularly disclose the impacts their impairment had on their job. Many did not request reasonable accommodations.

At times, the research participants were unsure whether there were just no disabled people working in the media, or whether people were not disclosing at the application stage or on the job, or a combination of all three. There was an overall view that popular representations of the media as fast paced and competitive was discouraging people with disabilities from applying for work in media industries.

It is possible that by its very reputation the media was putting off potential disabled employees. These media workers identified a clear problem with disabling attitudes in the media industry as a barrier preventing disabled people from getting jobs. For example, a disabled media worker reflected on her experiences at a film school in Australia as 'really hard, more attitudinally than physically'. Indeed, people with disabilities seeking careers in various media-related vocations note discouragement throughout their lives – from potential employers (Ouch Team 2007) to university professors (Diversity Jobs 2011).

A common theme that runs throughout, however, is the desire to be considered as equal to their non-disabled counterparts, albeit with the necessary supports made available. As a journalist with hearing impairment explained:

> We're just like anyone else. Our disabilities shouldn't preclude us from working in the media. Society needs to be exposed to people with dis- abilities and other differences to combat stereotypes and show that we're just as capable. When I was in journalism school, I was expected to produce the same kind of work as everyone else. And I wouldn't have expected any less.

This issue of disclosure was also discussed in a number of contexts. For example, some educators noted a cultural shift whereby it was more

socially acceptable for people with mental health conditions to disclose their conditions and seek support from university disability offices. A number of research participants reflected on a shift in understanding and acceptance in the time since they were an undergraduate student. This is a significant finding particularly in the context of both prior research where educators' views were found to be disabling (see Goggin and Newell 2003) and material published online today that suggests disabled students continue to experience negative attitudes (Okobokekeimei 2013). There is a clear need for further dedicated research in this area.

As for other invisible disabilities or impairments, one educator described a student only letting him know in a casual off hand way that he was colour blind and therefore unable to match colour accurately in a visual effects class. However, this student did not identify as disabled, nor request accommodations. In an example of a subject-centred approach espoused by Lattuca earlier, this research participant suggested the inherent requirements of the course could be achieved through black and white contrast and brightness matching. The media educators I spoke with were eager to implement such creative approaches to ensuring their students could achieve their course requirements. Indeed, this creative subject-centred approach should pervade education within media studies which is by definition a creative pursuit. Like Daily cited earlier, a film production lecturer described being 'initially uncertain how a paraplegic (sic) for example would function on set' when such a student enrolled in his course. He describes his first reaction as 'prejudiced' because when the students worked together as a team to support each other on set the lecturer explains 'I was the one to learn'. In this example, adaptations are a fair and reasonable approach and something the student and their peers can take responsibility for, as discussed earlier by Dailey (Dailey and Lattuca 2006).

Attitudes and Accommodations

The research participants were also heavily influenced by the notion that disabled people should be seen as just like everyone else:

> Hiring more people with disability can help media professionals and journalists see them as people – not disabled people – but as skilled, unique, contributing media professionals. This in turn can help break down or

demystify any stigmas or stereotypes journalists may see or have in disabled people, which may add to stigmas and stereotypes in the community.

While disabled people should be seen as just people, they were also considered as having unique perspectives that could go some way to change society for the better. Journalists in particular were described as 'influential people' who should not be affected by 'personal bias'. However, there was recognition that personal bias regarding disability – namely that people with disability cannot contribute to society – does dominate. Yet with the media requiring 'diverse voices from diverse backgrounds' there were clear benefits to hiring more people with disability in this industry. People with disability not only have an important perspective, disabled journalists may go some way to halt or even reverse 'any bias or stereotyping from being transmitted from journalists to citizens'. Not hiring disabled staff was described as 'a great disservice because you'd be missing out on some really great minds and great, skilled people'. So a benefit to hiring disabled people is that you would get a better workforce generally by 'not excluding anybody based on pre-conceptions'. Ex journalists and editors commented that they liked to think they would just hire the best person for the job, regardless of disability.

The notion that people with disabilities should be considered as 'people' is also linked to a changing media landscape and the importance of technology for inclusion and job performance. For most of the respondents, new technology held great potential for inclusion:

> . . . it shouldn't matter at all, it does not matter because online and radio, print . . . – anybody can do these, any able-bodied or disabled person can do these. If the technology allows you to be able to put words to air, or put words online or to print, you can make it happen.

And different types of representations:

> . . . [people with disabilities and their allies] really want . . . to be heard, tell their story and raise awareness. That's what the media should be doing for them. It should be partly the role of media [to] tell that story. [Now] online media and citizen journalism [provides this opportunity].

Overall, lecturers had some concerns about students entering the industry – this appeared to be both impairment and media specific. Journalism educators expressed concern about people with mental health conditions, while film and TV educators worried about people being physically able and capable of operating equipment on set. However, the media was recognised as a diverse industry where people had a variety of skills and abilities that were both suited and unsuited to particular roles – as one participant explained, 'Everybody has different strengths. You don't all have to be the same'. Research participants noted the ways their disabled students took their impairment into account when deciding which role in the media they sought a career in:

> The students identified areas of the industry they perceived to best suit them. The student with vision impairment believed the 'frantic' newsroom may not be the space for them, but was more interested in long-form, feature publications.

Leadership and a Business Decision

Leadership was recognised as vital in changing the low employment levels of people with disabilities in the media. While most believed leadership from the top, particularly in a 'dictatorial' newsroom environment, was integral to changing the industry's perception of disabled workers, others suggested media leadership came from both the top and the bottom. The public was also seen as having a responsibility to 'lobby for diverse representation and content, which comes from having a diverse media industry workforce'.

My research participants were acutely aware that the media is a business and believed the biggest motivating factors for change were profit driven and attracting a larger audience. In response to the question about some outlets being more proactive in hiring disabled workers, some participants believed public broadcasters for example were more proactive because they did not have the same business constraints. There was a strong perception that commercial media would not be inclined to hire 'anyone who may cost them money in terms of special tools or job efficiency'. Public broadcasters by comparison had a duty to be more inclusive because 'Equal opportunity is in their code of conduct and employment charter'.

Others believed the media was making a tokenistic grabs for ratings by espousing disability inclusive employment practices as a 'marketing tool' to find a niche audience. However, this business focus could also potentially change the situation as one journalism lecturer hypothesised:

> Lots of media organisations are losing money. [We should ask] how can you do things differently?...the big advantage would be having a different perspective...someone who has a disability [could] potentially reach a different and wider audience and providing something different to your competitors.

CONCLUSION

Previous studies show that educators have a key role to play in whether disabled media studies students ultimately seek a career in the media (Sgroi 2016; Goggin and Newell 2003; John 1991). This chapter has explored common themes that appear in the literature regarding studies of students with disability in media-focused training such as journalism, film production and performing arts. This issue of disabling attitudes reoccurs most often throughout all the studies. These attitudes are most clearly tied to the notion that the media is a fast-paced and competitive industry, where business decisions around keeping costs down and expectations around job performance have a significant impact.

Two opposing arguments are clear in the prior research in this area. Firstly, several studies posit that disabled students are discouraged from entering the media workforce due to a perceived lack of resources and disabling attitudes. A second perspective, however, recognises that reasonable accommodations can be made. Several theorists and educators have therefore taken a subject-centred approach to learning by acknowledging the necessary skills a student must acquire and finding alternative ways to acquire these skills by accommodating physical and mental differences. This is an inclusive strategy reflective of the reality of a diverse student population.

Finally, the chapter reported findings of a study of Australian media studies lecturers and tutors which found educators believed the media industry to be a competitive, cut-throat environment that was unlikely to be inclusive of people with disability. Conversely, however, many saw the

university environment as far more welcoming and able to implement alternative arrangements, extend deadlines and adjust technologies. There was a perception also that the media was changing, diversity was recognised as significant on a number of levels and hiring more disabled workers could result in a cultural shift that made 'business sense'.

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From Newsrooms to Now Media: Employing Disabled Journalists

Abstract This chapter outlines prior research into the employment of disabled journalists, illustrating the continuation of employer fears associated with costs, performance and the reactions of others. Approaches to research encompass both quantitative assessments of actual numbers of disabled employees in newsrooms and qualitative assessments of biographical experiences. Although the majority of the literature on this topic was published during the 1990s, there is little to suggest attitudes have changed considerably in the intervening 20 years. At the same time, print media has shifted towards online and participatory media. While discriminatory fears persist within the industry, disabled journalists also recognise the unique benefits of being a disabled journalist and the opportunities presented by a new digital industry.

Keywords Disabled journalists · Inspiration · Fear · Pity · Disability blogs · Participatory media

This chapter addresses the employment of people with disability – as journalists, editors and in other roles within print media. While disability advocates and academics have focused on the issue of the representation of disability in the media, a theme that runs throughout the background of the research is the argument that increased numbers of people with disability working in the media at all levels would improve problematic representational tropes. This chapter outlines prior research in this area,

with a focus on disabled journalists. Academic investigations of this issue have taken both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Fears regarding the employment of people with disability associated with costs, performance and the reactions of others have created an environment whereby disabled journalists struggle to find employment. However, the research also shows that people with disability are sometimes uniquely positioned to contribute to the media workforce, at times because of their experience with impairment and disability. The chapter therefore also explores the research on self-representations of disabled journalists regarding their employment opportunities through both blog writing and my own study of disabled journalists. The research identified four important themes: the use of adaptive technologies, discouragement from entering the industry, shifting notions of disability empathy and, finally, that the experience of disability brings with it unique perspectives.

One important feature of journalism is reporting the news. The news can be defined as 'a timely account of a recent, interesting and significant event' (Kershner 2012). Although interesting and significant are subjective terms, Kershner goes on to explain that mundane events such as a man mowing his lawn or a child attending school are not 'newsworthy' events. However, a number of disability advocates and journalists have recently pointed out that people with disability living everyday lives and completing the type of mundane events Kershner identifies constantly make the news. Disability advocates call these 'not news' stories 'inspiration porn' following Australian journalist and media personality Stella Young's 2012 critique of this media trope:

> My everyday life in which I do exactly the same things as everyone else should not inspire people, and yet I am constantly congratulated by strangers for simply existing. (Young 2012)

Young explains that the media is a powerful tool in shaping people's perceptions and offers criticism of the way the news media perpetuates the cultural assumption that people with disability inspire others just by living. Young observed journalists appeared to be incapable of framing disability stories outside this context. As editor of the ABC's disability portal Ramp Up which ran from 2010–2014, Young set a different agenda, commissioning articles written by people with disability that did frame disability in a different way.

DISABILITY AND THE NEWSROOM: PRIOR RESEARCH

Quantitative Analysis

In 1985 Mark Popovich conducted a major research project into the employment and potential employment of people with disability in newspapers in the United States. He surveyed 447 daily newspapers, and discovered 64 reporters and 62 editors with disabilities were employed (Popovich cited in Keefer and Smith 1992). He projected that across the United States, there were approximately 650 newsroom workers with disability. He noted that while editors claimed there were few positions within the newsroom that required a particular level of physical ability, the industry remained concerned about productivity and costs (Popovich cited in John 1994). Yet he further hypothesised that the affordances of the information age, particularly 'low cost computing technology' (Mark Popovich et al. 1988) held great employment potential for students with disability seeking a career in newspapers.

He began by noting that the employment of people with disability in the media (1.2 per cent) was far below the employment of people with disability in the general workforce (8.9 per cent). However, at the time, Popovich notes, communications researchers were not interested in interrogating this *employment* trend, focusing instead on media effects such as the impact of disability *representation* on attitudes towards disability.

Popovich also sought to establish how effective people with disability could be as sub editors by conducting a study of university students' (with and without disability) use of video display terminals (VDTs), a new electronic method of copyediting – his sample included 12 non-disabled journalism majors, 12 disabled volunteers with 'little or no computer experience' (Mark Popovich et al. 1988) and 12 non-disabled general studies students. He discovered no significant difference between the three groups, although the journalism majors were slightly more accurate. He concluded that while disabled students performed as well as non-disabled general studies students, dedication and language skills were a better gauge of newsroom potential.

Popovich's research has influenced subsequent studies and shows the importance of studying the experiences of students with disability seeking to pursue a career in the media, a topic also discussed in the previous chapter. Although Popovich's study does not appear to consider the role of assistive

technology nor the potential of disabled journalism majors, his argument that adaptations in computing technology and increasing opportunities for people with disability to work in the newsroom remains important, particularly in the current changing newspaper context. This focus on employment that Popovich noted was absent during 1980s disability communications research emerged as a concern during the 1990s following, in particular, the passing of the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA). Popovich's study influenced two key texts in particular – Keefer and Smith's survey of 1626 newspapers regarding their employment of people with disability and John's 1994 investigation of the adaptive technologies required by people with disability in the media (Keefer and Smith 1992; John 1994).

In 1990/1991 Keefer and Smith conducted a research survey of daily newspapers in the United States to discover the number of people with disability they employ, what types of impairments the staff have, and whether the number of reporters and editors with disabilities had increased since Popovich's study. Finally, the study sought to establish how well those employed did their jobs (Keefer and Smith 1992). They mailed the surveys to 1626 American daily newspapers addressing these issues as well as requesting examples of accomplishments or difficulties of workers with disabilities – 326 newspapers responded, with newspapers with larger circulations being more likely to respond (Keefer and Smith 1992). Keefer and Smith hypothesised that those who employ people with disabilities were more likely to respond and so calculated their results based on the full 1626 daily newspapers in the United States. According to this methodology, 5.2 per cent of newspapers reported that they currently employed at least one individual with a disability, equating to 133 individuals (Keefer and Smith 1992). Of those 133, 45 were reporters, 57 were editors, 12 were photographers and 19 were support staff. However, 6.8 per cent of the newspapers (again, based on 1626 population) reported having hired at least one person with a disability between 1986 and 1990, equating to 198 employees (Keefer and Smith 1992). The majority of people with disability employed at newspapers between 1986 and 1990 had mobility impairments (40 per cent), with 33 per cent having a hearing, speech or vision impairment, and 10 per cent being restricted in the use of their arms – only 10 of the 198 employees reported having a mental illness. When contrasted with Popovich's 1980s study of journalists with disability, the number of employed workers appears to be falling below Popovich's 1986 projection of 650 newsroom workers with disability (Popovich cited in John 1994).

Jeffrey Alan John also draws on Popovich's study to outline the challenges faced by people with disability seeking employment in the media and describes an environment whereby assistive technology and simple workplace accommodations result in an inclusive environment for people with disability working in the newsroom. John recognised computers as the most important adaptive technology for disabled journalists. Despite his investigation taking place back in 1994, John predicted the importance of a number of other devices such as keyboard overlays, keypads, dictation hardware and software, and eye tracking capability which were far more uncommon and therefore more expensive at that time. John frequently raises the issue of cost throughout his article; however, he argues most of the adaptations needed are in fact simple and not very expensive. He explicitly mentions the cost of the Eyegaze computer system which in 1994 cost $25,000. However, the majority of technology recommended in John's article is now readily available, or has in fact been superseded by other technology. Costs are also significantly lower today.

These issues of adaptations versus costs are also considered via the insights of John McGory, the editor of a trade magazine called *Builder Update*. McGory agrees that in a context where desktop publishing equipment is readily available, physical abilities are less important; however, for McGory, acquiring that equipment is a business decision and cost must be considered. However, with the advent of the ADA, this business decision became a legal issue – according to the ADA, people with disabilities are a minority group and it is illegal to discriminate against them (John 1994). Nevertheless, as John attests, even the *anticipation* of costs can deter editors from hiring journalists with disability.

The study also showed co-workers displayed disabling attitudes regarding reasonable accommodations. As John notes, the issues faced by journalists with disability go beyond technology and continue to relate to both employer and co-worker attitudes. For example, John cites reporters with disability who acknowledge that the technologies that allow them to do their jobs are considered 'slow and tedious' by their non-disabled colleagues. Similarly, attitudes become a factor when job descriptions are written in such a way to unnecessarily exclude people with disability. For example, John recounts the experience of a journalist who applied for a position that stipulated the applicant needed to use a car which the reporter was not able to do due to his disability. However, when he applied anyway and eventually secured the position, the reporter, now an editor, discovered a driver's licence was actually not a necessary part of the job (John 1994).

Qualitative Analysis: Biographical Experiences

Charles A. Riley examines the rise and fall of the disability specific publication *We* in Chapter 7 of his book *Disability and the Media*. *We* was a bi-monthly lifestyle magazine created in 1996 by people with disabilities to ensure a more adequate representation of disability (Riley 2005). In his study, Riley believes *We* offers a framework for the '[right] formula . . . for getting disability on the page' (Riley 2005). All of their staff and freelance writers, some of whom had never written for a magazine before, were people with disabilities. *We* adopted the 'nothing about us without us' policy from day one, specifically hiring people with disabilities who later became the face of disability for a time, being interviewed on mainstream media (Riley 2005).

The magazine was non-profit, although Riley admits that they sought to model *We* on for-profit magazines. In terms of readership, the *We* demographic was divided evenly between readers with disabilities, and families and friends who wanted to have a better understanding of disability – this second group was targeted at times. The magazine approached all their readers as consumers rather than patients and, instead of seeking medical advertising, they wanted 'the Cadillac and Jaguar ads that ran in *Fortune* or *The New Yorker*'. *We* attempted to position itself as a lifestyle magazine for people with disabilities who appreciated the finer things in life. They wanted to attract a readership that was:

> . . . less angry, less adversarial, more inclined to assimilate and, frankly, to spend freely . . . advertisers would be charmed by the idea of prosperous people with disabilities ready to roll into their showrooms with credit cards on the ready.

