UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

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Bingeing Difference: Netflix, Advocacy, & Disability

A dissertation submitted in partial

satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Film & Television

by

Brittany Judith Green

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Bingeing Difference: Netflix, Advocacy, & Disability

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Doctor of Philosophy in Film and Television

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Professor Denise R. Mann, Chair

This dissertation is a production study of disability representation in televisual entertainment from 2015-2024 at Netflix. The current digital ecosystem provides a forum for niche topics due to enhanced competition between platforms, more sophisticated utilization of algorithms to precisely target selected audiences, and increased opportunities for creators that are given more authorial control over previously underrepresented storylines. While there is much at stake for

those who consume these representations, this project focuses on the characters. This seemingly disparate group of collaborators – including "entities" like the disability advocacy groups, university research organizations, casting agents, disabled creatives, as well as corporate "institutions" like Netflix, Nielsen, and IMDB– play off each other in complex, consequential ways that can only be understood by acknowledging and delineating their mutually constitutive roles in producing the characters that make it to the screen. This project combines production studies and disability media studies frameworks to delineate how these entities and institutions understand themselves and their industrial and social functions. This project tracks emerging practices in disability representation in entertainment media including diversity pipeline programs, cultures of disclosure, authentic casting practices, and utilizing diversity as a branding strategy, while also tracing the axiomatic notions of normality, neutrality, and naturalness.

The dissertation of Brittany Judith Green is approved.

Steven Franklin Anderson

Jasmine Nadua Trice

Ellen Seiter

Denise R. Mann, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

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Education

M.A. Dartmouth College (*Cultural Studies)* ***2015-2017***

B.A. University of Central Florida (*Humanities, Religion & Cultural Studies*). ***2010-2014***

Fellowships and Grants

UCLA TFT Executive Board Scholarship ***Summer 2020***

Jack K. Sauter Scholarship ***Spring 2018-19***

Graduate Summer Research Fellowship ***Summer 2018***
Amount Awarded: $6,000

Conferences and Presentations

Murphy, Brittany, "*That's Inappropriate*: Sustaining Labor and the Social Influencer." Society for Cinema and Media Studies. Seattle, WA. March 13th, 2019. Presenter.

Latsis, Dimitrios, **Murphy, Brittany**, Oyallon, Jenny, Sharma, Aparna, Williams, Mark, Bret Vukoder. "The Media Ecology Project." Society for Cinema and Media Studies. Chicago, Il. March 24th, 2017. Presenter.

Teaching and Research Fields

Critical Media Industry Studies, Television Studies, Underrepresented Student Advocacy, Queer Theory, Gender Studies, Disability Studies, Media Industry Studies, Production Studies, Algorithmic Culture.

Teaching Experience

Teaching Fellow ***Summer 2021-2022***
Supervisor: Professor: Jasmine Trice, Benjamin Sampson, Veronica Paredes, Karen Bowdre, Jonathan Kuntz, Bryan Wuest
Descriptions: FTV 4, FTV 10A, FTV 51, FTV 6, FTV, 113, FTV 6, FTV 112
Responsibilities: Teaching a section discussion, grading, writing assistant

Introduction

In 2019, the Television Academy hosted *Lights! Camera! Access! 2.0*, an event which sought to connect entertainment industry personnel through panels on disability and representation. This was not simply a staged opportunity for an industry institution to pat itself on the back for its outward support of diversity, equity, and inclusion – instead, much of the discourse was critical of the television industry and came from disabled media professionals' firsthand experiences of inaccessibility on set and in the job market. During a Q&A segment at the event, an assistant in charge of delivering microphones to panelists kept insisting an actor take a mic before commenting, not realizing the actor was deaf and was trying to redirect the mic to his interpreter, who was relaying in ASL. As the audience realized what was happening, many in the room started to laugh to smooth over the gaffe. The (horrified) employee's blunder became a segue for a thoughtful discussion about accessibility in the entertainment industry and the industry-wide practice of hiring non-disabled actors to play disabled characters. Though the event itself met enough technical minimums of accessibility, this encounter, as well as the statements by nearly one hundred industry professionals (ranging from producers, casting directors and editors, and others) made it apparent that the industry still has progress to make.

Accessibility was both a focus and a feature of my research for this project due to the nationwide lockdown and quarantine procedures of the Covid-19 pandemic. The global epidemic drew attention to issues of accessibility (who can be expected or required to go certain places, and under what level of personal risk?) as well as the inequitable distribution of medical, financial, and other forms of assistance across socioeconomic, racial, gender, and ability categories. Within Hollywood, beyond shutting down production across the board, the pandemic

led to events like *Lights! Camera! Access! 2.0* being hosted virtually. Other events were canceled outright. Even so, during my virtual participation in panels and events related to disability representation and media work, I heard speakers suggesting the new norm of video conferencing offered the potential for more voices to enter the conversation about disability in Hollywood; it is probably more appropriate to say it allowed more people to *witness* the conversations. Nevertheless, the oft-repeated claim represents the hopeful, contradictory way accessibility became restricted and expanded during the pandemic. Moreover, as the technical limitations of video conferencing were put front-and-center of work and social life, issues related to ability were likewise foregrounded through use of (and frustration with) captioning systems, screen description software, and real-time translation workflows. In terms of this project, the pandemic's limitations on on-site participant-observation required me to explore alternative ways of analyzing industry perspectives as a supplement to interviews, including analysis of publicly available interviews for trade press, promotional materials, white paper reports, and documentation of advocacy group activities. My methodology focuses on cross-referencing my interviews with Hollywood practitioners with these "artifacts" to approach a "thick description" of disability representation in television that is presently missing.[1]

Bingeing Difference: Netflix, Advocacy, & Disability explores the on- and off-screen processes shaping televisual disability representation in the age of Streaming Video on Demand (SVOD). I focus my analysis specifically on Netflix Original programs released between 2015-2024, but the themes of industry discourse, public relations rhetoric, and aesthetic strategies surrounding and contained within these programs build on television's history of representation and suggest future directions for a data-driven production environment.

[1] John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 2008), 424.

In addition to highlighting the perspectives of disabled creatives navigating the world of streaming television production, I argue that disability advocacy groups play an essential role in influencing the culture of production around images of disability. To make this argument, my project blends approaches from critical media industry studies, production studies, and disability studies; I draw on the latter through the framework of disability media studies (DMS), evident in the works of Elizabeth Ellcessor, Mack Hagood, and Bill Kirkpatrick. Through a DMS approach, my project seeks to answer the following questions: First, how have consultancies invested in promoting disability representation like RespectAbility, The Inevitable Foundation, and Hollywood Health & Society shaped disability representation in the past decade, and through what specific means? Second, what is the working relationship like between non-profit disability advocacy groups, tech-world media platforms like Netflix, and university-based research organizations that advise media companies based on their original reports on diversity, equity, and inclusion in Hollywood. And third, how do these production processes, ideological exchanges, and creative relationships compare to public rhetoric about disability initiatives and accessibility at Netflix and in streaming media?

Methodology and Literature

As part of research for this project, I interviewed figures from each of the sectors described above involved in televisual disability representation. I spoke with Hollywood practitioners, including actors, directors, writers, and casting agents; I also met with leaders in the disability advocacy space from prominent organizations such as RespectAbility, Hollywood Health & Society (HH&S), and The Inevitable Foundation; And finally, I talked with researchers investigating media representation both in academic and journalistic networks, including academic researchers from UCLA and CSU and entertainment reporters from *IndieWire* and

TheWrap. The perspectives and stories shared by those above depict a complicated, slow-moving, and often frustrating production environment around disability representation. That said, many of my interview subjects can find satisfaction in small-scale victories that, in their views, push awareness about disability and its representation on-screen in positive directions, albeit very slowly and not always in a linear progression.

Combining critical analysis of these interviews with against-the-grain readings of trade press, research reports, and textual analysis of select programming reveals the deeply interconnected nature of Hollywood advocacy groups, university research centers focused on social impact entertainment (SIE), and Netflix. This interconnected landscape is explored using individual Netflix shows as case studies – which help to ground the discussion of disability representation in observable, specific production contexts and histories. Though useful as structuring objects and critical to understanding the role each sector plays in shaping what is seen on screen, the representations in the shows discussed below should not overshadow the way disability representation is also a construct produced through the discursive and cultural interactions of media companies, advocacy group, researchers, and creatives. As Denise Mann writes, interviews are "cultural artifacts" that contain "evidence of an intricate, interlocking system of heavily codified, discursive knowledge."[2] Keeping this system of "heavily codified" knowledge in mind, I am careful to emphasize throughout that *representation* includes not only the aesthetic object but also the way these production entities frame their stories and characters for audiences and make them intelligible as positive or harmful, subversive or conservative, or as embodying other social, political, or artistic values.

[2] Denise Mann, "It's Not TV, It's Brand Management TV: The Collective Author(s) of the Lost Franchise," in *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, ed. Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2009), 104.

Finally, while many of my critiques highlight the cultural aspects of production work and the internal organizations of advocacy groups, it is important to acknowledge that when interfacing with media companies, advocacy groups often rely on quantitative data – in the form of various "diversity reports" provided by university-affiliated and independent research programs – to support their efforts. This project explores how the social and quantitative appeals made by advocacy groups complement one another and are seen by these groups as tools for advancing disability representation. My goal in studying such research data, including that from USC's Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, UCLA's Hollywood Diversity Report, and the Center for Scholars and Storytellers, is to add nuance to the findings of these groups by exploring how this data is made actionable towards advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (specifically in terms of disability representation) in Hollywood.

Production Studies and Critical Media Industry Studies

I analyze the following stories of production provided by my interview subjects and rendered in trade press and other materials with an eye for moments of what John Caldwell calls "industrial self-reflexivity," or moments where industry personnel craft narratives around their work, make sense of the precarious and competitive media labor market, and, in the case of advocacy groups and disability representation, create moral or political frameworks for creative decision-making. This production studies methodology allows me to contextualize the on-the-ground perspectives and personal assessments from workaday media personnel within the larger top-down, economics-driven dynamics of the television business. Just as disability advocacy groups must learn to "talk the talk" (i.e. profit margins, market trends, "the bottom line") to make headway in dealings with Netflix and other production companies, I use the production studies framework to highlight the corporate and financial stratagems underlying some of the most high-

profile efforts to improve media representations of disability; this involves (on both my part and the part of advocacy groups) finding how studies of disability representation and viewership data can underline the potential profits to be gained from diversifying talent on- and off-screen. This is evidenced in the new partnership between Nielson and RespectAbility, wherein RespectAbility is working with the legacy audience data company to help it gather and track data through the Grace Note analytics software.[3] This partnership also informs Nielson's ongoing work on audience attitudes. Senior Vice President of Diverse Insights, Intelligence & Innovation, Stacie De Armas explains that underrepresentation isn't the only problem for audiences; in some cases, they can feel misrepresented even when included, at which point they emotionally withdraw and turn away from a given brand that they feel cannot be trusted to create authentic and fair representations.[4]

This project serves as one of the first to bring together the voices of industry, advocacy, and media production to study the representation of disability in streaming television, and as such my interviews act as an archive for disclosures about the rituals, practices, and attitudes towards representation within and around Netflix (especially between 2021-2024). In his work on Netflix and algorithmic recommendation, Mattias Frey sees similar value in simply presenting internal communications at Netflix (in case, before 2015), both for his own analysis and as means of starting future conversations about the streaming giant's business culture.[5] Gabriel

[3] "Nielsen's Gracenote Teams with Five Leading Media Advocacy Groups to Make Diverse Content Creators and Talent More Discoverable, Accessible," Nielsen, January 18, 2024, accessed May 13, 2024, https://www.nielsen.com/news-center/2024/nielsens-gracenote-teams-with-five-leading-media-advocacy-groups-to-make-diverse-content-creators-and-talent-more-discoverable-accessible/.

[4] "Big Brain Energy: The Power of Neurodivergence in Media," (panel presented at SXSW 2024, Austin, TX, March 10, 2024), https://schedule.sxsw.com/2024/events/PP141505.

[5] Mattias Frey, *Netflix Recommends: Algorithms, Film Choice, and the History of Taste* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021).

Rossman's interviews and ethnographic work in the late 1990s for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation also serve as an example of archival pieces of a larger oral history concerning media advocacy.

My in-person observational fieldwork, though limited by the pandemic, consisted of a visit to Raleigh Studios for a *FYSEE For Yourself* promotional event, attending the previously mentioned *Lights! Camera! Access! 2.0* conference, and a research assistantship for the Skoll Center for Social Impact Entertainment, where I contributed to a project gathering data on media consultancy organizations for underrepresented populations in film and television. While lockdown procedures made it nearly impossible to form extended relationships with my interview subjects or other industry personnel, as I would have in a traditional ethnographic research mode, I was able to form productive working relationships with a few subjects, who noticeably became more cooperative and forthcoming about their work, their work community's dynamics, and their personal goals and desires for the industry over the course of our correspondence.

Disability Studies

My dissertation is not a comprehensive historiography of disability representation in television. However, I needed to understand the major legal, political, and technological discourses of disability studies and history in the United States in order to undertake this project. Lennard Davis, author of a foundational disability studies text, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (1995), utilizes Deafness as a way to speak about disability more broadly. He further theorizes disability in relation to topics I consider critically important to understanding how disability operates in the contemporary media industries landscape. For instance, Davis theorizes disability in relation to constructions of "normalcy," which are used to

define and differentiate (dis)abled bodies. In this way he shifts the focus of disability studies: "The object of disability studies is not the person using the wheelchair or the Deaf person," he writes, "but the set of social, historical, economic, and cultural processes that regulate and control the way we think about and think through the body."[6] "Normalcy" emerges as an explicit theme in the Netflix shows analyzed for this project; characters are often seen explaining their own or others' disabilities to able-bodied persons using informal frameworks of "normalcy" that compare able-bodied subjectivities to disabled subjectivities and bodies. While these moments draw attention to the disabled bodies on-screen by highlighting their difference, they typically do so in ways that avoid positioning disability as what Davis would call "the problem." On this notion, Davis writes, "As with recent scholarship on race, which has turned its attention to whiteness, I would like to focus not so much on the construction of disability as on the construction of normalcy. I do this because the 'problem' is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person."[7]

Davis's work additionally informs my theoretical approach in its mapping of Michel Foucault's theory of bio-power onto the disabled body. While other disability scholars have used Foucault to understand disability (see Garland-Thompson, Tremain, McRuer), Davis uses this work to connect constructions of normalcy to the conditions of capitalist society: constructions of normalcy are thus "propelled by economic and social factors and can be seen as part of more general project to control and regulate the body."[8]

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[6] Lennard Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995) 2.

[7] Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 23.

[8] Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 3.

Davis is not the only scholar who targets normalcy as a key lens through which disability can be better understood. In *Extraordinary Bodies,* Rosemarie Garland-Thomson utilizes the term "normate" to refer to the privileged social status of the able-bodied: the "normate" is a "constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them."[9] *Extraordinary Bodies* reframes disability as "another culture-bound, physically justified difference to consider along with race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality."[10] Like Davis, Garland-Thomson moves away from the medical model of disability to the social model, and in doing so urges scholars to understand disability not as a pathology but rather as a "political minority."[11]

Robert McRuer's *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* takes this exploration of normalcy within disability studies and combines it with long-held conversations about heteronormativity and gender norms, sexual identity, and constructions of difference within queer studies. McRuer explains that even though we have been able to see a connection between the broader fields of study (i.e. disability and queer studies) because of a "shared" pathologized past, a gap remains in the literature between the connection of heterosexuality and able-bodied identity. McRuer explores the etymological emergence of heterosexuality and disability, detailing the shared histories of these terms and the starkness of how homosexuality and able-bodiedness have been juxtaposed to facilitate "the disciplining of disability."[12]

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[9] Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 8.

[10] Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies,* 5.

[11] Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies,* 6.

[12] Robert McRuer, "Crip Eye for the Normate Guy: Queer Theory and the Disciplining of Disability Studies," *PMLA* 120, no. 2 (2005): 586–92.

The emphasis by Davis, Garland-Thomson, and McRuer (among others) on the cultural and social factors that shape concepts of normalcy and disability underlines the stakes of this project's interest in representations of disability in popular culture, which can be seen as a critical arena for establishing, negotiating, and perpetuating ideologies about embodied normalcy and difference. Further support for this kind of study comes from editors Elizabeth Ellcessor, Mack Hagood, and Bill Kirkpatrick in their 2017 volume *Disability Media Studies.* In introducing and defining what they consider a distinct disciplinary methodology, the editors make a call for "perspectives and methodological tools to analyze how disability shapes media texts, technologies, and industries— and how our media, in turn, shape what it means to be "disabled" or "able- bodied" in contemporary society."[13] To accomplish this, the authors suggest pursuing research that combines the theoretical principles of disability studies with methodologies for studying industrial and creative production environments from media studies. They write:

> The rich history of disability studies provides a wealth of insights into disability as narrative trope, cultural identity, lived experience, socioeconomic status, and political category. Media studies is a humanities-centered, mostly qualitative field that explores how the media work as cultural, political, and economic institutions, as sites of meaning-making and ideological contestation, and as resources for social and individual identity formation and expression.[14]

Disability media studies (DMS) thus provides a critical framework that seeks to understand disability representation holistically, as a product of environment, culture, and

[13] Elizabeth Ellcessor, Mack Hagood, and Bill Kirkpatrick, "Introduction: Toward a Disability Media Studies," in *Disability Media Studies*, ed. Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick (New York: NYU Press, 2017), 1–28.

[14] Ellcessor, Hagood, and Kirkpatrick, "Toward a Disability Media Studies."

aesthetics, rather solely through textual analysis, which comprises much of the current literature on disability representation in television.[15] I mention DMS here not only because I share many of the same research goals and principles as the editors and contributing authors (including approaching disability as category constructed through *media* culture), but also because the field has emerged directly within the periodization for my project and thus represents an essential part of the critical (academic) discourse around disability representation that my interview subjects and Netflix executives address in the commentary below.

Periodization

While this project's periodization is based in the respective production and reception time frames of my case study shows (2015-2024), to fully understand the industrial landscape of disability programming, I also point to important events immediately leading up to this period of streaming television history. In 2010, for example, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) produced "Where We Are on TV," a report tracking data on people with disabilities in the television industry for the first time (alongside statistics LGBTQ+ populations). In 2013, non-profit advocacy group RespectAbility was founded to advance opportunities for people with disabilities in film and television. At the same time, Netflix's shift to original media production (rather than platform management) meant the company began interfacing with consultants from groups like Hollywood Health & Society to develop its growing lineup of shows, which were positioned to tap into so-called "niche" markets of previously underrepresented viewers.[16] In 2014, UCLA released the first "Hollywood Diversity Report," which served not only as a useful resource of empirical data about hiring practices in

[15] Ellcessor, Hagood, and Kirkpatrick, "Toward a Disability Media Studies."

