Capturing Disability on Camera:
An Analysis of Disability Representation in Television Programming with a Focus on Canadian Regulatory Initiatives

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Abstract

In 2006, the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB) introduced the Equitable Portrayal Code; a non-voluntary code intended to assist private broadcasters in eliminating negative portrayals and stereotyping (CAB, 2007). The Code emerged in response to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission's (CRTC) request that the CAB spearhead the initiative to increase the presence, portrayal and participation of disabled people in television programming. This paper argues that while the Equitable Portrayal Code is a timely and much needed provision its efficacy is mired by several factors, including its lack of guidance on what constitutes a stereotypical portrayal. Drawing from critical disability theory, an in-depth analysis of four television programs aired during prime-time by Canadian broadcasters was conducted in order to illustrate how disability stereotypes are constructed. This paper concludes with recommendations directed to the community of Canadian Heritage, the Sub-Committee on the Status of Disabled Persons, the CRTC, and the CAB, aimed at strengthening the efficacy of the Equitable Portrayal Code.

Introduction

According to Statistics Canada (2007a), 4.4 million Canadians experience disability.[1] Though this figure represents a large segment of the population, disabled people are seldom represented in Canada's cultural landscape (Bremner 2008). Historically, disabled people have been consigned to the fringes of society by being denied many of their rights as citizens and the equal opportunity to participate in the

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[1] The Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS), a national survey designed to collect information on Canadians with disabilities, funded by Human Resources and Social Development Canada and conducted by Statistics Canada, "uses the World Health Organization's framework of disability provided by the International Classification of Functioning (ICF). This framework defines disability as the relationship between body structures and functions, daily activities and social participation, while recognizing the role of environmental factors. For the purpose of PALS, disabled people are those who reported experiencing difficulties with daily living activities, or who indicated that a physical, mental condition or health related problem reduced the kind or amount of activities they could do" (Statistics Canada 2007b).

social, political and economic fabric of Canada (Council of Canadians with Disabilities 2009). The injustices that disabled people routinely encounter stem, in part, from negative social attitudes and stereotypes that "medicalize, patronize, criminalize and dehumanize disabled people" (Barnes 1992 under "The Language of Disability"). According to Barnes, these stereotypes, which appear in the media "form the bed-rock on which the attitudes towards, assumptions about and expectations of disabled people are based (Barnes 1992 under "The Language of Disability").

In recognizing the occurrence of stereotypes in the media, it is worth considering the amount of public exposure. The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) reports that, on average, Canadians watch roughly 27 hours of television per week, which amounts to approximately 1,404 hours a year (CRTC 2008). In light of the amount of time people spend watching television, there has been a profusion of research that examines television effects. While traditional effects research tends to focus on violence,[2] more recently, a growing body of literature has emerged that takes a closer look at gender and racial portrayals.[3] Yet, despite the prevalence of disability, there is a dearth of literature that examines disability portrayals. Much of what is available is outdated and/or based on the findings produced by a content analysis. The tendency for scholars to concentrate on the frequency with which disability is portrayed in television has meant that little attention has been given to closely analyzing these portrayals according to storyline, language and character attitudes. This paper seeks to

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[2] See, for instance: Cline, Croft & Courrier (1973), Gerbner & Gross (1976), Huesmann, Lefkowitz & Walder (1972), Paik and Comstock (1994) and Sander (1997).

[3] See, for instance: Butler & Paisley (1980), Furnham & Mak (1999), Gillespie (1995), Gunter (1995), Li-Vollmer (2002), Mastro & Stern (2003), Streenland & Schmidt (1985) and Rada (2000).

attend to these elements by engaging in an in-depth analysis of four television programs aired by Canadian broadcasters during prime-time. This paper begins by examining recent regulatory initiatives aimed at increasing the presence, portrayal and participation of disabled people in television programming (CAB 2005). The argument raised suggests that while the Canadian Association of Broadcasters' (CAB) Equitable Portrayal Code is a timely and much needed provision its efficacy is mired by several factors, including its lack of guidance on what constitutes a stereotypical portrayal. The in-depth analysis seeks to address this issue by identifying disability stereotypes and deconstructing the ways in which disability is represented in recent television programming. This paper concludes with recommendations, directed to the community of Canadian Heritage, the Sub-Committee on the Status of Disabled Persons, the CRTC, and the CAB, aimed at strengthening the efficacy of the Equitable Portrayal Code.

Media effects/Cultivation theory

The idea that television impacts how we think or behave has been widely researched and debated amongst scholars in the field of media studies. Livingstone (1996) reports that since the 1920s, a large number of studies have emerged that seek to examine the effects of mass media. She notes that during this time, arguments that the mass media presents both "powerful effects" and "null effects" have been presented. Livingstone (1996) states that: "despite the volume of research, the debate about media effects -- whether it can be shown empirically that the specific mass media messages, typically those transmitted by television, have specific, often detrimental effects, on the audiences who are exposed to them -- remains unresolved" (Livingstone 1996, p. 305).

While the debate surrounding media effects continues, the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council (CBSC) acknowledges, on their website, that "broadcasters have the ability to influence opinion, modify attitudes and shape minds" (CBSC 2009). The CBSC posits that it is for this reason that "the industry created a system of *voluntary* codes that set high standards for all of their programming" (CBSC 2009 emphasis added).

When considering the effects of disability stereotypes in the media, cultivation theory can help to explain how even 'subtle' stereotypes could have a damaging effect on social perceptions toward disability. Cultivation theory rests on the notion that television gradually influences viewers' perceptions of reality through the shaping of attitudes and beliefs (Gerbner et al. 1980; Gerbner 1998). Gerbner et al. (1986) suggest that finding evidence against television effects is nearly impossible given that television has reached the point of saturation. The idea is that "even 'light' viewers live in the same cultural environment as most others, and what they do not get from the tube can be acquired indirectly from others who do watch television" (Gerbner et al. 1986, p. 21).