While this approach achieved some success, *We* was criticised for over-estimating 'the spending power of the typical American with a disability' (Riley 2005). This approach received criticism from the 'hard-core journalists and activists with disabilities who had been on the scene for decades' who also did not believe the magazine reflected the reality of most people with disabilities (Riley 2005). Although Riley concedes that this focus may have contributed to the ultimate failure of *We*, he argues the magazine was ahead of its time in viewing people with disability as a potential market. He attributes the collapse of the magazine to the dot-com bubble and a failed attempt to move online.

More recent research focuses on what people with disability report about their experiences, either via interview analysis (Jones 2014) or analysis of self-published materials online (Ellis and Goggin 2015a, b; Haller 2010). To begin with Jones' study of five journalists 'whose lives and work intersect with disability' in Toronto, the focus continues on the news-producing environment – an issue covered extensively in the first stage of disability media employment analysis during the 1980s. Jones however, broadens the scope to consider how people with disabilities are represented, the environmental and attitudinal constructions of news, what language is used and how journalists frame disability, as well as discussing the issues surrounding gate-keeping, control and agenda-setting (Jones 2014). The research draws on the insights obtained in much of the prior work in this area, particularly during the 1990s, demonstrating their continued relevance.

The journalists admitted they sometimes felt sidelined by their disabilities, for example, Helen Henderson – the first female business journalist at the *Toronto Star* and the reporter on the longest running national disability beat in Canada – said that she would not be given any fire-chasing stories as she would take longer to get there than someone else (Jones 2014). However, Barbara Turnbull points out that while she would not be sent to a murder scene or a fire, she has not actually missed that kind of reporting (Jones 2014). Just as I cited Hockenberry's views on reporting in dangerous situations in the introduction to this book, Ing Wong-Ward, a producer for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, agrees that different people have different skills, limitations and job smarts irrespective of disability (Jones 2014).

Jones, who offers an insider perspective of the industry, observed that for her interview subjects, disability was not always considered central to a story but it did impact on their journalistic experience (Jones 2014). Jones' participants acknowledged journalists can represent disability in problematic ways (Jones 2014). The journalists indicated that they felt like 'tokenistic representatives of disability' and were often asked by 'advocacy organizations to take-up disability-related stories' (Jones 2014). Occasionally, they thought they had become the 'go-to' adviser on disability:

> [Disability is] not an area that I have traditionally been interested in covering . . . sometimes I feel like I'm betraying the disabled population because I choose not to write many stories that have to do with disability. But I always felt living it was enough. (Turnbull in Jones 2014)

A freelance journalist and editor with a spinal cord injury in Jones' study questioned the connection between disability and being a good professional. He explained that his job was to 'inform people, engage them, add to their knowledge, and always, always, always, above everything, give a new perspective' but he was not an 'advocate journalist' (Trumshaw in Jones 2014). However, the participants, like Stella Young cited at the beginning of the chapter, criticised the tendency for journalists and editors to fall back on the 'supercrip' stereotype (Jones 2014):

> People don't want to see the truth, it's depressing and scary. That's why so many people shy away from disability...[or] people become overly impressed. I think people's expectations are so low about people with disabilities that if somebody rises above the lowest of the low they're heralded as this incredible hero, rather than realizing that there are a whole lot of people who live with disabilities and live relatively normal lives – aren't heroes, aren't anything else. (Jones 2014)

Finally, the participants observed the way disability was not seen as newsworthy on a daily basis but that disability-related stories are necessary to agenda-setting (Jones 2014). Significantly, the journalists Jones interviewed did not necessarily believe a journalist needed to be disabled in order to accurately report on disability issues (Jones 2014).

While Jones' paper observes that the impacts of online journalism, citizen media and new technologies are vastly underexplored in the academic literature (Jones 2014), the paper does not advance this area of study, focusing instead on the role of journalists in more traditional publications, in print-based media and disability beats. The paper does, however, recognise the significance of the relationship between journalists, news outlets and disability advocates. Jones calls for better collaboration between journalists and disability advocacy groups (Jones 2014) and finishes the paper with a list of suggestions from the journalists she interviewed regarding how to pitch a story to the mainstream media. However, disability advocates are increasingly finding ways to bypass the mainstream media and publish their own stories outside of the editorial control Jones examines. Twitter in particular has provided an effective avenue for disability news, while blogs, despite their waning importance in an increasingly crowded social media space, remain significant to the disability news sphere due to their longer form (Hollier 2012; Haller 2010; Ellis and Goggin 2015a).

The Industry's Response: Journalistic Voice and Self-Representations

As mentioned previously, the available statistics regarding the number of people with disability working as journalists is inaccurate and out of date. Aside from Popovich's study which is now some 30 years old, the only available statistics are from the early 1990s, particularly in the United States where a brief interest in reporting on disabled journalists emerged in the years either side of the introduction of the ADA. However, the 1990s was a significant decade for both disability inclusion and for massive changes within the media and journalism in particular. As the industry moved through a period of global reorganisation and responded to the democratising potential of user-generated content for more diverse people's perspectives to enter the public sphere, changing views about freelancers and short-term contracts were evident. For example, mid-2000s industry-based research blames the low number of journalists with disability on freelancers, short-term contracts and lack of editorial leadership in this space (Blake and Stevens 2004; Fundación ONCE 2007). Conversely, interviews with disabled journalists conducted for this book overwhelmingly suggest freelancing offers more opportunity for employment because the journalist can more easily tailor their work environment and use adaptive technologies.

However, following this shift in the media industry towards freelancers and digital platforms, the focus on obtaining robust quantitative data waned and the only statistics available report on the media industry broadly. Although a number of industry studies and reports provide valuable information about the number of actors with disability appearing on television, and these will be discussed in Chapter 5, it is difficult to obtain accurate and up to date statistics regarding disabled journalists. Perhaps this is because journalists are not identifying as disabled, as a number of academics and ex journalists hypothesised in Chapter 2. Or perhaps, whereas television is experiencing a period of growth and expansion, journalism is experiencing major disruptions as online news sources become more important to the news seeking public.

In the absence of recent figures, however, disabled journalists are reporting their experiences online, giving us important qualitative insights. These experiences reveal the continuation of employer fear around costs, performance and the reactions of others. Yet they also highlight the competitive edge that disability offers these journalists.

Qualitative Insights

Before discussing these more recent qualitative insights, interviews with disabled journalists conducted during the 1990s provide an important historical perspective. Three key themes emerge in this stage of academic research. Firstly, reporters with disability report a concern that employers or potential employers view them as inferior or as lesser quality journalists than their non-disabled counterparts. A related concern is they have been hired for tokenistic reasons. Finally, reporters indicate feeling constricted regarding the kinds of issue they can cover, for example being considered the 'disability expert'.

An article published in the *American Journalism Review* in 1991 by a journalist with vision impairment argues that while disabled journalists know 'how to circumvent their obstacles' the editors who hired them did not (Cooke and Reisner 1991). The article goes on to chronicle a number of issues surrounding the employment of people with disability as journalists, including whether or not to disclose a disability or the impacts of a degenerative impairment, the costs associated with workplace modification, the equalising potential of computing technology, perceived tokenism, discomfort around disability and of contravening the requirements of the ADA precluding open and honest conversations about disability and, finally, the fierce competition already within journalism. Writing in 1991, disability was described as 'the last newsroom minority':

> The media business has spent decades recruiting women and ethnic and religious minorities. But it is the rare organization that seeks out and hires qualified candidates with disabilities. (Cooke and Reisner 1991)

Although published in the early 1990s, there is little evidence these disabling attitudes and inaccessible workplaces no longer exist. Disability is still not recognised as a minority issue and disabled journalists often either remain underemployed or do not acknowledge their impairments in order to remain competitive. This is evidenced by an article published in 2016 in *The Guardian* which finds similar issues to those reported on in 1991 around people with disability seeking careers in journalism.

This issue of disclosure appears in both the 1991 and 2016 studies. An anonymous reporter with deteriorating vision explained to Cooke in 1991 that he would not acknowledge the effects of his vision impairment

or ask for workplace accommodations because he feared being 'perceived as being less than completely able' would result in fewer assignments. Cooke recounted the way an established reporter laboured in isolation with a magnifying glass so that his employers would not become aware of his deteriorating vision. While it is difficult to imagine this happening today in the way Cooke described when screen readers and other accessible computing technology is more readily and affordably available, the fears around job performance and the perception that journalism is a fast-paced, cut-throat industry where journalists are expected to be completely able bodied remain. For example, in 2016, a journalism graduate feared that if she disclosed her disability she would not be asked in for an interview:

> I always worry that I will never be perceived as someone who is as good as everyone else. I will always lack something, such as the same standards of professionalism and acceptance, within the workplace. (Mceachran 2012)

These fears are not misplaced. Research shows that when potential employees disclose disability on their CVs they are less likely to be granted an interview (Ameri 2014). The fear that employers may see them as too great a risk, both professionally and financially, is a common theme in interviews with journalists with disability:

> Who wants to employ someone who will need expensive equipment provided, and who cannot 100 % commit themselves to certain tasks like every 'normal' employee? My hearing impairment may by mild, but technically I am still disadvantaged. (Mceachran 2012)

Just as Goggin and Newell discovered in their assessment of the Australian media industry as discussed in Chapter 2, a number of journalists with disability have both blogged about and discussed in interviews the perception that they have to work harder in order to overcome accusations of tokenism and the prejudices evident in their colleagues and managers. Michelle Hackman, a journalist with vision impairment, writes that:

> Those who make it in the field are the standout go-getters who seek out work arounds to lessen the burden of the disabilities on employers. They are the few willing to put extra effort into their stories in the hope that audiences will view their reporting as equal to that of non-disabled journalists.

And they are the ones willing to tolerate relentless, if latent, prejudice from sources and editors alike who often have trouble squaring disability with competence. (Hackman 2016)

She also cites the experience of a number of disabled journalists who believe their experiences with disability bring unique perspectives and abilities to journalism such as making interviewees feel comfortable, and gaining the edge over non-disabled journalists. One journalist I spoke with described the unexpected benefits of her disability to the role:

I like to think that having a disability makes me a more empathetic person. I'm able to relate to other people who have differences, whatever they may be. I'm also passionate about educating others, and writing about disabilities is one way in which I do so. Additionally, because I tend to interview sources via email or chat, I ensure accuracy in my reporting.

Another suggested people with disability have unique perspectives and close knit communities to draw upon:

...we're presented with lots of opportunities to discuss and collaborate and push forward viewpoints that other people might not have considered...having lived experience – as a person with disability, and understanding things like the effect that discrimination can have on you, and understanding the damage that terrible narratives and films can actually have upon disabled people.

Self-Representation and Blogging

As noted previously, while Riley blames the disruptive influence of the internet for the ultimate demise of *We*, online platforms and publications have also created opportunities for disabled journalists. A number of online publications exist that are run by and for people with disability. These have in part developed through online communities such as Gimp Girl which was established to offer a sense of belonging for people with disability (Cole et al. 2011). For example, following a number of incentives to include more disabled workers in the BBC workforce, the BBC launched a disability-focused online platform – Ouch! In the next chapter I discuss a similar site, Ramp Up, which was administered through the

Australian public broadcaster the ABC between 2010 and 2014 when it lost government funding.

As outlined previously, the media is changing, and blogs and social media have had a significant impact on traditional forms of journalism. Recognising the potential of blogs and social media to change the range and amount of disability information available to the public, Beth Haller argues people with disability and their allies can 'bypass traditional news sources' using internet connections to tell their stories how they want to (Haller 2010). Using statistics from 2009, she noted that more people were turning to internet sources to access information and that social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter in particular were amassing enormous numbers of users. In the reasonably short time since Haller's book was published there has been a further shift in the ways people access information, and news in particular. A total of 63 per cent of both Facebook and Twitter users say they obtain most of their news information from these sites, with Twitter being favoured for 'breaking news' (Barthel et al. 2015).

However, Haller's argument that blogs have a 'significant role in [disability] activism' (Haller 2010) remain important to the disability media ecology today – even as their relevance more broadly is seen to be lessening, blogs allow disability advocates to launch coordinated global efforts to critique the media. This continuing relevance of blogs to the disability community has been recognised by a number of other disability media theorists and practitioners (Ellis and Goggin 2015a; Hollier 2012; Goggin and Noonan 2006; Kuusisto 2007). Similarly, academics regularly draw on the insights of disability bloggers to both explain disability concepts and note the reactions of this group to particularly significant cultural events (see Brown 2015; Haller 2010; Ellis 2015a, b). Increasingly, disability bloggers' articles are republished in the mainstream media when issues of importance to the disability community are more widely picked up – one example is the Ashley X controversy, or when reality TV star Kylie Jenner posed for a photoshoot in a wheelchair, or the recent outcry over the Hollywood adaptation of *Me Before You*.

A Study of Disabled Journalists

My own research with disabled journalists yields similar trends as those identified in the 1991 and 2016 articles discussed previously. I interviewed a number of journalists with disability working in a variety of

capacities and media formats including print, radio, television, maga-
zines and online publications. Some have had disabilities their whole
lives, others acquired impairments after they commenced a career in
media and do not necessarily identify as disabled. The types of impair-
ments represented in this sample include vision, hearing, dyslexia,
cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, amputees and rheumatoid arthritis.
I draw on their insights throughout the following chapters; however,
they raise a number of points relevant to the discussion here regarding
adaptive technology, discouragement from attempting to enter this
industry, empathy, and, finally, the unique perspectives they bring to
journalism and storytelling.

Adaptive Technology

A theme that ran throughout the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s
research was the promise of computing technology to offer a more
equitable working environment. Indeed, the affordances of the infor-
mation age and the increasing reliance on computing technology have
created a potentially more accessible environment for people with dis-
ability to work in information-based professions. Screen readers, mag-
nification software and dictation programmes have both specific
benefits for people with disability, and broad general convenience-
based benefits for people working in a number of professions.
Personalised computing, particularly around tablets, is ubiquitous so
it is no longer so unusual for a person to individualise their computer to
suit their physical needs. A number of the disabled journalists I spoke to
recognised the importance of tailoring their work environments, parti-
cularly via assistive technologies.

For example, people with vision impairments were able to use
screen readers and magnification software, some with hearing impair-
ments used instant messenger for interviews rather than the tele-
phone, dyslexia could be managed through another computer
programme – Read and Write Gold. Many mentioned they preferred
to work from home because they could construct their ideal work
environment.

A number of research participants described inaccessible workplaces
and employers who were unwilling to supply the programmes they

needed to do their jobs. Other respondents, however, explained the ways they adapted non-specialised technologies, including adapting their bodies to operate media equipment in a different way in the absence of specialised technology:

> [. . .] I had to learn [how to mix a radio desk live with one arm] . . . But through the set up I had to really think [about] optimising these hands to make it work. In terms of radio editing both in analogue and digital I was gun.

Discouragement from Entering the Industry

My research participants reported being both discouraged and encouraged to pursue a career in media:

> . . . [people said] 'it's a waste of time', 'no one will want to hire you', 'it will be precarious underpaid work' (which a lot of the time it is).

Many reported being discouraged by people such as social workers, high school teachers, family members and media producers. Media management, likewise was described as not understanding the unique challenges and perspectives that came with having a disability and working in the media, as a multimedia artist who had a career spanning print, radio, television and online explained,

> I had some really great bosses but my overwhelming impression is that there's a lip service paid to disability without perhaps being interested to pursue with that might mean in terms of communications and interactions and power.

They recognised that while the media is already a competitive industry, people with disability have to work harder to get a look in:

> . . . if you are disabled you do have to work harder to be better than other people at what you do and compensate for your weaknesses.
> [My managers] were very perplexed [about my ability to work]. I think I was always meant to be more grateful.

One respondent believed that whereas her co-workers could be more inclusive because they saw her working day to day, management might have struggled:

> I felt my managers above me, in most places I've worked, don't understand that sort of struggles and energy it takes from me as their worker in whatever capacity. I would sum this up across all my different media jobs.

Empathy

As discussed throughout this chapter, this issue of representation, particularly around the discourse of the 'super cripple' – or as Clogston first described, the 'superhuman' – remains a key concern. As Jones' respondents suggested, this may be attributed to a lack of understanding and empathy. Yet the influence of Young's inspiration porn critiques loomed large in my interviews with journalists from a number of countries. This phenomenon was often referred to as the reason why more disabled journalists are required in the industry.

Social media stories that could be quickly shared among networks of people were seen as a significant issue in the perpetuation of inspiration porn, with one participant commenting several times about a news story of a McDonald's worker feeding a disabled customer:

> . . . it's more necessary than ever [that disabled people work in the media] because with social media being really easily accessible, [there has been an] exponential increase in pity-porn stories [like the one] about the disabled person going to McDonalds and the [goodly] worker feeds them their burger.

These stories were problematic because they were not about people with disability living their lives. In this example, the story becomes about the kind nature of the McDonald's employee rather than the ways people with disability are not supported to live their lives with independence. Media coverage such as this predominantly functions to 'justify' the disabled person as 'so inspiring the disability doesn't matter, or overcoming their adversity'. For my research participants this comes back to the 'meta narratives of disability as tragedy or inspiration or evil, weak'. All agreed these narratives needed to be challenged and a key way to do that is to have 'people with disabilities producing work which positions disability as a sociopolitical issue' because 'it's very hard for non-disabled journalists to view disability as benign human variation not really noteworthy of comment'. Each interview subject agreed either explicitly or implicitly that more people with disability working in the media could address this issue

and move the narrative beyond inspiration porn. However, there was recognition also that 'many journalists' believe that 'anyone should be able to write on anything'. Nevertheless, empathy was recognised as something that changed with experience, particularly personal experience of disability, impairment and inaccessible public space.

Unique Perspectives

An Australian multimedia artist with disability with a journalism career spanning print, radio, television and multimedia put it to me that people with disability are *more* suited to media careers because they are very good storytellers:

> One of the great levellers about media, unless you're really unlucky, it is about ways to telling stories, ways of encapsulating meaning and I think sometimes we have the edge on that stuff. A lot of us – if we're capable, we have to be really articulate, effective story tellers from when we're quite young, and I think that it does hone your skills for this area.