[16] Kate Langrall Folb, interview by Brittany Green, Zoom, May 13, 2021.

the industry, but also as the centerpiece of an industry-wide discussion about inequality in entertainment media. Today, the report is partly funded by Netflix and studies the industrial footprint of many identity categories, including race/ethnicity and gender; significantly, data on disability was not added to this report until 2023.[17]

Case Studies and Chapters

This project studies the production contexts of four Netflix Original programs featuring representations of disability: *Special* (2019-2021), *The Healing Powers of Dude* (2020), *Atypical* (2017-2021), and *Grace and Frankie* (2015-2022). In addition to textual analysis of on-screen representation, narrative themes, and aesthetic strategies, I investigate the production process that shaped the final product, focusing especially on the relationship between Netflix and advocacy groups as seen through the work of consultants, the establishment of talent development programs, and other forms of industrial collaboration. That Netflix commissioned these shows as part of its burgeoning Originals lineup speaks to the programs' marketing functions; in many ways, watching and studying these shows is an exercise in exploring Netflix's brand identity as it relates to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility.[18] While Netflix is undoubtedly the focus, I do make reference to one non-Netflix show (Amazon Prime's *As We See It*) in tandem with the Netflix show *Atypical,* in order to contextualize the depiction of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) across streaming media. ASD is a uniquely pervasive topic in both television programming and disability studies; there are currently *several* popular shows spanning streaming and network TV that highlight ASD protagonists (often referencing the disorder in the title) such as *The Good*

[17] "UCLA Newsroom: 10th Annual Hollywood Diversity Report Finds More Top TV Shows Feature Racially Diverse Casts," UCLA Disability Studies Inclusion Labs, November 9, 2023, https://dslabs.ucla.edu/ucla-newsroom-10th-annual-hollywood-diversity-report-finds-more-top-tv-shows-feature-racially-diverse-casts/.

[18] Amanda D. Lotz, *Netflix and Streaming Video: The Business of Subscriber-Funded Video on Demand* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2022).

Doctor, *Everything's Gonna Be Okay*, *The A-Word*, and *Love on the Spectrum*. Historically, autistic-coded characters – most notably Sheldon from CBS megahit *The Big Bang Theory*, but also characters like Abed from *Community*, and Dr. Temperance Brennan from *Bones* – have been well-received or even celebrated by allistic (non-autistic) audiences but have been objects of derision from the ASD community for their lack of realism or tastefulness.[19]

Title:	Platform:	Representation:	Netflix Tags:	Creator:	Year:
Grace and Frankie	Netflix	Mobility, Chronic Illness, Mental Health, Alcoholism, and Addiction	Sitcoms, TV Dramas, TV Comedies, LGBTQ TV Shows, Heartfelt, Witty, Disability, Disability-, Disability TV	Marta Kauffman Howard J. Morris	2015-2022
Atypical	Netflix	Autism Spectrum Disorder	Teen TV Shows, TV Dramas, TV Comedies, Heartfelt, Quirky, Disability, Disability-, Disability TV	Robia Rashid	2017-2021
Special	Netflix	Cerebral Palsy, Deafness, Autism Spectrum Disorder	TV Shows Based on Books, TV Comedies, LGBTQ TV Shows, Heartfelt, Witty, Disability TV, Disability-	Ryan O'Connell	2019-2021
The Healing Powers of Dude	Netflix	Social Anxiety Disorder, Wheelchair use.	Sentimental, Heartfelt, Kids, Disability	Sam Littenberg-Weisberg and Erica Spates	2020
As We See It	Amazon	Autism Spectrum Disorder	N/A	Jason Katims	2022

Figure 1

The shows in this project (seen in Fig. 1) are categorized as either comedies or dramedies; apart from *Grace and Frankie* and *As We See It,* the shows revolve around a white, male protagonist. In addition, each show employs a character of color in the role of sidekick, or what Kristen Lopez refers to as the "able-bodied buffer."[20] These peripheral characters act as the

[19] Michelle Dean and Anders Nordahl-Hansen, "A Review of Research Studying Film and Television Representations of ASD," *Review Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 9 (June 21, 2021).

[20] Kristen Lopez, interview by Brittany Green, Zoom, April 4, 2024.

driving force behind the protagonist's self-reflection, which ultimately centers around their disability. Lopez further notes a tendency in disability-centric productions to offer "caretaker entertainment," which privileges the point-of-view of parents, siblings, or other aides whose lives are altered because of their supportive responsibilities to the disabled main character.[21] In this study, *Atypical* and *As We See It* clearly exemplify this narrative mode.

The first chapter of the text, "*Special* and The Writer-Creator-Star Phenomena in Disability Representation" explores social constructions of ableism, internalized ableism, hierarchies of disability, and other elements of disability culture through a textual analysis of the Ryan O'Connell-led series. This chapter highlights the insights of the VP of RespectAbility Lauren Appelbaum, who spoke to me about the organization's recent creation of its first diversity pipeline program. Appelbaum is one of the most consequential figures in disability advocacy in the current entertainment industry. Her prominence within RespectAbility is matched by her influence as a public face of disability advocacy in the trade press. For instance, she is often quoted as an authority on disability inclusion and authentic representation in publications like *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*. Likewise, she is invited to speak as an expert on panel presentations and has personally aided in creating partnerships that connect RespectAbility with Netflix, Nielson, The Television Academy, and academic research organizations like UCLA's Center for Scholars and Storytellers. A large portion of this chapter utilizes media industry studies scholars like Axelle, Raats, Van Audenhove, Crawford, Mark, and Elkins to better understand the Netflix DEIAA branding strategy.

The second chapter, "*The Healing Powers of Dude*: Advocacy and Research Groups" examines Netflix's partnership with RespectAbility, particularly its funding of the collaborative

[21] Kristen Lopez, "'As We See It' Review: Amazon Prime Drama Has Strong Cast but Dated Representation," *IndieWire*, January 20, 2022.

pipeline program the Children's Content Lab for Disabled Creators. Whereas Ch 1 is a specific look into disability advocacy as it shaped *Special,* Ch 2 takes a broader focus: understanding the landscape of disability advocacy and institutional research organizations devoted to studying disability representation. The story that emerges in this chapter involves the history of advocacy groups in the media industry and the emergence of the pipeline program as a lucrative tool for these organizations. While this chapter does not provide a comprehensive history of disability advocacy groups in the media – no such history exists – I believe my chapter takes a productive first step towards uncovering the origins of the advocacy playbook driving today's industry. Furthermore, this chapter will continue to define and chart Netflix's use of diversity as a branding strategy. "Authentic casting" and writing hiring practices are explored in-depth through interviews with various Hollywood practitioners, both creative and research-based personnel.

In my final chapter "*Atypical* and *As We See It,* The Rhetoric of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)" focuses on the proliferation of autistic characters in SVOD programming. This chapter provides a brief history of autistic characters in media and examines the historical identity categories associated with these characters, like "ethnic-whiteness," and "techno-savantism."[22] Exploring multiple industry panels moderated by representatives from RespectAbility addressing neurodivergence in media showcases emerging industry partnerships with far-reaching ramifications for representation, like that of RespectAbility and Nielson. This chapter investigates the production, reception, and consulting efforts in *Atypical* and *As We See It,* and in doing so highlights the differences and similarities of Netflix and Amazon Original programming. Throughout the chapter I focus on the rhetoric of ASD and the term "normal" to

[22] Malcolm Matthews, "Why Sheldon Cooper Can't Be Black: The Visual Rhetoric of Autism and Ethnicity," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 13, no. 1 (2019): 57-74.

understand disability discourse, including debates about emerging terminology and preferences for person-first vs. identity first language.

The Coda: *Grace and Frankie*, Disability and Aging will tie together the takeaways from each chapter into a larger argument about disability's uniqueness as an identity category and object of analysis. Disability scholars note it is the only identity category all people can/will eventually be a part of if they live long enough. This "temporary-able bodiedness" will be explored as it appears in literature on disability and, using *Grace and Frankie,* how it appears in televisual representations. This closing section will end with a brief look at the trajectory of disability programming on SVOD services.

Conclusion: The Bottom Line and Changing Landscape

Though the numbers are still dismal, disability representation is becoming more common across popular media. There are multiple reasons for this, including enhanced competition between platforms, expansion of the utilization of algorithms to precisely target niche audiences, and the increased attractiveness of these platforms for television auteurs, who are given more control over previously prohibited (and supposedly "unprofitable") stories than they would be within the legacy production arrangements. While these shifts have led to changing attitudes and cultures within media production, the motivating factor determining who or what makes it to the screen – from legacy Hollywood to Silicon Beach – remains the same: profit. Consider these words from Darnell Hunt, the inaugural P.I. for the "Hollywood Diversity Report" and professor in UCLA's Sociology Department: "While we believe the moral argument for diversity is the most important, it's not the one that's moving the industry. We made the strategic choice to

focus on how diversity benefits the bottom line because all of our discussions with industry stakeholders told us that this would be the most compelling and persuasive argument."[23]

VP of RespectAbility Lauren Appelbaum has been not only a champion for people with disabilities in the entertainment industry, but has also been helpful for this project, shedding light on the inner workings of RespectAbility, their partnerships with Netflix, and the ways in which the organization helps SVOD services within Hollywood tell authentic stories. Of course, as Hunt explains, just because authentic portrayals of historically underrepresented identity categories is the right move doesn't mean it's the one that changes the industry. Within the RespectAbility Hollywood Inclusion Toolkit (a free resource) there is a video from 2018 entitled, *Webinar: The Hollywood Disability Inclusion Toolkit*. The subheading of the video states, "Learn how you can access a $1 trillion market – the disability community!" The Hollywood consultancies involved in advocating for the disability community are not shy when it comes to showing companies that they are missing out on revenue sources if they are not reaching out to and representing people with disabilities in their media.

The Ruderman Family Foundation, a philanthropic organization that devotes its efforts to promote inclusion for people with disabilities, has produced research studies to help better assist people with disabilities in media representation. A market research article from 2019 states, "This research reveals that about half of US households support accurate portrayals of disabled characters and would sign up for a content distributor committed to disabled actors. Their spending power is estimated at $10.4 billion per month for US households."[24] A recent report

[23] Ana-Christina Ramón and Darnell Hunt, "Far from Being a Luxury, Increased Diversity Is a Business Imperative," The State of SIE, February 14, 2019, https://thestateofsie.com/darnell-hunt-ana-christina-ramon-representation-diversity-progress/.

[24] "Disability Inclusion in Movies and Television: Market Research, 2019," *Ruderman Family Foundation*, accessed May 19, 2023, https://rudermanfoundation.org/white_papers/disability-inclusion-in-movies-and-television-market-research-2019/.

from Neilson echoes this financial estimation and brings in RespectAbility to help create data-points to track disability representation television through their software Gracenote.[25] Many of the current shows heralded for "positive and authentic" representations of disability are created by disabled creatives such as Ryan O'Connell's *Special* (further explored in Chapter 1).

Netflix is listening to the financial incentives noted by advocacy and research groups and has, in kind, pivoted to making inroads in DEIA (even as it is simultaneously a marketing strategy). Time will tell if these diversity-pipeline programs lead to emerging disabled creatives becoming executives with the ability to green light more projects with holistic portrayals of disability representation. In addition to the over-used bottom-line rhetoric that is in part responsible for the creation of these diversity pipeline programs, audience viewership of diversity programming is seen as a form of self-education. Ron Becker explains that in the 1990's, gays and lesbians were seen by television networks as a desirable demographic because they were, "reported to be well educated with a disproportionate amount of disposable income." Engaging with gay and lesbian programming was therefore a way to be seen as culturally progressive.[26] Similarly, the recent reports by Nielson, Ruderman, and others detail the disability demographic as a trillion-dollar industry, and many Millennials and Gen Z's are watching disability programming as a way to gain progressive cultural capital and avoid being criticized as uninformed.

The Academy has seen systematic disability inclusion since 2021. Abbey White of *The Hollywood Reporter* explains, "The 2024 Oscars will include confidential accessibility requests

[25] Jennifer Maas, "Nielsen-Owned Gracenote to Track Disability Representation on TV," *Variety*, December 8, 2022.

[26] Ron Becker, "Gay-Themed Television and the Slumpy Class: The Affordable, Multicultural Politics of the Gay Nineties," *Television & New Media* 7, no. 2 (May 1, 2006): 184–215.

for all nominees and guests, captioning, audio description, in-theater assisted listening devices, accessible seating and parking, and a suite of ASL interpretation services."[27] Just as the #Oscarsowhite and #Metoo movements had an impact beyond TV and movie screens, disability visibility is slowly but surely being integrated into the conversation of diversity, equity, and inclusion. President Biden signed Executive Order (EO) 14035: Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce in 2021, which signaled new strides for people with disabilities. The addition of Accessibility to DEI is a major step in policy and the recognition that disability is diversity.[28] These socio-cultural, industrial, and legislative steps are moving the needle for disability representation in television and society.

[27] Abbey White, "A Recent History of the Academy's Accessibility and Disability Inclusion Efforts," *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 7, 2024.

[28] Joseph R. Biden, "Executive Order 14035, on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce," June 25, 2021, The White House, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/06/25/executive-order-on-diversity-equity-inclusion-and-accessibility-in-the-federal-workforce/.

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Chapter 1

Special: Writer, Creator, Star Phenomena in Disability

The Netflix Original Series *Special* (2019-2021) opens with Ryan Hayes (Ryan O'Connell) tripping over himself while walking down a sunny SoCal sidewalk. A little boy who witnesses the fall runs to his aid and seems alarmed when Ryan gets up limping. "You're walking funny," the boy says, "you need to go to the hospital, mister!" Ryan explains, "That's not from my fall. I have a thing. It's called cerebral palsy." The boy asks for further explanation, ushering in the show's first moment of instructive disability representation, delivered with a wry self-awareness by O'Connell: "Cerebral palsy is a disability resulting from damage to the brain before, during, or shortly after birth, and outwardly manifested through muscular incoordination." The child screams in response and rushes off on his razor scooter. Throughout its two-season run, *Special* provides many similar moments where the show humorously acknowledges its responsibility to represent multiple forms of disability with equal measures of authenticity and accuracy.

This chapter uses the Netflix original series *Special* as a case study to examine two subjects: 1) the unique function of the writer-creator-star "multi-hyphenate" role within disability creator cultures, and 2) the influence of consultancies and research institutions (such as RespectAbility and the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative) in shaping, circulating, and framing media representations of disability more broadly. In investigating the first subject, this chapter uses a combination of textual analysis and critical readings of trade press to explore how representations of disability *authored by* disabled creators appear and are received differently than those from non-disabled creators.

I am especially interested in the ways social constructions of ableism, internalized ableism, hierarchies of disability, and other elements of disability culture manifest within *Special*'s aesthetic and narrative strategies. To explore these concepts, I draw on disability scholars including Robert McRuer, Leonard Davis, and Erin Andrews. By blending my textual analysis with production studies, I hope to distinguish this project from previous scholarship on disability in television, which has focused primarily on aesthetic, narrative, or political elements. Instead, I interpret on-screen representation as a product of efforts not only by passionate, disabled creators, but also by a network of disability-related institutional forces who work to make their voices heard on set alongside the demands of producers, executives, marketing departments, and the media industry marketplace. This project is situated within the emerging field of disability media studies (DMS). I argue that understanding the motivations and operations of such institutions is critical to understanding how and why disabilities are represented by Netflix in original programming like *Special.*

On its own terms, O'Connell's close relationship to the nonprofit advocacy organization RespectAbility and the organization's promotion and celebration of *Special* supports its prominence in this analysis. But even beyond its relevance to *Special,* this under-studied organization offers valuable insight into the wider relationship between advocacy organizations and media production companies like Netflix – especially since RespectAbility has invested heavily in public-facing marketing campaigns that outline the company's mission and provide a narrative structure for understanding how its work in the media space supports this mission. In other words, the organization is a ripe subject for a production studies analysis that attempts to read between the lines of industrial, production, and creative discourses, as outlined by John Caldwell.

The organization provides relatively extensive access to its personnel through hundreds of hours of seminar style video, press releases, articles, and so on, including interviews with O'Connell about *Special.* These industrial/promotional resources, when read alongside materials like interviews from Senior VP of Entertainment Lauren Appelbaum, suggest a holistic understanding of *Special* as embodying a historically situated approach to representing and interpreting disability on streaming television.

The Luminate 2023 Entertainment Diversity Progress Report notes the show's distinctive status within Netflix's lineup, writing "if it seems like Ryan O'Connell is carrying the weight of disabled visibility on his back, it might be because he is."[1] Like his fictional counterpart, the real Ryan O'Connell is in his early thirties, he has mild cerebral palsy, he is gay, and he works as a writer (though not for online blogs, as in the show). O'Connell's real writing credits include acclaimed shows such as the *Will and Grace* (2017-2018) reboot, *Awkward* (2014-2016), and *Daytime Divas* (2017). Until his recent success with *Queer as Folk* (2022), in which he is the sole disabled series regular, *Special* served as his most recognized calling card, especially since he operated as the Netflix original short-form series' creator, writer, and star. *Special* is adapted from O'Connell's memoir *I'm Special: And Other Lies We Tell Ourselves* released in 2015. The memoir's feel-good, heartfelt approach to exploring the experience of disability sparked the interest of Jim Parsons, the executive producer of *The Big Bang Theory,* who carried the project through a number of production false starts before settling at Stage 13 and Netflix.

While generally it is not unusual for someone to play themselves on-screen in film or television, O'Connell's hyphenate status (creator-writer-star) is striking given how rare it is for disabled actors to be cast in roles where they embody those same disabilities. The Ruderman

[1] Luminate, *2023 Hollywood Diversity & Inclusion (DEI) Report* (Los Angeles, 2023), https://luminatedata.com/reports/entertainment-diversity-report/.

Foundation has commissioned a White Paper Research that has informed the entertainment industry for several years. Other consultancies that specifically focus on disability (such as RespectAbility) often use Ruderman's executive summaries as the basis for their stats and figures concerning above- and below-the-line labor for people with disabilities. The report released in 2016 explains that 95% of characters with disabilities are played by able-bodied actors.[2] Other figures support the lack of presence for disabled actors. For instance, the 2018-19 GLAAD "Where We are on TV" report indicated that 2.8% of characters with disabilities are presently on prime-time cable and network TV.[3] Though the Ruderman Foundation does not provide a granular breakdown of these numbers for characters on all streaming video on-demand (SVOD) services, there is data that examines disability representation on Netflix specifically. Netflix recently partnered with the University of Southern California's Annenberg Inclusion Initiative to generate a report, "Inclusion in Netflix Original U.S. Scripted Series & Films," which indicates that: less than 1% of lead characters in a scripted series have a disability; 5.1% of main cast characters have a disability; and, in speaking roles, there were only 2.4% of characters with a disability averaged between the years of 2018-2019.[4] The partnership is strategic and is one example of many that differentiate Netflix from Hollywood's linear broadcasters and begin to establish Netflix's brand as the diverse and inclusive SVOD platform.

In a 2021 blog post by Ted Sarandos titled "Building a Legacy of Inclusion: Results From Our First Film and Series Diversity Study," the current co-CEO of Netflix speaks about the

[2] Danny Woodburn and Kristina Kopić, *The Ruderman White Paper: On Employment of Actors with Disabilities in Television* (July 2016), 42.

[3] GLAAD, *Where We Are on TV Report 2018-2019,* accessed May 16, 2019, https://www.glaad.org/whereweareontv18.

