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Disability Representation in the Animation Industry

As per the United States Census Bureau's 2014 survey regarding Americans with disabilities, 85.3 million Americans live with disabilities, and 55.2 million have severe disabilities. (Taylor, Household Economic Studies) Even though there are such a staggering number of People with disability (PWD), they are rarely represented in the media. Generally, society considers PWDs invisible, excluding them from the media. When you see Dory, who has short-term memory loss in Finding Nemo for the first time, it is easier to miss her disability because our disability awareness as a society is lacking. Even though the changes in disability representation are gradually happening in the animation industry, a lot still needs to be done.

Let us start with understanding what disability is. Americans with Disability Act (ADA) defines disability as "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment." (Introduction to the Americans with Disabilities Act) Furthermore, disabilities can be categorized into two types: visible and nonvisible. Visible disabilities are the ones where impairments are apparent and observable. For example, in the Peter Pan animated

movie, when you see Captain Hook his disability of impaired limb is visible. Even the name of his character in the film hints at his disability.

On the other hand, the nonvisible disability is not apparent to others. Dory, a Pacific blue tang fish, in Finding Nemo and Finding Dory has short-term memory loss, but it is not perceived as a disability, only a little personality trait. Whether it is a visible or a nonvisible disability, finding the representation and the correct representation in media matters a lot to people and families struggling with infirmity.

In 2022, traditional media, such as radio, television, newspapers, and magazines, are not the only source of information and entertainment. New media, such as social media and subscription video on demand (SVOD), have taken over traditional media. Because of numerous options and fast access, the time spent consuming media has also increased. This means that media has a more significant mental and emotional impact on our lives. It is not uncommon to see toddlers watching cartoons or children's TV shows on YouTube. The power of media is that kids from a very young and impressionable age start consuming media. They imbibe behavior and values not only from their family and friends but from the media too. Not only media, especially social media, negatively impacts the perception not only of disabilities but also of body image of self. Research by Sarah E. McComb and Jennifer S. Mills from the Department of Psychology at York University shows that "... exposure to thin idealized images on Instagram results in increased negative mood and increased body dissatisfaction among young women..." (McComb et al.) Similarly, negatively stereotyping PWDs as weak, mean, or helpless in media creates an unfair general perspective regarding disability.

Paul Longmore, in his essay “Screening Stereotypes” argues, “Deformity of the body symbolizes deformity of soul. Physical handicaps are made the emblems of evil.” (133) Captain Hook from Peter Pan, Doctor Psycho, and Doctor Poison from Wonder Woman are examples of how disability is used as an evil villain trope in comics and films. Such negative representation creates harmful stereotypes. In his essay, “You’re a Surprise from Every Angle”: Disability, Identity, and Otherness in The Hunchback of Notre Dame,” the author Martin F. Norden discusses how Quasimodo’s appearance emphasized his ‘otherness’ in society. (163) PWDs are not considered the same as normative people, people with no disability. After the release of The Hunchback of Notre Dame, “The British Scoliosis Society complained to Nicholas Scott, the Minister of Disabled People, that people with scoliosis had been the targets of more than one hundred assaults in the months following the release of the Disney film, whereas none had occurred in the six months prior. There seems little question that the film helped fan the flames of prejudice and discrimination.” (Norden 173) As it is, PWDs face discrimination and prejudices daily. Negative representation in films and literature makes it even harder for them to overcome negative perceptions online and in real life. Therefore, it is crucial to understand and acknowledge that PWDs need positive representation.

Big animation studios such as Disney, Pixar, and DreamWorks in the U.S., CBeebies, and BBC in the UK, and studios in Japan are slowly embracing positive representation. For example, Kotaro Tamura’s Josee, the Tiger, and the Fish is a “brave, emotional animated love story features one of the first lead characters in a romance anime to use a wheelchair.” (Davis) Josee, the Tiger, and the Fish is based on

a book written in 1984 with the same title. Tamura said he wanted to present a story where a character's handicap does not stop her from having a happy life. "We should also have some characters who are born unable to walk, and are still in a wheelchair at the end of the story. In that sense, Josee really contributes to the diversity of characters in anime. That is very meaningful for me." (Davis). Stories like Josee's should be told more often. Despite their specific challenges, it is essential to show that PWDs are the same as non-disabled people. Love, respect, dream, and ambition are for everybody. Josee, the Tiger, and the Fish is not the only anime handling the issues related to disability and its challenges. There are many more examples of positive stereotyping in anime, such as A Silent Voice, that covers deafness, bullying, and mental illness.

Another example of positive role models in animations is Hannah Sparkes' character in Fireman Sam. Hannah is an 11-year-old girl who uses a wheelchair because of her disability. She is smart, plays football, and helps her father with his inventions. The show presents her as a wholesome character, not focusing only on her disability. In his article "Children's TV pretends disability doesn't exist," Tim Smedley talks about various disabled characters that are presented positively. "Jenny Sealey, co-director of the 2012 Paralympics Opening Ceremony and artistic director of sign language theatre company Graege," tells Smedley that she received "...an email from a mother which said that the Fireman Sam character, Hannah Sparkes (who uses a wheelchair)" helped her to explain to her child about her dad being a wheelchair user." (Smedley) This example of an email regarding Hannah Sparkes' character shown in positive light substantiates that presenting disability as only a part of the character's personality, not as a whole personality, changes the real-life perception of a PWD.