In addition to the amount of exposure, the argument for cultivation theory can be further enhanced by the concentration of media ownership. With the exception of Canada's public broadcaster, the Canadian Broadcast Corporation (CBC) and several provincial public and private educational broadcasters, broadcast media in Canada is owned by the five largest media companies (Lang 2008), which raises concerns regarding the potential for increasingly homogeneous perspectives. While the effects of television can never be absolute, the transmission of images, messages and information is nonetheless one dimensional. The one dimensional aspect of television combined with its tendency to depict stereotypes of disability as "representations of 'the real'" (Hall 1980,

p.149) is problematic on the grounds that it perpetuates and reinforces inaccurate presumptions that contribute to the discrimination and marginalization of disabled people. Removing disability stereotypes from the 'collective conscious of society' depends, in large part, on recognizing that the reality with which we live is often quite different from the 'reality' that television depicts.

Critical disability theory

Whereas cultivation theory is concerned with how accumulated exposure to television shapes society, critical disability theory is concerned with how society shapes disability. Mike Oliver is among a handful of British academics credited for spearheading disability scholarship. In his conceptualization of models of disability, Oliver (1990) makes a "binary distinction" between what he refers to as "the individual and social models of disability". The individual model for Oliver is underpinned by "the personal tragedy theory of disability" as well as "psychological and medical aspects of disability", which he refers to as the medicalization of disability (Oliver 1990 under "The Individual and Social Model of Disability")

According to Oliver, the individual model of disability, grounded within the field of medicine and rehabilitation, "locates the 'problem' of disability within the individual" and assumes that functional and psychological limitations are invariably caused by disability (Oliver 1990, under "Individual and Social Models"). Oliver posits that one of the reasons why the medicalization of disability is problematic is because it operates with the aim of restoring 'normality'. In response to the medical approach, disabled people are

beginning to challenge those institutional and professional arrangements and practices that operate according to principles of normalization (Oliver 1990).

By the 1980s, the social model of disability began to gain clout. Fundamental to the social model is the idea that disability is shaped by "social organization" through the "relationship of the individual to society" (Rioux and Valentine 2006, p. 49). Under this view, disability is considered a "difference rather than as an anomaly" and the onus to promote the inclusion of disabled people in society is considered a "public responsibility" (Rioux and Valentine 2006, p. 51). The social model is less concerned with the individualization of impairment and concentrates instead on the way that society considers, accommodates and accounts for impairment (Oliver 1990; Rioux and Valentine 2006). Adopting a purely medical approach to disability is detrimental in that it serves to absolve society from addressing accessibility and attitudinal barriers thereby fueling discriminatory and exclusionary practices. The emerging discourse surrounding the cause(s) of disability is important in order to generate constructive dialogue and challenge conceptions of disability that have long been viewed through a medical lens.

Regulating representation

In 2004, the CRTC emphasized that broadcasters have a role in both creating and reinforcing positive attitudes toward disabled people. At the time, the only code in place for monitoring and guiding portrayals was the Canadian Association of Broadcaster's (CAB), sex-role portrayal code. In *Public Notice 2004-2, Introduction to Broadcasting Decisions CRTC 2004-6 to 2004-27 renewing the licences of 22 specialty services*, the CRTC called upon all broadcasters "to incorporate disabled people into their cultural

diversity corporate planning" (CRTC 2004, para 53). In doing so, the CRTC assigned the CAB the task of developing an action plan (CRTC 2004).

By 2005, the CAB released a report entitled: *The Presence, Portrayal and Participation of Persons with Disabilities in Television Programming*. The report was based on a qualitative study conducted by CONNECTUS Consulting Inc. (CONNECTUS) and revealed that there was a lack of industry guidelines and standards in regards to the portrayal of disabled people in television programming. In light of the findings, the Sex-role Portrayal Code was changed to the Equitable Portrayal Code (CAB 2007). The Equitable Portrayal Code is a non-voluntary code intended to assist in eliminating "negative portrayals and stereotyping in broadcast programming … based on matters of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status or physical or mental disability" (CAB 2007 under "Statement of Intent"). The Code is also intended to provide guidance on matters pertaining to "human rights, negative portrayal, stereotyping, stigmatization and victimization, the derision of myths, traditions or practices, degrading material and exploitation" (CAB 2007 under "Statement of Intent").

Enforcing the Equitable Portrayal Code

While the Equitable Portrayal Code is a timely and a much needed provision, consideration and planning must also be given in regards to how broadcasters will be able to adhere to the Code's principles. Figures published by Statistics Canada in 2004, the same year that the CRTC raised the importance of addressing the issue of disability portrayals, revealed that 63 percent of Canadians' television viewing time is dedicated to

foreign programming (Statistics Canada 2008). This statistical figure supports previous research, which found that "audience measures consistently show that Canadian audiences prefer U.S. prime-time drama to the Canadian equivalent" (Attallah and Foster 2002, p. 221).

The high proportion of American programming can be attributed to issues pertaining to profitability. Canadian broadcasters can purchase American programs at a fraction of the cost of production (Attallah and Foster 2002). According to Attallah and Foster (2002), producing a Canadian program may cost ten times as much as purchasing the rights to broadcast an American program. Adding to this financial disparity is the fact that advertising revenue is generally not as lucrative for Canadian programming as it is for American programming. Thus, Canadian programming "is often produced at a loss" of revenue (Attallah and Foster 2002, p. 220). The predominance of American programming, coupled by the fact that there is presently no American equivalent of the Equitable Portrayal Code, raises concerns about the feasibility of the CRTC and the CAB's initiative to promote the presence, portrayal and participation of disabled people in television programming. The CRTC's current Canadian Content (CanCon) regulations stipulate that 60 percent of programming broadcast between 6:00am and midnight, and 50 percent of programming aired between 6:00pm and midnight "must be of Canadian origin" (CRTC 2009a). However, broadcasters and networks can fulfill these requirements by producing low-cost Canadian programs that are scheduled outside prime-time hours so as not to hinder profitability (Attallah and Foster 2002).