[4] "Annenberg Inclusion Initiative Releases Study of Representation in Netflix Original Productions," USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, February 26, 2021, http://annenberg.usc.edu/news/research-and-impact/annenberg-inclusion-initiative-releases-study-representation-netflix.

partnership between Netflix and USC's Annenberg Initiative, among others, to improve disability representation in streaming television. Beyond their self-congratulatory tone, the Netflix PR Blogs are useful for indicating how Netflix believes it can and should demonstrate a commitment to *transparency* in its representation priorities. In the article, Sarandos details the accomplishments and strides Netflix has made for underrepresented storylines and characters in the original series programming since 2013. But, he explains, to *really* understand if Netflix has made progress on the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) front, the company needs to do a self-audit with the top researchers in this field (i.e., Stacy Smith's team at USC). The first Netflix-commissioned report published in 2021 utilized Netflix series and films only from 2018-2019. The Co-CEO/Chief Content Officer explained that although Netflix programming is leading the industry in some identity categories such as race/ethnicity and female representation, it continues to lag behind other production companies and streaming platforms in other categories. "We still have work to do in increasing representation of the LGBTQ community and characters with disabilities," Sarandos writes.[5] The Netflix blog that encompasses its PR strategy for DEI and promises commitment to representation in the future bolsters its credibility via the company's trademark polish and slick graphic design, complete with elegant illustrations by Ndubisi Okoye, videos from Dr. Stacy Smith, and Inclusion Report data from Netflix on internal hiring practices. It also contains videos highlighting the dedication and passion of production and creative personnel working to advance the company's representation numbers via content focused on historically underrepresented populations. In an eleven-minute video from Smith on the blog, she details the Annenberg commissioned report and one of its major (but not very

[5] Sarandos, Ted, "Building a Legacy of Inclusion: Results From Our First Film and Series Diversity Study," Netflix, February 26, 2021, https://about.netflix.com/en/news/building-a-legacy-of-inclusion.

surprising) findings: “The LGBTQ+ community and people with disabilities rarely see themselves reflected on screen.” At the end of the video Dr. Smith explains,

> There is something else that’s important about this investigation. It’s historic. At the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, were not aware of any other company taking a leadership role and making their findings as transparent and rolling out those results to all the communities that either work on Netflix films and series or consume them as audiences. And given the size and scope of Netflix content particularly as it relates to its entertainment industry peers, the results show one thing very clear. Netflix is committed to inclusion across its content portfolio and were excited to see what the results might yield in years to come.[6]

Later, the blog describes the “Inclusion Lens,” a vague (by design) catch-all term favored by Netflix PR communications to characterize Netflix’s holistic approach to representing diverse populations on-screen. Ted Sarandos elaborates, “Over the years, we’ve seen that to drive real change, we need to approach our work with an “inclusion lens.” That means asking more questions like: “whose voice is missing? Is this portrayal authentic? Who is excluded?” This lens directly impacts who is being hired both above and below the line as well as the stories we make for our members.”[7] Yet Sarandos’ tact in explaining away Netflix’s diversity deficiencies means little if there is not also meaningful financial investment in changing the status quo.

To Netflix’s credit, the company does in fact seem willing to back up Sarandos’ and other executives’ lofty rhetoric through internal initiatives and strategic partnerships with DEI-associated entities. For instance, in 2021 the company launched the Creative Equity Fund,

[6] Sarandos, “Building a Legacy of Inclusion.”

[7] Sarandos, “Building a Legacy of Inclusion.”

through which the company "will invest $100 million dollars over the next five years in a combination of external organizations with a strong track record of setting underrepresented communities up for success in the TV and film industries, as well as bespoke Netflix programs that will help us to identify, train and provide job placement for up-and-coming talent globally."[8] Netflix has also created partnerships with organizations like Ghetto Film School, Film Independent's Project Involve, Firelight Media and Black Public Media, all of which fund efforts to provide media-making resources and training to budding storytellers in underrepresented communities. Similarly, Netflix has continued to foster its relationship with RespectAbility by co-funding the Children's Content Lab for Disabled TV Creators, a mentorship and training program designed to generate a pipeline of disabled talent in both above- and below-the-line roles. For context, RespectAbility is the leading consultancy in the disability entertainment space and has connections to every case study in my dissertation, particularly *Special* (O'Connell is a collaborator and advocate for the organization).

To give in to an irresistible play on words, *Special* is in fact "special" not only because the main character and the show's creator share the same disability, but also because people with disabilities were included in many aspects of the production both in front of and behind the camera. While the pitfalls of affinity bias in hiring have long been understood – when employers prefer hiring applicants who share similar interests, backgrounds, identity categories, the workplace becomes more homogenous and less favorable to new ideas, cultures, etc. – Netflix and USC's commissioned reports on diversity further support this fact and call for the creation of more shows like *Special.* In 2021, their report declared simply that when people from underrepresented populations are responsible for the creation of programming, the programming

[8] Sarandos, "Building a Legacy of Inclusion."

features more underrepresented talent. This is not surprising, but hopefully this kind of statistical and institutional evidence appeals more to profit-minded executives to follow through on their promises for more representation. RespectAbility and other disability focused advocacy groups often utilize "bottom-line" rhetoric as a tactic to influence SVOD companies like Netflix to invest in disability representation.

For its part, *Special* seems willing to take on as many representational categories as it can. The tagline for the series *Special*, "Living, Laughing, Limping," conveys the show's refreshing blend of sweetness and bluntness, which it uses to cleverly navigate issues of queer identity, non-traditional forms of relationships, and non-nuclear family dynamics, similar to other coming of age sitcoms on Netflix. Yet, *Special* provides a nuanced and complex portrayal of disability representation, which is further interrogated through the cast and creators' intersectional identity. Television and queer studies scholar Ron Becker, author of *Prime-Time Closet* and "Gay-Themed Television and the Slumpy Class," attributes the rise of gay-themed programming to both the turbulent socio-political conditions of the 1990s, rise of neoliberalism, and innovations in audience targeting by the Big Three networks, who pivoted their attentions to a niche audience dubbed the "slumpies" (Socially Liberal, Urban-Minded Professionals).[9]

Though the comparison has its limitations, Becker's logic can be useful for similarly understanding the rise of disability-focused programming. Historically, these two categories are the most underrepresented in television history. This is evidenced by the most recent reports from USC's Annenberg, GLAADs "Where We Are on TV" Report, and UCLA's Hollywood Diversity Report, which began tracking disability on-screen representation for the first time in 2023. Just as Becker explains that the "slumpies" consumed gay programming in the 90s as a

[9] Ron Becker, "Gay-Themed Television and the Slumpy Class: The Affordable, Multicultural Politics of the Gay Nineties," *Television & New Media* 7, no. 2 (May 1, 2006): 184–215.

nod to "performative politics" – i.e., watching progressive programming to feel you are being progressive and inclusive – I believe today's slumpies are engaging a similar aspirational politics in consuming disability programming. I argue that Netflix is interested in gaining viewership for its disability programming both because it is committed to promoting inclusive storytelling and because creating content focused on marginalized identities is part of the company's current marketing strategy and branding philosophy. Whether one is convinced by the corporate rhetoric or not, Netflix works to cultivate a reputation as a politically progressive (when convenient) SVOD platform through its representation initiatives. Becker writes,

> At a time when multicultural discourses valued, commodified, politicized, and perhaps fetishized differences and identity, being marginalized on almost any axis enjoyed a cultural cache with certain socially enlightened members of the educated class; from a politically correct perspective, being black, Latino, gay, or disabled seemed to offer one an inherent edginess forged from social oppression.[10]

The televisual representation of "diversity" i.e., race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity, has gained visibility and *profitability* in recent years. It is only within the last several years that disability representation has begun to receive the same attention as a profitable identity category. In *Netflix's Speculative Fictions: Financializing Platform Television,* media scholar Colin Jon Mark Crawford examines Netflix's use of investor-facing financial discourse to create self-serving "lore" about its business decisions – including marketing and programming – that establishes and bolsters its status in the media industry. As Crawford writes, "The company rather views its titles as enterprising investments—risks—of varying sizes and its content library

[10] Becker, "Gay-Themed Television and the Slumpy Class."

as a portfolio, all of which serve the project of the Netflix brand; the Netflix *story*."[11] Much like media industry scholars Van Dijck, Terranova, and Lobato, Crawford understands Netflix as part of the emerging platform economy that operates by industrial logics not necessarily found in traditional media industry models; "I define this relatively new, online video landscape…as "platform television" and use this term (as opposed to Streaming or Subscription Video on Demand) to keep in mind the platform logics of exchange and extraction, and the ubiquity of televisuality produced by hyperconnectivity."[12] Crawford adapts Timothy Haven's concept of "industry lore," or the "conventional knowledge" determined by "industry insiders" concerning possible production types, and what audiences will be attracted to what media to stress the way Netflix's value is both literal and symbolic, thus necessitating emphasis on manipulating the company narrative.[13] He defines his concept of "investor lore" as "the emergent discourses among investing actors about what kinds of user experiences are and are not valuable and which users these experiences will and will not engage."[14] In regards to *Special,* such "actors" would include disability consultancies and advocacy organizations, university research groups (like USC'S Annenberg, UCLA'S Entertainment and Media Research Initiative, etc.), organizations like Hollywood Health and Society, and those involved in Netflix's partnership with the Creative Equity Fund. Crawford explains that while he is focused on financial communication, this

[11] Colin Jon Mark Crawford, *Netflix's Speculative Fictions: Financializing Platform Television* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020) 1.

[12] Crawford, *Netflix's Speculative Fictions,* 3.

[13] Crawford, *Netflix's Speculative Fictions,* 3.

[14] Crawford, *Netflix's Speculative Fictions,* 4.

framework lends itself to other "investing actors" like "fans, creative and tech labor, journalists, and researchers."[15]

Utilizing Judith Butler's 1993 work *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* as a theoretical touchstone, Crawford is examining the performative language of Netflix's public communications about its financial lineage. "By constantly reiterating and citing specific discourses and promises of value, Netflix seeks precisely to bring into being the forms of value that it names."[16] I believe this same performative discourse is underwriting the diversity-related branding and other communications at Netflix to more closely associate the brand with diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, even those the company is not itself a direct sponsor of. Even when Netflix fails the DEI litmus test, especially within the category of disability, they use their corporate and PR communications to create discourse surrounding the "we'll do better" narrative by allocating funding to projects and partnerships that create more rhetoric around the DEI brand. While I am not accusing Netflix of fabricating disability narratives when none exist, I do see hints of performativity in the company's funding and promotion of reports on its own diversity practices, which often frame evidence of the company's *lack* of diversity as progress that deserves praise in and of itself. This practice is evidenced in other forms of "diversity work," where apologizing for a lack of diversity and creating a paper-trail of remorse for its lack, stands in for diversity itself.[17]

For instance, consider Netflix's first internal report on its workforce diversity in 2021, titled "Inclusion Takes Root at Netflix: Our First Report," which they released in tandem with a

[15] Crawford, *Netflix's Speculative Ficitons,* 15.

[16] Crawford, *Netflix's Speculative Fictions,* 16.

[17] Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

ten-minute video that doubles down on the growth/root/gardening metaphor: "Sowing the Seeds." In the latter, VP of Inclusion Strategy Vernā Myers explains that "What we [at Netflix] have learned about diversity and inclusion is that, while it is the right thing to do for sure, it is also responsible for our ability to innovate."[18] Here Myers emphasizes Netflix's broader brand identity – innovation in the streaming media space – and muses how convenient it is that the company's industry "progressiveness" maps neatly onto social and political progressiveness. Meanwhile, Ted Sarandos is seen sitting in a director's chair, explaining the methods for improving the company's DEI: "The best way to have it on screen is to have it in writer's rooms, and the best way to have it in writer's rooms is to have it in our internal community." [19] Here the video forcefully advances the narrative of Netflix's commitment to a workforce predicated on DEI while simultaneously highlighting the Original Programming that has distinguished the SVOD service from competitors like Hulu or Amazon.

"Sowing the Seeds" goes to great lengths to showcase the company's investment in representing multiple and diverse identity categories historically underrepresented in film and television, including gender, sexual identity, age, religion, race, and ethnicity. Disability, however, is discussed at the very end of the nearly ten-minute video segment. It is here that *Special* is utilized as a feather in Netflix's cap. Under the heading, "Feeling Special: Normalizing Narratives," Director of Content Acquisition Cole Gavin says:

> Growing up with special needs, you learn, and it becomes organic to your DNA that other people have different cues in life, and it's important to dimensionalize them and see them for who they are, so much more past their needs. *Special* is a coming-of-age series about

[18] Vernā Myers, "Inclusion Takes Root at Netflix: Our First Report," Netflix, January 13, 2021, https://about.netflix.com/en/news/netflix-inclusion-report-2021.

[19] Myers, "Inclusion Takes Root at Netflix."

> a boy named Ryan who wants to be independent from his parents, wants a job that pays, wants his voice to heard, but also is someone coming to terms with his disability and his sexuality. It was the first time we have seen a gay man with cerebral palsy on television being an agent of his own story. If we're not bringing forward these voices and finding stories that are relatable but told in a very different point of view, then were not doing our jobs right.[20]

Vernā Myers ends the video stating, "The neutral period is over, we need the courageous, period. And that is part of how we are thinking about transformation, cultural change, content that allows for stories of all sorts of groups of people to be heard, and for all of us to have meaningful lives with dignity even in the places we work."[21] This lofty quote sits uneasily next to her "while it is the right thing to do, for sure, it also…" quote, but ultimately pays off the video's narrative that Netflix is working towards a more diverse workplace above all.

For a company that became famous for its inscrutable black boxing of its technical systems, consumer data collection processes, and viewership numbers, when it comes to DEI, Netflix privileges one word across its marketing and branding practices more than any other: "transparency." Netflix's internal diversity report (and its accompanying video) offers a glimpse into the *terms* of Netflix's transparency, or, to put it differently, what *kind* of transparency the organization is willing to have. When speaking about the internal employee reports and quantitative data detailing on-screen and behind-the-screen representation, Netflix has been adamant in their PR communications that they want to lead the way in corporate transparency. This goal, however, does not extend to Netflix's audience or viewer data. Media scholar Michael

[20] Myers, "Inclusion Takes Root at Netflix."

[21] Myers, "Inclusion Takes Root at Netflix."

Wayne has been investigating Netflix for several years and points out the irony of Netflix's fixation on "transparency." In "Netflix audience data, streaming industry discourse, and the emerging realities of 'popular' television," Wayne discusses the industrial discourse surrounding Netflix's collection and use of data. From 2007 through 2018, Netflix enacted "anti-transparency policies," which allowed executives to comment on audience data even as this data would not be made public. Wayne states, "This public discourse about proprietary data provided Netflix opportunities to differentiate itself from its linear competitors, explicitly criticize traditional industry practice, and deflect criticism about programming decisions." [22] Wayne argues that the original anti-transparency stance Netflix used to differentiate from legacy programming reverted with the advent of "selective viewership" data in 2019, which he describes as "selectively publishing viewership numbers for a small number of original titles to highlight the popularity of the platform's original content."[23] Crawford is similarly skeptical of Netflix's interpretation of transparency, citing Netflix's decision to erase its PR communications on the company blog prior to 2015.

Netflix's record of anti-transparency actions extends beyond data. Wayne explains that multiple trade press reports indicate a history of corporate secrecy even internally, and even among Netflix showrunners. During my interviews, an informant told me of a story in which her partner leased office space in the same building as Netflix on Sunset Boulevard. They explained that even though Netflix had the office space on the tenth floor and no other office or people from the ground could see inside the building, Netflix demanded that a special film be overlayed on the building's windows as a condition of the lease agreement, since Netflix executives were

[22] Michael L Wayne, "Netflix Audience Data, Streaming Industry Discourse, and the Emerging Realities of 'Popular' Television," *Media, Culture & Society* 44, no. 2 (March 1, 2022): 194.

[23] Wayne, "Netflix Audience Data," 194.

worried concerned about drones photographing their storyboards. Though this is anecdotal evidence, and perhaps such corporate behavior is not outrageous in the media world, it does speak to a culture of *secrecy* rather than *transparency* in even the company's everyday production practices.

Shifting away from transparency, I want to return to the connection between Netflix's approach to DEI in terms of sexuality, age, and other identity categories, and its approach to representing disability in its original programming. In USC Annenberg's 2021 report, "Inclusion in Netflix Original U.S. Scripted Series & Films," LGBTQ representation is explicitly grouped with representation of people with disabilities. This lumping together all forms of difference is familiar to The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), who started identifying characters with disabilities in 2010, as seen in its report *Where We are on TV*. The report speaks to a long history of the coupling of queer theory and disability studies. Attempting to differentiate the categories, GLAAD points out in the report that nearly 27.2% of the US population self-identify as having a disability.[24] Such relationships, partnerships, and the reports they produce between organizations like USC, Hollywood Health and Society, RespectAbility and Netflix forms the basis of this chapter's analysis.

In "Streaming difference(s): Netflix and the branding of diversity," authors Axelle Asmar, Tim Raats and Leo Van Audenhove investigate Netflix's relationship to diversity representation through the examination of Netflix's self-published 2021 "Diversity Report" (referred to above). They pay special attention to the rhetorical strategies Netflix uses in its corporate communication, which highlights the SVOD service's diversity branding and content. The authors observe and outline four distinct "elements of success" employed by Netflix: (1)

[24] Dr. Stacy L Smith et al., "Inclusion in Netflix Original U.S. Scripted Series & Films," 2021, 37.

Subscriber based monthly revenue increase (in both cost of subscription and amount of people subscribing), (2) Original content production, (3) Algorithmic recommendation for audience segmentation (to differentiate existing audiences and the ability to attract new ones), and (4) Transnational expansion.[25] Though this article sheds light on how the SVOD service is self-theorizing its diversity content and corporate branding, the identity categories that Netflix focuses on within the report leave much to be desired in terms of genuine disability inclusion. In fact, in the article mentioned above, disability is left out of the conversation entirely. The authors explain that "Netflix stresses the company's commitment to representing its audience in all its diversity—that is, ethnic, sexual, or linguistic."[26] They go on to explain, "This branding is not innocent; rather, by embodying a cosmopolitan ethos, Netflix aims at building a cultural (policy) apparatus with enough influence to smooth out its global expansion."[27] With Netflix's' primary emphasis on globalization and transnational expansion (and thus diversity), it is important to acknowledge that I am not only writing in the United States, but I am also examining disability from a western American perspective. For over 30 years in the United States, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has been the primary legislative tool for understanding and addressing issues related to disability. This landmark legislation, supported by lobbying from activists like Judy Heumann (colloquially known as the "Mother of the Disability Rights Movement"), has significantly impacted how disability is represented, even within televisual entertainment.[28]

[25] Axelle Asmar, Tim Raats, and Leo Van Audenhove, "Streaming Difference(s): Netflix and the Branding of Diversity," *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies* 18, no. 1 (September 21, 2022), 24-40.

[26] Asmar, Raats, and Van Audenhove, "Streaming Difference(s)," 25.

[27] Asmar, Raats, and Van Audenhove, "Steaming Difference(s)," 27.

[28] Judith Heumann and Kristen Joiner, *Being Heumann: An Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Activist* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020).

Netflix's ambitions to expand transnationally provide a critical context for understanding its approach to increasing diversity representation in its content and branding. Media scholar Evan Elkins describes the company's efforts as "streaming diplomacy," saying, "Netflix attempts to promote its progressive brand while strengthening its foreign policy apparatus in order to gain footholds in global markets."[29] Elkins builds on the work of authors like O'Reilly and Banet-Weiser to dissect the Netflix branding strategy, "Consequently, branding goes further than the sole ascription of a logo," he writes, "it creates the cultural context in which commodities are to be used, conjuring the series of images, themes of values associated to the branded products."[30] Asmar, Raats, and Van Audenhove used a data scraper on 800 press releases from Netflix, utilizing the data analysis tool NVivo and a codebook with both a deductive and inductive approach. The diversity and subthemes identified were (1) racial and ethnic (2) gender diversity (3) sexual diversity (4) age diversity and (5) linguistic diversity. Once again, disability is not formally recognized in the categories, despite Netflix's brand identity as "a game changer in an industry that is either too slow or too unwilling to change." [31] A 2023 *Hollywood Reporter* article adds to this discussion a report from Luminate, the current name for the previous collection of data brands known as Nielsen/MRC Data and Variety Business Intelligence. Commenting on the report, writes:

> Finally, the [Luminate] study notes that out of all the systematically marginalized groups examined, visibility for people with disabilities was by far the worst, partly because not all disabilities are visible, and researchers had to rely on self-disclosure. Ryan O'Connell

[29] Evan Elkins, "Streaming Diplomacy: Netflix's Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy," in *The Routledge Handbook of Digital Media and Globalization*, ed. Dal Yong Jin (New York: Routledge, 2021).