It is true that people with disability are storytellers, they must explain their experiences and bodies to multiple people throughout their lives – doctors, family members, friends and often even total strangers. In her article about disabled journalists Hackman identifies an 'unexpected bright side' to working as a disabled journalist that has gone somewhat unremarked in the broader discussion. She recounts the ways disabled journalists believe their disabilities can put people at ease, or at least let their guards down (Hackman 2016). The journalists she interviewed were acutely aware of the kinds of prejudices I introduced in Chapter 1 where people fear disability but feel a social pressure to be kindly towards this group.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined prior research into the employment of people with disability in the media, from both an academic and industry perspective. The academic focus on the employment of people with disability in the media began with Popovich's quantitative analysis of the number of disabled journalists employed across newsrooms in the United States and a recognition that assistive technology could be of particular benefit. During this stage

of research, the argument that skills should be more important than physical abilities appears often, the equalising potential of computing technology is recognised, but fears associated with the performance, costs (particularly regarding technology) and the reactions of others still dominate.

As the newspaper industry changed in the late 1990s/early 2000s and as cultural and media disability studies gained momentum, the quantitative issue of employment lost traction and theorists focused instead on media representations. The media underwent radical transformations as a result of digital media and the internet in particular. With many media outlets, including small-scale disability operations, seduced by the promises of the dot-com revolution, invariably, some were destined to fail. This analysis is largely concerned with the notion of quality – that is whether a disability specific publication run by people with disability can compete in the mainstream media industry. The idea also that disability is a social, not medical, issue appears, with several publications competing for dominance. Ultimately, however, not all of these magazines could withstand the digital revolution.

Then, as the impacts of digital media, blogging and the full immersion of the information age became established, the focus returns to the experiences of journalists with disability. My own research with disabled journalists identified a number of related concerns including technology, discouragement, empathy and finally – and perhaps most importantly – the unique perspectives people with disability bring to the profession. Significantly, these perspectives relate to both disability insight beyond the inspirational paradigm and the news in general. In the following chapter I focus on broadcasting to consider the industry's response to the issue of media employment. The media and government responded to the issue of the low employment levels of people with disability in the media via a variety of incentives such as community media activism.

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The Industry's Response: From Broadcast to Alternative and Community Media

Abstract This chapter addresses the industry's response to the low employment of people with disability in the media via a consideration of industry reports, community training programmes and initiatives established by people with disabilities themselves. The chapter explores the importance of paid work and agenda setting visionaries as well as accessible community programmes. Interviews with disabled media workers continue throughout this chapter alongside case studies of two prominent disabled Australian media workers – Nas Campanella on radio and Adam Hills on television.

Keywords Disability media employment · Industry response · Disability community initiatives · Disability television · Adam Hills · Assistive technology · Paralympics

This chapter focuses on the industry's response to the low employment of people with disability in the media and the ways people with disability have taken up opportunities to gain skills and establish careers in that particular industry. The industry itself has initiated a number of measures, including quotas, community training programmes and reporting guidelines; however, these incentives are largely seen to be ineffective. As recently as May 2016, BBC head of news James Harding acknowledged

diversity targets were not being met and the BBC needed to do more to facilitate the employment of people with disability:

> We have made a noticeable difference to what the BBC looks and sounds like on air. I'd say it's not enough, but we have done a lot. I won't rattle off a list of names, but take a look or a listen to the news and you'll see. We have got to provide more jobs and more senior ones for disabled journalists. (James Harding cited on Martinson 2016)

The BBC had earlier announced a target of an 8 per cent disabled workforce (Martinson 2016) – Harding's recent statements were the latest in a long line of diversity initiatives. Following research into this issue undertaken in 2003, the BBC expressed an interest in changing the way disability was represented on television by increasing disability employment (BBC 2004). They announced several targets for the inclusion of disabled characters, presenters and storylines, including funding for programme development. There have also been a number of initiatives that feature people with disabilities in behind the scenes roles – one example is the BBC's disability programmes unit which operated during the 1990s and which recruited prominent disabled media workers such as Damon Rose, now editor of the BBC's disability portal Ouch! At the time Rose was described as the 'exception rather than the norm' (Jury 1998).

The chapter begins by outlining industry-led research into the topic of employing people with disability in the media focusing on two reports that came out in the mid-2000s before moving to introduce community media as an important training ground for disabled media workers. The chapter then discusses the Australian disability specific online publication Ramp Up and the unique approach this publication, under the helm of its editor Stella Young, took to disability media representation and employment. Finally, the chapter introduces disability-focused theatre as offering peripheral but important insights into the disability media employment discussion.

INDUSTRY REPORTS

This notion that the employment of people with disability in the media could ultimately lead to an improved social position of people with disabilities has featured in both mainstream media initiatives and those focused at the community level. A 1998 report into training and equal opportunities at a number of UK-based media outlets acknowledged

slow progress but noted the importance of community-based incentives (Wood 2012). Similarly, the industry focused on establishing both reporting guidelines and guidelines around how to interact with disabled colleagues (Blake and Stevens 2004; OfCom 1998). These guidelines are now out of date in a rapidly changing media environment; however, their legacy can be seen in the continuation of similar policies and incentives to include disabled people on and off screen released in the last year including Harding's BBC targets.

Two significant reports addressing the broader employment of people with disability in the media were released in the mid-2000s. The BBC's *Adjusting the Picture* and The European Commission's *Guide for Media and Disabilities* both suggest people with disabilities are under-represented in the media workforce and that producers and senior management must display leadership in shifting attitudes to remedy this (Blake and Stevens 2004; Fundación ONCE 2007). *Adjusting the Picture* in particular recognises the influence of employer fear around job performance, costs and the reactions of others, including other employees who describe feeling 'put upon'. The reactions of co-workers is a major focus in this report, with reported fears around communication, language, the need to schedule extra time, being asked to do more to cover for the disabled colleague as well as a general discomfort about disability. The report responds to these fears by suggesting open lines of communications between employers and employees, both those with and without disability. Simple workplace accommodations including rearranging office space, improved availability of assistive technology and flexible working hours are also recommended. A third report published during the same era by the Canadian Broadcasters Corporation similarly recognises the effect of employer attitudes and issues surrounding a number of factors, including accommodations, education, training and communication (Cavanagh et al. 2005).

Although over a decade old, there is little to suggest the insights regarding attitudes and accommodations put forward by these reports are out of date; however, the industry has changed considerably since their publication and my own research with people with disability working as journalists and freelance writers and media producers paints a different picture. For example, while these reports attribute the existence of inequitable workforce practices and disabling employment decisions on the media's increasing reliance on freelancers and short-term contracts, my own research found people with disabilities working as freelancers actually had better access to

workplace accommodations. One journalist I spoke to who had participated in the BBC's training scheme for disabled people made the shift to freelance to 'be in control of my working environment'. Others suggested working from home provided a flexible and 'ideal environment' particularly during 'periods of un-wellness' that crop up from time to time in a disabled person's life.

However, while the opportunity to work flexibly from home has resulted in positive outcomes for these freelancers regarding accommodations in their own environments, they do little to address accessibility issues in public spaces and mainstream work environments. Further, when people with disability are not visible, then accessibility issues may be exacerbated because the problem is not evident and there is little motivation to change things. However, it can also be argued that motivation may not be present even when disabled people do work in mainstream environments with all its inaccessible locations. A wheelchair user I interviewed described working for 12 years in a building without an accessible toilet; others described not being able to access accessible technologies.

COMMUNITY MEDIA

In their introduction to the BBC collection *Framed: Interrogating Disability in the Media*, Ann Pointon and Chris Davis argue that a consideration of trends in 'employment and training and the development of a disability arts movement' is crucial to changing the way disability figures in the media (Pointon and Davies 1997). This collection appeared at a crucial moment in both the disability social justice movement and broader disruptions to the media industry related to participatory, community and alternative media. Whereas video production skills were reframed from being a form of art therapy, or recreational pursuit to a potential vocational skill for those who excelled, the reality was these pursuits rarely led to paid employment (Roberts 1997). With the availability of cheap digital video during the 1990s, a number of community-based projects were established to teach people with disability media skills with a view to enhancing quality of life both through recreation activities and by imparting the skills necessary to embark on a media-related career.

People from socially disadvantaged groups are often ushered into vocational media diplomas under the premise that participants will be able to move from producing their own media as fans or amateurs to becoming professionals. David Buckingham, who does not focus on disability, argues

the ability of people from 'disadvantaged backgrounds' to be able to translate their existing skills into actual media qualifications is problematised by the many obstacles they face, including 'unequal access to media technologies' (Buckingham 2013). People with disability often face unequal access to media technologies as a result of both expense and inaccessibility. For example, screen readers and adaptive software can often cost in excess of $1000 and in order to acquire these vital pieces of technologies, disabled people may need to obtain a government grant. Even with the increasing availability of assistive technology as mainstream features of tablet and smartphones for example, disabled people on low incomes may need government funding. Conversely, often these programmes explicitly exclude the acquisition of tablets because they are considered recreational rather than vocational.

It is important to note, however, that some creative practice initiatives may not have employment in a paid capability as the ultimate goal. People with mental health conditions participating in participatory arts programmes for example, although leading to improved social outcomes, did not lead to entry into paid employment (Hacking et al. 2008). As Hall and Wilton (2011) suggest, governments have focused on access to employment as a means for 'income and social inclusion', yet participation in creative practices should be seen as viable alternatives 'for disabled people to find meaningful activities within a society where paid employment is so highly valued yet so difficult for many to access and sustain' (Hall and Wilton 2011). Although an important perspective, for many paid employment *is* the ultimate goal. Within the media industry it is therefore vital to have people with disability in production roles across all levels of the industry – as 'as owners, managers, professionals, and workers' (Ellis and Goggin 2015a) – in order to change representations which have for many years been problematic and one-dimensional. As a disabled performer and disability advocate Kate Hood – who leads the diversity committee of the Australian actors union Equity and has had a career in Australian media dating back to the late 1970s – explains:

> In my ideal world, there would be a level playing field within our profession. We would see people with disabilities studying at drama schools, writing for television, directing for stage and film. It would be common place for the Australian public to see actors who were genuinely disabled on our stages and screens. (Hood 2015)

Hood is advocating for a more disability friendly Australian media industry and points towards the impact community-led arts and culture programmes such as Back to Back theatre and the Other Film Festival have had in this space (Hood n.d). Her observations show the concept of community or alternative media has created important opportunities for people with disability seeking a career in the media.

Indeed, it can be argued that community media has offered an excellent training ground for people seeking careers in the media generally. Several of the people I interviewed got their start volunteering on community radio or television for example. Community media also has a significant role within the broader media framework in keeping communities informed and fostering a sense of belonging. Community radio is noted for keeping people up to date about what to do in the event of crisis situations and for offering perspectives that challenge mainstream versions of events. For people with vision impairments, community radio via radio for the print handicapped (RPH) offers an important media service in Australia, engaging 1600 volunteers to produce 1500 hours of radio per week (Michael Meadows et al. 2007). One research participant – who describes herself as a 'gun' operating any radio desk – got her start reading the newspaper on RPH in Sydney. This is clearly an important service for people with vision impairments and some intellectual disabilities who are unable to read a print newspaper but would like to stay up to date on the news – it also offers an important media training programme for volunteers.

One example of this is Triple J newsreader Nas Campanella. Campanella began her career in community radio and received a degree in journalism from the University of Technology Sydney. She later secured a cadetship at the ABC in 2011. She describes radio as how she and other blind people 'discover the world' (Mosen 2015). Campanella had been reading the news using the screen reader JAWs for some time before it was revealed she was in fact blind and used assistive technology. Following the reveal, she received international media attention (Shepherd 2014); however, coverage went beyond the typical inspirational puff piece. Like many of the respondents in the industry reports discussed earlier, and indeed reflecting other such examples in similar industries and discussed throughout this book, Campanella describes encountering negativity – such as the response of potential employers – when she attended interviews:

> . . . not a lot of people have met people with disabilities, and not a lot of people are open-minded about what they're capable of . . . So I think they

were quite taken aback when someone with no sight walked into their office and said, 'I want a job, this is what I can do.' (Albert 2014)

She goes on to hypothesise that the reaction can be attributed in part to a lack of information about what people with disabilities can do in the workforce. The media coverage of Campanella is unique in this regard because it concentrates on *how* Campanella does her job, rather than her identity as an inspirational role model, the media frame typically applied to people with disability who find success. For example, Jane Albert describes the way Campanella has adapted her environment:

> Her studio is equipped with strategically placed Velcro patches – she operates her own panel – so she can recognise which buttons to push to air news grabs and mute or activate her mic. While she's reading on air [an] electronic voice reads her copy down her headphones which she repeats a nanosecond later. In another ear the talking clock lets her know how much time she has left. The sound of her own voice is audible over the top of it all. (Albert 2014)

While Campanella goes about her life and career in a mainstream media position, albeit one funded by the public broadcaster, disability specific publications are also providing opportunities for people with disabilities seeking media work. Like community radio, community television has also provided opportunities for people with disability to both shape a media agenda and engage in media training.

Community television is typically understood as offering a community service, whether that is information or participation in the media for disenfranchised groups. Some training initiatives broadcast shows that do not have wide appeal purely for the purpose of giving voice to community groups such as people with disability who might otherwise go unheard. *No Limits*, a magazine style programme on community television in Victoria Australia, gave a number of people with disability such as Stella Young – who went on to edit Ramp Up and introduce the concept of 'inspiration porn' to the popular lexicon – early training in the Australian disability media space. An irreverent disability humour was invoked throughout the show's regular explorations of non-normative bodies. *No Limits* was created by and for people with disability and was careful to present a number of different perspectives. However, while community television and *No Limits* offered some training at the community level for people with disabilities interested in media industries, it was

not until the Australian government initiated Ramp Up that a dedicated disability space employing people with disability as media workers really took off.

DISABILITY SPECIFIC PUBLICATIONS: RAMP UP

Ramp Up was part of a coordinated national disability strategy implemented by the Australian government in 2010. The strategy pledged funding to facilitate the inclusion of people with disability, carers and disability allies in community life, and media was a core feature of the national disability strategy. Cinemas were given funding to implement accessible technology to improve cinema accessibility for people who are Deaf or hearing impaired, Blind or vision impaired. Additionally, libraries were given funding to provide print materials in alternative accessible formats and a disability-focused media portal Ramp Up was established in conjunction with the public broadcaster, the ABC:

> Ramp Up was dedicated to discussion, news, debate, humour and general information for everyone in Australia's disability communities. The website featured columns from people with a wide range of disabilities and stories on the disability community by people who know the community best. (Department of Social Services 2015)

Stella Young was appointed editor in chief and encouraged Australians with disability to help her shape a new disability media agenda (Young 2010). The site flourished for a number of years and gave Australians with disability a space to share 'stories . . . Truths [and] resources . . . to ramp up the conversation about disability in Australia' (Young 2010). Young became somewhat of a celebrity media commentator in Australia and appeared on a number of current affairs programmes, including *Q&A*, to give a disability perspective. She went on a tour of the United States and gave a well-received TEDx talk. When Ramp Up closed, Young moved over to the ABC's opinion site The Drum to continue a focus on disability issues in a non-disability-focused space. The Australian disability media space was dealt a blow when Young died unexpectedly in 2014 at the age of 32. Young was a great leader in this space and encouraged the Australian media to listen more to people with disabilities.

Ramp Up did not just assist with raising the profile of disability in the media. With regard to employment, members of the Australian disability

community saw Ramp Up 'as a real wedge into better career options'. Young's vision was paramount to securing a new media landscape and form of income for people with disability writing articles for the publication. This precedent that 'everyone got paid' was significant. Payment was vital to professionalising the work. However, the government cut funding to Ramp Up in another 'devastating blow' to the disability community in 2014 and the site ceased operations on 30 June 2014.

This funding decision impacted the disability community in Australia both in terms of representations and media career strategies. The loss of a space for disability in the media was keenly felt. My research participants described a sense of loss on two fronts. First, the loss of a place for debate, 'a mediated and active political and educative space' – disabled media workers described being 'denied a place to connect with each other and network'. The second loss was felt around 'payment per story' and a removal of 'paid work from people with disabilities, both as contributing writers and editors'. However, my research participants explained the way Ramp Up continues to influence the disability media agenda:

> We're still using Ramp Up because it's actually archived, and so, if ABC actually looked at it, they're still getting quite a few hits on our discussions. But I think Ramp Up was very special because of Stella having a particular editorial style because she was a talented young woman. So there was that. But I think there's – there really isn't anything in that space at the moment mainstream.

The Ramp Up community was unsuccessful in its community-led activities, including crowd funding, to see the site refunded (see Ellis and Goggin 2015b). However, several of its writers went on to write for more mainstream publications which have shown a recent interest in disability issues.

FROM THEATRE TO TELEVISION: QUALITY, CATCH UP AND CONTROLLING CULTURE

So far, this book has concentrated on journalists and what can be described as off-screen media workers. However, actors or those who appear in front of the camera on television in particular are a significant part of the media workforce and certainly the group the general public has most interaction with – they can see disabled actors, they cannot always see disabled newspaper reporters. While I address this topic in depth in the next chapter, for now I turn to a brief discussion of this group in the context of community

theatre before turning to consider the industry's response and *lack* of response to the poor employment opportunities for this group. The impact of changing media representations, particularly on television, could have a potentially important impact within theatre (Band et al. 2011).