An article that appeared in the Financial Post on April 30, 2009 reported that in approaching the CRTC about renewing its licence for a one year term, CanWest Global

requested "relief from certain conditions that its TV licence carries, such as, how much Canadian-produced drama to run and standardized local programming requirements throughout its chain" (Vieira, 2009). Two weeks following this request, the CRTC announced that it would grant one-year licence renewals to four private conventional broadcasters, including CanWest Global, without imposing "a condition on English-language broadcasters requiring a 1-to-1 ratio between Canadian and non-Canadian programming expenditures." The CRTC remarked that imposing this condition would "not be practical for the upcoming broadcast year, given the sector's production timelines and the programming commitments that were already in place." The CRTC maintained that it "will continue to explore various regulatory measures to ensure that English-language television broadcasters devote an appropriate proportion of their expenditures to Canadian programming" (CRTC 2009b under "Canadian Programming Expenditures"). Even so, existing regulations appear to be ineffective in promoting Canadian content and allow for a significant portion of American programming to be broadcast on Canadian networks.

Another issue that arises is that of unintentional non-compliance. While the CRTC recognizes that industry codes provide guidance when the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council (CBSC) adjudicates complaints about matters such as stereotypical or negative portrayals,[4] the Equitable Portrayal Code does not actually explicitly identify stereotypes or offer examples of negative portrayals that should be counteracted or

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[4] Neither the CRTC nor the CAB responds directly to public concerns or complaints regarding industry codes. This function is handled by the CBSC, "which is an independent, non-governmental organization, created by the CAB [and approved by the CRTC] to administer standards established by its members. The Council's membership includes more than 700 private sector radio and television stations, specialty services and networks from across Canada" (CBSC 2009).

avoided. This inevitably leads to confusion for broadcasters (and viewers) about what is considered to be a stereotypical and negative portrayal. In providing guidance about stereotyping, the Equitable Portrayal Code simply states the following:

> Recognizing that stereotyping is a form of generalization that is frequently simplistic, belittling, hurtful or prejudicial, while being unreflective of the complexity of the group being stereotyped, broadcasters shall ensure that their programming contains no unduly negative stereotypical material or comment which is based on matters of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status or physical or mental disability (CAB 2007).

What is absent from this clause is a clear definition of what constitutes "unduly negative stereotypical material or comment". Similarly, in providing guidance on negative portrayals the Code states:

> In an effort to ensure appropriate depictions of all individuals and groups, broadcasters shall refrain from airing unduly negative portrayals of persons with respect to race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status or physical or mental disability. Negative portrayal can take many different forms, including (but not limited to) stereotyping, stigmatization and victimization, derision of myths, traditions or practices, degrading material, and exploitation (CAB 2007).

As it stands, the Equitable Portrayal Code offers little guidance on actually defining negative portrayals leaving decisions on such matters open to the discretion of individual broadcasters. While the above clause indicates that negative portrayals may, for instance, take the form of stereotyping, it does not give examples of stereotypes or offer guidance on how they can be avoided.

Lastly, the enforceability of the Code is questionable, in part, because it fails to outline consequential repercussions for broadcasters who breach equitable standards. While the CBSC has the authority to make decisions when viewers initiate complaints

about stereotypical and negative portrayals, without the accompaniment of a penalty, these decisions, on their own, fail to deter broadcasters from breaching industry codes.

The national chair of the CBSC, Ron Cohen, maintains that the Equitable Portrayal Code is non-voluntary, enforceable and a condition of licence for all broadcasters. In principle, a broadcaster could lose their licence if they continuously fail to comply with the Code (Bremner 2008). However, as the in-depth analysis in the latter part of this paper illustrates, despite the existence of the Code, broadcasters are still airing programs that reflect negative portrayals and stereotypes.

It is worth noting that because the CRTC is an administrative body established by Parliament to regulate broadcasting in Canada, it could be argued, in theory, that since it receives statutory powers by the government to issue broadcast licences to private broadcasters the private broadcasters in turn are subject to the provisions of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms.* Accordingly, it might be possible to raise a s. 15(1) *Charter* claim against a broadcaster for discriminatory representation in the media.[5] Recently, in R v. Kapp (2008), the Supreme Court of Canada held that section 15's "central concern" is "combating discrimination, defined in terms of perpetuating disadvantage and stereotyping" (*R. v. Kapp* 2008, para 24). However, a critical question that has yet to be dealt with in case law is whether negative stereotyping in the media could be grounds for

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[5] S. 15(1) stipulates the following: "Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability" (*Charter* s. 15.1).

a s. 15(1) *Charter* claim, or whether such a claim would ultimately be denied on the grounds that it is an "abstract" and "subjective" component of human dignity.[6]

Further, complicating the use of the *Charter* to promote the Equitable Portrayal Code is s. 2(b), which guarantees the fundamental "freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication." Hypothetically, if the Court were to recognize the infringement of s. 15(1) through stereotypical portrayals of disability in television programming, it could ultimately be saved under s. 1 as the Court could allow s. 2(b) to take precedence. While this discussion is purely speculative, it is nonetheless worth considering as a potential, mechanism for the enforcement of non-voluntary industry codes aimed at eliminating negative and stereotypical portrayals. However, in recognizing that private broadcasters oppose regulation and advocate for a system of self-regulation, more should ultimately be done by the CAB and CBSC to ensure the enforceability and efficacy of industry codes at the regulatory level.

