

Challenging Disabling Images

A new national research project has been set up to explore ways in which images of disability are created and used in the mass media.

The project will also investigate the impact of those images on people with disabilities. It will explore the strategies that people with disabilities might be able to use to overcome social barriers, and to participate more fully in the decisions that influence their lives. The project, which has just started, will run for three years. It is called Disability, Representation and Social participation.

The researchers hope that the project will have a number of practical outcomes. One may be to work with disability organisations, the media industry and policy makers on drafting good practice guidelines for broadcasters, advertising agencies, charities and others in relation to how people with disabilities are represented in the media.

Debate and direct action over the past few years by organizations around the world of people with disabilities have raised a number of challenges to the traditional and often stereotypical images of disability used by a wide range of organizations involved in providing services, policy-making or fundraising.

Such images are seen by the movement as discriminatory and disabling, and as having an impact on the participation in economic, cultural and social life desired and required by people with disabilities.

In Australia no effective moves have yet been made by the media and advertising industries, or by government, to explore, develop and promote good practice aimed at eroding all too common media stereotypes of people with disabilities as, for example, "heroic", "tragic", "victims", "evil", or "passive and dependent".

This research project aims, by setting up in-depth discussion groups and interviews with a range of people and organizations, and by analysing everyday images of disability, to assist in the overdue public debate about effective means of challenging this particular aspect of discrimination. The researchers believe that changes in the media are closely related to the broader empowerment of people with disabilities.

The project is being run by Helen Meekosha and Andrew Jakubowicz, and they would welcome comments, ideas, examples of images from the media, and further queries. It is supported by the Australia Research Council under a research scheme for academic work.

If you would like to be kept informed about the project, please write to:

Helen Meekosha
School of Social Work
University of New South Wales
PO Box 1
KENSINGTON NSW 2033
Tel: (02) 662 8991