As discussed, community-based programmes offer opportunities for people with disability to participate in media-related activities. Community theatre and arts are significant in this space, offering an opportunity for people to become involved in professional theatre for example. However, there continues a perception that disability theatre is not of the same quality as theatre, perhaps due to the legacy of art as therapy – disabled performers are viewed as not quite as good as non-disabled actors (Hargrave 2009). Jenny Sealey, an artistic director for the UK Graeae Theatre Company, explains the way critics view disabled actors as inferior to non-disabled actors:

> After my production of *The Changeling*, I was asked 'Why did you not have all good actors in *The Changeling*?'. . . . The rehearsal process had been so extraordinary with two blind actors, one deaf, two wheelchair users, one mobility impaired and a sign language interpreter/actor. For me the imbalance was about an audience not being able to see the subtle nature of a huge exercise in artistic and practical access. (Jenny Sealey 2002 cited in Conroy 2009)

This perception pervades the media space as well, with disabled actors and presenters being viewed as being of lesser quality than their non-disabled peers. However, as I will discuss later in the chapter, there have been recent moves to change this perception, for example through television coverage of the Paralympics.

In addition, a number of actors have commented on the inaccessibility of the audition process as impacting their ability to secure a role (Sherer 2014; Steven 2015; Raynor and Hayward 2005) – this is also touched on further in Chapter 5. To return to disability advocate Kate Hood, the inclusion of more disabled actors is vital:

> If my ideal world existed, it would not be galling to witness an able bodied actor receiving adulation for playing a disabled person, because I would be a working actor myself – quite possibly playing a major role. (Hood 2015)

Woodburn and Kopić – who discovered only 5 per cent of disabled characters are portrayed by disabled actors – agree:

It is absolutely unacceptable to have 95% of characters with disabilities played by actors without disabilities. It is a matter of social justice to have a large segment of our population authentically represented in the mass entertainment that is television and scripted, dramatized stories. It is necessary to create an environment where actors with disabilities have access to play characters with disabilities. It is also necessary to reduce stigma surrounding 'invisible' disabilities such as addiction and mental illness. Only by having actors who are open about those disabilities will we slowly create a society that doesn't shun or shame a vast segment of its population. We have to tell stories about people with a variety of disabilities and we have to be fair in representing them accurately. Only then will we have more realistic stories that reflect our society. (Woodburn and Kopić 2016)

There have been a number of recent moves to improve the visibility of disability on television, particularly as part of Channel 4's attempt to rebrand the Paralympics as something capable of attracting an audience. *The Last Leg* was part of Channel 4's attempt to drastically change the image of the Paralympic games from a patronising 'ahh bless' audience response to embrace a 'cool factor' never before associated with disability in the media (Scope 2012; Ellis 2015). They promised at least 50 per cent of on-screen presenters would be disabled themselves and invested £500,000 to both find and train new talent (Midgley 2010). Their first recruit was former Paralympian Ade Adepitan who commented 'it's important to have paralympians actually commentating and imparting their knowledge on the Paralympic Games ... I don't think there's any reason why disabled athletes can't present their own shows.' (Ade Adepitan quoted in Midgley 2010).

Australian comedian Adam Hills is now well known to international audiences as a result of his hosting the popular comedy television talk show *The Last Leg*. However, *The Last Leg* first began broadcasting on Channel 4 in the United Kingdom purely as a complement to their coverage of the 2012 Paralympic Games. The show featured highlights from the Paralympics, comedy and guests to give another perspective on the day's coverage. Adam Hills describes the show, an unexpected hit which is now in its ninth season, as 'three guys with four legs talking about the week' (Mcardle 2016). However, Hills, who was born without part of his right foot, has not always joked about his impairment:

For many years, I didn't talk about my foot on-stage, because I didn't want to be defined by it. Then I realized I could own it, joke about it and move on. (Alexander 2012)

Hills was recruited as part of a team of disabled presenters. Best known as a comedian, he had actually studied to be a sports journalist at Macquarie University, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in Communications in 1991. However, while at University he began performing stand-up at an open mic night at the Sydney Comedy Store in 1989. Early in his career he worked as a stagehand at a TV station and as a comedy writer on a radio breakfast show. Comedy then became his main focus, yet an experience early in Hills' career put him off ever mentioning his disability, 'I'd done two gigs back to back and I only had 15 minutes' worth of material, and I found myself saying: "Errrm . . . uhhhh . . . I've got an artificial foot"' (Gordon 2013). More experienced comics berated him, telling him: 'You're not old enough to talk about your foot yet. Wait until you build up your comic chops, prove yourself as a comedian first, work out how to be funny, and then when you have got that down pat you can talk about your foot.' (Gordon 2013). His manager also who told him, 'Just don't talk about it for a while because you will be known as the one-legged comedian.' (Alexander 2012). This notion that a person with disability must 'prove' their worth first before identifying as disabled pervades much of the academic and blogger literature on this topic, particularly when it comes to the media. It was therefore another 13 years before Hills mentioned his foot in his routine again, following his nomination for the Perrier Award, the most esteemed comedy prize at the Edinburgh Festival. The nomination coincided with the increased security measures at airports following September 11:

> When I started talking about my foot on stage, there had to be a reason for it. My foot always set off metal detectors at airports. After September 11, they'd go, 'We need to check', but when I said it was an artificial foot they didn't want to offend me and they would go, 'I'm sorry mate, go, go.' Part of me would be going, 'Dude, check, there could be a knife!' I want to know the plane is safe, I don't want know that some guy could pretend to have an artificial foot and get on with a knife. I talked about that on stage, and the point of that was: don't be scared. Don't worry if you ask what happened and I tell you and you say, 'Oh god, I'm so sorry.' There's nothing to be sorry about. (Saner 2012)

Hills continued this focus on people's uncertainty regarding how to react to disability as they encountered it in everyday life when he requested *The Last Leg* viewers tweet questions regarding (potentially tasteless or foolish) questions on disability with the tag #isitok. The hashtag became a feature of the show and a defining moment of Twitter as a forum for disability media. As the show's commissioning editor Syeda Irtizaali explains:

Very quickly, people were asking the etiquette around disability, what you can and can't ask. A couple of questions began 'Is it OK...?', so at our very first editorial meeting I said, 'people want us to do this, it's perfect'. It came to define the [Paralympic] show and really took off, continuing into the main show. It amazes me how brilliant and witty people are when they send their stuff through. (Richardson 2013)

While Hills has achieved great success in the media and is now recognisable as one of the most popular comedy/sport television presenters, media profiles often tend to approach a representation of Hills as what disability critics, theorists, activists and bloggers would describe as the 'supercrip' – a representation whereby the disabled person has overcome any and all obstacles with a good attitude and whereby disability does not matter.

Similarly, while Hills has gained important international success and the profile of disabled actors has been raised, there still remains widespread industry prejudice against this group. For example, since activist Kate Hood became a wheelchair user in 2002 she has not been sent on an audition despite her previous media success (Clements 2015). This is despite a new agreement between the Screen Producers Association of Australia and the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance, the peak union organisation covering the media, entertainment, sports and arts industries, that resulted in a clause that 'encourages the inclusion of performers from diverse ethnic backgrounds and/or with a disability' being introduced in The Actors Equity's 2013–2015 Actors' Television Programs Agreement (Clements 2015; Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance 2014). If this clause were followed faithfully, it would result in actors with disabilities being called into audition for disabled characters. However, this does not seem to be the case, and Hood has made a further call for quotas to be enforced.

Conclusion

It is clear that the media has a problem with disability, a problem with representation, and a problem in hiring practices. However, while the media industry has at various times acknowledged this problem and made a variety of attempts to rectify it, these attempts have not made significant or sustainable change. For example, industry reports and guidelines published during the mid-2000s acknowledge accommodations can be made to facilitate the

inclusion of people with disability in the media workforce, yet they have not made lasting change or been significantly updated to address the changing media landscape. Nevertheless, community initiatives – including radio, television and community led performing arts training – provide valuable training grounds that have shaped excellent media workers such as Stella Young and Damon Rose who have gone on to shape important new media agendas using publicly funded online platforms.

While the chapter explores the ways people with disability have taken advantage of these industry initiatives and carved out careers, the chapter also acknowledges the continuing inaccessibility of the media environment, for example at auditions, and advice around disability disclosure. The next chapter expands this discussion, paying close attention to disabled actors who are increasingly left out of diversity discussions. As introduced in this chapter and continuing in the next, these actors are advocating for a recognition of disability diversity in the media both on and off screen.

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A Collective Phew: Disability Acting

Abstract This chapter continues the discussion of disabled actors introduced at the end of the previous chapter but goes deeper into the views expressed by this group as reported in academic- and industry-based research as well as in media interviews. A number of common themes emerge when we consider the views and experiences of disabled actors – their experiences of implicit and explicit discrimination in hiring and audition practices, their issues with accessibility, their fears regarding disclosure, their wish for accommodations and their move towards activism. All of these stem from a desire to move away from long-held media stereotypes and be cast in so-called 'regular' roles.

Keywords Media stereotypes · Disabled actors · Reasonable accommodations · Disability regular roles · Disability disclosure

As discussed throughout this book, the importance of disabled participation on and off screen is an ongoing concern within disability media studies. Disabled actors who have achieved star status are vocal in the media regarding these goals – this was particularly evident during the 2015 Oscars diversity debate when Hollywood's lack of diversity was discussed and debated under the Twitter hashtag #OscarsSoWhite. The #OscarsSoWhite discussion centred on the lack of racial diversity and absence of African-American nominees in 2016. Notable African-

American Hollywood personalities Jada Pinkett Smith, Will Smith and director Spike Lee boycotted the awards ceremony. Actress and director Lupita Nyong'o – who won an academy award in 2014 for her role in *12 Years a Slave* – also expressed disappointment about the lack of diversity in an Instagram post. She called for an expansion of the types of stories being recognised in 'a diverse reflection of the best of what our art has to offer today' (Nyong'o cited on Willis 2016). Cheryl Boone Isaac, the President of the Academy, was quick to respond to the criticism, issuing a statement also critical of the lack of diversity and calling for generational change:

> In 2016, the mandate is inclusion in all of its facets: gender, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. We recognize the very real concerns of our community, and I so appreciate all of you who have reached out to me in our effort to move forward together. (Boone Isaacs 2016)

Although she claimed to be 'heartbroken and frustrated about the lack of inclusion', the idea of *disability* diversity was seen to be once again conspicuously absent – both from her speech and indeed from the discussion of diversity more broadly in Hollywood. In a recent analysis of the number of disabled actors portraying disabled characters on television, actor Danny Woodburn criticised Boone Isaacs for failing to respond to the calls by disabled actors to include disability in her diversity statement (Woodburn and Kopić 2016). Several actors – whom I discuss in depth in this chapter such as Eileen Grubba and Mat Fraser – have also emphasised the importance of including disability within the Academy Awards diversity debate (Hay 2016; Thomas 2016; Gruber 2016).

This is not to say Hollywood films do not portray disability; in fact, between 1927 when the awards began and 2012, 16 per cent of the winners in both best actor and actress categories won for a portrayal of a character with disability (Rodgers 2012). However, throughout this history, only four people with disability have received academy awards. In 1947 Harold Russell – who had lost both his arms during World War II – won best supporting actor for his portrayal of a soldier with the same impairment in *The Best Years of Our Lives*. In 1984 Linda Hunt won best actress in a supporting role for her portrayal of Billy Kwan (a man) in *The Year of Living Dangerously*. In 1987 Marlee Matlin won best actress for her portrayal of a student with hearing impairment in *Children of a Lesser God*. Finally, artist Dan Keplinger – who wrote and starred in *King Gimp* – won best short subject documentary in 1999. However, he was unable to

accept his award as there was no wheelchair ramp to the stage – the award was instead accepted by two able-bodied directors. The stairs Keplinger was unable to transcend have been described as having an important cultural function:

> It is reassuring for the audience to see an actor like Daniel Day Lewis, after so convincingly portraying disability in *My Left Foot*, get up from his seat in the auditorium and walk to the stage to accept his award. There is a collective 'Phew' as people see it was all an illusion. Society's fear and loathing around disability, it seems, can be magically transcended. (Shinn 2014)

Keplinger's inability to accept the award is a revealing moment in the Academy's history. While the image of disability was available for consumption, the physical environment of the Academy Awards ceremony assumed no one receiving an award up on stage would be disabled themselves. This assumption that people with disability would not be present is an example of the unconscious prejudice Lupita Nyong'o referred to in her Instagram post.

This chapter continues this theme of unconscious prejudice by outlining the experiences of actors with disability seeking employment in the media and in popular culture. I begin with an analysis of current academic and industry research in this area, drawing in particular on the 2005 study of the American Screen Actors Guild (SAG) *The Employment of Performers with Disabilities in the Entertainment Industry* and the 2016 *Ruderman White Paper on the Employment of Actors with Disabilities in Television* introduced in the previous chapter (Raynor and Hayward 2005; Woodburn and Kopić 2016). Analysis of user-generated content and media interviews with disabled actors complements the academic work and points towards areas for future research. From this, we have determined some main reoccurring themes in the literature – issues regarding preconceived prejudice, requests for accessibility, the fear of disclosure and the desire for accommodations (including at initial casting), as well as the importance of activism.

The chapter also offers a critique of stereotypical and traditional views in popular media regarding actors with disabilities and what they are perceived of being able, or unable, to do. This critique briefly includes the notion of crip drag or the hiring of non-disabled actors in disabled roles. The chapter concludes by offering an insight into how diversity in popular media can be increased by raising the profile of inclusion. It uses as

examples both unknown actors attempting to break into the industry and high-profile disabled actors such as Peter Dinklage and Eileen Grubba, including a short case study on the latter's role in the TV show *Sons of Anarchy*. Dinklage and Grubba are considered 'celebrities' yet they have also experienced the same issues identified previously as unknown actors trying to catch a break.

Literature Review: Academic, Industry and Media Texts

As introduced in the previous chapter, the majority of academic research regarding disabled actors and performers comes from arts- or theatre-based research rather than media analysis. However, there are some important intersections between these two disciplines – disabled actors typically receive training in the arts and, if successful, are employed in both theatre and media contexts. While the literature regarding actors with disability is limited, the few studies that do exist raise a number of important and reoccurring concerns. Disabled actors report experiencing stigma and prejudice in their attempt to find work in the media (Raynor and Hayward 2005). These barriers are informed by employer attitudes, particularly around costs, performance and the reactions of others, and it is these attitudes that have the greatest impact on whether or not disabled actors find work.

They Do Not Want to Hire Actors with Disabilities: Prejudice, Accessibility, Disclosure and Accommodation at Casting

Media representation and the employment of people with disability in broader society have been linked several times by both academics and politicians (Barnes 1992; Eagle 2002; OfCom 2005). Increasing on-screen representation of disability is cited as one way to increase the employment of people with disabilities in broader society; however, actors with disabilities claim a prejudice against them in the industry. The 2005 study of the SAG performers discovered disabled actors reported working an average 4.1 days a year, with males working an average of 5 and females 2 days (Raynor and Hayward 2005). The 2016 Ruderman study, however, found that the majority of their respondents reported working less than 1 day a year (Woodburn and Kopić 2016).

Both studies also report that disabled actors have negative experiences with regard to stigma and the preconceived notions of casting agents and producers, showing little had changed over the decade. In a related

academic study, a number of actors with disability seeking work in the Los Angeles area report being discouraged from a career in the media (Breeden 2012) and claim that they are overlooked for both mainstream roles and also disability specific ones (Breeden 2012). Indeed, despite increasing numbers of disabled characters on television (see Woodburn and Kopić 2016; GLAAD 2015), disability is still under-represented because disabled actors are not being cast in these roles. According to Raynor and Hayward (2009), 'no matter what the role, having a disability was not considered an advantage, even when auditioning to play a character with a disability'. Disabled actress Eileen Grubba comments that whereas other actors are sent on 5–10 auditions a week, she is sent on 5–10 a year and must find creative ways to be seen by casting directors (Gruber 2016).

Research pertaining from media interviews paints a similar picture. For example, while researching a story about people with disability in the media for CBC's *Moving On*, journalist Joanne Smith recounts a number of casting directors and executive producers telling her 'point-blank . . . they didn't want to hire people with disabilities' for either broadcast or theatre work (Media Smarts, no date). Similarly, Tari Hartman Squire established a union of performers with disability in 1980 in response to an experience in the late 1970s when she went to an audition wearing a neck brace following an injury and the casting director looked at her, 'shook her head and walked away' (Wolfe 2011). Squire says that although her disability was temporary, the experience prompted her to think about the issues performers with disability experience and whether the SAG was doing anything to address them:

> We felt these actors would have issues in common. Were blind actors at auditions receiving their scripts in alternative formats (then audio tape and Braille)? Were there qualified sign language interpreters at auditions? Were auditions wheelchair accessible? (Wolfe 2011)

In contrast, or perhaps in defiance of this prejudice, in 1992, O'Steen identified moves to mainstream actors through strategies adopted by an agent representing 11 disabled actors. This agent sent disabled actors to audition for 'regular roles' and recounted sending a client who used to wheelchair to audition for the role of 'pesky office boy':

> Well, this guy could run over people's toes in the office, he could make a nuisance of himself. And he got the role. (Marie Lanaras quoted in O'steen 1992)

Another wheelchair-using client secured a role as a police officer in an office position by convincing the producers he 'could be a police officer who had been injured in the field' (Marie Lanaras quoted in O'steen 1992).