Established disability stereotypes

While disabled people make up the world's largest minority at 650 million, their limited presence in television fails to reflect this (United Nations 2006; Broverman 2008). In looking at the issue of disability inclusion in Hollywood, Broverman (2008) refers to a study commissioned by the Screen Actors Guild of America (SAG) in 2005, which

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[6] In *R. v. Kapp* (2008), the Court acknowledged that a number of issues have emerged in attempting to apply 'human dignity' as a legal test. The Court stated the following: "…human dignity is an abstract and subjective notion that …cannot only become confusing and difficult to apply; it has also proven to be an *additional* burden on equality claimants, rather than the philosophical enhancement it was intended to be" (*R. v. Kapp* 2008, para 22, emphasis in original).

revealed that "less than 2 percent of TV show characters display a disability and only 0.5 percent have speaking roles" (Screen Actors Guild 2005). This figure is at odds with the number of Americans that experience disability. According to US census data for 2005, the total household population was 288 million. Of this, 15 percent, or over 43 million, reported a disability (US Census Bureau 2005).[7]

In reviewing some of the empirical literature that examines disability and television, an emerging theme that surfaces concerns limited presence of disability. Nelson (2003) reports on a study conducted by Donaldson (1981) in 1979 that found that out of a sample comprised of 85 half-hour American prime-time television programs, disabled characters were only occasionally depicted in major roles and "seldom appeared in incidental roles" (Nelson 2003, p. 10). Nelson reports that "in the entire study, not one handicapped character appeared in a minor role except in juxtaposition to other handicapped characters" and that disabled characters did not exist "among the thousands of people in the background" (Nelson 2003, p. 10).

When disability is portrayed in television, it is often presented in a stereotypical manner. Nelson (2003) illustrates the pattern of stereotypes that label disabled people and the myths that are perpetuated. In documenting recurrent themes that surfaced in programming that included disabled characters, he found that some of the most common depictions include the disabled person as vulnerable and as a victim as depicted in telethons, the disabled person as a hero or 'supercrip', the disabled person as a violent threat, the disabled person as difficult, the disabled person as dependent and the disabled person as tragic (Nelson 2003, pp. 176-180).

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[7] This figure is likely higher since those under the age of 5 were not included.

In the qualitative study conducted by CONNECTUS on behalf of the CAB, a number of participants expressed concern with regards to the perpetuation of myths and echoed Nelson's (2003) pattern of stereotypes. According to several respondents, disabilities that are less visible, such as mental illness, are portrayed in ways that perpetuate "fear-inducing" stereotypes (CAB 2005). One participant implied that the tendency for violence to be committed by mentally ill characters contributes to the notion that mentally ill individuals are dangerous (CAB 2005). Wahl and Roth (1982) reported the same depiction of violence being associated with mental illness and observed that confusion and aggression were also associated with mentally ill characters. Similarly, a study conducted by Signorielli in 1989 that looked at 17 samples of dramatic programming found that negative and stigmatized depictions of mental illness were frequent. Signorielli reported that 72.1 percent of mentally ill characters in prime-time dramas were portrayed as violent (versus 41.6 percent of all adult major characters) and noted, for example, that 21.6 percent of the mentally ill characters committed murder (Signorielli 1989, p. 327). A study conducted eight years later by Diefenbach (1997) showed some improvement and revealed that of the 184 programs analyzed, 33.9 percent of the characters depicted as mentally ill were portrayed as violent (Diefenbach 1997, p. 293). A more recent study conducted by Diefenbach and West (2007) found that out of the 84 hours of prime time programming that was examined, 29 characters were identified as having a mental illness. Of this figure, 11 were depicted as violent committing a combined total of 38 offences, including 13 murders (Diefenbach and West 2007 p. 187). Diefenbach and West also found that characters with mental illness are 10 times more likely to be portrayed violent than those without mental illness (Diefenbach

and West 2007, p.181). A comparison of these studies suggests that while mentally ill characters portrayed as violent are beginning to decline, the number is still grossly disproportionate to non-mentally ill characters as well as to the actual mentally ill population. Contrary to stereotypes that associate mental illness with violence, the Canadian Mental Health Association reports that "people with mental illness are far more likely to be victims of crime, than perpetrators" (Canadian Mental Health Association 2010 under "#5. The Victims of Violence"). In returning for a moment to cultivation theory, it is worth noting that in the same study, Diefenbach and West (2007) found that 58 percent of survey participants believed that negative portrayals of mentally ill characters affect the attitudes of viewers about mental illness (Diefenbach and West 2007, p. 193).

When the focus shifted from dramatic programming to news, a shared concern that was expressed among the participants in the CONNECTUS study was the use of "insensitive language [that] perpetuates stereotyping of persons with disabilities as somehow afflicted with a condition that victimizes and medicalizes their status" by describing them, for example, as "suffering from an affliction", "overcoming a disability", or as being "confined to a wheelchair" (CAB 2005). CONNECTUS noted one participant's observation that news stories presenting disabled people tend to focus on "tragedy, victimization, or criminality." Another participant observed that news coverage is often centered on the "hyper-accomplishments" or "heroism" of disabled people (CAB 2005 under "Portrayal of Persons with Disabilities – News Programming").

Positive effects of disability portrayals

In addition to its aim of eliminating negative stereotypes of disability, the argument for strengthening the efficacy of the Equitable Portrayal Code can also be supported by examining the impact of positive portrayals of disability. Byrd and Elliott (1984) conducted two interrelated studies that assessed the extent to which exposure to portrayals of disability shapes attitudes toward disabled people. One group of eighth graders watched an episode that depicted a blind character whereas a second group watched an episode that did not feature a character with a disability. When comparing the attitudes between the two groups, Byrd and Elliott found that there were little if any significant changes. However, the study found that those in the third group who watched an educational film about blindness had "significantly altered attitudes". This was also the case in the second study, which was comprised of college males. Byrd and Elliott suggest that "the [educational] film was effective because it provided information that would facilitate better interaction thus reducing anxiety in persons without disabilities" (Bryd and Elliott 1984).

The findings by Byrd and Elliott (1984) are supported by Farnall and Smith (1999) who report that positive portrayals of disability in television can lead to "more positive perceptions and feelings towards those with disabilities" (Farnall and Smith 1999, p. 670). Farnall and Smith find that increased exposure to positive portrayals could help foster "greater understanding, sensitivity and comfort" among the public (Farnall and Smith 1999, p. 670). Byrd and Elliott (1984) and Farnall and Smith (1999) illustrate the critical role that television can play in either sustaining or reshaping negative attitudes and lend support to cultivation theory.