[30] Asmar, Raats, and Van Audenhove, "Streaming Difference(s)," 27.

[31] Asmar, Raats, and Van Audenhove, "Streaming Difference(s)," 29.

> was the only series creator with a disability across the two-year sample, and between his roles on *Special* and *Queer as Folk,* he represented more than 10% of series regular actors with disabilities during that time. In film, only a total of eight actors with disabilities were part of a main title cast in 2021 and 2022.[32]

Sun's commentary is part of the broader conversation about Netflix's transnational expansion, considering how much of the content listed in the report was made overseas. The report posits Hollywood's failure to hire actors with disabilities in the few roles that did get made, declaring "the big question that this raises is why studios and networks wouldn't hire the people from this community whose stories are being used to make money."[33] Such sentiment reappears in a later discussion evaluating the industry's desire (both creators and consultancies) to hire actors with disabilities in disabled character roles.

Special Textual Analysis

In *Special*'s pilot, aspiring writer Ryan (O'Connell) gets a job at Egg Woke, an online magazine akin to Buzzfeed. During one of his first staff meetings, Ryan's boss Olivia (Marla Mindelle) points out his limp and rudely asks if something happened to him. Not wanting to discuss the details of his disability in front of his new co-workers, Ryan says his limp came from getting hit by a car. The dramatic irony of the scene makes the viewer sympathize with Ryan's desire to avoid talking about his disability; at the same time, it draws attention to the ambiguous distinctions between injury and disability. Ryan's character, we presume, thinks that by describing his limp as an injury, he will draw less attention from co-workers (and avoid further

[32] Rebecca Sun, "Intersectionality and Overseas Content Drove Diverse Film and TV in 2021 and 2022 (Study)," *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 17, 2023.

[33] "Hollywood Diversity & Inclusion (DEI) Report."

insensitive questioning from his boss) and avoid negative special treatment that might come, he presumes, from saying his limp and lack of coordination is a result of cerebral palsy. In an interview for *EW,* O'Connell says he felt that by telling his story and playing himself, he could, in a partial sense, make able-bodied viewers feel *in* on the jokes and absurdities of the disabled experience. O'Connell recognizes that as a person with a disability, he will be inevitably pigeon-holed as a "spokesperson" for others with a variety of disabilities and underlines his commitment to use his platform to make characters with disabilities more accessible for able-bodied audiences.[34] The *fictional* Ryan's disability figures prominently in his workplace persona. At one point, his boss makes a glib remark about wanting to hear an opinion from "the diversity hire." In the Hollywood writers' room, the diversity hire position has been the target of criticism as a disingenuous way for media companies to claim credit for promoting diversity without actually supporting it – mainly by paying employees that have historically been marginalized. At Egg Woke, when the "diversity hire" (who happens to be a white male) begins to speak, Olivia interjects, "Just kidding straight, white, men have been canceled." This kind of self-reflexive rhetoric pokes fun at the way the media industry is constantly adapting to shifts in progressive political discourse – even at the expense of the media industry's own efforts to keep up (i.e. the diversity hire position).[35]

In the episode "Blind, Deaf, Date," Olivia approaches Ryan with the prospect of a blind date. She says she thinks her cousin would be the "perfect" boyfriend for him. To Ryan's surprise, when he meets his date, he is greeted in American Sign Language (ASL) alongside

[34] Nick Romano, "Ryan O'Connell on Netflix's Special and Awkward Gay Sex," *Entertainment Weekly*, April 12, 2019.

[35] *Special*, season 1, episode 1, "Chapter One: Cerebral Lolzy," directed by Anna Dokoza, aired April 12, 2009, on Netflix.

English ("Hey, are you Ryan?"). The man explains he is actually *not* Ryan's date but is instead Ryan's date's ASL interpreter. Ryan's actual date, Michael (Andrew Daly), jumps in, "So I'm Michael…I'm just gonna let you know I'm sorry in advance because I'm a blind date virgin, so this might hurt a little bit." Confused and visibly frustrated, Ryan asks, "How does this work?" Jordan, the interpreter, clarifies, "So, you'll just say whatever you want to Michael, but just make sure he can read your lips." The moment serves a didactic function, educating both Ryan and the viewer about Deaf culture in both English and ASL.

This scene is one of many instances where *Special* merges its narrative desire to subvert expectations with its representational desire to subvert preconceptions of disability. It is a cliché of diversity-focused programming to overcorrect for the lack of presence by indulging the educational address too much, turning scenes like this from *Special* into show-stopping public service announcements that disrupt immersion in favor of shows' well-meaning ideological goals. For instance, the Netflix Original Series *Sex Education* was recently criticized for its execution of a disability-centric scene in the show's final season, which critics labeled overly "performative."[36]

Special presents such misunderstandings of disability as a means of exploring representation within its diegesis – but these incidents are not purely fictional. I witnessed a strikingly similar incident while attending the Lights! Camera! Access! 2.0 conference at The Television Academy in 2019 which I briefly describe in the introduction to this project. The event was held to connect Hollywood personnel who either identify as disabled or are affiliated with disability-centric programming. During a Q&A segment, an event host employee in charge of delivering microphones to panelists kept insisting an actor take a mic, not realizing the actor

[36] Inga Parkel, "What That 'Sex Education' Disability Story Could Learn from Reality TV," *Salon*, October 2, 2023.

was Deaf and was trying to redirect the mic to his interpreter, who was relaying his ASL. Many in the room started to laugh, but the employee's blunder then became a segue for a thoughtful discussion about accessibility in the entertainment industry and the industry-wide practice of hiring non-disabled actors to play disabled characters.

Internalized Ableism

In *Disability as Diversity: Developing a Cultural Competence,* psychologist Erin Andrews writes, "Among disabled people, "internalized" prejudices and stereotypes can affect one's attitude toward oneself and others with disabilities. Some people with disabilities avoid association and reject romantic or sexual partnership with other disabled people, either within their own disability group or with those who have other types of disabilities."[37]

Special makes a point of demonstrating how Ryan's experience of ableist discrimination does not absolve him of perpetuating other forms of stereotyping or discrimination. He is imperfect, irrational, and at times insensitive. In the blind date scene, once the fact of Ryan's date's deafness sets in, Ryan comments derisively that his boss Olivia must "really, really hate" him to set him up with someone like this. Later, when discussing the experience with Olivia, Ryan is incredulous to discover that his blind date wasn't interested in him. Ryan insists *he* should be the one to reject his date since, in his view as someone with a limp, he is higher up on the disability "hierarchy" than a deaf person. Ryan's internalized ableism appears and reappears throughout the series and allows the show to probe the tensions between disability by birth and disability by circumstance (as in Ryan's fake car crash, disease, injury, age, etc.). The conversation between Ryan and Olivia regarding the blind date expands on these themes.

[37] Erin E. Andrews, *Disability As Diversity: Developing Cultural Competence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 51.

Olivia's character is used in this and similar scenes as an ironic foil (considering how callous she is most of the time in the office) to challenge Ryan's own beliefs about disability and his relationship to it:

Ryan: "You didn't tell me he was Deaf, okay?"

Olivia: "So? You're disabled."

Ryan: "I am not disabled. I was hit by a car."

Olivia: "And you were left with a weird limp, which I'm pretty sure makes you disabled."

Ryan: "Whatever. I can still do better than a Deaf guy."

Olivia: "Wow. Are you serious right now? This is amazing. Like, I knew you were fucked up, but this is, like, layers. You have to write about this."

Ryan: "Write about what?"

Olivia: "How you hate that you're disabled, and getting set up with someone that is Deaf forced you to look in the mirror."

Ryan: "That's not what this is. Why are you always so mean to me?"

Olivia: "Because you need it! Everyone just treats you like you're the boy in the car accident bubble."

Ryan: "Oh, so you being rude is actually doing me a favor? Wow. Thank you so much Olivia."

Olivia: "Ah, you are so welcome. Ooh, and I thought of a new article idea for you. "Four Ways Ryan Can Get His Shit Together." Number one, he can stop suffering from internalized ableism."

Ryan: "That's not a thing."

A reading of this show and scene would ask us to explore how the introduction of this term can act as a PSA for people unfamiliar with disability studies rhetoric. Internalized ableism – or perhaps a different internalized "ism" such as "sexism," "racism," etc. – refers to the way

hegemonic ideology is internalized by minority groups. bell hooks has written extensively about internalization in terms of racism, but she also explains how this concept can lend itself to other minority groups, including people with disabilities.[38] hooks also utilizes the concept of intersectionality to encourage researchers to keep in mind how identity categories overlap and impact subjectivity in complex, multi-faceted ways. It should also be noted that disability is inherently intersectional since disabled persons already occupy other identity categories.

In a virtual workshop hosted by O'Connell through RespectAbility in 2020, he talks about the process of marketing his life for his memoir, then for a television show pitch. He explains that when he sold the option to his book, *Special and Other Lies We Tell*, he did not disclose he had a disability, and in fact he considered himself "closeted" about his disability – even to close friends. (It turns out his lie about being hit by a car is based on true events.) He says:

> So I moved to New York to go to school, and everyone assumed my limp was from my car accident, and I never corrected them because I just thought, "oh, being hit by a car is so much more relatable – no one has really understood cerebral palsy – like, when I had to explain it in the past, people just get confused – everyone can understand getting hit by a car. It could happen to them, blah blah blah. I mean, I didn't know I was also suffering from deep, dark, internalized ableism, but at the time I thought I was performing this amazing life hack when really, I was just hacking up my life to bits.[39]

In his field-advancing 1995 book *Enforcing normalcy: Disability, deafness, and the body,* Lennard Davis employs deafness as a microcosm of disability more broadly. In this and other disability studies work, Davis argues that studying how disability is socially constructed

[38] bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Class and Sex at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

[39] Eric Ascher, "Virtual Workshop: Learn From Ryan O'Connell," RespectAbility, April 15, 2020, https://www.respectability.org/2020/04/ryan-oconnell-webinar/.

necessitates studying how normalcy is likewise socially constructed. The two categories define and reinforce one another, and, in this way, each is necessary for the others' existence. He writes, "I do this because the 'problem' is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person."[40] O'Connell often speaks about how he historically tried to fit into the "normalcy" that was created for him rather than confront the systems that created ableism to begin with.

Special is a particularly rich case study to explore not only disability representation but also the intersectionality of disability. Robert McRuer's *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* is a foundational text to the intersections of queer theory and disability studies. McRuer's work builds on that of other disability studies scholars including Lennard Davis (*Enforcing Normalcy*) and Rosemary Garland-Thomson (*Extraordinary Bodies*), Judith Butler, and Michel Foucault. McRuer explores neoliberal capitalism as the dominant economic and cultural system in which identities have been constructed and in which they operate over the past quarter century. McRuer's argument about the influence of economic-industrial logics on understandings of identity category resonates with a point O'Connell makes when speculating why disability specifically has been so poorly represented across media history: "Disability is profoundly uncomfortable given the value systems of our culture," he says. "We live in a culture that is about productivity. It's about being bigger, faster, stronger." [41] McRuer draws attention to the fragility of the concept of normalcy, wherein able-bodiedness is considered the norm and its status as an identity category is erased – it becomes a "non-identity." Nevertheless, as other

[40] Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), 23-24.

[41] Greg Marshall, "Ryan O'Connell on the Importance of Facing Rejection in the Sack and Finding His Voice in Hollywood," *Literary Hub*, June 9, 2022, https://lithub.com/ryan-oconnell-on-the-importance-of-facing-rejection-in-the-sack-and-finding-his-voice-in-hollywood/.

disability scholars point out as well, disability represents the only identity category that all people will become part of if they live long enough. "Everyone is virtually disabled," he writes, "both in the sense that able-bodied norms are 'intrinsically impossible to embody,' and fully in the sense that able-bodied status is always temporary."[42]

Special additionally underscores how disability is interpreted differently not only in its interactions with other forms of difference, but also within the social environment of the disabled community. In an interaction with his Physical Therapist, Simon *Special* explores the topic of "within-group attitudes." Erin Andrews explains, "Among disabled people, "internalized" prejudices and stereotypes can affect one's attitude toward oneself and others with disabilities."[43] When Simon notices that Ryan is lusting after another male physical therapist and not focused on his own therapy he barks, "Save that for Grindr," a dating site for gay men and other LGBTQ people. Ryan responds, "What would my profile say? I'm gay *and* disabled, but I promise not to drool on you till the third date?" Ryan and Simon banter a bit more as the camera pans from Ryan's point of view to Bob, a middle-aged man in a motorized wheelchair. Noticing Bob, Ryan explains his complicated relationship with his cerebral palsy explaining, "It must be freeing to be so disabled. Sometimes I feel like having a mild case is like being bi-racial… it's like I'm in limbo…it's like I'm not able-bodied enough to be hanging in the mainstream world, but I'm not disabled enough to be hanging out with the cool PT crowd. At least Bob knows where he belongs." *Special* does not force Ryan's character to be a spokesperson for disability, it showcases many people with lived experiences of the disabilities they are portraying on screen and does not fall into one-dimensional tropes that are common in other media about disability.

[42] Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 30.

[43] Andrews, *Disability As Diversity*, 51.

Later, Ryan joins his friend Henry (Buck Andrews) for a meetup with a disability support group called "The Crips." In characteristic fashion, Ryan is amusingly wary of socializing with other disabled people due to his negative preconceptions: "So these people that we're meeting today, they're like fun and cool, right? I mean, they're disabled, but they're fun. And cool. Not to say that you can't be both or whatever." While Henry explains that his friend group is in fact fun, the pair is approached by an older man on the street who makes a point of staring at Henry while he is stimming (a repetitive behavior or vocalization recognized in neurotypical groups). Henry notices and confronts the man, "I'm stimming, honey. Self-stimulatory behavior is occasionally a symptom of people like me that were diagnosed with Asperger's, but that term is now problematic, because whoops, it was coined by Nazis, so technically now we are all just somewhere on the autism spectrum. Neurodiverse, if ya nasty. But I mostly identify as hot." The overt instructional moment echoes the opening sequence when Ryan lays out the facts and other pertinent information about his cerebral palsy (by way of an interaction with a stranger). These moments reveal O'Connell's sense of responsibility to lay groundwork for future disability narratives, as well as his ability to make these moments entertaining. Here and elsewhere, the show pushes the boundaries of comedy about disability because the writer-creator-star inhabits the lived identity represented and has utilized consultants and actors who share the disabilities portrayed on screen. The scene above touches on two pieces of disability studies and culture that should be examined further: comedy in disability narratives and the functions of recruitment and community.

Disability scholar Carrol Gil argues there are four primary functions of disability culture: fortification, unification, communication, and recruitment. These are extrapolated from Erin Andrews. *Special* stands out as a model of the "recruitment" and "communication" functions

alongside shows like *Atypical* and *As We See It* (though I would argue these functions are represented with more nuance and authenticity in *Special*). Historically, and because of models of disability like the medical model, organizations around disability were created and run by non-disabled people. We can see this in charity research for finding "cures" for disabilities or impairments.

During Ryan's first Crip group-share he says "I have to admit, I actually thought I was done dealing with my CP, but it still trolls me all the time. Uber drivers ask what's wrong with me. Strangers come up to me at the gym and congratulate me simply for exercising."
An annoyed member of the circle responds, "Eww. Inspiration porn." Ryan quickly turns and asks, "Is that what that is? Yeah, that makes sense. And then… I went on a date with a guy a few weeks ago, and he was super cute, an actor. I mean Hallmark movies but, you know, still. The whole time I was thinking, what is he doing with me? I mean I know I'm not gay Grendel, but you know. Anyway, we were, um, hooking up, and he was just so focused on my disability. It was very clear that it turned him on. And it made me feel not great. And, of course, part of me was just like, "Oh." "This is why he was into me. It makes sense now." So anyway."
Another member of the group responds, "Wait, Hallmark movies? If you're gonna get fetishized, you can't give it up to anyone below, like, B-list movie star." And with that, laughing breaks tension. The romantic partner that Ryan describes had a story arc to show the sexual fetishization of people with disabilities by non-disabled partners. The scene, as most in *Special,* conveys the raw emotions that Ryan is dealing with navigating his intersectional identity as a young, gay, man with CP.

Inspiration Porn

Disability studies and digital media studies scholars alike have noticed disappointing trends in popular representational strategies, including the tendency to turn stories about characters with disabilities into patronizing and simplistic "Inspiration Porn." Given *Special*'s determination to subvert overused tropes of disability representation, it is no surprise that the show finds a way to feature this one as well. In one episode, Ryan is approached by an attractive man outside his gym. Thinking he is about to get a date, Ryan welcomes the man's interest. But the conversation takes a turn when the man says, "I would love to interview you for my podcast. It's super inspiring to see you give it your all [at the gym], despite your limitations. Keep it up!"

As Jan Grue explains, "Inspiration porn is the representation of disability as a desirable but undesired characteristic, usually by showing impairment as a visually or symbolically distinct biophysical deficit in one person, a deficit that can and must be overcome through the display of physical prowess."[44] Originally described by disability activist and comedian Stella Young, "Inspiration Porn" first appeared as an outwardly innocuous but still regressive trope in meme culture on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms. Today, it has become a target of criticism on shows like ABC's *Speechless* (2016-2019), whose screenwriter and actor Zach Anner gave a keynote on the topic at Lights! Camera! Access! 2.0. Anner, a writer-creator-star with Cerebral Palsy, first explained the unconventional way he had to break into Hollywood as a person with a disability. Anner kick started his career via YouTube and social media, then parlayed his successes in these spheres back into legacy Hollywood opportunities. Before gaining writing and acting credits on *Speechless*, Anner won the chance to be on his own reality TV show *Rollin' with Zach* (2011-) via a video contest held by Oprah's O Network. Anner's

[44] Jan Grue, "The Problem with Inspiration Porn: A Tentative Definition and a Provisional Critique," *Disability & Society* 31, no. 6 (July 2, 2016): 838–49.

career trajectory makes sense only in the context of emerging connected viewing practices and the industrial and cultural shift from mass media to social media logic. It also sheds light on one way television shows can avoid the trappings of "inspiration porn" when creative decision-making power rests with creators-writers-stars who live the embodied identities of the characters they invent and depict. Anner is now in the inaugural cohort of Netflix's 'Created by Initiative' for Underrepresented Writers that receives its funding from the Creative Equity Fund. As the Netflix blog explains:

> The program is designed to ensure underrepresented and historically excluded talent are set up for success beyond the writers' room. The development deals provide these writers with the opportunity to go through the studio development process and hone their projects alongside Netflix executives from the series and film teams. Additionally, all series writers will be invited to participate in a showrunner training lab designed to provide the essential skills needed to successfully run a Netflix series.[45]

In O'Connell's workshop for RespectAbility, he spoke to the organization's Inclusion Associate Tatiana Lee about consciously writing Ryan's character as someone *not* unilaterally inspiring. O'Connell describes wanting his main character to be "an asshole sometimes" and not unnaturally "virtuous, inspiring" – in other words, not someone who could be looked upon by able-bodied audiences thinking "how do we [disabled people] get up every day and just live our lives – it's so brave!"[46]

[45] Tiffany Burrell-Lewis, "Introducing the 'Netflix Created By Initiative' for Underrepresented Writers," Netflix, January 12, 2023, https://about.netflix.com/en/news/introducing-the-netflix-created-by-initiative.

[46] Ascher, "Virtual Workshop."