These examples illustrate the ways disability can be used to an actor's advantage. This is a concept also highlighted by Breeden when one of her interview subjects recounted the way a mentor actually encouraged her to disclose her disability, to 'use it' in her work:

> Don't hide it, don't put it away for anyone else, use it, make it part of all your characters.' And I'm like, 'Wow that's weird!' And that's hard too because . . . it is this thing that so many people are like, 'Ooh, she has something wrong with her . . . ' if I put it out there on display then I don't know. But maybe that's the way to go. Maybe to celebrate it. . . . (Breeden 2012)

Later in the chapter I discuss a number of actors who have 'used it' in the ways Breeden's respondent describes; however, it seems unlikely that this would work for unknown actors, particularly when they report difficulties in even securing an audition when they disclose their disability. For example, in February 2016, aspiring actor and model Julian Thomas posted a YouTube video detailing his experiences securing auditions as an actor with disability (Thomas 2016). He conducted a social experiment of sorts by sending out two different photos to casting directors across a 6-month period. During the 3-month period in which he sent a photo clearly showing he had a disability, he received only three call-backs. However, during the 3 months where the photo he sent to casting directors was cropped to obscure his disability he received 53. For Thomas, this is a clear indication of the discrimination experienced by actors with disability:

> What Hollywood essentially is telling me is that I'm not good enough. The fact that I have one arm is not good enough. (Thomas 2016)

He goes on to explain that at this stage of the audition process he is being judged exclusively on his physical appearance, not on his acting ability. The only available roles for people with disability Thomas explains are 'some inspirational character, some villain or a war vet'. There are no opportunities to portray 'regular guy[s] living their lives'. The impacts, Thomas believes, are damaging because an unrealistic representation of the world is being offered and no one is doing anything about it:

It's just you're setting up such unrealistic expectations and you're setting us up to live in a world that we don't actually live in. And our realities and what we see on TV are just getting more and more distant. And it's becoming an extremely big problem. (Thomas 2016)

For Thomas, the lack of representation of real actors with disability has an impact not only on the broader population's understandings of diversity but also on the sense of self of people with disability, unable to see themselves represented in the mainstream media:

All these images [and media] really have an impact on us and how we see ourselves, and the fact that people that have disabilities are so underrepresented makes you feel that you are very, very, very small in this world, that you almost practically don't exist. (Thomas 2016)

Thomas ends his video with a call for action in recognition that the lack of disability diversity onscreen is unacceptable and for people to share his story.

In addition to these challenges, disabled actors seeking work are also limited in the kinds of roles they can apply for (Hay 2016; Mulkerrins 2016). This includes roles depicting characters with disability which are often given to able-bodied actors who can attract audiences (Gruber 2016; Hay 2016). Disabled *American Horror Story: Freak Show* actor and UK performance artist Mat Fraser describes this as 'spacking up' (Hay 2016) and disability bloggers have made a connection to 'black face', describing the practice as 'crip drag' (Smith 2010, February 18).

Accessibility is also a significant factor for actors with disability seeking auditions in particular. Mat Fraser recognises that a number of physical environmental barriers restrict people with disability from auditioning (Hay 2016). Canadian actor Hal Myshrall was physically unable to attend auditions because the buildings were not accessible (Steven 2015). Danny Woodburn in fact cites the example of an audition for a wheelchair using character being held 'on the second floor of a no-elevator building' (Woodburn and Kopić 2016). Instances such as this, as well as on set inaccessibility, have been hilariously lampooned in Teal Sherer's web series *My Gimpy Life* (Sherer 2014).

Regarding the disclosure of disability, this issue also remains unchanged between 2005 and 2016. For example, a respondent to the 2005 study reported being discouraged from disclosing their disability:

> I asked the casting director...what would happen if I went to an audition with short sleeves on or a tank top with my stump showing...She said to me, 'That would be a Frankenstein moment.' (Raynor and Hayward 2005)

In the 2005 study there was a consensus among disabled actors that it was best not to disclose their disability because preconceived ideas about disability would impact their ability to find work. Although a smaller sample, this was found quantitatively to be the same in the 2016 study, with actors with non-visible disabilities securing more auditions and roles. According to a respondent to that study:

> When they find out I'm low vision they worry that I can't do the job as well as others. I was told by many directors that I respect never to tell directors or casting directors about my disability, because I won't get called in. (Woodburn and Kopić 2016)

Lori Breeden's 2012 study of actors with disability working in the Los Angeles area yielded similar results around disclosure and perceptions regarding job performance:

> People are afraid to hire us...because they think we're going to make a stink, because they think we're going to be harder to deal with, and I don't like that perception at all! (Breeden 2012)

Actors with disabilities are also reportedly too afraid to ask for simple accommodations for fear they would be considered incapable of doing the job (Raynor and Hayward 2005). Throughout SAG's report respondents claim that accommodations would help their employment prospects. Analysis of the survey reveals that these accommodations are not onerous and deal mostly with 'access to food; a nearby bathroom; large print scripts; having the director or production staff speak louder; assistance in walking long distances or climbing stairs; or a place to sit while waiting' (Raynor and Hayward 2009). These accommodations should be covered by the ADA; however in 1992, O'Steen discovered within the entertainment and media industry ADA complaints were non-existent because they were considered

too difficult to prove. This remains the case today as disabled actors fear losing jobs if they complain or disclose their need for accommodations. Further, and repeating the findings of the research outlined previously, O'Steen claims disabled actors were also experiencing discrimination in the form of inaccessible buildings, casting directors believing actors with disability are 'more trouble than they're worth', and a lack of insurance (O'steen 1992). These three issues constitute an example of the types of employment-related discrimination the ADA intended to mitigate.

As can be seen from the previous discussions, disabled actors experience a substantial bias again them. They work fewer days than their non-disabled counterparts, or not at all, with many reporting workplace discrimination. Prospects for employment were are limited because actors believe they are only being considered for disability specific roles, because there is a lack of acting jobs in general, and because of their increased difficulty getting an audition (Armbrust 2005).

Overcoming Marginalisation: The Importance of Activism

Thomas' ideas outlined previously regarding some form of disability advocacy in the media industry are not unique. Following Squire's advocacy work, also as outlined previously, disability was recognised alongside other marginalised groups in SAG's affirmative action clauses in 1980, over a decade before the passing of the ADA. Yet while there are some notable instances of disabled actors performing in key roles during the 1980s – such as Marlin Matlin in *Children of a Lesser God* and Geri Jewell becoming the first person with a visible disability to appear on prime time television in the sitcom *The Facts of Life* – Squire acknowledges actors with disability have been both underemployed and unemployed for 30 years (Wolfe 2011). She has continued to establish a number of initiatives to include disabled actors such as I AM PWD (Inclusion in the Arts and Media of Performers with Disabilities), a campaign created in 2008 by SAG's Committee of Performers with Disabilities, the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA) and the Actor's Equity. Robert David Hall, the national Chairperson for the campaign, explained the significance for actors with disabilities:

> The normal struggles any performer faces, however, are complicated ten-fold by our industry's reluctance to include people with disabilities in the full landscape of entertainment. In the 21st century, media is the world's common cultural

environment. Society's values and priorities are expressed and reflected in film, television, theatre, news and music. If you aren't seen and heard, you are invisible. People with disabilities are largely invisible within the arts and media landscape. I AM PWD will awaken the general public to the lack of inclusion and universal access for people with disabilities by uniting with a network of industry, labor, community and government allies. (Robert David Hall 2008)

The campaign has been described as giving a 'significant boost' to disabled actors finding employment. It has also been credited with ushering in a new era of disability representation where disability is both incidental and unsentimental (Norden 2014).

Perhaps as a result of this, a number of people with disability employed by the media are also spokespeople or activists for a variety of inclusive initiatives – these include R.J. Mitte, an actor with cerebral palsy famed for his role as Walt Jnr in *Breaking Bad*, and *Sons of Anarchy* actor Kurt Yaeger who is also a spokesperson for I AM PWD. Similarly, Marlee Matlin advocates for greater accessibility to captions to ensure people who are Deaf or hard of hearing have equal access to screen-based media. Mat Fraser has long been involved in disability advocacy during the 1990s and 2000s in the United Kingdom and following his role in *American Horror Story: Freak Show* has gone on to advocate for increased representation of actors with disability in Hollywood (Hay 2016). Popular disabled actors Peter Dinklage and Eileen Grubba are also both renowned for their activism and attempts at raising the profile of inclusion. Their views will be discussed later in the chapter.

MOVING AWAY FROM STEREOTYPES: INCREASING MEDIA DIVERSITY

The available interviews and self-representations of actors with disability often raise the issue of cultural existence. Robert David Hall, who portrayed coroner Dr Robbins on *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* for 15 years and is national chair of the Performers with Disabilities committee of the SAG, wrote in 2005 that 'If you don't see someone who looks like you on screen, it's as though you don't exist in our culture' (Robert David Hall in Raynor and Hayward 2005). For a number of years Hall was the only actor with disability with a series regular role on USA network television.

Disability critics therefore often call for wider variety in the types of roles characters with disability inhabit. As Teal Sherer, an actress who uses

a wheelchair, comments, 'There's no reason I can't play the teacher, the best friend, the computer tech' (Sherer 2014). In 2005 OfCom released a report calling for increased numbers of people with disability in both main and incidental roles on television:

> There are potential benefits of disability being both 'central/relevant' and 'incidental' themes in the portrayal of people/characters with disabilities on television. Portrayal of disability as 'central' or 'relevant' can serve a useful function of informing the general population of specific issues that people with disabilities face in life. Equally, portrayal of disability as 'incidental' reflects the reality that people with disabilities can lead busy lives with the same rich tapestry of experience that all people, with a disability or not, live. (OfCom 2005)

If, as recent estimates suggest, people with disability make up around 20 per cent of the population in Western countries (Goggin and Newell 2005), why do we not see this group in the background, or indeed foreground, of media, entertainment and popular culture? In *The Cinema of Isolation*, Martin Norden argued people with disability only appear in the background of cinema for atmospheric purposes, as a form of prop to communicate more information to the audience (Norden 1994). Lisa Hammond, an actress with restricted growth who portrays Donna Yates on the UK drama *EastEnders*, draws a parallel with restricted growth actors taking on roles such as goblins and aliens, 'they're warm props. We're at such a delicate phase of media representation, and I feel it puts our cause back a bit.' (Hammond quoted in Shakespeare 2015). While Hammond and Peter Dinklage, whom I discuss later in the chapter, are established actors, for many, attempting to break into the industry is allusive.

Eileen Grubba: Disability Diversity

Actress Eileen Grubba noticed the effect her impairment had on casting directors and so began auditioning for particular types of roles broadly linked by their 'outsider' status:

> I'd go in for roles and they'd figure out that I had a limp. And then it was when we started going out for the hard crackhead, drug addict, hooker, prostitute roles that they could justify the limp ... Fortunately for me,

some of those roles really made an impact, like the one on *Sons of Anarchy*, Precious Ryan. (Jennings 2016)

In this quote, Grubba refers to the character Precious Ryan whom she portrayed in the US television series *Sons of Anarchy* which ran from 2008–2014. She notes that for this role, and within the visual medium of film and television, her limp must be justified as communicating something. Disability and impairments such as limps have come to connote various, predominantly negative, aspects of characterisation – it has been argued that physical impairment often connotes 'a moral lameness'. As a result, actors who can convince audiences they are disabled when they are not achieve virtuoso status (Czertok 2016). This argument suggests that mastering a limp proves how good an actor is and secondly draws on cultural associations with negativity. For Grubba, who already and always has had a limp, however, it has led to typecasting. Yet she continues to see the importance of these roles and in establishing strong, disabled characters such as Precious Ryan.

Sons of Anarchy is significant for its use of disabled actors portraying disabled characters, disabled actors portraying 'regular' characters in examples of diversity, and the problematic use of disability as what Mitchell and Snyder describe as a 'narrative prosthesis', or a crutch to prop up a story, with non-disabled actors also portraying disability. Throughout its 7-year run, disability, illness and impairment featured often as the members of the Sons of Anarchy motorcycle club lived their lives.

In early episodes frequent references are made to Gemma's heart condition as the 'family curse' and Clay's ageing arthritic body signals towards his imminent fall as president to the younger and more physically able 30-year-old Jax. While these representations and instances of disability are portrayed in the series by actors who do not share the impairment and are there simply for narrative complexity, at least two actors with disability have appeared on *Sons of Anarchy*. Eileen Grubba appeared as Precious Ryan, club member Bobby Munson's ex-wife and current wife of bounty hunter Sergio Coletti. While she appears in only one episode and her impairment is obscured, her character is an important example of the way actors with disability can appear as any character in a television show. Grubba has commented on this in an interview with The Huffington Post:

We need to get casting to start bringing in actors with physical differences for all kinds of roles, not disability specific. Like real life, they can be a

mother, a teacher, a lawyer, a judge, a friend, a banker, a shop owner, a victim, a witness, a neighbor, a cop. Why not? Let them build their experience and resumes. Let them in the game. (Gruber 2016)

Yet Grubba's Precious in *Sons of Anarchy*, although a minor character, had a strong legacy. She represents a strong female character in the hyper-masculine world of the Sons of Anarchy motorcycle club. While both Gemma and Tara are typically celebrated as the strong female characters of the show, Precious achieves what no other woman has been able to – remove her children from the seduction of the club, survive and make a life for her family away from the club. In fact, it is the club that returns to her begging for her help when Jax's son is kidnapped. It can therefore be argued that Precious is the most effective mother figure in the series. Grubba speaks of the importance of Precious Ryan:

> [Precious was] one of the FEW girls who got to punch one of the main club members in the face ... I love playing characters like Precious, who are strong, fearless, and will violently fight for their rights. We need more women showing up like that. (Grubba in Gruber 2016)

Later, in Season 5, another disabled actor, Kurt Yaeger, is featured as Greg the Peg. Unlike Grubba's experience, his amputated leg and blade prosthetic form an integral part of the action. Greg the Peg is a nomad (or independent) member of the club who comes to Charming to join the original charter. He is recruited by Clay in his quest for power over Jax who is quickly gaining influence. Along with two other nomads, Greg the Peg terrorises the residents of Charming and discredits Jax's leadership of the Charming charter of Sons of Anarchy. It is unclear to both viewers and the characters in the show who is behind the attacks until a close up of Greg the Peg's prosthetic is shown. Aside from his name, Greg's amputated leg is barely registered in the show itself; however, like the 'pesky office' boy cited earlier, disability is used within *Sons of Anarchy* in a way that enhances the story.

Peter Dinklage: Raising the Profile of Inclusion

Peter Dinklage is perhaps the most famous disabled actor currently on television. Dinklage – who portrays Tyrion Lannister on the critically acclaimed series *Game of Thrones* – has received numerous awards,

changed the way audiences identify with disabled characters on television and, in the process, raised the profile of disability inclusion. For example, in his 2012 Emmy acceptance speech Dinklage encouraged people to 'Google' Martin Henderson. Henderson, a 37-year-old man of short stature suffered paralysis after he was picked up and 'thrown' outside a pub in the United Kingdom (Young 2012) – the incident occurred a week after the UK rugby team participated in a 'dwarf tossing contest' (Wardrop 2012). Within 10 minutes of Dinklage's speech Henderson became a trending topic on Twitter as people began to reflect on the horror of what happened to him. Prior to this incident and Dinklage bringing it to the world's attention, Henderson was a relatively unknown English actor who had appeared as a goblin in the *Harry Potter* films (Wardrop 2012). Henderson's attack became broadly viewed as illustrative of the discrimination people of short statue routinely experienced in both employment opportunities and everyday life.

Around the same time, Ritch Workman, a politician in Florida (United States), lodged a proposal to repeal Florida's ban on the practice of dwarf tossing in pubs, claiming he wanted to open up employment opportunities for this group (Young 2012). In response, Stella Young argued these entertainment practices reflected entrenched discriminatory attitudes. She called for a broader discussion 'to look more broadly at discrimination in employment, rather than coming up with novel ways of using short statured people for the amusement of others' (Young 2012). She renewed her call for 'a conversation about why short-statured people experience discrimination in the labour market' (Young 2013) the following year when an Australian footballer set a dwarf entertainer on fire during club celebrations.

Returning to the impact of his Emmy speech, Dinklage used this to highlight the media's continued implication in the poor treatment of dwarves:

> Dwarves are still the butt of jokes. It's one of the last bastions of acceptable prejudice. Not just by people who've had too much to drink in England and want to throw a person. But by media, everything. (Dinklege cited in Kois 2012)

He goes on to say people can 'say no' to the kinds of roles that subject dwarves to ridicule and prejudice. He has been celebrated for this stance in the industry and for turning down roles 'on principle' (Kois 2012) and has

spoken at length about his refusal to accept jobs that portray a certain kind of character such as 'Cute elves and buffoonish leprechauns' (Lawrence 2015):

> I had a code that I lived by and knew the things that made me uncomfortable, and that I was not going to take them. There are a lot of other jobs that pay the rent and I wasn't going to just see acting as a way to pay the bills, because it really didn't. (Lawrence 2015)

As an unknown actor in 2000 he told a theatre magazine 'I seem to play a lot of wisecracking, cynical characters . . . but what I really want is to play the romantic lead and get the girl' (Dinklege cited in Blake 2000). However, his wise cracking characters have been able to make a number of politically charged statements about disability inclusion. For example, in *Elf*, as children's storybook author Miles Finch and when mistaken for an elf, he rages:

> Hey, jackweed, I get more action in a week than you've had in your entire life. I've got houses in L.A., Paris and Vail. In each one, a 70 inch plasma screen. So I suggest you wipe that stupid smile off your face before I come over there and SMACK it off! You feeling strong, my friend? Call me elf one more time.

In *Living with Oblivion* he portrays an actor annoyed about being cast in a dream sequence:

> Have you ever had a dream with a dwarf in it? Do you know anyone who's had a dream with a dwarf in it? No! I don't even have dreams with dwarves in them. The only place I've seen dwarves in dreams is in stupid movies like this! 'Oh make it weird, put a dwarf in it!'. Everyone will go 'Woah, this must be a fuckin' dream, there's a fuckin' dwarf in it!'. Well I'm sick of it! You can take this dream sequence and stick it up your ass!