Methods and sampling

While a number of studies have documented the frequency with which disability is presented on television, understanding how to evaluate the depiction is necessary in order to truly advance positive portrayals. Guided by the theoretical framework of critical disability theory, an in-depth analysis of four prime-time television programs was conducted. Elements such as storyline, use of language, and character attitudes were examined through a social model lens in order to identify negative stereotypes and to illustrate how the depiction of disability was problematic and how it could have been more positively portrayed. Purposive sampling was used to establish a repertoire of four television episodes with which to inform the analysis. The key selection criteria were episodes that depicted disability within the central storyline and episodes that were current at the time of the analysis with air dates following the advent of the Equitable Portrayal Code. The final criteria were episodes that fell within the genres of news or dramatic programming. According to Statistics Canada (2008), news and dramatic programming receive the largest viewership among Canadians. For the purpose of conducting an in-depth analysis, honing in on these two genres offered a useful starting point.

In recognizing that CanCon regulations allow for a substantial amount of foreign programming to occupy prime-time viewing on Canadian networks, most of which is American (Attallah and Foster 2002), this analysis is not limited to Canadian programs, but examines programming that is aired in prime-time on Canadian networks. Thus, both Canadian and American programs have been included and analyzed. It is prudent to note that this analysis is not intended to compare American portrayals against Canadian

portrayals as a larger sample size would be required in order to establish rigour and to develop a valid pattern of depictions. Nor does this analysis attempt to investigate the prevalence of stereotypes. Instead, the aim is to illustrate how we can begin to identify the elements that contribute to stereotypical depictions. Diverting from the traditional content analysis approach and engaging in an in-depth analysis offers a better understanding of how the intersection of plot development, language and character attitudes lead to the construction of negative stereotypes and how these elements can be used to generate positive portrayals. Such an analysis is useful in order to better understand the intention and hindered efficacy of the Equitable Portrayal Code.

Positively autistic

On October 27, 2008, CBC The National aired *Positively Autistic*, a segment that documented the perspectives of adults with autism and the mother of a young child with autism and prompted the viewer to question whether autism is really a disorder or just a neurological difference. The program revealed that life with autism is not a tragedy or mental deficit, but a different way of interacting within space and a different way of internalizing information and communicating. One of the individuals featured on the show was Amanda Baggs. She writes her own blog and produces videos, which she posts on You Tube. In explaining how she experiences and views autism, Baggs remarks that it bothers her to hear autism described as a tragedy and points out that "it's one of the oldest disability stereotypes in general" (Baggs in CBC, 2008). Baggs does not consider autism to be a lack or deficit. She seems to subscribe to the social model in stating that "disability is the intersection of certain forms of human difference and society's failure to plan for

certain forms of human difference thereby rejecting individuals that have different needs"
(Baggs in CBC 2008). Baggs illustrates the capabilities that those with autism can have.
She notes, for example, that she learned to create videos without being taught and
explains how she records and then downloads footage to her computer and uses a variety
of programs to convert the files, edit and caption them and then convert the footage to a
file that can be uploaded online (CBC 2008). In one particular video, Baggs demonstrates
how the majority of people can identify colours, but cannot identify a musical note just
from hearing it. She shows that she can do both instantly and that to her they "seem
logical to both be part of the same skill, which is identifying the frequency range of light
or sound" (Baggs in CBC 2008). For Baggs, it is the same yet she recognizes that for
others it is different. When questioned about independence, Baggs remarks that "anyone
who believes they are truly independent is fooling themselves." She elaborates:

> Nobody is truly independent. Everyone is dependent on
> each other and many parts of the disability community are
> quite aware of that in ways that most people are not. And
> to us, the thing is why is it that some kinds of dependence
> are so invisible to people that they're called independence
> where a lot of kinds are considered dependence and
> considered something awful for it. Why is it that I am not
> considered to live independently because I can't cook for
> myself, but other people are considered to live
> independently if they can't fix their computers (Baggs in
> CBC 2008).

This quote is profound in that it challenges what it means to be independent and reinforces
the idea that disability may be arbitrarily defined and understood by preconceived notions
of what independence should look like. This episode was successful in defying disability
stereotypes and in illustrating the merit of the social model by portraying autism through
the vantage point of those who have direct experience. The questions that Baggs were
asked were constructed in such a way that served to challenge and address negative

stereotypes that label autism as a deficit. CBC did not challenge the views that were expressed by the individuals featured on the program and actually seemed to promote the view that autism is a neurological difference by titling the episode "Positively Autistic" and by prompting the individuals featured on the program to elaborate on their views and experience living with autism.

Challenging the (in)dependence of the blind in journalistic programming

Another notable journalistic segment that questioned social attitudes about disability was an episode of ABC's *What would you do?* produced by Ann Sorkowitz. The premise of the program is that unknown actors are hired to behave a particular way in public in the presence of unsuspecting people who are being filmed by a hidden camera. The idea is to create awkward scenarios in order to capture public responses and learn how individuals react in certain situations. In an episode that aired on January 27, 2009 entitled "Stealing from the Blind", ABC hired a blind actress and a blind actor to walk into a bakery on separate occasions and purchase a cake. The clerk behind the counter was also a hired actor. In the segment, the clerk makes derogatory and offensive comments toward the blind customers. He begins by asking with a sarcastic tone; "would Helen Keller step up to the front please?" before he takes her order he asks; "do you have like a seeing eye dog or something?" (Sorkowitz 2009). At one point he asks the blind woman "Are you deaf too? I told you three times" (Sorkowitz 2009). In addition to offending the blind customers he also attempts to shortchange them. The reactions from patrons varied. Some openly expressed outrage and defended the blind actors by informing them that they were being shortchanged. One woman actually turns to the clerk

and makes the following remark: "You're acting like a total idiot in front of her. She's not a handicap" (Sorkowitz 2009). Another woman informs the clerk that she once worked with individuals who educated people about "how to deal with people with disabilities". Another patron, who claimed to be a psychologist, remarks that the clerk is the one with the disability (Sorkowitz 2009). When challenged by another patron the clerk defends himself: "Man I can see, she's the one who's blind" (Sorkowitz 2009). However, not all of the patrons defended the blind actors. In fact, with the exception of one customer, the patrons only came to the defence of the blind actors when they were being shortchanged (Sorkowitz 2009).