Writer, Creator, Star

Characters with disabilities have historically been the most underrepresented identity group in popular television. The 2022-23 GLAAD "Where We Are On TV" report states that 2.1% of characters on scripted broadcast television have disabilities, which is significantly lower than the percentage of people living with disabilities in the U.S.[47] While opportunities for representing disability in media have been slowly rising, there is reason to believe this trend benefits from the past few decades' massive and historic shifts in media industry production, distribution, and exhibition. The combined effects of emerging digital distribution channels, growing advocacy groups such as GLAAD, and increasing media diversity initiatives has aided the influx of "Writer-Creator-Stars" like O'Connell. Recently there has been a proliferation of characters with disabilities in SVOD programming, especially at Netflix, whose audience tracking capabilities have exposed the genuine demand for and profitability of more diverse representation. These trends extend beyond disability-focused content, as seen by the prominence of millennial "Writer-Creator-Star" roles in popular shows such as *This Close* (2018-), *Atlanta* (2016-2022), *Insecure* (2016-2021), and *Broad City* (2014-2019), among many others.

Special does not fall prey to either of the tropes that are commonly associated with narratives of disability, such as the "evil avenger" or the "super crip."[48] The former represents a trope that connects characters with disabilities to villainy, and the latter describes a character whose disability somehow enables them to access superhuman abilities. With a proliferation of

[47] Megan Townsend, "GLAAD 2018-19 Where We Are On TV" (GLAAD), https://glaad.org/files/WWAT/WWAT_GLAAD_2018-2019.pdf.

[48] Alison Harnett, "Escaping the Evil Avenger and the Supercrip: Images of Disability in Popular Television," *Irish Communication Review* 8, no. 1 (November 2, 2016).

characters with disabilities in Netflix Originals such as *Raising Dion* (2019-2022) and *In the Dark* (2019-2022), where characters' disabilities inevitably become their main strength, we see *Special* imagining a different kind of narrative. The show is often focused instead on down-to-earth, sincere family and friendship narratives where disability plays a major role but is not limited to acting within a binary of good and evil.

In "Theorizing Television's Writer–Producer: Re-Viewing *The Producer's Medium*" Alisa Perren and Thomas Schatz reappraise foundational theories of media and production from scholars Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch. The authors state, "An astute rhetorical move in the book is the way that the coauthors allow their subjects to invoke the term auteur, which they do often enough. Even more important is the way that the conversations steadily sharpen the book's central argument, positing that television is not simply a producer's medium but a writer–producer's medium."[49] The primacy of the auteur is evident both in *Special's* content and the paratextual material that surrounds the show. A rhetorical motif of this material implies that to see oneself represented on screen, one must *be* the one to create the representation. In other words, self-representation (by what amounts to an auteur figure) is identified as an exalted form of representation. This sentiment informs similar shows led by multi-hyphenate creators from underrepresented populations, including *This Close*, *Insecure*, *Atlanta*, *Broad City*, etc. As Perren and Schatz explain, "The ascendance of both "cult" and "quality" television—along with the expanded means by which creatives can interact directly with viewers and the networks' need to differentiate (and elevate) their product amid a glut of content—clearly has contributed to an increased public awareness of the showrunner figure and, with it, heightened coverage of

[49] Alisa Perren and Thomas Schatz, "Theorizing Television's Writer–Producer: Re-Viewing *The Producer's Medium*," *Television & New Media* 16, no. 1 (January 2015): 86–93.

them."[50] Of course, the category of creator or writer-star is not new and extends back to Gertrude Berg of the original *Goldbergs* and Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy.*[51] However, it should be underscored that when portraying underrepresented characters, a show that is able to have actors that are experiencing the disability portrayed is a remarkable historical feat.

In *Show Sold Separately,* Jonathan Gray analyzes what he calls "paratextual" materials – bonus material, press releases, interviews, etc. – and provides a taxonomy of such industrial paratexts, with an emphasis on their relationship to authenticity and authorial aura. Gray's conceptual and taxonomic contributions map neatly onto the paratextual materials for *Special*. O'Connell's authorial aura as a youthful voice on disability representation is a composite of varying modes of address seen in social media posts, promotional trailers, on-site events like the Netflix 2019 pop up "FY SEE Yourself" at Raleigh Studios in Los Angeles, trade interviews, and press releases or other documentation of Netflix's consultancy with disability consultancies like RespectAbility.[52] Simply put, O'Connell, as a novice to the television industry with a few episodes of scripted TV under his belt, emerged as an ambassador of an in-demand brand of "authentic" storytelling based on the prominent role his lived experience of difference plays in his paratextual activity. More impressively, this brand identity does not shy away from calling out the society (including media production companies) that have magnified his difference and created systematic barriers that uphold it. O'Connell stated in an interview with *The Guardian*, "I

[50] Perren and Schatz, "Theorizing Television's Writer-Producer," 90.

[51] Miranda Banks, "I Love Lucy: The Writer-Producer," in *How to Watch Television,* ed. Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittel (New York: NYU Press, 2013) 244–252.

[52] Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: NYU Press, 2010).

was born into an Ableist Hellhole."[53] This also speaks to the emphasis on "star" in the writer-creator-star hyphenate. Viewers feel more able to connect with the show's creative team because they feel involved in promoting the visibility of the show and recognize the significance of O'Connell's semi-autobiographical narrative mode. As many scholars have argued, the possibilities for authorial control in television at any given time are dependent on several variables, including historical industrial shifts in corporate structure or conglomeration, production streamlining, and/or economic trends. In our current digital moment, the use of social media and premium SVOD services allows for an especially salient ecosystem for a classical version of an auteur to achieve power and establish brand identities across distribution platforms. Building on the work of Michel Foucault, Gray states, "Authors, as such, are not solely external authorities; rather, they are texts that audiences utilize to make meaning and to situate themselves in relation to other texts."[54] O'Connell explains that in developing *Special,* he was attempting to create a productive reference point for other shows and creators to follow suit and replicate his model. In one interview for *The Guardian*, O'Connell was asked how changes in the industry relate to the amount of space available for disability-centric stories, and how more space can be created. He answered, "More disabled creators. We need to stop putting disabled characters in the hands of able-bodied people because that doesn't give us money or opportunities, and they don't fully get what it's like."[55]

In *Production Culture,* John Caldwell is also concerned with authenticity and authorship. This text is primarily focused on how the industry makes sense of itself in a self-reflexive

[53] Ryan Gilbey, "Ryan O'Connell: 'I Was Born into an Ableist Hellhole,'" *The Guardian*, May 25, 2021, sec. Television & Radio.

[54] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 108.

[55] Gilbey, "Ryan O'Connell."

manner. Caldwell writes, "My project is also less about finding an "authentic" reality "behind the scenes"—an empirical notion that tends to be naïve about that ways that media industry realities are *always* constructed—than it is about studying the industry's own self-representation, self-critique, and self-reflection."[56] Caldwell's work makes a case and offers a framework for scrutinizing not only what is on-screen (in this case, representations of disability), but also the various ways companies like Netflix, even creators like O'Connell, self-present their decisions and their creations to influence how these representations are understood.

In the past decade, SVOD platforms like Netflix have taken a cue from the established on-site promotional strategies of legacy studios and have begun hosting free pop-up marketing events (in major metropolitan areas) to generate interest in their original programming, fostering a face-to-face, personal connection that these companies hope filters back into the sometimes-isolating digital platform experience. In 2019, an event called "FYSEE For Yourself" showcased Netflix's Original Series programming within a warehouse at Raleigh Studios in LA. The event featured a red carpet where young, energetic Netflix personnel were eagerly waiting to take your photo while reminding you to tag, tweet, and publicize the event. The studio was filled with promotional material from the original series shows, all meticulously staged to create social-media-ready backdrops. The title "FYSEE For Yourself" was a play on the upcoming Emmy awards (and appeal for consideration) and the ability to interact with props from the Original programming. The event offered attendees a sense of "micro-celebrity" by cheekily suggesting people might be filmed, photographed, and/or shared on social media at any given time during the event.[57] On the event website, the FAQ page heading "Might I be filmed?" reads:

[56] Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 5.

[57] Alice E. Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

> Really glad you asked. As you can probably guess, we at Netflix are fans of content. Sometimes we even make content with our fans. When you show up, you'll see the signs informing you that your beautiful face is on camera. If you have any questions about it, just reach out to the staff, and they will be happy to answer them.

Another room of the studio was set up theater style and had a continuous loop of Netflix Original series shows, including *Special*. This event happened less than a year before Covid-19 drastically changed the production industry. When beginning this production study, I hoped to investigate in-person events like this, but the shift to virtual events since the pandemic forced the industry to engage with production personnel, audiences, and the idea of disability in other ways. In a way, the shift to virtual and socially distanced promotional strategies brought to the fore ideas of accessibility. This has in turn affected the ways in which disability factors into the conversation of streaming television, both in front of and behind the screen. The pandemic brought a plethora of images about disability to the forefront of the conversation, and the lasting effects of Covid-19 on people's bodies and mental health have sparked conversations about safety, health, and living with long-term illness and even disabilities. On the other hand, the pandemic necessitated practical changes be made to improve the accessibility of production, consulting, advocacy; some conversations that have historically taken place behind doors that became accessible via remote video conferencing.

While we cannot know exactly how much *Special* has grossed to date or its viewership data, we can get an idea of how Netflix spends its money in relation to its diversity-centric shows by tracking initiatives like the partnership with USC's Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, which releases its own executive summaries and reports. The same goes for reports from The Children's Content Lab and the Entertainment Lab, which partner with RespectAbility, as well

as promotional material that speaks about Netflix's hiring of diverse talent. We do know that Netflix canceled *Special* after only two seasons and has "ghost canceled" other disability narratives like the *Healing Powers of Dude* (which will be the case study for chapter 2). Even with the cancellation, O'Connell maintains a partnership with Jim Parsons, and although there is currently no confirmation of a release date, a pilot for a "traumedy" entitled *Accessible* is being "mulled over" at HBO Max.[58] However, the last industry communications published about the deal happened in 2021. This possible hesitation on HBO Max's (now just Max) part to pick up the pilot may align with O'Connell self-deprecating explanation of his industry prospects in a PR video for Netflix, "I don't want to shock or alarm you, but selling a show with a gay, disabled lead is very hard."[59] Though there is no mention of the lead in the series also being part of the LGBTQ+ community, it is clear from his previous work that this is something O'Connell is very passionate about maintaining as part of his authorial reputation and creative priorities.

With underrepresented programming on the rise, researchers have the opportunity and responsibility to critically examine shows that feature depictions of characters with disabilities, especially when these shows are heralded as firsts. This section aimed to bring together questions of authorship and disability representation by examining texts and paratexts of *Special*. The writer-creator-star and the paratexts that are generated by this hyphenate are not only worth considering but are crucial to holistically understanding the original media text and its influence for audiences.

[58] Gilbey, "Ryan O'Connell."

[59] Netflix, "How Special Came to Netflix with Ryan O'Connell," August 21, 2019, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s24UtlmNDv4.

Production Study Discursive Analysis of Diversity-Themed Institutions

Lauren Appelbaum is a critical figure in this chapter, as she has her hand in multiple important institutional efforts to advance media representation of disability. For instance, she is the Senior Vice President of Entertainment and News Media for RespectAbility, a non-profit focused around advancing opportunities and changing harmful stigmas for people with disabilities. She also is Founder the Lab for Entertainment Professionals with Disabilities, Managing Editor of *The RespectAbility Report*, and the author of "The Hollywood Disability Inclusion Toolkit." During an interview with Appelbaum in 2021, she and I discussed the RespectAbility Toolkit, which was created in March of 2018 for Hollywood practitioners. After the initial presentation of the report (which included personnel from Netflix according to Appelbaum), RespectAbility was asked to do similar presentations at NBCUniversal, the Walt Disney Company, Sony Pictures Entertainment, and Netflix itself. Among other topics, the presentations focused on updating and educating producers, executives, and other practitioners on which "disability 101 language" is currently accepted and which language and tropes to avoid in programming. Appelbaum says, "And then we've done other trainings, for example, HR departments, creative execs, production execs, marketing teams, casting. And so, we've found that that's been very helpful. Or, we've done trainings by job function where it's then they where it's kind of like the 201, and so and we see that as vitally important."[60] Appelbaum explains that after these initial consultations in 2018, the consulting arm of the organization grew exponentially, "So in 2019, we consulted on about a dozen projects, and by projects, I mean TV episodes or film. In 2020 we consulted on 70 and already in 2021, the number is probably higher now because I haven't looked in the past few weeks but 35 additional projects and a lot of 2020

[60] Lauren Appelbaum, interview by Brittany Green, Zoom, May 6, 2021.

projects are carrying over."[61] I asked if RespectAbility had consulted on the series *Special* with Ryan O'Connell she responded, "We did not," adding suggestively, "He didn't really need help from within the community already. But our senior consultant and associate for entertainment media, Tatiana Lee, actually is in *Special* because she's also an actress. So, you'll see her, you'll see her in season two."[62] Appelbaum's response demonstrates the way O'Connell's authenticity-based storytelling identity is not simply a part of his authorial persona, but also a quality understood as having quantifiable influence on the behind-the-scenes production process.

Later in our conversation, Appelbaum spoke about RespectAbility as a whole and the ways in which the organization is still the "new kids on the block" in terms of Hollywood consultancies for underrepresented groups. I asked if there was any overlap between RespectAbility and the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), to which Appelbaum explained, "So I've learned a lot from GLAAD to be honest, because they've been around a lot longer than us."[63] Later, "I've been very, very lucky that the folks there have been very open and honest with me. They've shared what's worked, what hasn't worked. You know, as we build out our team and need to fund the team, they've even shared how much they charge to do different things, you know, because the industry is still figuring out that they need to pay for consultants of any marginalized population."[64] Appelbaum's answer is quite interesting because it indicates the ways pressure groups or consultancies share information about advocacy best practices while also navigating Hollywood's cutthroat economic environment, which pushes back on the creation of new roles without ample (typically numbers-based) justification. The role

[61] Appelbaum.

[62] Appelbaum.

[63] Appelbaum.

[64] Appelbaum.

of consultant for a television series is not a wholly new concept – consultants have historically been used to achieve a semblance of realism in representations of specialized settings, vocations, procedures, particularly on shows dealing with military, legal, and medical issues. But the need for paid consultants on projects with underrepresented cultures and characters is coming into its own and is bolstered by social demands for not only aesthetic realism, but genuine connection and economic benefit (via employment and professional opportunity) to the cultures and peoples represented.

Despite the positive changes to representation and the professional opportunities afforded by the growth of representation consultants, there are those who remain skeptical about the role's capacity for substantive change. In a video for *Al Jazeera,* Raeshem Nijhon (co-founder of Culture House) compares cultural consultancy to "a band-aid, a giant one, covering up a problem that runs deep." She continues, "The idea is not for us as consultants to come in and now larger organizations or corporations can say, "see, we have diversity," no, no, no. Cultural consultants are there to support a writers' room, and often that writers room, regardless of whether there's cultural consultants or not, has to be incredibly diverse." The continued lack of diversity in writers room means that there remains an expectation on those underrepresented personnel who do make it to act as an informal consultant for their identity categories.[65]

Netflix is no stranger to working with large organizations like RespectAbility to bring in cultural consultants in the name of adding authenticity to its original programming. In the past, the company has also utilized smaller agencies like LaVant Consulting, The Disability Visibility Project and FilmDis. While disability consulting is currently an integral part of authentic portrayals for characters with disabilities on screen, advocacy organizations like Inevitable

[65] Al Jazeera, "Hollywood's latest role: the cultural consultant: The Listening Post," June 19, 2022, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7t-95EV1FM.

Foundation are insisting there is more to be done. According to the Inevitable Foundation's home page, its mission is to improve the experience of disabled persons in society through media by "invest[ing] in disabled writers and filmmakers so they can achieve artistic and financial freedom and use film and television to destigmatize disability and mental health globally."[66] The company notes the ironic consequences – the "kicker," they call it – of this mission: "If we achieve our vision, this organization will no longer need to exist."[67] The main takeaway from many of these organizations is that if Hollywood can sustainably become more diverse, the need for these positions and organizations would be redundant. The organization aims to help disabled writers, creative executives and showrunners, and entertainment professionals through services and research reports.

The Inevitable Foundation offers and supports a similar mission and vision as that of RespectAbility, but based on its activities, it functions more like a pressure group than a consultancy. This pressure group status means the organization does not feel as obligated to cling to consultancy as a means of improving representation in Hollywood, since it cannot exert social pressure from outside the industry proper. A similar pressure group, the Disability as Diversity Campaign, puts into further relief the differences between these entities in its pledge to "[pressure] entertainment industry players to explicitly include disability in every diversity, equity, and inclusion conversation and strategy."[68] Consultancy has in fact become a target for pressure groups who see the practice as a way for the media industry to minimize or placate larger concerns about representation. In a guest column for the *Hollywood Reporter* titled

[66] "Why We Exist: Breaking down Barriers Keeping Mid-Career Disabled Screenwriters from Reaching Their Full Commercial and Creative Potential," Inevitable Foundation, accessed January 18, 2024, https://www.inevitable.foundation/why.

[67] "Why We Exist."

[68] "Mission," Disability is Diversity, accessed January 18, 2024, https://disabilityisdiversity.com/mission.

"Hollywood is Failing Disabled Screenwriters with the "Consultant Trap,"" The Inevitable Foundation's Richie Siegel and Marisa Torelli-Pedevska explain how consultancy positions are often explicitly removed from actual writing positions, limiting the ability for underrepresented population to self-represent. Instead, these positions are often brought on board only after the story has been "locked," when superficial changes are all that is left to debate. Moreover, the conditions of these jobs are less than desirable and reflect media companies' lack of interest in them. Siegel and Torelli-Pedevska write, "There are four main issues with consultancy culture: 1) rock-bottom pay; 2) no WGA credits or benefits; 3) delayed engagement; 4) a moral dilemma of capitulation."[69] The solution to these issues, they say, is simple: hire disabled writers at the beginning of a project and thus "recognize them not as one-off consultants, but as valuable and collaborative creators and problem-solvers. This applies to both film and television, for when disabled characters are part of a narrative and when they are not."[70] Siegel and Torelli-Pedevska instead point to the promise of its organization's services – especially the Free Concierge Service that connects disabled writers with entertainment – as means of enacting transformative change in the industry. They go on, "Nearly every week, we're asked if we consult on film and TV projects, and our answer is always the same: Hire our fellows and their peers to write, not our staff to consult. Your project will be richer for it — and will further the careers of underrepresented writers who have plenty to offer an industry desperate for fresh (and profitable!) perspectives."[71] The Inevitable Foundation does work with Netflix, and in fact

[69] Richie Siegel Torelli-Pedevska Marisa, Richie Siegel, and Marisa Torelli-Pedevska, "Guest Column: Hollywood Is Failing Disabled Screenwriters With the 'Consultant Trap,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 10, 2021.

[70] Torelli-Pedevska, Siegel, and Torelli-Pedevska, "Guest Column."

[71] Torelli-Pedevska, Siegel, and Torelli-Pedevska, "Guest Column."

nominated Zach Anner as part of the 'Created By Initiative" offering script development deals to disabled writers, as part of the Creative Equity Fund's many ventures.