The portrayal was a send up of the 'man from another place' dream sequence experienced by Cooper in *Twin Peaks* and a comment on countless other media representations. While Dinklage's Tyrion continues the genre of wise cracking cynical characters he portrayed in his younger years, he has brought about a new image of the 'leading man':

> There is a different definition of the leading man now . . . It's fantastic. You look at the leading men of the past and they are very different. Hollywood is

finally opening the door wider to more realistic portrayals of who people are. It's not just about beautiful Hollywood stars. (Peter Dinklage in Lawrence 2015)

There is a definite strategy to Dinklage's roles and the kinds of characters he will play. His portrayals of a children's book author mistaken for an elf, an out of work actor, and the 'monstrous' son of a major political figure in a fantasy world have more in common than not. However, while *Game of Thrones* has catapulted Dinklage's career and thrust him firmly into the limelight into a space where he can make disability critiques to broad populations, it must be remembered that most actors do not become mega stars.

For all of Dinklage's memorable, politically engaged characters making covert and overt statements about disability inclusion, there remain a large number of actors who do engage in clichéd roles and stereotyping. However, as academic Tom Shakespeare comments, a generational shift has occurred whereby his children and their friends of restricted growth work in a number of different professions compared to previously:

When I was growing up, performing was the default option for a dwarf with few qualifications. If your only chance in the job market is a boring clerical job, putting on the pointy hat looks like easy money for a bit of fun. (Shakespeare 2015)

Just as Dinklage and Shakespeare call on actors with restricted growth to refuse jobs that ridicule people with impairments, in response to a question about whether he has ever refused roles, another disabled actor Mat Fraser believes he was never offered any problematic roles because he 'wore [his] politics on [his] sleeve so strongly' (Hay 2016). Fraser further points to the important role disabled commentators, such as Stella Young with her TED talk, have to play in shifting the cultural landscape. Fraser comments he will 'never . . . criticize a disabled person for trying to make a buck' and locates the problem of disability representation and employment in the media with 'leav[ing] a story around disability in a room with non-disabled people who don't know many disabled people' (Hay 2016). He maintains disability is an important tactical focus:

People's understanding of disability and how they feel about it would be so different if we had just one major network series with a disabled character in

it played by a disabled actor. And I know that's going to happen in the next five to ten, wouldn't you say? But then again, I expected that 15 years ago. (Hay 2016)

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the employment of disabled actors as reported in a number of industry, academic and media reports. The discussion reveals several core issues regarding actors with disability seeking employment in film and television, including difficulties getting an audition, the perception that non-disabled actors are of superior quality – even in roles portraying disabled characters – and the problem of one dimensional and limited roles when it comes to the disability experience. Many actors want to be considered for regular roles rather than stereotypical disability specific ones. Media diversity matters – casting only non-disabled people does not reflect the reality of the world we live in and, by extension, perpetuates the notion that disability does not exist.

However, coalitions of disabled actors have been proactive in responding to disability discrimination through advocacy and activism which have aimed to address physical and attitudinal barriers to disabled people seeking employment in entertainment and media industries. Via the advocacy of celebrity spokespeople such as RJ Mitte and Kurt Yaeger, these have gained international and cross-media support. However, the problem of underemployment continues as disabled actors still struggle to find work or even secure auditions.

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Digital Disability Media Disclosure: The Business of Blogging and Web Series Diversity

Abstract This chapter explores the internet as an alternative employment environment for disabled media professionals. Most often recognised as an arena for alternative forms of representation, the chapter offers two case studies – disability blogging and disability web series. Drawing on a content analysis of the self-identification of disability social justice bloggers, and an analysis of the motivations of disability web series producers, the chapter argues for a broader recognition of the new work environment of the internet and the possibilities it offers for people with disability and disability media. The new industrial arrangements allowed via disability-focused web series provide new opportunities for a diversity of representations on and off screen. In this disability digital media workforce, workers are encouraged rather than discouraged to disclose their disability.

Keywords Digital media workforce · Disability blogs · Disability web series · Disability disclosure

The different issues raised in this book are gaining more attention both within and outside the disability community particularly as a result of the increasing momentum of the internet and the emergence of dedicated disability spaces online. New technologies have long impacted on the ways the media is produced and consumed as well as the makeup of the workforce. With the internet ushering in a new era of change, the media

environment has again been forever altered. A new breed of internet-savvy workers has emerged in this context who are expected to be proactive, knowledgeable across all media forms and yet never quite sure where their next job is coming from. While it is important to consider the new companies, skills and practices that emerge through this changing industrial context, so too should we focus on how individuals navigate these changes (Deuze and Steward 2011). This is particularly important for people with disability who, like the new media worker, have long experienced precarious job stability or long periods of unemployment.

So what is this new media workforce and how is it different to the media that existed before it? In 2016 we are constantly engaging with media, more so than ever before, and this has brought about a wide range of media-based positions. Following interviews with 250 self-identified new media workers, Rosalind Gill offers a list of occupations within this workforce:

> Self-descriptions [on new media work] included programmer, interaction designer, editor, copywriter, business manager, artist, illustrator, researcher, content manager, freelance concept maker, software document writer, consultant, project manager, web site developer and entrepreneur. (Gill 2011)

While the industry is broad, Gill identifies 10 common characteristics of this new media work and new media workers – love of the work; entrepreneurialism; short-term, precarious, insecure work; low pay; long hours; keeping up; DIY learning, informality, exclusions and inequalities; and no future (Gill 2011). For Gill, workers in the new media industry are expected to work long hours, commodify themselves and be 'flexible, adaptable, sociable, [and] self-directing'. Audiences expect the media to be instantaneous, diverse, open to feedback and accessible on any device they choose. This is creating both opportunities and challenges for people working in this area, particularly those with disability. While new media work has a popular image of being relaxed and informal, the reality is that people must work at an intense pace without job security while the boundary between work and leisure grows increasingly blurry. Online spaces also create inequalities such as a lack of payment per story. In an environment where patterns of inequality are difficult to prove among informal patterns of work, and in a workforce interspersed with high expectations, unsustainable work practices and burnout, people may therefore be excluded on the basis of disability (Gill 2011).

Conversely, however, as this chapter will argue, people may be included on the basis of their disability. In an era of self as product and constant networking for the next job, disability has become an asset. It is true that digital media technologies have allowed people with disability to bypass traditional news sources and make their own news via blogs and social media to discuss the issues they believe are important. Consider, for example, the language the following blogger uses to promote his consultancy business. In this description, disability becomes a valuable insight and, unlike other disabled media workers or industries discussed throughout this book, disclosure makes good business sense:

> As a leading inspirational speaker, record-breaking polar adventurer, multi award-winning charity founder and disability role model, Michael McGrath is a catalyst for change in the organisations he works with. His extraordinary ability to engage emotionally and intellectually with audiences from business and education will inspire, motivate and transform the way people think and act. (Mcgrath 2016)

Disability is included among an extensive list of consultancy skills. Unlike the journalists discussed in Chapter 3 or the actors quoted in Chapters 4 and 5, disclosure makes good business sense here. The chapter includes two studies of disabled workers in the new digital media environment. First, I conduct a content analysis of people who identify as disability bloggers to consider the changing nature of the disability blogosphere towards a form of both work and influence. Next I analyse the emergence of a number of disability-focused web series and the motivations of their creators to consider the important opportunities for both disability representation and disability media work. Niche audiences are increasingly valued in the new media environment, and although precarious forms of labour that blur the public and private self continue to dominate, there are significant opportunities for people with disability as owners, managers, professionals and workers throughout this workforce.

The chapter also considers whether independent disability bloggers identify with the media as an industry – for example do they see themselves as people working in the media or as having a media background? Do people making web series that employ people with disability both on and off screen desire a career in the mainstream media? To answer these questions, this chapter sets out to investigate media employment opportunities that arise as a result of digital media environments.

A Changing Media Environment

All forms of traditional media have changed in response to the disruptive influence of the internet – internet-based blogs and social media have impacted on newspaper, radio and television news. Indeed, the internet has even changed the way in which news is consumed and produced. In the modern 24-hour news cycle, and in the rush to get ahead of competitors, including the competition presented by bloggers, extensively researched and fact-checked articles have given way to articles that can be changed or updated later as new information comes in – consumers have come to expect a faster and more instantaneous availability of news. Even these consumers are also now targets. Facebook algorithms and spreadable media have resulted in a targeted personalised news environment whereby people who log into their Facebook account receive links to articles the Facebook algorithm believes will interest them based on their prior browsing history and demographic information. The impact of this can also be seen in the area of entertainment – for example, user-generated video productions distributed on sites such as YouTube and Vimeo and the availability of video on demand and original programming have both impacted on broadcast television. These new forms and formats are also ushering in new opportunities for disability and media.

Early discussions of the media employment nexus online for those with a disability focused on representations of lost opportunities, rather than new opportunities for employment. For example, in 2010 disabled documentary filmmaker Billy Golfus described the lack of opportunity afforded to him as a person with disability seeking a career in the media following the success of his 1995 documentary *When Billy Broke His Head and Other Tales of Wonder*:

> I was constantly being treated like the down person, as the disabled person always is in a number of contexts. Instead of being treated like a mensch, you know? And so I was constantly being the one that was talked to through someone . . . I wrote it, I was Emmy nominated for it. For the script. Those were your true words coming through on the film . . . It wasn't his film. It was my friends. It was my disability and he got the career. He got to work at PBS. (Golfus 2010)

When Billy Broke His Head is widely recognised as a pivotal moment in disability representations. The documentary took the viewer on a journey about the emergence of disability civil rights and explained in an effective

way what exactly a social understanding of disability entailed. It is recognised within disability studies as part of a key group of documentaries that effectively challenged media representations (Snyder and Mitchell 2006). However, this behind the scenes story of exclusion and systemic discrimination in the media workforce had remained untold even as the documentary itself was lauded as a key piece of media. The emergence of YouTube enabled Golfus to re-initiate this important discussion with a more global audience. These kinds of insights may now continue online every day and offer a sustained form of media attention. These modern multimedia critiques which focus on activism and advocacy have their roots in blogging, an early form of internet conversation.

Blogging

We Blog: A History of Blogging

The term weblog was first coined in 1997 when Usenet user Jorn Barger described a list of links on his website Robot Wisdom as a 'weblog' (Wortham 2007). Two years later another user, Peter Merholz, turned the noun into a verb by splitting the word in two – 'we blog' (The Economist 2006). 'Blog' then reasserted itself as a noun as it entered the popular zeitgeist to describe the process of online journaling, an activity that had also been described as escribitionism – a combination of the words exhibitionist, the Spanish word escribir (to write), and also alluding to the e prefix popular in the technology world.

Blogging in this early form was firmly rooted in the personal and subjective. The media was therefore not concerned about any potential competition, particularly because only people with the ability to code could create personal websites. However, as more user-friendly software was introduced in the 2000s and people no longer needed to know html, more people without any technological skills began to engage in the practice of blogging. By the mid-2000s blogging had established itself as an important part of online culture. Increasing numbers of people were both creating and commenting on blogs. By 2004 a new blog was appearing every 5.8 seconds (BBC News 2004). 'Blog' was declared Merriam-Webster's word of the year in 2004 and defined as 'a Web site that contains an online personal journal with reflections, comments and often hyperlinks' (BBC News 2004). Shirky predicted that 'blogging will stop referring to any particularly coherent

activity' (Shirky 2003) – some bloggers attracted large audiences and others participated in smaller conversations with their own friends.

However, blogging did not remain a static activity and has developed and evolved to the point where Merriam-Webster's first definition of blog is now not accurate enough to encompass the range of activities, conversations and platforms covered, in particular in the field of news media. As bloggers moved from chronicling their daily lives to performing a similar role to journalists such as breaking news and engaging in in-depth investigative reporting, the distinction between a journalist and a blogger was hotly debated. Were bloggers and journalists the same? Was blogging more popular than journalism? As the debate raged, journalists acquired a reputation of being vultures and sell-outs, while bloggers were untrained, subjective and emotive. Would the mainstream, and particularly the newspaper industry, survive if anyone could publish what was on their mind, and at any time?

Attempts were made to define the inherent attributes separating journalists from bloggers. Journalist Jolie O'Dell description of bloggers as 'self-serving scum' (O'Dell 2010a) in a blog post in 2010 is somewhat ironic, particularly as it sparked continued heated debate among bloggers and journalists alike. O'Dell posted a follow-up blog outlining the characteristics of a journalist, including training, scrutiny, attribution, objectivity, an obsession with the truth, a drive to serve people, scepticism, integrity and passion (O'Dell 2010b). She maintained that bloggers – whom she saw as more subjective and less open to feedback – were unconcerned about such things.

This debate continues today. Yet while we may have argued that initially bloggers were considered inferior to journalists, blogs are gradually being seen as a forum that could provide an important training ground for would-be journalists. As a result, making sweeping judgements about either journalists or bloggers fell out of favour and a belief emerged that each should be judged on the basis of their writing. However, in recent years both blogging and journalism have changed, with both protagonists now taking on more characteristics of the other. So when two online outlets that began as a collection of bloggers – the Huffington Post and Politico – won Pulitzer prizes, some declared the blogger versus journalist debate 'over' (Jones 2012).

This emergence and increasing influence of blogs allowed for wider distribution of neglected topics, and so communities of disenfranchised groups began to be given a voice, a platform and, sometimes, an audience.

Technology writer Dan Gilmore's observation that 'your voice matters. Now, if you have something worth saying, you can be heard. You can make your own news. We all can' (Gillmor 2006) is particularly relevant to the engaged disability blogosphere which emerged in the mid-2000s. A special issue of the journal *Disability Studies Quarterly* celebrated the disability blogosphere in 2007 for the potential this form of online writing had for providing a forum for disability perspectives. Bloggers and academics reflected on the blog as a 'new forum for disability advocacy and public engagement', with opportunities for both experienced writers and those new to publishing (Kuusisto 2007). However, there was no reflection on the blog as an opportunity for employment, nor for bloggers to 'become' journalists. Blogging was still largely being framed as a recreational pursuit. The focus instead was on representation of disability issues, although a number of contributors commented on the ways their work made its way into the mainstream media (Olson 2007). Although unrecognised in disability studies, at the same time, in media studies broadly, research showed that increasing numbers of bloggers viewed blogging as journalism or as related or complementary to journalism (Ji and Sheehy 2010). Today, with recent trends in blogging focusing on new media work and reframing bloggers as 'influencers' rather than hobbyists, Gillmor's predictions about people making their own news have significance beyond more diverse representations of disability. Increasingly blogs are being run as a business or a forum for freelancers and consultants to promote their skills and services.

Blogs as Businesses

Declarations that the blog is dead disregard the constantly evolving nature of blogs, from forum threads, to personal homepages, to LiveJournal diaries and, increasingly, to Wordpress or Tumblr sites. Recent trends in blogging recognise blogs are a business. Bloggers are not simply exhibitionist writers in an electronic environment (escribitionists), they are business people selling something, from their own e-books to advertising space on the blog itself. As such, engagement and reach are all the more important. Indeed, the definition of the blog and blogging has reignited debate in the last couple of years. Recent analysis of blogging trends suggests bloggers no longer consider themselves hobbyists, they are 'influencers'. Long form pieces are becoming more important, comment threads will be pushed into social media

spaces so that bloggers can expand their reach and use the resources they spend moderating comments sections on cultivating their businesses, multimedia will become more important and audience engagement will be valued over clicks or views (Kissane 2016).

Disability Blogging: A Case Study

The question regarding the, sometimes, fine line between bloggers and journalists should also be posed in the disability arena – do disability bloggers identify as journalists? Disability bloggers offer significant insights about the experience of disability, initiate important debates and explain social justice concepts in simple easy to understand language. The influence of the disability blogosphere can be seen within the disability community broadly (The Goldfish 2007), academia (see Brown 2015; Haller 2010; Ellis 2015a, b), and the mainstream media who both republish blogs on contentious disability issues and draw on the insights of disabled bloggers or social media users discussing particular issues (Gerstein 2015). However, to date there has been no empirical study of whether bloggers addressing disability social justice issues identify as people working in the media. This study therefore attempts to explore how bloggers on a number of platforms self-identify, focusing on journalism. In an era where bloggers are redefining themselves as influencers and running their blogs like a business, the question of whether bloggers identify as journalists, or as coming from a background in journalism, is significant.

Proceeding from Thoreau's observations that personal narrative allowed disability bloggers a way to discuss the intersections between the medical and social models of disability, I conducted a content analysis of the 'about' sections of people blogging about disability social justice issues to discover whether they identified as disabled. I was also interested in if they identified as journalists or other media workers, including those identified by Gill in her broad definition cited at the beginning of the chapter. I took note of whether these bloggers incorporated business activities such as selling or promoting their work or including a link where readers could directly contribute money to 'support the blog'. The analysis explored a number of different blogging platforms in an attempt to establish which platforms are most likely to be used by disability bloggers incorporating business practices.

Method – Random Sample

A content analysis of a random sample of blogs posted on Blogger/ blogspot, Tumblr, Wordpress, Wix, Squarespace, Weeby and LiveJournal was conducted using the search term 'disability journalist'. Because a number of the platforms did not contain dedicated search options, the search of each site was conducted using a Google search. The total number of blogs the search yielded was noted and then the sample for analysis reduced to a more manageable every third result. The blogs were further filtered for relevance by excluding posts by the same blogger, blogs by organisations rather than individuals, and blogs that were mainstream news articles. Given the sheer size of the blogosphere, the analysis concentrated on the first five pages of results. While this yielded relatively small samples for analysis – and in the case of LiveJournal only one result – the study offers an important starting point for an analysis of disability blogging as a form of media work.

Findings

The results are summarised in Table 6.1.