Having witnessed the scene unfold on video with the host John Quiñones, Caroline Keating, a Professor of Psychology at Colgate University, explains: "Many people are hesitant to intervene in situations where handicapped people look like they may need help" (Sorkowitz 2009). Keating attributes this to people's general reluctance to challenge ideas of independence. What is problematic with Keating's remark, as well as some of the remarks made by the defensive patrons, was the use of pejorative terms such as "handicap" and "idiot." Ironically, one patron defends the blind woman by proclaiming that she is "not a handicap" before Keating generally refers to the blind actors as "handicapped persons." Another patron's remark, while made with good intentions, implied that disabled people needed to be "dealt with", which reinforces historical associations of disabled people as burdens to society. This segment attempted to uncover social attitudes toward blind people. Yet, in doing so, the producers portrayed the blind actors as vulnerable by placing them in a situation whereby their independence was challenged. Similarly, the unsuspecting patrons were placed in a position whereby

they were called upon to help the blind patrons thus reinforcing the stereotype that disabled people are dependent upon others.

Despite the ethical issues concerning the deceptive tactics that this program employs,[8] this particular segment is encouraging in that the responses from the unsuspecting customers seemed to suggest that the public generally opposes discriminatory attitudes directed toward disabled people. However, it remains doubtful that this episode portrayed disability in a positive light, in part, because the blind actors were ultimately placed in an inferior role. It is also questionable as to whether this segment was an accurate depiction of disability due to the blatant level of discrimination exerted by the clerk, which seemed too exaggerated to be realistic especially for an individual employed in a customer service role. The clerk's outlandish behaviour was presented in a realist light to viewers thereby suggesting that public attitudes toward disabled people are characterized by overt discrimination. The reality is that discrimination often occurs at a covert level.

Debates about deafness as a disability or a culture in a medical drama

In shifting the focus to dramatic programming, the following discussion begins with an analysis of an episode of the American medical drama *House* produced by Fox and airing in Canada on Global. The show stars Hugh Laurie as Dr. Gregory House, known simply as House. House has an impaired leg and uses a cane. He experiences chronic pain and is addicted to prescription pain medication. House defeats the helpless/dependent category of disability stereotypes in that he is a prominent and

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[8] At one point the host, John Quiñones, refers to ABC's social experiment as a "con game" inadvertently indicating that it lacks validity and ethical standards that frame legitimate studies.

successful diagnostician. Yet, he does fall into the miserable category. He is callous and manipulative toward his team and patients, yet determined to solve seemingly impossible medical cases. In an episode that aired on April 27 2009, written by David Shore and Matthew V Lewis, House and his team investigate the mysterious symptoms of a Deaf teenager named Seth.

During a medical procedure, House instructs his team to insert a cochlear implant without Seth's consent. Before doing so, he rationalizes his choice on the grounds that, in not being able to hear, Seth has no idea what he is missing. When Seth awakes from surgery he is disturbed by all the sounds in his environment. It is too much for his brain to process and he is clearly in a state of distress. Seth's mother initially appears upset and orders the cochlear implant to be removed. With his typical ring of sarcasm, House exclaims that he will blind Seth too if he wants to experience the blind culture. House recognizes Seth's mother's ambivalence and remarks that she really wants her son to hear and that she just "didn't have the guts to make him get the implant" (Shore and Lewis 2009). When approached by the Chief of Staff as to why he inserted the cochlear implant House remarks: "because he's ignorant and being raised by an idiot. My patient is opting into a handicap. It's an insult to all the other gimps out there" (Shore and Lewis 2009). Meanwhile, Seth's girlfriend, who is also deaf, attempts to explain to him that the cochlear implant will open up a whole new world, but Seth continues to resist it. He is disturbed to hear his girlfriend speak and recognizes that her speech is different to that of everyone else. Later, House enters Seth's room to find him being restrained by nurses. He has ripped out the cochlear implant. Seth's mother informs her son that she is going to permit the doctors to repair it. Seth rebukes his mother's authority: "But you always said

that was my decision" (Shore and Lewis 2009). She responds by noting that he ripped the implant out after only a few days and did not give it a chance. The issue closes with her making the following remark: "I'm the mother. It's my call. I don't know if I'm making the right one, but it's mine to make" (Shore and Lewis 2009).

While it is commendable that the writers incorporated the debate about deafness as a culture or disability into the plot, this really was the extent of their laudable contribution. There were a number of troubling issues with the depiction of deafness in this episode. The first was that deafness was ultimately viewed under the individual model in that Seth's inability to hear was considered a deficit. According to Kyle (1990), a professor of Deaf studies at the University of Bristol, the oppression of Deaf people can be understood according to "closeness or distance from hearing norms" (Kyle 1990, p. 11). Kyle indicates that there is a prevalent notion that opportunities and advancement in life requires acceptance that social structures within society are largely shaped by hearing people and that it is therefore 'necessary' for Deaf people to "accept hearingness" (Kyle 1990, p. 11). He notes that the Deaf culture has historically been challenged and oppressed through social practices aimed at eradicating and 'normalizing' the Deaf through oral language (Kyle 1990, p. 5).