When I asked Appelbaum whether she considered RespectAbility a pressure group (following the lead of GLAAD), she responded thoughtfully, "No, we've not taken the stance of calling out when [media companies have] done stuff badly. What we've done instead is try to establish the relationships to work with them, so they will avoid doing that. But if there's an issue, we primarily try to get to them privately to explain the problem. Now, it doesn't mean that we haven't done some of the calling out."[72] She cites an incident when a studio production came under fire for an issue of disability representation, and she was conferring with personnel at the studio about whether/how to respond to reporters seeking comments on the ongoing matter. Appelbaum says she was surprised that, rather than getting pushback about following up, the studio executive wanted her to speak – "It is important," she recalls them saying. She subsequently accepted an interview with the *New York Times* and brought with her a RespectAbility Lab alum who herself had the disability portrayed in the film. She stated that after that initial interview, "The *New York Times* editor practically has me on speed dial."[73] Though she states that she is often not quoted, a lot of the editors will reach out to ask her about proper language for disability representation within their writing. She ends with explaining, "But we have specifically taken the approach of not actively criticizing films and projects that do it wrong, and to try to do that in a more private manner and use it as an educational opportunity. Now, not everyone can be taught, but the goal is that, hopefully they will want to be taught."[74]

[72] Appelbaum.

[73] Appelbaum.

[74] Appelbaum.

This story highlights the sometimes-veiled education and curation that is present in trade articles about disability representation.

Though Netflix does not frame its diversity initiative as such, they are certainly part of a response to decades of sustained, coordinated, and effective pressure by groups like RespectAbility, and these organizations deserve some of the credit for improving disability representation that is often ascribed to the media production companies or even the multi-hyphenate creators and showrunners. To its credit, Netflix has invested in expanding opportunities for training and hiring diverse creators, as O'Connell has called for in multiple interviews. Consider the Entertainment Lab, a collaboration between Netflix and RespectAbility. Through Netflix promotional videos about their hiring practices and training, it appears like Netflix is modeling its efforts to cultivate diverse talent on those by organizations like RespectAbility. Conveniently, declaring this aspirational goal in PR material once again aligns with the company's branding strategy declaring Netflix a pioneering force in the industry for diverse storytelling.

In reality, Netflix's diversification efforts *depend* on pressure groups' institutional backing and social networks: Currently, RespectAbility has two such organizations where Netflix is either a funder, a partner or both: the RespectAbility Entertainment Lab and the Children's Content Lab for Disabled Creators. The RespectAbility Annual Entertainment Lab is a six-week experience for people with disabilities behind the camera:

> The Entertainment Lab aims to help develop and elevate the talent pipeline of professionals with disabilities working behind-the-scenes in television, film, and streaming, while introducing them to studio executives and other decision makers who will advise Lab Fellows on various aspects of the industry and their craft. Lab alumni

currently are working at Disney, Netflix, Nickelodeon, Paramount Pictures, Sony Pictures Entertainment, and more.[75]

The Entertainment Lab was created in 2019 by Appelbaum and Delbert Whetter, a Deaf filmmaker based in Santa Monica. Appelbaum told me in their very first year, they were hosted by The Walt Disney Company, NBCUniversal, Sony, Pictures Entertainment, Paramount, and Bunim Murray Productions, and in addition partnered with Film Independent and Sundance Institute. The studios and partners either provided a monetary donation, hosted for free, provided food and cocktail hours, or offered some form of in-kind donation to the program. The program has now completed its fifth year and is an example of the very systematic and sustainable ways that RespectAbility is helping to create and foster a pipeline of talent in production, development, directing, writing, cinematography, editing, etc. Appelbaum hopes that by its tenth year the program will be self-sustaining because by then the alums of the program will be in a position to hire, "And we can play matchmaker."[76]

One of the goals of disability consultancies is challenging the long-held and mistaken belief that content focused on underrepresented populations (but *especially* disability) is not profitable; this belief is proving highly resilient even as pressure groups and creators become more effective at crafting economic and marketing narratives that highlight the potential profits of targeting underrepresented audiences.

In the "The Hollywood Disability Inclusion Toolkit" webinar Appelbaum states,

> This is our community's opportunity to ensure inclusion and equality for all people including America's largest minority, the one in five Americans with a disability. There's

[75] "RespectAbility Labs for Entertainment Professionals with Disabilities," RespectAbility, accessed September 27, 2023, https://www.respectability.org/lab/.

[76] Appelbaum.

> a monetary reason for this, too. Opening the inclusion umbrella is the right thing to do as well as the economically smart thing given that the disability market is valued at more than 1 trillion dollars.

O'Connell echoes this sentiment and emphasizes the demand of underserved audiences in his RespectAbility webinar with Tatiana Lee:

> From a business perspective, it's like, you have a quarter of the population that has nothing for them. So, from a business standpoint, it would serve you to make money. I mean, I think, like if I go to a movie, if I get the faintest whiff of gay in a movie, I will be there opening night with fucking popcorn, because I'm like desperado for gay content… I'm like, "hon, there's nothing. There's a huge gap, why does no one think to fill it?" I think because disabled people have historically not had access to the gatekeepers of Hollywood and they've never been in these positions before where they've been pitching their own stuff or whatever, we have been exiled a little bit – we've been pushed out. And people don't expect us to be in those positions.[77]

Creators like O'Connell and organizations like RespectAbility, the Inevitable Foundation, and FilmDis are making huge strides in calling for the industry to make changes, and creating great content in the process. As these quotes indicate, the success of these efforts may depend on the ability of these groups to adopt the language of media finance and economics – of data analytics and audience targeting. As companies like Netflix are surely learning based on their original programming (though again, we cannot know exact viewership figures), representations of disability and other underrepresented identity categories are indeed profitable.

[77] Ascher, "Virtual Workshop."

O'Connell, Special, and Netflix

O'Connell seems to speak candidly about his experience as a multi-hyphenate (writer-creator-star) and about his working relationship with Netflix as a platform. There are currently no trade materials that indicate he has other projects with the streamer but is working as a writer for an HBO Max show *Anon Pls*, and just released a debut novel entitled, *Just by Looking Him*, which is now being adapted into a film with O'Connell directing and acting and Jim Parsons in the lead role. *Just by Looking at Him* will be produced by FilmNation Entertainment and Berlanti/Schechter Films. In an interview about this book O'Connell explained,

> When I started writing for TV in Hollywood, people really didn't know what to do with me. I was this weird kind of diverse they couldn't profit off of or monetize [laughs]. I knew very quickly that my voice, for better or for worse, is very specific. A lot of gifted writers can mask it and write for a show about doctors or write for a show about whatever and really acclimate to the tone of a show. I realized that I could not do that. I felt like I needed to make my own base rather than be a company man or a writer for hire. But it was really frustrating because Hollywood is so spineless and fear-driven. They need reference points for what you're doing and there just wasn't any of that for me.[78]

O'Connell's feelings on the shortcomings of disability representation are mirrored in the reports by USC, UCLA, GLAAD, etc. The ideas of disability and aging, the intersectionality of disability with other marginalized groups, and the value systems inherent in U.S. culture are heavily dissected by disability theorists.

[78] Marshall, "Ryan O'Connell on the Importance of Facing Rejection."

Conclusion

Special has established a new standard for subversive and complicated representation of disability – not just at Netflix, but also across the television landscape. Major players or "investing actors," as described by Crawford, were directly involved in the creation and circulation of disability representations in the Netflix Original Series. My goal in this chapter was to highlight the multiple, sometimes contradictory ways disability is represented in *Special* through (1) textual analysis, (2) an investigation of O'Connell's status as a multi-hyphenate showrunner, (3) and an exploration of working relationships between disability consultancies, research organizations, and Netflix. My hope was to bring together the stories of disability representation through the lens of production and media studies, in the service of telling a more holistic story about the state of the industry's disability representation in the last ten years. When describing what advice he would give to other creators from marginalized communities when pitching their work to production companies, O'Connell encouraged creators to remember the following mantra: "I have value, and not only do I have value, but the story that I want to tell, particularly if it pertains to disability, is so fucking needed."[79] As statistical evidence from Netflix and other organizations continues to put into numbers the dearth of disability representation today and historically, it is important to remember the answer to solving this issue includes, in the immediate scale, hiring disabled creatives and practitioners in all stages of production. For O'Connell, the answer for storytellers is to embrace defiant self-representation. At a RespectAbility Q&A, O'Connell emphasized that pushing the envelope isn't enough, saying "I don't like to push the envelope, I like to cum all over it. So, I think that, in terms of being ballsy and daring, there is no bounds. I don't know. I don't know. I just think, again, you should

[79] Ascher, "Virtual Workshop."

always be speaking the truth and being as brutally honest as you can be, or otherwise what is the point?" [80]

[80] Ascher, "Virtual Workshop."

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Chapter 2

The Healing Powers of Dude

Television is often described colloquially as having a unique ability to reflect and even influence societal norms, as compared to other forms of media. Even if we admit this sentiment is somewhat idealistic and a simplification of the complex ways media engages audiences and communicates ideologies – not to mention the way social change is negotiated – I do not believe this fact undermines the importance of studying televisual representation at every level of the industry. While studying representations specifically of individuals with disabilities in the streaming television landscape, I have interviewed and encountered media production personnel who appreciate the potential for thoughtful representations to not only create professional opportunities for historically marginalized media workers and talent in Hollywood, but also to bring awareness to others' experiences and perspectives.

Whereas the previous chapter explored discursive and textual representations of disability and cerebral palsy in the auteur-driven, indie-flavored dramedy *Special*, this chapter switches generic gears to see how the institutional maneuvers of RespectAbility and other Social Impact Entertainment (SEI) groups play out within the children's and family streaming media market. This shift in focus allows us to see how the generic and industrial demands of children's programming elicit distinct communication and aesthetic strategies related to disability representation from SEI and media groups like the Children's Content Lab (funded by Netflix), The Inevitable Foundation, UCLA's Center for Scholars and Storytellers, and other academic research organizations focusing on disability in television.

This chapter's investigation into disability consultancy practices, authenticity-focused casting systems, collaborative funding models (between RespectAbility and Netflix), and

underrepresented creator "pipeline" programs takes as its case study *The Healing Powers of Dude* (2020), a Netflix original children's comedy series about an 11-year-old boy (Jace Chapman) and his talking emotional support dog named Dude (voiced by Steve Zahn). Despite having only a brief, single-season run of eight half-hour episodes, *The Healing Powers of Dude*'s focus on representing a range of disabilities, often in an overtly pedagogical way for the benefit of a presumed audience of children, makes the show a valuable subject for understanding both the nature and range of representations of disability in streaming television and the emerging working relationships between Netflix and media advocacy groups in producing these representations.

RespectAbility's well-established authority in promoting new modes of inclusive representations in television production is reflected in the fact that the organization has a major role in every chapter of this project. The interest group's systematic, tiered approach to disability advocacy and consulting includes active engagement with content creators, studios, and networks, as part of an effort to encourage the hiring of disabled talent in front of and behind the camera, and to improve broader cultural understandings of disability both within the production environment and beyond.

Netflix has been accused of trying to invest in the children's market as a "subscriber retention" tool.[1] Parrot Analytics explained in a 2022 report that, "Between January 2020 and September 2021 children's content demand surged 58%, while demand for other streaming content grew by 22.5%. The share of children's content expanded from 8.4% to 10.5%." [2]

[1] Vikrant Mathur, "Why Disney+ and Netflix Plans for Targeting Kids with Ads May Be Different, yet the Same," The Drum, August 26, 2022. https://www.thedrum.com/opinion/2022/08/26/why-disney-and-netflix-plans-targeting-kids-with-ads-may-be-different-yet-the.

[2] Ben Bowman, "Demand for Children's Content Surges - Can Anyone Catch Netflix?," Parrot Analytics, January 10, 2023, https://thestreamable.com/news/demand-for-childrens-content-surges-can-anyone-catch-netflix.

Perhaps more interesting, the article noted that Netflix "dominated" 25% of the children's market in the third quarter of 2021 which is "far ahead" of companies like Disney+ which only had 15%.[3] In the children's content space, Netflix is trying to directly compete with Disney, a company with an established children's media presence and a notorious, cradle-to-grave marketing strategy. Netflix has continued to promote its new advertising tiers and boasts in a 2024 self-promotional article, "When you advertise with Netflix, you can reach the most engaged audience in the world," the company has kept its promise to parents that it will not advertise on children's programming and profiles.[4]

The company has also created a "Netflix Family hub," where "parents and caregivers can find free printable activities, DIYs, recipes, and more for kids of all ages and stages." [5] Netflix has been both accused and praised for its "woke" children's content.[6] The strategy of diverse content, even within the highly contentious children's space can be seen as another effort by the streamer to align its branding strategy with diversity. Ellen Seiter has investigated children's content and advertising extensively in *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture*. Sheltering children from advertising and toy franchises associated with popular content is impractical and potentially damaging for social connection. Seiter argues, "…contemporary parenthood is always already embedded in consumerism," much of which "vary greatly from

[3] Bowman, "Demand for Children's Content Surges."

[4] "Netflix Upfront 2024: The Year of Growth and Momentum," Netflix, May 15, 2024, https://about.netflix.com/en/news/netflix-upfront-2024-the-year-of-growth-and-momentum.

[5] "Welcome to Netflix Family," Netflix Family, accessed May 22, 2024, https://www.netflixfamily.com/.

[6] Conor Murray, "Netflix's 'Cocomelon Lane' Garners Anti-'Woke' Backlash For Featuring Gay Couple," Forbes, December 21, 2023, https://www.forbes.com/sites/conormurray/2023/12/21/netflixs-cocomelon-lane-garners-anti-woke-backlash-for-featuring-gay-couple/.

class to class."[7] Seiter's work brings nuance to the history of television advocacy through her investigation of Action for Children's Television (ACT) and also helps to provide historical context for the development of children's advertising, which is especially important with the current negotiations by SVOD platforms.

The Children's Content Lab for Disabled TV Creators, established in 2022 and funded by Netflix, is an additional teaching/mentoring pipeline talent program created by RespectAbility committed to increasing disability representation in children's television. The Children's Content Lab represents one of many emerging "Diversity-Pipeline Programs," discussed further below, which provide opportunities both for diverse creators to gain a foothold in the industry, and for media companies to back up their rhetorical commitments to diversity with real funding initiatives. By providing mentorship, training, and networking opportunities to up-and-coming creators with disabilities, the Children's Content Lab empowers new voices to develop and produce original content. Beyond simply providing resources and training to produce content, however, the Children's Content Lab and similar pipeline programs also facilitate media industry networking – in this case, to working Netflix production personnel. The proximity afforded by these programs between up-and-coming creators and working professionals is thus one of the more substantial ways these programs operate as more than empty, marketing-friendly stunts.

The collaboration between RespectAbility and Netflix via the Children's Content Lab for Disabled Creators has led to the development of projects that likewise emerge out of the desire to raise awareness for disability issues and causes, primarily by foregrounding disabled characters and experiences in the hopes of, ultimately, fostering a more inclusive media landscape. It would be fair to call the relationship between non-profit interest groups like RespectAbility and profit-

[7] Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture* (New York: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 3.

driven media companies like Netflix "symbiotic," given Netflix's tendency to heavily promote its role in facilitating such collaborations and their resulting projects. Disability creatives and advocates often frame this symbiotic relationship in ambivalent terms, in some cases expressing cynicism about companies like Netflix patting themselves on the back in trade press, in other cases recognizing the significant financial and cultural support provided by these companies through pipeline initiatives. So long as more money flows from the streamer into community-based advocacy groups, some commentators can accept Netflix's self-presentation in relation to DEI programming and employment. Considering the lack of representation on-screen and within the disability creative community is the foundational problem, by using marketing efforts to promote DEI as a branding strategy, a platform like Netflix in a way places itself *outside of* the gap in disability programming, ironically by creating content about how they spend money on DEI.

In this chapter I will provide a history of what are broadly described as "advocacy groups" in the Hollywood media entertainment industry, focusing on how particular historical circumstances have shaped contemporary disability representational strategies and norms. The purpose of following this lead is to ultimately understand how disability-focused organizations like RespectAbility emerged and learned from previous preeminent organizations like the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) to inform and make more effective their current advocacy approaches. This history will also briefly discuss how (media) industrial and technological shifts have shaped how community advocacy groups operate and view the media industry's role in advancing their causes. As I mentioned earlier, this investigation will utilize a concrete case study, the Netflix Original Series *The Healing Powers of Dude,* both for textual analysis purposes (to understand the aesthetic and cultural results of industrial-advocacy

activities) and for providing specific, illustrative examples of casting, disability public relations work, consulting, and talent pipeline management in practice.

On the textual analysis front, I explore the show's representations of disability in terms of "visibility," or the legibility of characters' disabilities through visual representation. By focusing on severe social anxiety and forms of neurodivergence, *The Healing Powers of Dude* works towards creating so-called "teachable moments" for younger audiences presumed to be more familiar with disability as an observable condition, as a state of being or quality that impacts people only to the extent that it can be *seen* and witnessed in obvious ways. I will examine UCLA's Center for Scholars and Storyteller's (CSS) report titled, "Disabled U.S. Audience Perceptions of Representation on Screen Report," and contextualize the information in the CSS within larger academic, industrial, and creative conversations around social impact entertainment. Finally, beyond research on media industry, disability, and media representation, this chapter is informed by interviews I conducted with Hollywood practitioners working in and around productions featuring on-screen disability. In some cases, which I will indicate, I have been requested to alter names of interview subjects.

Advocacy Groups

Within media industry, the term "advocacy groups" has come to replace the previous terminology, "pressure groups," which carries a pejorative connotation and brings to mind cutthroat political lobbyist groups, and instead, productively (I'd argue) draws focus to the supportive, social activist intentions of these non-profit groups. The transition to "advocacy groups" can be seen in texts like *Advocacy Groups and the Entertainment Industry* from 2001, an edited collection of essays from academics and media industry personnel that emerged out of the proceedings of a 1997 conference jointly sponsored by the University of California, Los

Angeles' Center for Communication Policy, the American Cinema Foundation, and the Center for the Study of Popular Culture. Within this work, speakers cite work from the 1980s, including Kathryn Montgomery's *Target: Prime Time Advocacy Groups and the Struggle Over Entertainment* (1989) as formative texts further encouraging the relabeling and reframing of these groups and their activities in the media space.[8] My project heavily investigates four prominent contemporary advocacy groups – RespectAbility, as well as a the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), Hollywood Health and Society (HH&S), and the Inevitable Foundation – and analyzes the means and rationales behind their efforts to promote *positive* and *authentic* portrayals of disability on television.

Writing on best practices for advocacy groups operating in the television and media industry, Peggy Charren, founder of the organization Action for Children's Television (ACT) writes, "In school I learned about constitutional values and rights, particularly the importance of free speech in a democracy, the right to speak and be heard. This turned out to be a bedrock principle underlying my efforts to get more TV choices for children and to fight censorship as a solution to children's TV problems."[9] Charren dedicated 30 years of her life to activism for children's television content through her organization. Her work was instrumental in the enactment of the 1974 Children's Television Policy Statement mandating children's television producers focus on developing "educational and informational" programming. After the Regan administration overturned much of the legislation Action for Children's Television worked to create, Charren and other advocates in children's programming championed the 1990 Children's

[8] Michael Suman and Gabriel Rossman, eds., *Advocacy Groups and the Entertainment Industry* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), 145.

[9] Bruce Weber, "Peggy Charren, Children's TV Crusader, Dies at 86," *The New York Times*, January 23, 2015, sec. Arts, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/23/arts/peggy-charren-childrens-tv-crusader-is-dead-at-86.html.