For children coping with difficulties arising from dyspraxia, BBC's CBeebies created a show called Tree Fu Tom. In each episode, Tom and his friends use special movements that create magic to solve problems in an enchanted world. "Children with dyspraxia have difficulty developing the movement skills that come naturally to their peers. They often have poor balance and postural stability; find it difficult to move their arms and legs in a coordinated manner; and struggle to use both sides of their body together." (McClary) Tree Fu Tom series choreographer Nick Kellington worked with "movement specialists Sally Payne and Dr. Lynda Foulder-Hughes to develop unique spell movement sequences that reflect the narrative of each story-line and which have a "cool" martial-arts type feel (which is particularly engaging for boys)." (McClary) Even though the show is created keeping in mind children suffering from dyspraxia, it is also an excellent example for other children and adults who struggle with coordination difficulties due to autism.

Other than the narrative styles and stories related to PWDs in animation movies and series, another factor that helps make content inclusive is accessible content. Accessibility of content considers possible disabilities that can physically and mentally trigger a user while watching or using your content. Accessible content is where a range of disabilities are considered while creating the content. For example, people with motion sickness can be triggered by fast-moving images on the screen. To create accessible content for the internet, content creators use Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0. World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) created these technical guidelines for internet-delivered content. Here is the description of how these recommendations help:

Following these guidelines will make content accessible to a wider range of people with disabilities, including blindness and low vision, deafness and hearing loss, learning disabilities, cognitive limitations, limited movement, speech disabilities, photosensitivity and combinations of these. Following these guidelines will also often make your Web content more usable to users in general. (*Web content accessibility guidelines (WCAG) 2.0*)

Provision of including transcripts, alternative text for images, captions, and keyboard functionalities are a few examples of implementation of WCAG 2.0. Streaming services, gaming platforms, social media platforms, cable TV providers, and other content delivery producers follow accessibility guidelines to deliver content. Content creation and management platform companies such as Adobe that create applications such as Photoshop and Premier Pro have company-level accessibility standards that are derived from WCAG 2.0. Adobe also has a list of resources for improving accessibility in content created using Adobe products. (*Accessibility resources | Adobe*)

As much as disability representation and support matters in content creation and delivery, more job opportunities for PWDs in the animation industry are also needed. The U.S. federal government has five federal laws "to protect individuals with disabilities from discrimination in employment and the job application process." (Employment laws: Disability & discrimination) Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits: employers from discriminating against people with disabilities in all employment-related activities, including hiring, pay, benefits, firing and promotions. Covered employers include private businesses, educational institutions, employment

agencies, labor organizations, and state and local government entities with 15 or more employees. (Employment laws: Disability & discrimination)

Additionally, employers are not allowed to use A.I., algorithms, or software to identify people with disabilities to discriminate against them while considering them for a job opportunity. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) website has tips on their website for workers with disabilities. If a worker feels that they are being discriminated against, they can use these tips to resolve the issue with the employer before bringing a case to EEOC. (The Americans with disabilities act and the use of software, algorithms, and artificial intelligence to assess job applicants and employees)

However, laws can only do so much to open the doors for PWDs in the animation industry. Still, gatekeeping happens while hiring actors, performers, creators, and animators. For example, hiring non-disabled writers to write characters with physical disability leave a door open for misinterpretation and insincerity. The impactful change in representation happens when PWDs are given opportunities to succeed across the board. Disability activists have been pushing for changes in the industry for a very long time. In 2021, Ruderman Family Foundation, a disability rights activist nonprofit, successfully influenced studios such as Sony, Paramount, CBS, and NBC to pledge to audition for actors with disabilities. (Schneider) Similarly, Netflix announced in August 2022 that they are teaming with RespectAbility, an LA-based disability rights nonprofit to "train writers, animators and creative executives who have disabilities to work on television shows aimed at preschoolers and children." (Heasley)

Team Zenko Go by DreamWorks is an exceptional example of how "authentic casting" for disabled characters is valuable. (Cat-Wells) Jack Thomas, showrunner and

executive producer, wanted to ensure that the show remained all-inclusive. Team Zenko Go is a story about a group of do-gooders, including the character Ari, a wheelchair user. This group wants to make their town the happiest town in the world. Studio "hired Disability Consultant Kirsten Sharp to guide on "Ari's movements, and [make sure his] interactions were accurate." (Cat-Wells) True to their intent to make the show all-inclusive, Thomas cast Hartley Bernier, a fourteen-year actor with a chronic illness, as the voice of Ari. Team Zenko Go was produced during the peak of the pandemic. The studio allowed Bernier to record from his home studio to protect him from Covid-19. Even though the Team Zenko Go creators included Bernier, a physically challenged actor, at each stage of production, such examples are far from prevalent.

In the U.S., all big animation studios have diversity and inclusion programs. The intent is correct, but studios have a long way to go before inclusive programs are all-encompassing at all content creation, development, and distribution levels. For example, Disney has inclusion standards for hiring onscreen representation, creative leadership, and production department. However, Disney is vague about the percentage of roles for disabled candidates applying for a job. (Inclusion standards - disney.com)

Over the years, the representation of disability has significantly changed, but it is not enough. If we remake Ariel in 2022, we should show her using American Sign Language (ASL) or written words to communicate when she loses her ability to speak. Film and television are the lenses through which a society is perceived and presented. Children from a very young age are spending time watching cartoons. Children and adults learn social cues such as body language, the concept of personal space, and facial expressions from animations and films. If the media is constantly presenting

disability as a negative concept, society perceives PWDs also as a burden. Disability representation in the animation industry's creative, marketing, management, and distribution roles must be accessible to PWDs.

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