What was absent from this episode was the recognition of the historical treatment toward the Deaf in America and the oralist movement that was viewed by the Deaf as attempts to eradicate sign language and intended "to cut the tie between the past and the present thereby leaving Deaf people without historic roots" (Burch 2002, p. 55). In her account of the oralist movement, Burch (2002) explains that by the turn of the twentieth century, scientists and medical practitioners developed hearing tests and hearing aids in

an effort to detect, prevent and cure deafness thereby lending support to the initiative of pure oral training. She states that the medical community and oralist supporters both "sought to normalize Deaf people according to mainstream values." The shared view was that "enabling the Deaf to talk and, ideally, to hear better would supposedly restore them to the broader world" (Burch 2002, p. 13). This notion was reinforced in this episode when Seth's girlfriend remarked that the cochlear implant that was forced upon him would open him to a whole new world.

The notion of deafness as a disability under the individual model still widely exists in mainstream society as this episode of House illustrates. In addition to viewing deafness under a pathological lens, and failing to recognize the history of oppression caused by attempts to mainstream and 'cure' deaf people, this episode also contained dialogue that relied on the use of derogatory terms such as "handicap", "idiot" and "gimp." At one point, while observing Seth communicate with his girlfriend in sign language from outside his room, House makes the dehumanizing remark that watching them is "like the zoo except you can bang on the glass as much as you want" (Lewis, Shore, and Yaitanes 2009).

Finally, what is troubling about this episode is that it ends on the note that deafness should be cured and discredits the autonomy of the Deaf character. Seth was 17 years old and yet his autonomy to make the decision as to whether or not to have the cochlear implant was denied by his mother and the medical doctors assigned to his case. This episode did little to challenge stereotypes of deafness. While it presented arguments against mainstreaming and normalizing through the vantage point of Seth, the conclusion

may have the detrimental impact of suggesting that medicalizing and mainstreaming the Deaf is acceptable and for their own good.

Medicalizing mobility impairment in a teen drama

The final program examined is an episode of the Canadian teenage drama *Degrassi: The Next Generation.* This program follows the daily lives of a group of teenagers that attend Degrassi High, a fictional high school in Toronto, Ontario. The episode that is included in this analysis is entitled *Broken Wings.* It appears in season seven and revolves around the character of Jimmy who acquired a physical disability in season four. The episode opens with Jimmy in the gymnasium sitting in his wheelchair fantasizing about making the winning shot in a basketball game. His facial expression indicates that he feels discouraged and unhappy about his disability. In the next scene, Jimmy arrives for physiotherapy and is greeted by his girlfriend, Ashley. Here, he learns that another patient, who only two months prior was using a wheelchair, is now able to walk after stem cell surgery. When Ashley tells him that she too is going to have stem cell surgery Jimmy decides that he also wants to undergo the procedure. The next scene shows Jimmy bumping into a wall with his wheelchair in an attempt to turn around a corner.

In frustration Jimmy makes the following remark: "seriously man I'm done with this wheelchair" (Moore, Santamaria and Schuyler 2008). Another scene shows Jimmy and Ashley talking about their future together. When the topic turns to possibly living together in New York City Ashley makes the following comment: "walking through Central Park won't be as much fun if I have to push you in a wheelchair" (Moore et al,

2008). This comment perpetuates the idea of disabled people as burdensome and dependant. It is only when Jimmy's mother agrees with his decision to undergo stem cell treatment that his frustration and discontent dissolves into relief and optimism.

There are a number of elements at play in this episode that draw upon disability stereotypes. Unlike the character of Seth portrayed in the episode of *House*, Jimmy had an impairment that affected his mobility and one that was acquired later in life. He was forced to contend with the transition from being able-bodied to being disabled. In this, the viewer sees Jimmy grapple with not being able to play basketball with the use of his legs. The viewer also witnesses Jimmy's struggles with the built environment. When Jimmy bumped into the corner while navigating through a crowded hallway, his immediate reaction was to get rid of the wheelchair thus implying that the wheelchair was the problem and was disabling rather than a device that enabled him to be independent. This reinforces the individual model in that, while it was not explicitly stated, it was suggested that Jimmy needed to be 'fixed' in order to be able to abandon the wheelchair to get around easier and regain his independence.

If this scene were written from a social model perspective, Jimmy might have remarked on the inadequate design of the architecture that rendered it difficult to move with a wheelchair. Notwithstanding the fact that Jimmy's focus on restoring the use of his legs by undergoing stem cell treatment reflected the individual model, the depiction of unhappiness and his general feeling of 'lacking' is not necessarily inaccurate. Indeed, there may be a lengthy process in adjusting to a newly acquired disability and this certainly should not be overlooked. What was problematic about this episode was that all of the disabled characters desired medical treatment in order to restore them to a previous

state of 'normalcy'. This particular portrayal of disability might have been more positive and accurate if a capable and content character in a wheelchair was included. As a result of this omission, the viewer was only exposed to the individual model viewpoint that disability should be treated and cured. Despite Jimmy's remark that he would be okay if the stem cell treatment was not successful, the urgency in his desire to undergo the risky treatment in order to no longer be disabled suggests otherwise.

This episode bears a number of similarities to the episode of *House.* Both portray teenage males with disabilities. Both disabled characters have girlfriends with disabilities, which serves to challenge myths and stereotypes that disabled people are not sexual beings, and both programs portray disability within the individual model as something that must be ameliorated and cured. The fundamental difference between these depictions is that one deals with a recently acquired disability whereas the other depicts a disability that was acquired very early in life. Another difference was that the character who acquired his disability later in life desired medical treatment in order to return to his previous physiological state, whereas the other character did not wish to reverse his condition. A final difference worth noting was that the character who acquired his disability had the autonomy to make the decision to pursue medical treatment, whereas the other character was denied his autonomy and forced to undergo medical attempts to 'cure' his disability. In *Degrassi: The Next Generation,* the medicalization of disability was, for the most part, supported and seen as something positive in that it could enable the lead character to be restored to his previous physical state. Yet, in the episode of *House*, the medicalization of disability was a viewpoint that appeared to be presented

with ambivalence in that while the doctors promoted medical treatment, the character with the disability resisted medical attempts to reverse his deafness.

