



# critical media project

## Topic Overview: Disability

### have you ever wondered...

- ...why there aren't many characters with disabilities represented in media?
- ...why stories about disabled characters revolve around their disability as the premise?
- ...why disabilities are portrayed as either a challenge or stigma to overcome?
- ...why disabilities are often associated with physical impairments?

### key concepts

- Disability is an evolving concept that also can mean multiple things: it includes intellectual impairment, mental health problems, physical or sensory impairments, degenerative illnesses, mobility impairments, chronic illnesses, and more
- There are three primary models to understand disability: the medical model, the social model, and a more recent cultural model (that combines the medical and social)
- Socially constructed definitions of disability take into account changes over time, location, and environment as well as consider the institutions and laws that label and offer affordances for the disabled
- Disability is often dynamic: it can change over the course of an individual's life
- Disabled people often experience exclusion, oppression, and inequality--a form of discrimination known as "ableism"
- Perceptions of disability and disabled people are heavily influenced by media representations (or lack thereof)

### keywords

disability, stereotype, representation, ableism, able-bodied, pathologize

### the big picture

From a medical perspective, disability is an umbrella term that includes impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. However, disability is not just a medical or health condition, but involves the interaction between a person's body, their environment, the society or societies they live in, and the activities that they participate in. Disability, therefore, takes into account the attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder a person's participation and equal rights.

Historically, disability has been thought of in medical terms, or what disability scholars call the "medical model" of disability. In this model, disability is a medical "fact" or problem to be solved, and people with disabilities are seen as having a medical condition that needs to be "fixed". Many people still think about disability this way, seeing this perspective as "common sense". However, when disabilities are framed as flaws or problems that need fixing, it often results in social, cultural, political, and economic prejudice against disabled people. People with disabilities have even faced threats to their lives and health because of the idea that disabilities are "defects": in the past century alone, disabled people have faced involuntary sterilization, medical experimentation, and even euthanasia.

Starting in the 1970s, another model of disability was proposed by disability activists in the United Kingdom. The "social model" of disability argues that people may have impairments, but that those impairments are only disabilities in certain contexts. For example, anyone who wears glasses to improve their vision can be considered to have an impairment, but most people who wear glasses are not considered to be disabled. Similarly, a Deaf person may be hearing impaired, but in the context of a Deaf university (for example), they wouldn't be considered disabled, because their communication style and culture was dominant (or "the norm") in that environment. The "social model" doesn't see disability as a physical "fact", but as a socially constructed, marginalized identity that is assigned to certain people based on the perception that they are somehow different or outside what is considered to be "normal". This understanding of disability as a social label allows for people with disabilities to advocate for rights and resources, and push for social change. It also facilitates the adoption of a political or cultural identity that is associated with a particular disability-- for example, identifying as Blind or being a member of the Blind community (vs. being medically diagnosed with the visual impairment of blindness).

It's important to understand that what is considered to be "normal" and "able-bodied" is also socially constructed, and shifts over time. For example, homosexuality historically was considered to be a mental or psychiatric disorder. It was pathologized, and was not until the mid-1980s that the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

## **disability in everyday life**

Can you remember the first time you understood someone to be disabled? Maybe you noticed someone speaking in sign language, or walking with a service animal. Maybe you had a friend who had difficulty learning in school, or a classmate who used an iPad to communicate. Maybe your neighbor used to be able-bodied, but got in a car accident and now uses a prosthetic leg and a cane to walk. You or someone in your family may have a disability-- a visible disability, like using a wheelchair, or an invisible disability, like anxiety or dyslexia. Depending on your experience, your understanding of what disability is and what it means will vary.

Disability is often associated with physical impairments or widely recognized intellectual and developmental disabilities (such as Down syndrome or cerebral palsy). However, this limited-- and arguably stereotypical--understanding of what disability is operates as an unhelpful barrier to a richer comprehension and acceptance of disability. Disability is a term that incorporates a wide variety of impairments and differences: people can have intellectual disabilities, physical or sensory impairments, mental health problems, degenerative illnesses, developmental disabilities, learning disabilities, and more. Disability changes over time: you could be born with an impairment and have a medical procedure that alters it, or you could acquire a disability through an accident or some other life event. Disability can be permanent, cyclical, and even temporary. Disability also comes as we age: many elderly people experience sensory, cognitive and mobility changes. Because disability is so dynamic and the thinking around it is constantly evolving, it's remarkably difficult to make definitive distinctions between "disabled" and "non-disabled."

Disability is a term that describes a vast array of people, groups, and experiences. A person can have a minor disability that minimally affects how they live their life, or they could have multiple disabilities that interact with each other and are further impacted by limited accommodations. Despite this range of difference, there are some common experiences that come with being disabled. Because the social construction of disability positions the disabled as outside of the norm or somehow "deficient", disabled people are collectively subject to a great deal of discrimination, oppression, exclusion, and inequality. People with disabilities tend to have poor access to education, lower incomes, and lower levels of participation in society compared to non-disabled people. For disabled people in already marginalized groups-- racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ, immigrants, to name a few-- these forms of exclusion and prejudice are intensified.

### **why it all matters... food for thought**

The relationship between disability and the media is complex, but very important. The media circulates ideas, raises awareness, shapes our social identities, and helps us form

attitudes and opinions. Consequently, the media has a lot of power to shape not only how we think about disability, but who counts as disabled or able-bodied. The media has the power to perpetuate problematic stereotypes that harm people with disabilities, as well as help facilitate understanding and compassion.

More and more, representations of disability are not only appearing in the media, but are central to storylines and character development. In the 21st century, TV shows like *Glee*, *House*, *Breaking Bad*, *Friday Night Lights*, *Speechless*, *Quantico*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Empire*, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, and *The Good Doctor* have all featured characters with disabilities. For some of these characters, their disabilities are just another facet of who they are; for others, their storylines revolve around their disability. Advertisements and brand messaging also feature people with disabilities more and more frequently.

Unfortunately, many media representations of disability harm more than they help. Most of the images and ideas that circulate within the media position able-bodiedness as the norm, or as the ultimate goal for people with disabilities. These representations also tend to focus on physical impairments. Such stereotypical representations are not only inaccurate and distorted, but also act as 'disabling' stereotypes that marginalize people with disabilities even further. Given the power of the media to shape our understanding of disability, it is important that we think critically about how disability is portrayed--or not portrayed.

As you look through the media examples on this site, use them along with this overview as building blocks and avenues to dig deeper into how disability is portrayed... and ask questions. When we think critically about disability in the media, we might start by asking:

- How is "disability" portrayed in the media? What sort of impairments and/or illnesses are portrayed as disabilities? What disabilities are not portrayed as disabilities, but as character flaws or other negative qualities?
- How are disabled people represented? What do they look like, how do they speak, move, and behave? How do other people or characters respond to them?
- How do portrayals of disabled people in the news differ from characters with disabilities on TV shows and movies?
- How is disability portrayed in relation to disabled people? In shows with disabled characters, are their storylines about them, or their disabilities?
- How do representations of disabled people reinforce stereotypes, promote understanding, or do a combination of both?
- Are disabilities portrayed as conditions to be "fixed" or overcome? Are able-bodied people-- or being able-bodied-- portrayed as the desirable ideal?

**select sources:**

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[United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(CRPD\)](#)