

It's a Matter of Opinion

Helen Connors

The images and material found on radio, TV, film and the perspective and information they present are largely responsible for shaping our opinion and attitudes. Investigate the media's presentation of disability issues and representation of people with a disability and what you find perpetuates a sense of segregation from the broader community. Where misconceptions and stereotypes abound, people with disabilities are viewed as 'outsiders'.

This type of representation is now being challenged. Around the world academics, particularly in the field of cultural studies, analyse and debate the representation of disability. In Australia, those directly involved in media appear unaware or disinterested in the international debate. As society changes its approach to disability, as government legislates the rights of people with disabilities, people will demand change in the media away from perpetuating 'them' and 'us'.

Change is inevitable and facilitating change within all creative experiences and development of 'models' is a priority for AArts. The organisation considered it important to present an alternative viewpoint that encourages audiences to question their attitudes and the industry to change current practices. Television is the ideal medium to introduce this 'different' approach to large numbers of people.

AArts is concerned by community attitudes towards people with an intellectual disability. The concept that these individuals had no abilities, couldn't acquire skills; had no sense of humor or lived lives with similar ups and downs to 'the able bodied' presented the first challenge to AArts and resulting in the development of the comedy/drama series *House Gang*.

Initially, only the community based media organisation Metro Screen was prepared to invest its skills in the project. This partnership developed training, negotiated development funds and produced a 'pilot'. Supportive of the concept of *House Gang*, Alfred Road Productions became a partner to bring 'legitimacy' and industry credentials to the project.

Workshops were introduced to develop script ideas and through this process the attitudes displayed by potential script writers, cast members or directors indicated if they were able to contribute to the intention of the series. Acting classes and workshops with principal cast and writers; cues and changes to the 'usual' shooting schedule were also introduced.

House Gang (Series 1 and 2) did not focus on disability but presented the ups and downs of life as a way for audiences 'to connect' with characters with intellectual disabilities. Audiences learn they have a lot more in common with people with intellectual disabilities than sets them apart.

Generally attitude will determine whether you consider it important enough to make an effort to be informed. If program makers or presenters are aware and have a positive attitude they will want to see change - and are committed to find 'new' ways of practice. In gaining an awareness people learn to use non-discriminatory language and to consult or collaborate with disability communities. Change is not viewed as an isolated instance but as part of a long-term strategic planning process that involves - policy, procedures and program planning.

In addition to historical influences, how you respond to and present someone with a disability will be largely influenced by your own experience or socialisation. Often people in the media will go out of their way to avoid someone with a disability because they feel uneasy at what they perceive as an awkward situation. A person using a wheelchair may evoke fear and anxiety as you confront your own mortality and the fact that it could easily happen to you. In these instances, people only see the disability and not the person. This was illustrated when a person in a wheelchair robbed a bank in France, no witness was able to give a description of the person.

People feel 'differently' about different disabilities even with little contact with people with disabilities. Generally people do not want to be confronted by a person's disability - if there is going to be acceptance the disability must be concealed.

controlled, normalised and finally altered. Why do people have these opinions and ideas? Again, the answer is the media! Programmers and presenters reinforce people's tendency to categorise and set apart one type of disability from another.

In other countries like the USA, where the electronic media supports inclusive practices people with disabilities are represented and presented as legitimate, valuable members of the broader community. People with disabilities are represented in all aspects of the electronic media. From inclusion in general TV advertisements, to being employed as characters (private investigators etc) or presenters who just happen to have a disability. It is the person not the disability that is the focus. As people in Australia investigate notions of identity, diversity and culture, people will gain the confidence and self-esteem to demand similar changes.

The first step towards change in the electronic media in Australia is the 'right' attitude.



Extract of a paper prepared by Helen
Connors for the ABC