All of the bloggers in the sample identified as disabled themselves or as a disability ally. Given the quantitative nature of this study I did not conduct a deep textual analysis of the content of the blogs themselves, nor make judgements about whether a blogger ascribed to a social or medical model of disability, although this is an important area for future research particularly given the recent controversy around The Mighty and who should speak for the disability community. Along with a number of issues such as exploitative and disrespectful articles, it was revealed

Table 6.1 Blog content analysis

Platform	Total results	Analysis sample	No. who identify as media workers	Business-focused blogs
Blogger/ blogspot	145,000	8	5	6
Tumblr	14,400	9	6	5
Wordpress	56,200	7	7	7
Wix	437	3	2	2
Squarespace	1,430	6	4	6
Weeby	6000	3	2	3
LiveJournal	2,550	1	1	0

the disability advocacy website The Mighty received public funding but did not pay its contributors (see Bad Cripple 2016 for an analysis of the controversy). Further, the focus was more on supporting parents of children with disability rather than people with disabilities themselves.

To return to my content analysis, Thoreau's 2006 insights that disability bloggers move between medical and social frameworks to pursue a personal narrative model of disability remain significant (Thoreau 2006). As the table illustrates, the majority of disability social justice bloggers also identified as media workers in some capability, as either journalists, journalism professors, journalism students or freelance writers of some description. Taking into account Gill's loose definition of the new media worker, they all identify as media workers.

However, given changes in blogging in the last decade, the personal narrative model of disability is increasingly used to monetise and take full advantage of the blog medium. Blogs seem to function today to promote people's skills and abilities in a new media workforce as much as they do to critique a disabling society or give people greater insight into disability issues. The majority conducted their blog as a business site, either directly selling items, such as e-books or DVDs, promoting their writing and consultancy services, including advertising or sponsored articles, or offering a donate button to allow readers to give money directly to the blogger via PayPal.

While bloggers identified as media professionals on every platform, Wordpress, Squarespace and Weeby tended to be the most business-focused. Blogger, one of the oldest blogging platforms, yielded the highest number of results under the search terms; however, it did not significantly embrace the blog as business agenda. LiveJournal – which in 2003 Shirky recognised as the place where people interacted with friends rather than writing for 'some impersonal audience' (Shirky 2003) – continues to focus on the personal and did not yield significant results for this study.

This analysis also raises another issue that of the blog writer as commodity. Each platform is trying to distinguish itself to a particular group of users in an already crowded marketplace. Some, such as Squarespace have a monthly subscription fee. While more people may discuss disability issues on Blogger/blogspot, people with disabilities seeking to monetise their blogs and gain exposure are using Wordpress. Similarly, Wix is used to link back to Wordpress accounts rather than to launch disability-focused discussions.

Blogging: A Word of Caution for People with Disabilities

This analysis shows that disability bloggers today self-identify as media workers in a changing media workforce environment. The majority identify with job titles associated with a traditional media environment such as journalist, photojournalist, freelance writer or editor. In addition to these self-identifications, almost 100 per cent draw on the discourse of the new media work environment described by Gill earlier. While this environment is popularly seen to usher in great opportunity, we should remain cautious, particularly because people with disability are already subject to precarious, insecure forms of labour and encouraged to internalise and self-regulate adaptive work requirements. This can be seen in the issue of no payment.

Free labour in exchange for 'exposure' is an important topic raised by bloggers in a number of spheres. For example, Helen Razor outlines her terms as a freelance media personality on her blog:

> Please do not ask me to do things for no money. Not writing. Not speaking. Not media interviews, either. I know you mass electronic media outlets don't pay people but whatevs. Unless you have money for me, I will not provide free content to your television or radio program. (Razor 2016)

The idea that Razor – who has a worked in various high profile capacities in the Australian media industry over several decades – would be asked to contribute to electronic media outlets for the exposure is incredible. However, this appears to be a common practice today, with reports of both The Huffington Post and The Atlantic attempting to commission work for exposure rather than monetary payment for example (Thayer 2013; Media Mole 2016). As was touched on previously regarding The Mighty website, this argument that unpaid blog content is a more authentic form of journalism has pervaded the disability blogosphere for many years. Carly Findlay, a key Australian disability blogger, raised this issue in the context of disability expertise and employment on Ramp Up only a few weeks before that site closed in 2014:

> ...when I consult for a private or public organisation, I expect payment. If a company asks me for advice on disability, especially when they'd usually pay a consultant for their services, I expect to be paid. Similarly, if a publication or organisation asks me to write for them for free when they pay their staff to

write, and if they generate revenue, I want to be paid. I'd also like a link back to my blog – especially if I've done work for free. (Findlay 2014)

Findlay's blog Radio Carly offers an important example of the new type of disability bloggers active today. Her site contains personal blog posts, links to articles published in the mainstream media, and a donate button for readers to contribute monetarily towards her work. Like Findlay, a number of bloggers both within the disability blogosphere and other blogospheres are utilising donate buttons and Patreon accounts to invite their readers to crowd-fund their work. While this provides an important layer of recognition for people's contribution to the media landscape, at this stage it is unlikely that these types of crowd supported financial support provide a living wage.

WEB SERIES: A RHETORICAL AND ECONOMIC SPACE FOR DISABILITY

We can see a continuation of some of the issues that pervade the disability blogosphere and the consequential professionalisation of this media in another online space – that of web series. These episodic narrative videos distributed via the internet typically have high production values comparable to commercial media but are 'created specifically for web distribution (at least in the first instance)' (Leaver 2013). While web series are created by amateurs, independents and professionals, they came about because of both the multimedia affordances of the internet – and web 2.0 in particular – as well as a changing television industrial context. Whereas traditionally television has sought to attract mass audiences, increasingly smaller niche audiences have come to be seen as more profitable in a fragmented marketplace. Web series focus on this niche and are significant both as a critique of existing media and as an alternative mode of production.

Some approach a web series as a stepping-stone to more traditional media, an opportunity to promote interest in a television pilot, for example by splitting it up into bite size pieces – crowd-sourced funding provides both finance and an immediate audience. However, some web series producers are not seeking a television career and instead are creating content for a new medium with new rules, seeing the medium as a unique opportunity for unseen stories that cannot make it in the traditional

marketplace. Felicia Day, creator of *The Guild*, describes web series as a 'place to tell stories and present characters that haven't been seen; to cast actors in roles that would never get hired by a network' (Day 2009). As an example of this, Day cast Teal Sherer in season 3 and 4 of *The Guild*. Sherer went on to create and star in the pivotal disability web series *My Gimpy Life*.

Web series are produced by a number of different groups – amateurs, independent media as well as network television, advertisers and corporations (Christian 2011). Like the new era of disability bloggers who identify as media professionals discussed earlier in this chapter, web series operate in 'a rhetorical and economic space' (Christian 2012) where 'new representations may foster new industrial arrangements, including the diversification of talent on- and off-screen' (Ellcessor 2015) and a number of series that foreground disability on and off screen have achieved varying levels of success. Indeed, the benefits for both representation and employment via the web series format for people with disability are increasingly coming into focus as the format matures. For example, the industrial context of the disability web series genre has gone through several stages from the non-professional production ultimately sold to the mainstream media (*The Specials*) to professionally made commercial productions (*My Gimpy Life, Interrogation*) to trans-media publically funded pieces (*Very Special Episodes*). Paralleling these moves to professionalisation are user-generated videos seeking to offer an alternative mode of representation outside of tragedy and inspiration that dominate the mainstream media.

Changing representations is a key motivating factor for people creating web series about the disability experience. Take, for example, one of the earliest disability-focused web series *The Specials*. Created in 2009 by Dan and Katy Locke, the series follows five childhood friends – Sam, Hilly, Lewis, Megan and Lucy – now young adults living together in a share house in Brighton, UK. The friends each have an intellectual disability and the series injects disability into a reality television format – the friends are referred to as housemates, alliances are tenuous, and romances end as quickly as they begin against a background of life, work and daily chores. An original web series distributed on a dedicated website, created with the intention of offering a representation of life with an intellectual disability unseen in the mainstream media, *The Specials* was eventually picked up and distributed on Oprah Winfrey's OWN.

Another common theme that arises is that people using web series to create alternative forms of media feel rejected by the mainstream media

and going online has provided opportunities for self-representation. As Teal Sherer from *My Gimpy Life* explains:

> I was really frustrated because I wasn't auditioning a lot and wasn't working, so one of the reasons I wanted to create my own show was to have kind of a showcase for myself…A second element is that I always wanted to share what it's like being a girl on wheels, and do it with comedy. I don't think people with disabilities are seen enough in the media, and instead of waiting on someone else to give me that opportunity, I decided I would do it myself. (Gilman 2013)

The first season of *My Gimpy Life* was privately funded by Steven Dengler's technology investment company Dracogen; however, funding was not continued for the second season. As a result, Sherer and the producers secured the required $55,000 via a crowd-funding campaign on Kickstarter. Significantly, they secured this amount in less than a month (Sherer 2013).

The influence of *My Gimpy Life* is clear within the disability web series genre with a number of other series such as *Very Special Episodes, Uplifting Dystrophy, Stare at Shannon*, and *Don't Shoot The Messenger* adopting a similar style and format. The creators of these series often comment on the importance of diversity on and off screen. Shannon Devido, creator of *Stare at Shannon*, picks up on the arguments presented by Mat Fraser in the previous chapter when she explains:

> I think the way to combat stereotypes is to show an honest alternative to the skewed image the entertainment industry has created…That's why web series featuring disability are so important. They're written and produced by people who live it, rather than able bodied people writing what they think people with disabilities feel and how they act. (Schwartz and Hadley 2016)

Co-creators of *Very Special Episodes* Caitlin Wood and Cheryl Green agree the majority of media depictions of disability are 'what a nondisabled person *assumes* what disability must be like' (Wood on Rear 2015) and suggest the radical notion that media can be made for a disabled audience, and that is what their web series is attempting to do:

> I'm more interested in disabled people seeing ourselves in the media, recognizing that we are inherently capable of creating and contributing to culture, and that telling our personal story in a motivational speech onstage is not our highest possible contribution to society. (Green on Rear 2015)

The notion of inspiration is another important theme in these web series. *Very Special Episodes* takes up the critique of inspiration introduced by Stella Young and discussed in Chapter 3. It is funded by a grant from the Portland Regional Arts and Culture Council in Oregon and, like the disability blog sites discussed earlier, offers a trans-media advertisement for the maker's disability anthology *Criptiques.* Each episode is based on an essay in the book in an attempt to 'add more ingroup disability comedy to the media landscape, producing work that doesn't cater to people's desires to see disabled people as either charity recipients or heroes and heroines' (Green on Rear 2015). *My Gimpy Life* furthered this critique of inspiration when Sherer explicitly linked it to a form of discrimination similar to racism. An implicit critique of disability as an inspirational trope runs throughout the series as Sherer goes about her life. Another web series, *Don't Shoot the Messenger*, about communication between hearing and Deaf friends, also grew out of a frustration with existing portrayals of disabled and Deaf characters on film and television and the tendency to insert non-Deaf actors in these roles:

> A number of hearing actors [take] Deaf roles and, with their lack of ASL (American Sign Language) fluency, watching their performances is worse than sitting through a play with actors doing bad fake accents . . . It has also bothered me that the topics or plot lines about Deaf people are not realistic, and are giving general audiences false information and wrong impressions (Chaitoo on Schwartz and Hadley 2016)

Web series offer a useful vehicle to make these kinds of critiques, including that of (in)accessibility. Whereas people with disability complaining about accessibility would not typically receive too much sympathy, the communication enabled in the digital media environment appeals to a particular subsection of the audience. For example, like *My Gimpy Life, Uplifting Dystrophy* is made by people with media training and offers a humorous critique of everyday inaccessibility. The six-part web series follows friends Jonathan and Steve as they attempt to get into a party each episode. From a New York party, to a church party, to a restaurant party, to a stoner's party, to a dance party, they never get in because of either the host's casual ableism or Steven's unwillingness to tolerate the situations imposed on him. Whether he is stuck in a car as his accessible parking permit is stolen, is called out to the front of the church to perform the cheery cripple personality, or is stuck upstairs at a dance

party or downstairs at a New York party, Steven is clearly the guest you'd most want at your party.

Although web series have a reputation of relying on sketch comedy and therefore requiring actors with improv experience – *My Gimpy Life, Uplifting Dystrophy* and *Stare at Shannon* are clear examples of this – recent narratives are moving into other genres, and with these come more opportunity for diversity in media representation and employment.

As the internet develops as a mode of exhibition and distribution, more actors are appearing in online productions – indeed most actors will appear in at least one web production in their career (Miller 2012). Web series are a vehicle performers can use to promote their talents, expand their skills and be seen by casting agents. For actors it is a useful vehicle to reach targeted audiences and be seen in their hopes of securing more work (Miller 2012). Significantly, in an American context, web series are also offering competitive wages for actors (Miller 2012).Yet it has been observed that making it in the mainstream media is not necessarily the goal of all web series creators, with some turning down Hollywood development deals in favour of diversity.

Britain Valenti's science fiction web series *Interrogation* stands out as an example of media diversity. The series follows a team of ex-soldiers fighting to overthrow a totalitarian government in a dystopian future and has been celebrated for diversity in representation and employment. Valenti explains the series was motivated by a desire for diverse representations:

> It really came out of my desire to see sexy, competent and dangerous but fun and loud female characters. I'm a big fan of *Archer*, and while Lana is clearly the better, more skilled, more reliable agent. Archer has the most fun . . . all while magically being the best at what he does. I wanted to have female characters who could do the same thing. (Valenti on Hughes 2014)

The diversity extended beyond female leads and to off screen production roles:

> You have no idea what's lost when you limit voices in storytelling. There hasn't been a single director we've worked with that hasn't contributed in some unique way I never would have thought of. (Valenti on Black Girl Nerds 2015)

The series is also notable for including a number of disabled characters portrayed by disabled actors. This diversity in casting is a key component

of Valenti's commitment to a wide variety of voices on and off screen and reflects Day's earlier comments about new representations and work environments made possible via the web.

CONCLUSION

People with disability are using new digital media environments to highlight the problems they see with the mainstream media such as medicalised representations of disability, the tendency to hire non-disabled actors to portray disabled characters, the unpaid labour of people with disability who are all too often called upon for their expertise to educate disabling society, and the lack of understanding of the social disablement experienced by this group. There are also new opportunities to participate both on and off screen. While much of the media output has focused on rewriting damaging media narratives, increasingly as bloggers and producers of web series are attempting to turn what was once thought of as amateur hobbies into professional productions, we are seeing opportunities for employment.

Recent trends in blogging broadly have impacted the disability blogosphere and also the media employment opportunities for people with disability. This chapter reported findings of a content analysis of bloggers that address disability social justice issues. The analysis found that the majority of bloggers identified as traditional media workers. When the definition was expanded to include Gill's definition of the 'new media' worker, this number reached 100 per cent. Similarly, the majority of these bloggers conducted their blogs as a business, using the platform to sell products, either their e-books, DVDs or other media content, advertising space on the blog itself or finally by offering readers an opportunity to 'donate' money directly to the blogger via PayPal. While the analysis celebrated great potential for people with disability in the new media environment, we must remain cautious about the precarious nature of this form of labour – indeed the sheer number of platforms available suggests the disabled blogger are themselves a commodity.

The chapter also explored the growing number of disability web series productions and found that producers are seeking greater diversity on and off screen. A number of web series hold particular significance to disability media and the employment of people with disability in the media. *The Specials* achieved mainstream media attention and *My Gimpy Life* engaged a dedicated audience, eventually spawning a new generation of disability representations

through series such as *Uplifting Dystrophy* and *Very Special Episodes* and *Interrogation* which makes a point of diversity both on and off screen.

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Disability Participation in the Media: New Directions for Research

Abstract The chapter shares the insights of disabled media workers – the research participants for this project – and considers their advice for other people with disability seeking a career in the media. Five key themes related to media work as a disabled person emerged – love of the work, disclosure, technology, training and the business model characterising a new era in media work. These can be described as both words of optimism and words of caution. Throughout, the chapter expresses despair that in researching this book no significant new findings have been discovered to suggest there has been a change in attitude since the 1990s when the last major cycle of disability-related media work research took place despite the media as an industry having changed so much.

Keywords Disabled journalists · Disability digital media workforce · Unemployment

We often think that improving representations of disability in the media will have a flow-on effect to the rest of society. That the lives of people with disability can be improved if the media can achieve a shift in thinking that will then shift the thinking of the public. Indeed, media representations offer one of the most important interactions the general public has with disability. As alluded to throughout this book and much of the research on disability media, most of the time the media presents disability

through a prism of fear, pity and inspiration, and it is clear better representation is needed. Employment is also often at the centre of this discussion of a need for change. The argument goes that employment prospects in general society will improve if people see disabled characters gainfully employed in television dramas, or if newspapers integrate disabled people rather than hold them up as somehow separate from the rest of society. Core to this argument is including people with disability in the media production cycle, as owners, managers and workers at all levels throughout the industry, encompassing all forms and formats. Improving representations is vital, and including people with disability, with lived experience, is integral to this process. But it is a classic chicken and egg conundrum. What comes first? Better representations or more people employed in the media? It is too simplistic to say, as OfCom did in 2005, that 'increasing on-screen representation of people with disabilities could decrease prejudice towards people with disabilities and increase employment levels' (OfCom 2005) without considering the lack of employment opportunities for people with disability in the media itself. How can we get more people with disability employed in the media to do this important cultural work if the media, like every other industry, is influenced by the same disabling attitudes that prevent people with disability from obtaining employment generally?