Television Act. Charren wrote in response to the successful effort, "We've done what we set out to do. And it's going to take some time to see if it's working. This is something that the local communities should be doing. We don't want laws mandating good programs or censorship. We want the communities to tell broadcasters what's missing."[10] Charren's activism prompted more diverse programming and urged "communities" to take on more active, autonomous roles in determining what kind of content is "missing" and needed in the media landscape.[11]

Television studies scholars like Seiter have done extensive ethnographic research on audiences, specifically children and parents, she explains that though ACT was "well-intentioned," they promoted an "idealistic" vision of childhood that underestimates young kids' discernment abilities around commercials.[12] Seiter explained that Charren was highly visible in the trade press and stated that "ACT practiced sophisticated public relations."[13] Utilizing Kathryn Montgomery's work on pressure and advocacy groups Seiter notes ACT's ability to "remain friendly" with television networks as an example of *strategy*. Though advertising is not currently on the table for Netflix's children's programming, especially with the COPPA (Children's Online Privacy Protection Act) legislation that details what data can be gathered for children under 13 years of age, this is an example of the imbedded history of television advocacy groups and the ways in which they need to be aware of the cultural and industrial shifts in the entertainment space.[14]

[10] Weber, "Peggy Charren."

[11] Weber, "Peggy Charren."

[12] Seiter, *Sold Separately*, 96-97.

[13] Seiter, *Sold Separately*, 97.

[14] Mathur, "Why Disney+ and Netflix Plans for Targeting Kids."

Activists like Charren started to create a template in the 1970's for televisual advocacy, specifically in children's programming. In a 2015 interview with *The New York Times,* CBS Senior VP Michael Dann describes his interactions with Charren and ACT as fruitful, congenial, and, referring to Charren's proscriptive suggestions about the direction of children's television, "among the most constructive and logical I have heard."[15] Within six months of that meeting, Dann left his position at CBS and took a 75% pay cut to work at the Children's Television Workshop, which produced *Sesame Street.*[16] *Sesame Street* (1969-) has a reputation within the broadcast industry and popular culture as a model of the way children's programming can be simultaneously educational, culturally aware, and, of course, profitable.[17] Most recently, in 2022, *Sesame Street* has expanded its cast to include visibly and non-visibly disabled characters, including Ameera, an 8-year-old with a spinal cord injury, for which she uses a wheelchair or fore-arm crutches; this addition to the Middle Eastern and North African iteration of the show, *Ahlan Simsim* ("Welcome Sesame" in Arabic) deepened and expanded the US show's history of disability inclusion and representation, which dates back to its use of blind, deaf, and other differently abled characters and guest hosts since the 70s.[18]

RespectAbility's Children's Content Lab is an outgrowth of the foundational advocacy within media and entertainment specifically by people like Charren and others working with ACT. But while the number and status of these groups has grown since then, what can be said

[15] Weber, "Peggy Charren."

[16] Weber, "Peggy Charren."

[17] Shalom M. Fisch and Rosemarie T. Truglio, *"G" Is for Growing: Thirty Years of Research on Children and "Sesame Street."* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc, 2001).

[18] Shaun Heasley, "'Sesame Street' Welcomes New Muppet With Disability," Disability Scoop, April 1, 2022, https://www.disabilityscoop.com/2022/04/01/sesame-street-welcomes-new-muppet-with-disability/29785/.

about their abilities to actually enact change within the dynamic, contested, and data-driven streaming television landscape? Media scholar Michael Curtin argues that advocacy groups today have potential to make lasting and tangible industry inroads, but to do so, they must understand the "logic of the neo-network era, a logic that is best revealed by examining the changing nature of gatekeeping practices in the media industries."[19] Tempering this potential for advocacy groups to exert power, however, is Curtin's ultimate concession to media ownership as the last say in what gets produced and how; he writes, "media reflects the interests of owners more than they reflect the tastes of audiences or the judgment of media professionals."[20]

Curtin further argues for understanding the 1990s-era of network television as a fortuitous industrial environment for advocacy groups to extend their influence and solidify their positions in television production. In describing the decade's audience fragmentation, widespread use of time-shifting technologies, and especially niche advertising boom, Curtin (noting the success of shows like Michael Moore's *TV Nation* (1994-1995) and *Ellen* (1994-1998) and other television scholars describe the 1990s as a media environment in which underrepresented and marginalized communities, like those described by Charren, are viewed as valuable to media companies if only because they can appeal to niche audience interests, and thus advocacy groups' efforts could become industrially and economically significant.[21] Curtin explains, "Although the mass market is still attractive," he writes, "micro markets can be extremely lucrative, a realization that has engendered an intense search for narrowly defined and

[19] Michael Curtin, "Gatekeeping in the Neo-Network Era," in *Advocacy Groups and the Entertainment Industry*, ed. Michael Suman and Gabriel Rossman (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), 65.

[20] Curtin, "Gatekeeping," 67.

[21] Curtin, "Gatekeeping," 71.

underserved audiences. Race, ethnicity, gender, and age now have joined socioeconomic status as potentially marketable boundaries of difference."[22]

Contemporary accounts of the current media landscape emphasize how this 1990s-era interest in niche programming has transformed and intensified along with cultural, technological, and industrial shifts. This is especially true in the streaming television industry, where big data analytics and algorithmic curation can zero in on smaller and smaller target audiences. In *Netflix and the Re-Invention of Television,* Marieke Jenner argues that we are currently in "TV IV" (part of a periodization which marks off television history according to certain historical shifts – for instance, "TV III" encapsulates the 1990s-2010s rise of the internet and social media), which is characterized by a shift from a "mass medium" to a "niche medium."[23] The growing economic rationality of appealing to underserved (and by extension, underrepresented) audiences, writes Curtin, means that "despite the intensity of interest that these media companies may find among a micro audience, their participation in the market is not based on a commitment to the material interests or political principles of any particular group. Rather these firms simply are following a marketing strategy that they characterize as strictly capitalistic and generally disinterested in content issues."[24] It is perhaps not surprising that the bottom line continues to serve as the ultimate deciding factor in determining what content makes it to audience's screens, but in an interesting twist, advocacy groups like RespectAbility and the Inevitable Foundation have come to use this decision-making convention to their advantage to press for adding more "niche" programming. Despite the unavoidable (and depressing) necessity of providing financial

[22] Curtin, "Gatekeeping," 71.

[23] Mareike Jenner, *Netflix and the Re-Invention of Television* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 11.

[24] Curtin, "Gatekeeping," 72.

justification for improving media representation, RespectAbility rises to the challenge in their oft-cited figures, like their estimate that the disability community is a $1 trillion dollar market.[25] There is not a single disability advocacy group or academic research organization that has not lauded that the disability market as profitable, and, with the estimated number of people with disabilities rising, this market is becoming more and more lucrative.

Advocacy group's conscientiousness about industry's bottom-line concerns goes beyond simple rhetoric, however, and informs the way they engage and try to persuade media companies. Thomas Streeter compares the unique critical perspectives and practical approaches taken by advocacy groups compared to a diverse range of advocacy-centered or adjacent agents, including other activist groups, executives, policy experts, and lawyers.[26] "Advocacy groups have essentially jumped into the terrain created by corporate public- and government-relations departments," he writes, "trying to nudge corporate activities in directions that reflect a group's agenda using the same or similar tactics."[27] Streeter suggest advocacy groups have much to gain by learning to speak the language of the executive and corporate power brokers of media industry: "The easiest tactic [for advocacy groups in advancing their interests], then, is to try to argue that the desired policy is somehow congruent with one or another corporate goal" and this *goal* is particularly useful if it includes, "economic competition"[28] Appealing to the specter of overlooked or even lost revenue (lost by ignoring or poorly representing certain market

[25] Lauren Appelbaum, "Webinar: The Hollywood Disability Inclusion Toolkit," RespectAbility, March 15, 2018, https://www.respectability.org/2018/03/webinar-hollywood-disability-inclusion-toolkit/.

[26] Thomas Streeter, "What Is an Advocacy Group, Anyway?," in *Advocacy Groups and the Entertainment Industry*, ed. Michael Suman and Gabriel Rossman (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), 77.

[27] Streeter, "What Is an Advocacy Group, Anyway?," 77.

[28] Streeter, "What Is an Advocacy Group, Anyway?," 82.

segments) thus emerges as an important and, thus far, effectively refrain, if RespectAbility's public-facing rhetoric is any indication.

In 1998 Gabriel Rossman performed an ethnographic research study of advocacy groups – specifically GLAAD – for a 6-month participant observation study. His work provides more specific details about the internal strategy discussions within advocacy groups and how leaders attempt to advance the goals of their organization. Rossman details the differences in levels of corporate organization in these groups and how they leverage resources to work with the industry in a collaborative capacity (through consulting work) rather than operating from a framework of opposition, hostility, or supplication. Rossman explains:

> The most proactive tactic a cooperative advocacy group can use is offering free consulting. The ideal for a cooperative advocacy group is to be the media elite source for expert information concerning their constituency. Cooperative advocates want to ingratiate themselves with the media producers so that the producers will contact the advocates anytime media content deals with issues that concern their constituency. In this way the advocates can take a proactive role in shaping all content issued from connected sources, thus eliminating all offensive portrayals, and bolstering the number of quality and desirable portrayals."[29]

It is important to remember that despite needing to "learn the language" of the media industry to make more effective appeals, advocacy groups can in fact be considered an independent branch of the entertainment industry proper.[30] RespectAbility and HH&S in particular act as the "media

[29] Gabriel Rossman, "Hostile and Cooperative Advocacy," in *Advocacy Groups and the Entertainment Industry*, ed. Michael Suman and Gabriel Rossman (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), 92.

[30] Michael Suman and Garbiel Rossman, eds., *Advocacy Groups and the Entertainment Industry* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000).

elite source for expert information" on their respective populations and serve as critical resources for certain stages of media production dealing with challenges of creating authentic, creative, and entertaining representations. The phrase "consultant trap" has bubbled up in many of the interviews and press releases by media advocacy groups in the last five years. GLAAD was the first organization to offer consulting for LGBTQ+ populations in the media.

GLAAD is one of the oldest advocacy groups for underrepresented populations in the entertainment industry, and the organization's success has provided a template for the advocacy groups that followed in its wake. In an interview in 1998 by Gabriel Rossman of with then Assistant Entertainment Media Director for GLAAD, William Horn explains that GLAAD aims to make its mark in the "development and pre-production phases for both television and movies," saying that in the past GLAAD's work was made more difficult by trying to intervene in production after the fact, when production is already wrapped or the product is already released. "But now," Horn says, "we're trying to make it work with the entertainment industry to make sure that the portrayals are fair and accurate before they make it on screen."[31] I have now spoken with several television entertainment production personnel ranging from actors and writers, directors and casting agents and non-profit advocacy group leaders, and I've observed a commonality: all these practitioners were clear that the moment to make change in representation (of disability) is pre-production.

This is when the actions of the Diversity Consultant role can factor most into the conversations around representational authenticity. I met with Ava X. Rigelhaupt, a current disabled creative and disability advocate, to discuss her experience at RespectAbility and as a consultant in the disability space. Rigelhaupt says on the difficulty of dealing with complete or

[31] Gabriel Rossman, "The Proactive Strategy of GLAAD," in *Advocacy Groups and the Entertainment Industry*, ed. Michael Suman and Gabriel Rossman (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), 24.

near-complete projects, “Sometimes we review a movie that's already been made and we're always like, what are we supposed to do now? This movie's already been made and they're asking us for notes. We always love it when people come to us with not even a script, just like an idea. And to really work with us from the ground floor…[the best method puts] accessibility at the forefront, not as an afterthought.”[32] Casting Director Danielle Pretsfelder Demchick, whose voice will reappear in the casting section of this chapter, picks up on a similar thread, but prescribes how this up-front process should prioritize tasks to improve representation: “We [creators and production] have to start with the role that's disabled” in order to not only create fair and intelligent representation, but also mitigate accessibility issues, questions from financiers, etc.[33]

One of the ways advocacy groups sought (and continue to seek) to influence the production process towards improved representation is through consultancies and hiring practices. But even when, for instance, disability consultants are hired by media companies, those taking these positions can become professionally pigeon-holed in what Saga Darnell of the Inevitable Foundation (among others) call the “consultant trap,” wherein hiring consultants comes to replace hiring disabled or other diverse talent. This has the unintended consequence of still excluding these consultants from serving in traditional entertainment industry creative roles, including screenwriters and showrunners. In my conversation with Saga Darnell (they/them), Head of Research and Public Affairs for the Inevitable Foundation, they explained how the organization is looking to combat the “consultant trap” through programs like the Hire Disabled Writers Campaign. They also explained how the organization is attempting to systematically

[32] Ava Xiao-Lin Rigelhaupt, interview with Brittany Green, Zoom, January 24, 2024.

[33] Danielle Pretsfelder Demchick, interview with Brittany Green, Zoom, February 15, 2024.

ensure quality representation through "upstream[ing]" explanations for media companies: "Before you get to production, there are writers who have the concept and who put their lived experiences and the lived experiences of the people that they know that they've heard of into the scripts that they write, regardless of whether they're disabled or not. And if they are, it will just be more right. It just will. It'll be more authentic. It'll be more accurate. It will mess up less later down the line. It will just make more sense."[34]

For its part, GLAAD has been advocating for pre-production inclusion from its inception, but also manages projects postproduction. Ultimately, Horn insists in an interview with Rossman, the most important responsibility of GLAAD is "to be a resource and to provide [media companies] with as much information as humanly possible," in order to "make sure they don't make those mistakes in the first place."[35] While GLAAD has certainly operated as a resource, the organization has also come together to pressure media companies. It is during these periods that GLAAD has looked inward to consider how its actions should be modeled on or possibly deviate from advocacy strategies of other groups. Horn says:

> I'm sure that other groups and their tactics were used as models during the formation of GLAAD. In terms of how we form our campaigns, certainly we looked at the successes and mistakes of other organizations. But, more often than not, we don't look to other groups because we are doing things that are unprecedented, for instance the campaign behind *Ellen*. That was completely new. This type of lesbian and gay content has not occurred before on television. So here we sort of had to invent the wheel.[36]

[34] Saga Darnell, interview with Brittany Green, Zoom, February 24, 2024.

[35] Rossman, "The Proactive Strategy of GLAAD," 24.

[36] Rossman, "The Proactive Strategy," 25.

While conducting archival research on underrepresented television programing and advocacy groups, I researched the *Ellen* campaign by GLAAD. Through an investigation of the GLAAD archive I found 13 *GLAADAlerts* concerning *Ellen* – referring to the show as part of the "The Representation Revolution"[37]— which include information about *Ellen's* GLAAD Media Award, as well as correspondence between GLAAD and trade or other journalistic entities, including *TV Guide* and Barbra Walters.[38] GLAAD's archive documents the extent to which the organization had "boots on the ground" reaching out and directing media trade coverage around the show's representation of its lesbian main character. A few "Incident Reports" from the GLAAD Monitor Response Committee reveal how GLAAD personnel would scour the print, radio, and televised media for evidence of defamation, which the organization would pursue action against. Two reports about *Ellen* (1997) reveal extremely homophobic comments made on a national radio station, and the attention to detail and verbiage in the report speaks to GLAAD's hyper-focus on identifying problem discourses before they grew larger and using them as centerpieces for more expansive advocacy plans.

In GLAAD's coverage of *Ellen* as a "representation revolution" in its 1997 newsletter, Don Romesburg argues the organization was at the center of the media event around Ellen's diegetic coming out: "It is not an overstatement to say that without GLAAD, the *Ellen* "coming out" episode would have never happened."[39] (While the claim speaks to the central institutional role GLAAD had in facilitating press coverage and reception around the episode, it should be

[37] Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) Records, 1985-2011, Coll2012.173. USC ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, CA.

[38] Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) Records, 1985-2011, Coll2012.173. USC ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, CA.

[39] *Images* 6, Summer 1997, Coll2009-004, Ellen DeGeneres Folders, Lesbian Legacy Collection subject files, USC ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, CA.

noted that this claim somewhat problematically implies that the organization took the biggest initiative in or at least facilitated the star's real-world coming out as well.) Romesburg goes on to say, "Through months of building relationships with ABC and Touchstone, GLAAD had consulted on the lesbian-related content of the two episodes to come…"[40] The point person for consultancy between GLAAD and *Ellen* was in fact Chaz Bono, formerly Chastity Bono, whose work on the last two episodes of the season in question were said to have made them "more realistic" in the show's treatment of coming out.[41] This is an early and pivotal example of the consultation provided by GLAAD to the network both within the writers room and throughout production that has since become a model for groups like RespectAbility. GLAAD Communications Director Alan Klein says in the newsletter, "The 'Let Ellen Out Campaign' both through *GLAADAlert* and our Website, gave readers a week-by-week assessment of what was happening and mobilized people to respond."[42] Klein describes how a *GLAADAlert* memo that indicated ABC was "waffling" on airing the episode featuring Ellen's coming out, but that burgeoning internet communities were banding together to support and hasten the production process – some fans even sent waffle mix (to mock the network's uncertainty) and letters of support to ABC. President Jamie Tarses was reported to have been surprised and overwhelmed by the response on a yet-to-air product.[43] The mobilization of resources, strategic use of advocacy roles, and cultural influence this campaign had on underrepresented programming cannot be overstated. This media approach has been foundational in other media advocacy

[40] *Images* 6, Coll2009-004, USC ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives.

[41] *Images* 6, Coll2009-004, USC ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives.

[42] *Images* 6, Coll2009-004, USC ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives.

[43] *Images* 6, Coll2009-004, USC ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives.

groups including RespectAbility. As described in Chapter One, GLAAD has worked with RespectAbility on a myriad of representation-related initiatives, including labor disputes regarding appropriate pay for advocacy work, consulting gigs on various film and television productions, and broader advocacy campaigns where representatives from each organization sit together on panels and provide educational seminars.

The effectiveness of advocacy groups has been linked to political and social activism strategies pioneered during the civil rights movement in the 1960s. GLAAD's William Horn cites civil rights movement organizations as definitively establishing the idea that "media should actively report on and reflect all different types of people," and that this socio-political shift has "helped the lesbian and gay community in its struggle to be represented. I don't think the media would be listening to lesbian gay concerns as much if at all if it hadn't been for civil rights movement and this burgeoning notion in popular culture that media, including film and television, should represent all Americans."[44] The disability rights movement and LGBTQ+ rights movements are intricately connected with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Disability Activists like Judy Heumann were instrumental in creating the disability legislation in the U.S. that make these advocacy groups possible.

In the context of the contemporary media industry, the advocacy group is seen more as a resource and *partner* through consultancy than the oppositional framework associated with pressure groups in the 1980's. Rossman, Streeter, and Curtin has thus far described the broad goals and historical precedents of advocacy groups working in the media industry. Through my research of the organizations that advocate for disability representation in front of and behind the camera, I have identified two major "deliverables" advocacy groups seek to provide for media

[44] Rossman, "The Proactive Strategy of GLAAD," 25.

production clients: consulting and research reports. The major "deliverable" for the entertainer themselves lies in a systematic fostering of disabled talent. This happens through traditional networking (word of mouth by creative professionals) and talent databases created specifically to connect talent to production (primarily for actors and writers with disabilities). Much of this systematic fostering of talent is funded by Netflix. Netflix is identified as a client, partner, or funder of RespectAbility, The Inevitable Foundation, and Hollywood Health and Society.

The table below, though not exhaustive, gives a sense of the disability focused media entertainment advocacy groups currently operating in 2024.

