

## **DISCRIMINATION: DISABLED PEOPLE AND THE MEDIA.**

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'We are tired of being statistics, cases, wonderfully courageous examples to the world, pitiable objects to stimulate funding'.

Written almost thirty years ago by Paul Hunt, probably the most influential disabled writer and activist Britain has yet produced. This statement is taken from a book of essays, 'Stigma', documenting the experience of disability in the 1960s. It summarizes accurately one of the main obstacles to disabled people's emancipation; the stereotyped portrayal of disabled people in popular culture. Its sentiments are as relevant today as they were then.

### **Discrimination and Disabled People.**

The fact that disabled people have a substantially poorer standard of living to that of non-disabled people is no longer in doubt. Orthodox medical explanations suggest this be because impairment has such a traumatic physical and psychological effect on individuals they are unable to achieve a comparable lifestyle by their own efforts. Disabled people and their organizations reject this view as a sound basis for understanding the problems associated with disability.

They, along with a growing number of professionals and policy makers - particularly overseas, maintain that it is not impairment, which prevents people from achieving a reasonable lifestyle, but restrictive environments and disabling barriers. 'Disability', therefore, represents a complex system of social constraints imposed on people with impairments by a highly discriminatory society; to be a disabled person means to be discriminated against. The problem is worse for disabled members of the gay and lesbian communities, black people, and women with impairments.

Research by the British Council of Organizations of Disabled People (BCODP) 'Disabled People in Britain and Discrimination: A Case for Anti-Discrimination Legislation' shows that the type of discrimination encountered by disabled people is not just a question of individual prejudice; it is institutionalized in the very fabric of our society. Institutional discrimination - attitudes and policies which deny equal opportunities to disabled people - are evident in education, employment, the benefit system, support services, the built environment, the leisure industry, and politics.

### Disabling Imagery and the Media.

Much of this is attributable to the persistence of traditional misconceptions about disability and disabled people. Stereotype assumptions about people with impairments are based on superstition, myths and beliefs from earlier less enlightened times. They are inherent to our culture and persist partly because they are constantly reproduced through the communications media; books, films, television, newspapers and advertising. Moreover, in the same way those racist or sexist attitudes, whether implicit or explicit, are acquired through the 'normal' learning process, so too are negative assumptions about disabled people.

While the media alone cannot be held responsible for this alarming situation its impact cannot be overlooked. Official figures show that 98 per cent of British homes have a television, and on average we spend at least 24 and three quarter hours a week watching it. Sixty five per cent of the population read a daily newspaper, 72 per cent a Sunday newspaper, 9 per cent read magazines, and 81 per cent of the 26 per cent who use public libraries borrow books. Although there is some dispute about the level of influence the mass media has on our perceptions of the world, there are relatively few who would argue that it does not have any.

Disabled people have identified ten commonly recurring disabling stereotypes in the mass media. These include: the disabled person as pitiable and pathetic, as an object of curiosity or violence, as sinister or evil, as the super cripple, as atmosphere, as laughable, as her/his own worst enemy, as a burden, as non-sexual, and as being unable to participate in

daily life. These stereotypes are particularly evident on television, in the press, and in advertising.

### Television.

Apart from specialist programmes like the BBC's 'One in Four' and 'Same Difference' on Channel 4, disabled people are generally under represented on British television; but when they are it is usually in the context of one of the disabling stereotypes. In factual or current affairs programmes stories about disabled people are usually linked to medical treatment or the special achievements of disabled individuals - usually children. With one or two notable exceptions disabled people rarely appear in soaps or quiz shows. Their absence from mainstream programming coupled with the link between disability and medicine reinforces the widespread misconception that disabled people are ill and unable to participate in every day life.

In fictional programmes, the genre most likely to include disabled characters is crime and thriller films. They usually appear as criminals, monsters or powerless and pathetic victims. Recently screened examples include James Bond's arch rival 'Dr No' and 'What Ever Happened to Baby Jane' starring Bette Davis. In most cases disabled characters are introduced not because they are ordinary people but to suggest precisely the opposite.

### Newspapers.

Similar criticisms are applicable to the British press. The use of disablist language is common in newspapers, and not only in the tabloids, but also in the so called 'quality' papers. Terms like 'the disabled' and 'the handicapped' appear quite regularly despite campaigns by disability organizations to raise the awareness of journalists.

Reports about disabled people are usually featured for their sensation value rather than their accuracy. Common examples include items about the sexual impotency of recently disabled men, individuals who 'bravely manage' to achieve despite 'their handicap', and the non-disabled celebrity who understands the 'plight' of disabled people, or who is willing to make unprecedented personal sacrifices to help a particular charity. Individuals

with impairments are seen as legitimate fodder by a sensation hungry press eager for an easy story, and unwilling to consider the harm done to the public image of disabled people.

### The Advertising Industry.

There are at least two ways in which the advertising industry contributes to discrimination. Firstly, disabled people are excluded and in some instances deliberately ignored by mainstream advertisers and advertising agencies. Besides hiding disability from the general public this is a clear denial of disabled people's role as consumers. Secondly, some advertisers, notably charities, present a particularly distorted view of disability and disabled people to raise money. In both cases disabled people are the losers.

The depiction of disability in charity advertising is a major bone of contention for disabled people and their organizations. Images of the disabled person as pitiable and pathetic are still the most common in charity advertising. Moreover, despite vociferous protests from organizations of disabled people many charities continue to exploit them. Others focus on the 'courage and bravery' of individual 'super cripples'. Besides emphasizing the abnormality of the individuals concerned, this approach reinforces the perceived inadequacy of the rest of the disabled population. A more recent development in charity advertising is the stress on the 'abilities' rather than the 'disabilities', of disabled individuals - normal able-bodied attributes are emphasized while impairments are conveniently overlooked.

While this development might be seen as a step in the right direction it can achieve relatively little in terms of empowering disabled people. It is a clear denial of the status of disabled person and disabled culture, obscures the need for change, and perpetuates the impression that disabled people need to be supported by charitable organizations. The focus remains squarely on disabled people rather than on the disabling society in which we live; the very opposite of what is needed. The shift in emphasis, therefore, can be seen as little more than a shrewd marketing exercise by charities to conceal the fact that they themselves are a fundamental part of the disabling

process; normal able-bodied people do not depend on charity for life's necessities.

### Reducing Disabling Imagery in the Media.

The main problem with these and other disabling images is that they have been devised and produced by non-disabled people. Until very recently disabled people have had little or no say in how they are represented on television, in the press or in advertising.

A number of policy initiatives have emerged from the disability rights movement to rectify this situation. These include calls for more involvement of media personnel, particularly those in positions of authority, in disability equality training presented by disabled people, and a greater effort to recruit and train more disabled people to work in the media. Corporate awareness of disability related issues are likely to be less of a problem if disabled people are integrated at all levels into media organizations. Also, the BCODP has begun research to produce a set of guidelines to enable media personnel and advertisers avoid disablist imagery in the future. All those involved in the project are disabled people with a particular interest in disablist imagery and the media, all 82 BCODP member organizations have been formally invited to participate, and the findings will be published in 1992.

However, the impact of these initiatives is likely to be limited without the introduction of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation which: a/ provides a framework for policies which enable disabled people to integrate fully into the mainstream economic and social life of the community and; b/ sends a clear signal throughout British society that discrimination against disabled people is no longer acceptable.

Only when these policies have been implemented will the sentiments expressed in Paul Hunt's statement have less relevance.