DISABILITY MEDIA WORK: THE KEY THEMES

Employer Fear

Employer fear is a significant issue in the lack of employment opportunities afforded to people with disability – this fear and pity are two of the most often identified media stereotypes of disability (see Fiedler 1982; Shapiro 1994; Shakespeare 1994; Ellis and Goggin 2015; Kamenetsky et al. 2015; Johnson and Elkins 1989). For more than 30 years, disability media research has focused on the cultural function of these two images of disability. Research shows these two discourses impact on the public's reactions to this group in many aspects of life – from general interactions, to education, to employment. In the context of disability employment, studies consistently show that employers both fear and pity people with disability and this impacts their hiring decisions. While some researchers have found employers feel a social pressure to be 'kindly' to people with disability (Hayes and Macan 1997), others observe an underlying fear that

an employee with a disability is of lesser quality than one without. Fears associated with a perceived loss of productivity and increased costs associated with accommodations, increased supervision and, finally, being unable to terminate the employee with disability (Peck and Kirkbride 2001) also influence employment decisions. Management Professor Susan Premeaux demonstrates the dual function of fear and pity in employment decisions where she observes employers are more likely to hire people with disability to work in positions not closely associated with their own. She argues, they 'prefer to avoid people with disabilities, but also desire to keep this preference private' (Premeaux 2001). In many cases, people's socially filtered reactions to impairment, rather than the impairment itself, influence the employability of people with disability (Berthoud 2008).

These fears also pervade the media, a cost-driven industry that relies on attracting and retaining an audience. Fears associated with a loss of productivity dominate the media industry, with some reports showing people working in the media do not think people with disability can contribute to such a 'fast-paced' and competitive environment (Cavanagh et al. 2005; Blake and Stevens 2004; Fundación ONCE 2007). These attitudes can be traced back to media training environments – some tertiary educators share the belief that the media is not an appropriate workforce for people with disability (Goggin and Newell 2003; Sgroi 2016). This belief negatively influences media students with disability against pursuing a career in this area (John 1991).

Disability Work and Media: An Ironic Position

In her analysis of disabled media workers reflecting on their experiences in higher education, Sgroi explains people with disability working in the media occupy an ironic position because the media offers such a problematic image of disability (Sgroi 2016). Disabled media workers may find themselves contributing to and creating problematic images or they could in fact work as cultural revisionists, offering news perspectives and previously unseen media approaches to disability.

There have been notable advancements in how disability is represented in some media as the industry changes. Television for example is undergoing a significant period of cultural revision when it comes to disability – Tyrion Lannister is a key example of this, as is Adam Hills. I have offered examples of this positive change in representation throughout this book

and have attempted to present both historical research and contemporary analysis. However, what I have found is that there is still significant resistance to the *employment* of people with disability in a diverse media work workforce. I found that while the media as both an industry and a product has changed considerably since the 1990s when a lot of the research around the employment of people with disability in the media first took place, employer attitudes about the abilities of people with disability to *participate equally* in this workforce remain the same. Accordingly, the same can be said regarding the apprehensions of people with disability seeking a career in this area. In every chapter in this book I compared articles written in the 1980s, 1990s or early 2000s with those published more recently. I found the same prejudicial beliefs about costs, performance and the attitudes of others appearing unchanged between the early research and today.

I should not have had to write this book – we should have paid attention to the findings of the research which took place in the 1980s and 1990s that indicated things needed to change, that a change was upon us, that technology would be a great equaliser. Yet it has not been. Why not? Because of prejudicial beliefs and disabling attitudes. Because of preconceptions that people with disability are somehow inferior to people without. It is disappointing to cite media-based research almost 30 years old and find that it is not out of date. Things should have changed in the intervening 25 years, particularly because the media itself has changed so much.

The relationship between disability, media and work is complicated. An implicit argument that disability, media and work are interrelated runs throughout disability studies. For example, the social model of disability highlighted exclusion from the workforce as a key factor in the creation of a group of people deemed 'disabled' (Finklestein 1987; Oliver 1990). Similarly, arguments to include people with disabilities in the media production cycle were made long ago by British disability theorists ascribing to a social model of disability (Barnes 1992; Hevey 1997, 1992). Likewise, American cultural theorists have argued that people with disabilities should occupy cultural production roles to shape a different media agenda (Snyder and Mitchell 2006; Siebers 2008; Medical Noise 2012). However, the experiences of people occupying these roles, or attempting to, has gone distinctively unremarked, both within disability studies and outside it.

The mainstream media is starting to pay attention to the issue of disability media employment, particularly in the context of employing

more disabled actors to portray disabled characters in film and television. Danny Woodburn emphasises the importance of entertainment journalists in furthering causes to include more disabled actors:

> As with any deeply ingrained cultural construct, the stories we tell about it have the power to either reinforce it or change it. Entertainment journalists are the prime voices the public follows when it comes to reviews and assessments of entertainment. They should be the prime leaders in denouncing the exclusion of people with disabilities. Just like journalists were not silent on the artificial darkening of Zoe Saldana's skin for her role as Nina Simone in Nina, they need to speak up more and more in cases of ableist casting choices. We believe that if enough voices, especially voices in positions of power, speak up we can change the national conversation. We can begin to pay more attention to this social injustice, protest it, resist it, and ultimately change it. (Woodburn and Kopić 2016)

While Woodburn and others have been instrumental in bringing this topic to the media's attention, a more sustained media attention is required to effect lasting change. Equally, we must be careful to ensure a diversity within the disability discussion. Another hashtag inspired by the Oscars diversity debate emerged during the period of writing this book – #disabilitysowhite. It is therefore not enough to say that we need more people with disability in both on and off screen roles in the media – we need an intersectional diversity.

Hope, Yet Caution: A Critique of Inspiration

I have followed the work of Stella Young throughout this book. Young is a significant disabled media personality who has effectively framed a different media agenda, particularly via her critiques of 'inspiration porn' (Young 2012, 2014). As discussed, her critique of inspiration porn resonated strongly with disability communities throughout the world who were tired of the limited media offerings available. Fighting against inspiration porn is a key part of the work that we do as disability activists, academics and media workers. Young will be remembered not only for her individual media pieces but also for the way she shaped an entire generation of disabled media workers in Australia and beyond. Young's insights continue to have relevance even as the media continues to accelerate and change. And while we remember the educational insights of her much

lauded TED talk we should not forget her description of the way she too learnt from other disabled people:

> I learn from other disabled people all the time. I'm learning not that I am luckier than them, though. I am learning that it's a genius idea to use a pair of barbecue tongs to pick up things that you dropped. I'm learning that nifty trick where you can charge your mobile phone battery from your chair battery. Genius. We are learning from each others' strength and endurance, not against our bodies and our diagnoses, but against a world that exceptionalizes and objectifies us. (Young 2014)

Even as Young offered a way to critique the media and gave us clear alternatives, there is much work still to be done. There needs to be more disabled people working in media to offer alternatives that do not exceptionalise and objectify disability. One perspective is not enough. Young's insights around listening to and learning from disabled people speaks to another issue that disabled journalists have spoken of – the sense of tokenism (Cooke and Reisner 1991) or of being the go to person for 'disability issues' (Jones 2014). We do not just need one disabled 'go to' voice in the media, we need lots of different perspectives. We need the Stella Youngs who disclose their disability and use it to raise their own profile and the profile of disability advocacy more generally. To do what Joseph Shapiro urged back in 1989, to recognise disability as a civil rights issue and to pen stories about 'how society serves – or usually, fails to serve – disabled people' rather than perpetuate the same inspirational narrative (Shapiro 1989).

We also need the Serge Kovaleskis who simply work and exist in the media, reporting on a variety of issues. Throughout his career Kovaleski has reported stories about the Oklahoma City bombings, the Eliot Spitzer prostitution scandal (for which he won a Pulitzer), the Boston Marathon bombings, the Aurora Batman shooting, and a recent piece on the new Harper Lee novel. For his entire career he remained out of the spotlight, doing his job, until in November 2015 he suddenly became a 'disabled journalist' when he was mocked by Republican presidential hopeful Donald Trump during a speech. The incident raised the profile of disability employment in the media in two ways.

Firstly, the media response to the incident was immediate and negative – this type of bullying and mocking of a disabled person was not acceptable in 2015. In response, Trump was quoted as saying 'he should stop using his

disability to grandstand and get back to reporting' (Chasmar 2015). The advice seemed desperate on Trump's part because it was clear that Kovaleski had never used his disability to 'grandstand' – up to that point he was known not for being a disabled journalist but for winning a Pulitzer prize in 2009 and a *The New York Times*' Publisher's Award for journalistic excellence in 2015. However, Trump's response draws on the prejudicial attitude that pervades the disability employment space mentioned previously, that people with disability are hired for tokenistic reasons and use their disabilities to an unfair advantage. When Marlee Matlin was accused of receiving the 'pity vote' when she received her Oscar for Best Actress (Sobota 2015) is an example of this, as are the accusations the BBC went 'overboard' in their attempts to include minorities by hiring Cerrie Burnell. Again, that these kinds of accusations continue to appear from 1989 (Matlin), 2009 (Burnell) and 2015 (Kovaleski) shows how far we still have to come. However, these three disabled media workers excel in their fields. This excellence shows the second insight that emerged from the whole Trump–Kovaleski incident – that people with disability such as Kovaleski were working in the media and doing a very good job.

I cited playwright John Belluso's observations that 'Everyone, if they live long enough, will become disabled.' (John Belluso cited in Mckinley 2006) in the introduction to this book. This is part of the reason why disability is so stigmatised – people are afraid they may become disabled at any point. It is the reason for the 'collective phew' I discussed in Chapter 5 when the able-bodied Daniel Day Lewis transcended the stairs at the Academy Awards ceremony to accept an award for convincing the audience he was Christy Brown in *My Left Foot* while, in another year, an actual disabled man Dan Keplinger has no way to get onto the stage. Belluso described the way disability helped him as a playwright understand the process finding a balance between observation and participation:

> [My disability] is an experience that shapes my life and view of the world, and a topic that I find endlessly fascinating because there is that universal element...It is the one minority class in which anyone can become a member of at any time. (Haller 2008)

While Belluso is known for his plays which address disability themes and challenge the ways society treats people with disability, his disability-informed perspective is evident on his television-based writing work. For example, in *The Trial of Jack McCall*, an episode of *Deadwood*, the

influence of Belluso's disability is evident in a number of scenes. The episode introduced two threats – the outbreak of smallpox and the murder of Wild Bill Hickok – to the disparate group of rebels, outlaws and outcasts. The influence of Belluso's experience with disability can be seen most clearly towards the end of the episode when Reverend Smith choses Corinthians, Chapter 12 for the funeral sermon:

> Saint Paul tells us: By one's spirit are we all baptized in the one body . . . For the body is not one member but many . . . He tells us, The eye cannot say unto the hand, 'I have no need of thee.' Nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of thee.' Nay, much more those members of the body which seem to be more feeble, and those members of the body which we think of as less honorable, are all necessary. He says that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care, one to another, and where the one member suffer, all the members suffer with it.

This scene could be read as another example of a subtle disability critique running through the media like the characters played by Peter Dinklage and discussed in Chapter 5. Following this call to consider all members of the community as equal, including those that would usually be viewed as feeble or less worthy, the members of the camp begin to come together as a community. *Deadwood* has been celebrated for its representation of disability and for hiring disabled actors in these roles. For example, Beth Haller describes the series as subtly 'ground-breaking' in its acknowledgement that 'people with disabilities were part of the fabric of the 19th century, and the Old West in particular' (Haller 2005).

SELF-REPRESENTATIONS: FIVE KEY THEMES OF HOPE AND CAUTION

This book reported on the self-representations of people with disability working in the media. These insights were obtained via mainstream media interviews, original interviews, blog posts and activist materials. From these, it quickly became clear that people with disability working in the media saw themselves as cultural revisionists who could imagine a better media that would employ greater numbers of people with disability and, by extension, be a better, more inclusive, society where being disabled wouldn't be so disabling. In this final part of the concluding chapter I address a lasting insight of the original interviews I conducted, one

relating to the advice media workers with disabilities wished to give to people with disabilities seeking a career in the media. Five key themes related to media work as a disabled person emerged – love of the work, disclosure, technology, training and the business model. These themes, although emerging in response to a question about advice, are related to both optimism and caution. These workers recognise the media as a competitive industry yet see an important role for disabled workers.

Love of the Work

As discussed briefly in Chapter 6 the notion of a 'love of the work' and the media as a calling pervades the new media work environment (see Gill 2011). Regarding the importance of including more disabled workers in the media industry, both in traditional media and new media, the idea that disabled workers should do it because they 'love it' emerged in several interviews. There was a general agreement likewise that disabled people should work in the media, not just because they love it but because the disability community 'needed' them to. This great desire for better representations was a key feature in this love the work response.

Research participants described the media as a tough business for everyone and several described pitching several stories before one was picked up. The consensus was 'It is tough for everyone ... [yet] having a disability also means that you are fighting against a lot of prejudice'. As a result, participants cautioned that disabling attitudes pervade the media industry and it was possible that despite thinking they would 'love it' people actually did not. However, the research participants who did not love their first choice recognised the media is a diverse industry. They suggested finding the work you 'love' is somewhat of a process that should likewise take into account impairment effects as well as individual skills. For example, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, while editors may be reluctant to send some disabled journalists on 'fire chaser' stories, this is not the only career option for a disabled person seeking a career in journalism.

Disclosure

With regard to attitudes regarding disclosure, not much has changed over the past 30 years. As discussed in Chapter 3, journalists in both the 1990s and today do not disclose disability at the job application stage nor

on the job. Instead they labour in isolation to obscure the impacts of their impairment or hide how they go about their job, even when disclosure would result in access to enabling accommodations. I also cited several disabled actors throughout Chapters 4 and 5 who described being afraid to disclose their disability at audition because they thought they would miss out on jobs because they are considered too much work or potentially too expensive by casting agents.

However, some disabled media workers in a number of capacities recognise the benefits to disability disclosure. Firstly in developing a supportive network of colleagues who are also disabled – this network was also evident in the disability blogosphere where a number of disabled bloggers who identified as journalists dispensed advice about how to compensate for the effects of impairment and navigate a disabling work-place environment. A second benefit was seen in terms of having a unique perspective that could be seen as a positive rather than negative, particularly in a media environment trying to attract niche audiences. There was a view among my research participants that 'disabled people should market their point of difference'. As an editor of a disability social justice zine told me:

> We're sought after in a lot of cases by media because of our viewpoint, and because of our ability to quickly connect with people, and to have a particular viewpoint on a particular issue. So I think using that and market-ing that is something that disabled people – if you can start by even starting off with some local exposure...Start writing a blog, start a...podcast, something to start getting your voice out there and I think having your voice out there, and having...your point of view out of there [makes it] easier for people to have some trust in getting over their ableism...and over looking your disability and understanding that you're a person who's not only competent, but actually is somebody who's going to excel in that particular area.

New Technology, New Opportunities

As reflected in the previous quote, new technologies facilitating new forms of communications was also seen as an opportunity. As discussed in Chapter 6, many disabled bloggers blogging about disability social justice identify as either traditional media workers (for example journalists, photojournalists, broadcasters or filmmakers) or new media workers (con-sultants, content creators). Not all of the people I spoke with during the

research process for this book used assistive technology but a number did. Others had adapted or discarded existing technology. For example, research participants with vision impairments preferred the telephone while those with hearing impairments used instant messenger or email. Now in an era where everyone uses multiple forms of technology to communicate, this is increasingly less unusual.

Training

The issue of training emerged as an important part of media work; however, this was emphasised in the context of general advice to anyone seeking a media-related career. There was agreement that people with disability, like anyone seeking a media career, should hone their skills via internships and volunteer positions in community-based programmes. For people with disability, however, there was a keen sense to caution that they may be exploited in unpaid positions – I certainly heard stories about people losing government-funded media roles because grants had ended and workplaces preferred to receive a new grant to train a new disabled person rather than retain the worker they already had and pay them from their own pocket. In the context of the new media environment which I have been discussing throughout this book, training and especially self-training to stay abreast of new technologies and modes of communication, is seen as vitally important.

Business Model

The media is a business driven by costs and ratings. Industry reports cited throughout this book consistently show employment decisions are made on the basis of these perceived costs. A topic I have not addressed in this book but which requires attention within both media and disability studies is the employment conditions of people making the hardware we use to access media – the large screen televisions, the tablets and the personal computers. Dangerous working conditions have resulted in injuries and permanent disabilities; however, multinational corporations offer little to no support to people becoming permanently disabled as a result of poor working conditions. People watching their televisions at home are also not made aware of the impacts of the rush for the newest, best television on the market. This is where the media has a vital function to expose these poor working

conditions. As one woman, who lost both her arms in a factory accident in Mexico, explained in an article she wrote for *The Guardian*:

> I've worked in factories most of my life. I know I am not the first person to be injured. But more needs to be done to help the workers who are making the products that so many Americans buy. We don't ask for even a tiny share of the billions these companies make. We are just asking for enough to take care of our families and, when we are hurt, to take care of ourselves, too. (Moreno 2015)

The article chronicles the worker's injury, the aftermath and the lack of support she received such as the minimal compensation offered to her ($3800). This is an important area for future research, particularly given the accelerated rate of demand for new technologies and ways to access the media.

To return to the topic of the employment of people with disability to produce media content, a final theme that emerged in all of the interviews I conducted – both the interviews and profiles published in the mainstream media and the academic research consulted – is the hope that this new business model as it focuses on niche audiences and is distributed via digital platforms is facilitating a change. As a freelance radio journalist with a vision impairment told me, 'More and more [people working] in media understand … diversity'. However, many observed that disability is left out of the diversity discussion. Reflecting on her 14-year career in the media, the same radio journalist believed we were in the midst of a cultural shift, 'I think the future will be better'.

A Final Word …

As discussed, for people with disability, research from the 1980s and 1990s paints a picture of a disturbingly similar media employment in context to today's. The disability media employment conversation is a discussion we should be having now at a time when we spend more time than ever before immersed in media. As an industry, however, the media is in crisis with news of poor profits, massive staff redundancies and public funding cuts. Securing a job in the media is a difficult undertaking for anyone, let alone people with disability – it is well documented that during times of economic hardship employers are less willing to hire people with disability (De Jong 2011). At the same time, these changes to the media are bringing about more

opportunities for employment through the creation of dedicated disability alternative medias and flexibility around freelance work environments. The future *should* be better, but we must actively work to make it better.

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