Summary

Taken together, these four programs shed light on disability portrayals in television programming. While three of the programs depicted negative stereotypes there was some evidence of positive portrayals. Conducting this analysis through a social model lens has revealed the important role that storyline, language and character attitudes play in the construction of negative stereotypes. While it is impossible to draw definitive conclusions of disability portrayals from these four programs alone, this analysis has shown that the two journalistic programs, CBC more so than ABC, were more attuned to challenging preconceived notions of disability than the two dramas. This could be attributed to the inclusion and participation of disabled people.[9] The episode of *CBC The National*, for instance, seemed to challenge notions of autism as a neurological disorder by enabling the voice of autistic people, who subscribe to the social model of disability and consider autism a neurological difference, to be heard. In contrast to the portrayal of disability on the CBC segment, the two dramatic episodes appear to reflect disability stereotypes primarily through the promotion of the individual model of disability. While the episode of *House* did raise the question of whether deafness was a disability or a culture, the use of derogatory terms and expressions as well as the direction of the storyline ultimately failed to represent deafness and disability positively.

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[9] The differences in portrayal between the journalistic programs and dramatic programs might also be attributed to journalistic policy that provides guidelines on appropriate use of language and coverage, although, as evidenced by the use of derogatory terms in the episode of ABC's *What Would You Do?,* such guidelines may not necessarily present a substantial impact.

Recommendations

Current CanCon regulations allow for a significant amount of American programs, which are not produced according to the guidelines of the Equitable Portrayal Code, to be broadcast on Canadian networks. In order to address the impact that current CanCon regulations pose for equitable portrayals in television programming, the community of Canadian Heritage[10] and the Sub-Committee on the Status of Disabled Persons[11] might consider lobbying for targeted incentive funding on the production side. Targeted incentive funding could be allocated from the Canadian Media Fund[12], which will be implemented in the fiscal year 2010-2011. The CMF seeks to "foster the

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[10] "Canadian Heritage is responsible for national policies and programs that promote Canadian content, foster cultural participation, active citizenship and participation in Canada's civic life, and strengthen connections among Canadians" (Canadian Heritage 2009).

[11] The Sub-Committee presents recommendations to the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills Development, Social Development and the Status of Disabled persons.

[12] In March 2009, the Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, the Honourable James Moore, announced that the Canadian Television Fund (CTF) and the Canada New Media Fund (CNMF) "will be combined, reformed and rebranded as the Canada Media Fund (CMF) through a renewed partnership with the industry. The mandate of the CMF will be to ensure the production of quality content and to make it available on multiple platforms … The funds announced for the broadcasting and new media sectors in the 2009 Budget will be combined and joined through this partnership with the industry. By adding an ongoing allocation of $20.4 million to this funding each year, the Government will contribute a total of $134.7 million annually to support the production of Canadian programming through the work of Canadian producers over the next two years" (Canadian Heritage 2009).

development of cutting-edge applications and content to drive innovation back into the mainstream forms of content" (Canadian Heritage 2009). The Fund aims to support primarily drama, comedy, and children's programming and strives to "ensure the best use of the creative sector by promoting a strong Canadian presence through the predominant use of Canadian creative talent, including writers, directors, and performers" (Canadian Heritage 2009). Accordingly, incentive funding could be based on a portrayal monitoring framework that involves meeting disability portrayal goals in Canadian produced television programming. In addition to rewarding broadcasters that fulfill these goals, the fund could also be allocated to educate the Canadian production sector on equitable programming at all levels including writers, directors and performers.[13] However, in recognizing that Canadians enjoy watching American programming, increasing the amount spent on producing Canadian content is not a stand alone solution to increasing the efficacy of the Equitable Portrayal Code. Since Canadian viewers and Canadian networks value American programming, the CRTC and the CAB might consider liaising with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) on establishing equitable standards for American produced programming. This could help to ensure that the American television shows that Canadian networks purchase reflect equitable portrayals.

In addition to increasing funding on the production side and liaising with the FCC, it is crucial that the CAB follow up on the 2005 qualitative study carried out by CONNECTUS by conducting, or commissioning, a comprehensive content analysis carried out over a one-year span that not only measures the frequency of disability portrayals in American and Canadian programming, but also closely examines these portrayals through an in-depth analysis to assess whether they perpetuate or counter

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[13] See, for instance, the recommendations proposed by the CAB (2005) under "Measuring Progress".

disability stereotypes. An important component of this research would be the inclusion of Canadian viewership ratings for both American and Canadian programs included in the study. These ratings, which can be obtained by the Bureau of Broadcasting Measurement (BBM), are essential in order to gauge the extent to which the prevalence of American programming hinders the success of the Equitable Portrayal Code.

Conclusion

Existing literature suggests that disability tends to be portrayed within an established set of negative and inaccurate stereotypes that tend to pathologize disability. The in-depth analysis of four programs aired during prime-time by Canadian broadcasters has shown some evidence of the emergence of more positive portrayals. Even so, the predominance of negative stereotypes and inaccuracies is disconcerting. The CAB's establishment of the Equitable Portrayal Code, aimed at addressing negative portrayals in television programming, has the potential to play an integral role in eliminating stereotypes by providing clear guidelines to broadcasters, producers and the public about acceptable content. However, as it currently stands, the efficacy of the Equitable Portrayal Code is hindered by current CanCon regulations that allow for a substantial amount of American programming to be aired by Canadian broadcasters and by the lack of enforceability and explicit guidance as to what constitutes a negative and stereotypical portrayal. This paper endeavoured to illustrate that by closely examining television programming through a social model lens we can begin to understand how disability stereotypes are constructed through the development and direction of storyline, the use of

language, and character attitudes. How disability is captured on camera in the future

might ultimately depend on how disability is viewed on television today.

Acknowledgements

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