Name:	**Year Founded:**	**Resources Provided:**
Hollywood Health & Society	2001	Consultation, Research Reports, Tip Sheets, Awards, Events
RespectAbility	2013	Entertainment Labs, Consultation, Research Reports, Tip Sheets, Awards, Events
Ruderman	2013	Philanthropy, Research Reports, Awards, Events
FilmDis	2014	Consultation, Research Reports, Social Media Campaign Organizer
The Global Alliance for Disability in Media and Entertainment	2016	Research Reports, Tip Sheets, Awards, Events,
Disability Visibility Project	2017	Social Media Campaign Organizer
Inevitable Foundation	2022	Fellowships, Entertainment Labs, Talent Database, Media Campaign, Research Reports

Figure 2

Figure 1 chronologically depicts the organizations and the resources they provide to the entertainment community concerning disability. All groups except the Disability Media Project author a media awareness/research report. These reports are used by advocacy groups to provide data about the underrepresentation of characters on screen and in creative roles, as well as evidence that creating authentic portrayals of disability are profitable for SVOD platforms and

networks. Many of these groups provide consultation, some at no cost to media production clients, including HH&S, although most are fee-based operations. The consultation services provided vary from script development, notes, fact-checking, and other tasks related to both script, visual, and paratextual representation. Then there are some organizations like the Inevitable Foundation who are opposed to certain types of disability consultation, preferring to create media campaigns to promote hiring disabled talent and thus negating the need for a consultant altogether.[45] In some cases, however, consultants are the more appropriate tool for advocacy groups, particularly when they serve to monitor and improve the accessibility and working conditions during production. In this capacity, consultants highlight and address the barriers to entertainment media work that take place in actual media workspaces. While other advocacy groups have emerged in its wake, GLAAD was the first organization to start systematically and publicly documenting the lack of disability visibility in front of and behind the camera in entertainment media and remains an important vehicle for changing disability representation, even though their initial focus of the organization was the portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters in the media.

In "Entertainment-Education, American Style: Informing and Studying Hollywood's Portrayals of Social Issues," Hollywood Health and Society's (HH&S) Erica Rosenthal and Kate Folb discuss the emergence of Entertainment-Education (EE) and advocacy groups in entertainment as precursors to their work in HH&S. As they write:

> We study entertainment through a program of research on the content of entertainment narratives, the characteristics of the audiences who consume them, and their impact on

[45] "Hire Disabled Writers Initiative — Breaking down Barriers Keeping Mid-Career Disabled Screenwriters from Reaching Their Full Commercial and Creative Potential.," Inevitable Foundation, accessed March 10, 2024, https://www.inevitable.foundation/hire-disabled-writers.

> knowledge, attitudes, norms, and behavior. In addition, we shape entertainment narratives' impact through a collaborative relationship HH&S has developed and cultivated with the Hollywood creative community over the course of twenty years.[46]

This characterization of their work explains why HH&S is unique in the way it transcends the traditional boundaries of advocacy work, and why I have considered HH&S, for the purposes of my taxonomic charts, part of both advocacy groups and research groups within a major university. The authors explain one of their biggest obstacles is simply a reluctance on the part of media companies to be "told what to do." [47] To combat this, HH&S works towards "collaboration, not confrontation," which in their eyes softens the blow and reframes their work for executives who might see them as obstacles to quick, cheap, and efficient production. [48] Whereas other organizations have taken this path, HH&S is able to mobilize their scientific research teams to allow "writers to come to their own conclusions about what kinds of stories they choose to tell, and simultaneously addresses many of the advocates' concerns. It's a longer game, but the resulting stories are more authentic, nuanced, and compelling."[49] The hundreds of advocacy groups referred to by Rosenthal and Folb are not those found in Figure 1.1; they are instead smaller social media campaign groups that advocate for various diversity inclusion in Hollywood. Social media has made what were once letter writing campaigns or long calls spent on hold a much quicker process through social media communication (Twitter and Instagram

[46] Erica L. Rosenthal and Kate Langrall Folb, "Entertainment-Education, American Style: Informing and Studying Hollywood's Portrayals of Social Issues," in *Entertainment-Education Behind the Scenes: Case Studies for Theory and Practice*, ed. Lauren B. Frank and Paul Falzone (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 245–64, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-63614-2_15.

[47] Rosenthal and Folb, "Entertainment-Education," 258.

[48] Rosenthal and Folb, "Entertainment-Education," 258.

[49] Rosenthal and Folb, "Entertainment-Education, 258.

especially). Folb and Rosenthal are identifying what Curtin was describing with the changing landscape of the television industry, and the importance of advocacy groups understanding the *logic* of the neo-network era.

Jennifer Gillan author of *Television Brandcasting: The Return of the Content-Promotion Hybrid* examines the anxieties present in 1950's broadcast television and compares them to the uneasiness felt by advertisers in the era of internet television and "cord cutting." The nature and meaning of branded content utilized by both the SVOD services and advocacy groups alike to promote their diversity work (Netflix generates a plethora of this content) can only be understood in this context. Gillan explains that the "classic network era" was indicative of the one-way, push model of communication. These characteristics of mass media logics operate in relative contrast to what Gillan calls the contemporary "pull model," which "responds to the fact that television viewers and web/mobile users can access desired content on their own schedules, talk back to producers, and circulate brand commentary (some of it undesirable). Companies hoping to make inroads with customers must now engage them in the places they congregate (e.g. on social networking sites) and try to influence their entertainment choices and their recommendations to others."[50] The content-promotion hybrid and other new forms of television advertising investigated by Gillan, Grainge, Johnson, and Serazio traverse a myriad of areas: branded credit sequence, branded channel identification, dramatized shorts content that maintains identification with star persona, short-form content in the forms of storytelling that is paratextual in nature, "customized" lead-ins and outs, and content-promotion hybrids that "blur the lines between education or cause advocacy and storytelling."[51] Netflix is establishing a brand of diversity, and

[50] Jennifer Gillan, *Television Brandcasting: The Return of the Content-Promotion Hybrid* (New York; Routledge, 2015), 4.

[51] Gillan, *Television Brandcasting*, 10.

is clearly listening to groups like RespectAbility and the Inevitable Foundation when they advocate, "There is no diversity, equity, and inclusion without disability."[52]

Netflix Fund for Creative Equity and the Children's Content Lab

In *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* John Caldwell describes film and television production communities as "cultural expressions and entities" in their own right, "involving all of the symbolic processes and collective practices that other cultures use: to gain and reinforce identity, to forge consensus and order, to perpetuate themselves and their interests, and to interpret media *as* audience members."[53] While this project does not use ethnographic or participant-observation analysis, in both my interviews and my research into disability representation in the past eight years, my focus has been on tracking these production communities in their digital manifestations, where much of the news and community-forming activity takes place in both a semi-industrial and discursive sense.

My interview subjects for this chapter come from varied positions in Hollywood's power hierarchy; for this chapter I interviewed a relatively new writer/consultant, a mid-level writer/director, a senior casting director, the head of research for a major disability advocacy group and a disability advocate/creative practitioner that remains anonymous. Because the interviews and in-person industrial analysis for this project span over several years, I have some perspective on how these practitioner's work alongside Hollywood's both pre-and-post Covid-19. I am careful in my analysis to contextualize my subject's positions, since after all, as Caldwell reminds, "Knowledge about the industry…is usually highly coded, managed, and

[52] "THERE'S NO DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION WITHOUT DISABILITY," Disability is Diversity, accessed March 10, 2024, https://disabilityisdiversity.com/billboards.

[53] John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008) 2.

inflected," particularly in interviews.[54] Caldwell's work suggests the coded and rhetorically fraught nature of industry knowledge maps onto industrial hierarchies: the higher up the "industrial food chain" the researcher goes, the more curated the discourse concerning production becomes. Netflix's over-determined public communications come through various print and media sources, but especially talented at circling conversations back to the desired corporate talking points are figures like Netflix co-CEO Ted Sarandos and (now former) Netflix Head of Inclusion and Diversity Vernā Myers. To avoid becoming embroiled in the corporate discourse, which seems at varying times overly simplistic and other times impossibly multi-layered and contradictory, I follow in the production studies research model and focus on cross-referencing interviews with industry "deep" texts to figure out, in some way, "what production means.'"[55]

On April 27, 2023, Netflix published a video "Two Years In: An Update on the Netflix Fund for Creative Equity" which detailed the progress of the titular initiative. Rafael Agustín, the CEO of Latino Institute and recipient of the LALIFF Inclusion Fellowship, bookends the video saying, "I think there is a false narrative about [the Latino community]. And that's that there's not people who are talented enough. That's not true. What all marginalized communities most lack are funding and opportunity."[56] The video's stated intention was to give an update on the 29 million dollars already spent of the 100 million that Netflix pledged to advancing diversity and equity initiatives in the entertainment industry. The video boasts that Netflix has partnered with 80 organizations across the world, established 100 programs spanning 35 countries, and

[54] Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 2.

[55] Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 3.

[56] WeAreNetflix, "Two Years In: An Update on the Netflix Fund for Creative Equity," April 7, 2023, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HexKLoJOm3I.

supported over 4,500 production personnel, above and below the line.[57] Netflix and RespectAbility had established a partnership long before the Children's Content Lab for Disabled Creators, but this particular RespectAbility initiative is noteworthy because it is funded directly by the Netflix Equity Fund.

Lauren Appelbaum The VP of RespectAbility explains, "We founded the RespectAbility Entertainment Lab in 2019 to show the industry that there are disabled writers, directors, and crew available if you take the time to look for us," echoing Agustín's sentiment, which is repeated in various forms across Netflix's publicity materials and emphasizes the significant role of companies like themselves (not coincidentally) giving money to support previously marginalized creators.[58] Appelbaum explains that The Children's Content lab is a "natural offshoot" of the Entertainment Lab and, "Over the past five years, we've worked with more than 40 episodic series in the preschool and children's space, as well as a variety of kids and family films, placing disabled creatives in dozens of productions. We see a clear need to provide additional bridges between disabled creatives and those who create kids and family content."[59] The 4-minute video, produced by Netflix, gives a broad overview of many such initiatives, highlighting both domestic and international programs in an effort to convey the expanding audience of the tech streaming giant and the ways this global expansion adds additional lenses of representation to their agenda.

[57] WeAreNetflix, "Two Years In."

[58] BreAnna Bell, "Netflix Partners With RespectAbility on New Program for Disabled Children's Content Writers and Animators," *Variety*, August 24, 2022, https://variety.com/2022/tv/news/netflix-respectability-disabled-children-content-writers-animators-1235348694/.

[59] Bell, "Netflix Partners With RespectAbility."

In the same video, Nina Fiore, a member of the inaugural Children's Content Lab cohort, argues "media can really help people understand and learn more about people with disabilities so that they don't fear them, and they don't feel so awkward going to talk to them."[60] Here Fiore is pushing for understanding representation as something that occurs on the reception end, and is reflected in audience action off-screen. While this interestingly puts the onus for change on audiences rather than creators, this distinction seems hardly noticed when the video pivots into familiar calls for creating more opportunities for more creators and storytellers to create "more authentic, powerful, and unique stories," as Agustín says.[61] The commentators ultimately converge on an ideal solution for achieving this goal: diversity pipeline programs.

A diversity pipeline program provides resources and personal assistance to ensure opportunity for paid work in the entertainment industry for underrepresented creators. The Children's Content Lab is exemplary of this type of program. The Children's Content Lab is modeled on the successes and methodologies of its parent program, the Entertainment Lab. Through these programs, RespectAbility has been focusing its efforts on developing talent for creatives that are in the very beginning stages of their work; this approach contrasts with that of other groups like the Inevitable Foundation, which tailors its pipeline programs to mid-level creatives. I spoke with two creators who are RespectAbility Entertainment Lab alums and who currently work in the entertainment industry: writer/director Ashley Eakin and writer/consultant/actress Ava X Rigelhaupt.

I spoke with writer-director Ashley Eakin in 2024. In describing her time at RespectAbility, her work, and her relationship with Netflix via their Netflix Equity Fund, she

[60] WeAreNetflix, "Two Years In."

[61] WeAreNetflix, "Two Years In."

said, “I was part of Netflix's emerging filmmaker initiative, and directed *Forgive Us Our Trespasses* (2022), which actually it's on the platform right now and has a disabled lead.”[62] Ashley has been part of two Netflix Equity Fund initiatives, the Netflix Created By initiative for underrepresented writers, through which she was nominated by the Inevitable Foundation and the Emerging Filmmaker Initiative. “They really do care about disability representation,” Eakin said, “And the thing about any of their diversity initiatives is they're giving people jobs. I got paid the WGA minimum to write the script. I got paid to direct, assured I get residuals from that short. I got paid a very good rate to write a feature with them, with my husband, they put their money where their mouth is. And I think that's really inspiring and I feel grateful to kind of be in their orbit…Netflix has definitely been like an ally of mine throughout my journey.”[63]

Though according to Eakin, RespectAbility did not factor into her relationship on her current Netflix projects, she explains that the organization did help her secure a writing job on a series called *Mech Cadets*, a Netflix Original children’s series. *Mech Cadets* has a lead character that has limb difference, which is a lived experience of Eakin’s. Eakin goes on to say that RespectAbility was instrumental in getting that position, stating that they put her up for the role and secured her a meeting with the showrunner. “I ended up getting it, and I got to write two episodes and help them develop the disabled character and the storyline.”[64] The job surpassed her expectations, demonstrating the potential and promise of the professional resources in diversity pipeline programs. Eakin initially assumed she was going to be a consultant: “I was part of the writer’s room. You know, I kind of thought I was going to come in as a consultant, but

[62] Ashley Eakin, interview by Brittany Green, Zoom, February 8, 2024.

[63] Eakin, interview.

[64] Eakin, interview.

they *actually gave* me two episodes to write, which was amazing because sometimes disabled people can get trapped in the consultant category/job description area not being actually promoted to writers."[65] Here Eakin points once again to the convention of the "consultant trap" that inhibits many disabled writers or creative practitioners from being a part of the production, and instead limits their involvement by directing them to fix or mitigate issues related exclusively to representation. Eakin continues, "RespectAbility has been a huge ally in, you know, a lot of different disabled people's careers. That was my first writers' room."[66] Eakin's career trajectory started 10 years prior to working with RespectAbility. Her early jobs were assistantships. In these roles she was working with multiple production companies, including landing the job of John Chu's assistant on *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018).

From there, Eakin moved on to her current passion of directing. It was this path which brought her to the RespectAbility Entertainment Lab in 2019. She explained that though there was value in the cultural and social aspects of the lab itself, RespectAbility is useful especially for its ability to simply secure employment. This straightforward efficacy is considered rare in Eakin's mind: "[there] are so many [DEI related] programs out there…You go and you meet people, but does it actually lead to jobs?[67] RespectAbility's track record with her and her peers impressed her even as she laments the necessity of underrepresented creators needing to find, test, and appeal to such pipeline programs to begin with. She reflects, "I sometimes feel like marginalized communities have to do so many programs, like when other people don't have to do any programs, you know, in their work. And it's time and you're usually not paid for any of this

[65] Eakin, interview.

[66] Eakin, interview.

[67] Eakin, interview.

stuff. It's like an opportunity."[68] Here Eakin is narrating a new mythology of labor – what Caldwell would call a "genesis myth" – in the contemporary entertainment landscape, where navigating the world of representation initiatives becomes embroiled in the overall "grind" of employment and an additional obstacle diverse creators must learn to master and exploit in order to succeed in the industry.[69] Eakin's statement expresses a new facet of trade stories that concern diversity pipeline programs. It has been a theme in my interviews, diversity pipeline programs must lead to actualized work and compensation, if not, underrepresented creatives are "doing the program" rather than changing the industry.

My second interview subject, Ava X. Rigelhaupt, would be considered an emerging creator, as opposed to Eakin, whose previous industry experience and production put her in the mid-level camp. Rigelhaupt was part of RespectAbility's second annual Entertainment Lab. This was the Lab's first ever *virtual* cohort in 2020 due to work shutdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic. She was connected to RespectAbility through her work at the Ruderman Family Foundation, where she worked as an Inclusion Ambassador as part of her undergraduate Senior Project. Rigelhaupt says she was diagnosed with autism at 18, adding that autism diagnoses often come later for women. After her tenure as a Lab Fellow at Respectability, Ava was contacted by Lauren Appelbaum about interest in consulting on an autistic character for an upcoming Disney animated series, *The Ghost of Molly McGee* (2021). The character in question not only shared a lived experience of autism with Rigelhaupt, but also a shared cultural history of Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) heritage. Rigelhaupt explained that she consulted not only on the scripts but also on the program's animation and art design; she explains these responsibilities as

[68] Eakin, interview.

[69] Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 47.

necessary "because a lot of things about autism isn't just what they say, you know, it's how they say it and how they move, and things like that. And if you're not around disabled people or autistic people, the animators could just make a small…not even like a mistake, but just not knowing about different physicality that sometimes goes along with various disabilities."[70] This position led Appelbaum to offer her the RespectAbility Communications Fellowship, a program that funds disabled creatives to consult, learn about the entertainment industry, write, and do research.

During her RespectAbility Communications Fellowship, Rigelhaupt applied to internships and was chosen to work at Nickelodeon, where she was given the choice of live action or animation. Director Danielle Pretsfelder Demchick, then working at Nickelodeon, reached out to RespectAbility to promote this internship. Because of her involvement in RespectAbility's pipeline network, Rigelhaupt's application was flagged and reviewed more readily. During her RespectAbility fellowship, she consulted on *The Ghost of Molly McGee* and the 2002 dramedy *Cha Cha Real Smooth*. She explains that while consulting on the scripts, she also helped *Cha Cha Real Smooth* with casting efforts. Rigelhaupt states that they found a "first-time" actress to play the role, who was "authentic" for the part.[71] After the movie was made and ultimately bought by Apple TV, Rigelhaupt was contacted by Apple TV's production personnel looking for diversity consultants to help with the movie's press run. Rigelhaupt thus helped Apple TV write press bullet points that the actress, writer, and director would use to talk about the disability representation. Rigelhaupt is currently writing for a PBS series *Carl the Collector*

[70] Rigelhaupt, interview.

[71] Rigelhaupt, interview.

(PBS's first series centering a neurodivergent character) and is the Autistic Creative Consultant for a Broadway musical, in addition to many other emerging projects.

The Inevitable Foundations mission is, "Investing in disabled writers and filmmakers so they can achieve artistic and financial freedom."[72] To explore how the organization works toward these goals, I talked with the Head of Research and Public Affairs for the Inevitable Foundation Saga Darnell (they/them) to discuss the advocacy organization's history and transformation. RespectAbility and the Inevitable Foundation are, in my opinion, the most successful diversity pipeline programs for disabled talent. Thinking back to the organization's beginnings, Darnell describes serving as the Inevitable's first full-time employee. The non-profit was co-founded during Covid-19 quarantine by Richie Siegel and Marisa Torelli-Pedevska. "You look at our website, our goal is to not exist," says Darnell, addressing the fundamental contradiction of advocacy groups who exist because of inequality while also working to eliminate it. "We are not an organization that exists because a very rich person died. We are trying to take the financial scraps from the industry and advocate for the industry giants to invest the money themselves, you know, so that the pipeline of disabled creatives exists substantially and doesn't require third-party nonprofit intervention."[73] The goal of this organization is to create financial freedom for a population that has been woefully unrepresented in creative roles and unfairly compensated when they are. As Caldwell writes, "I hope to suggest how these industrial "critical" or "theorizing" artifacts, rituals, and mediated forms of reflexivity express an emerging and unstable economic and social order in Hollywood."[74] The discourse in these sectors

[72] "Why We Exist — Breaking down Barriers Keeping Mid-Career Disabled Screenwriters from Reaching Their Full Commercial and Creative Potential.," Inevitable Foundation, accessed January 18, 2024, https://www.inevitable.foundation/why.

[73] Darnell, interview.

[74] Caldwell, *Production Culture,* 5.

surrounding money is quite different from that taking place in the marketing departments at SVODs, where diversity media is often posed as a potentially lucrative market trend. For advocates like Darnell at Inevitable, the organization's financial priority is trying to close a pay gap for creatives with disabilities in a system rapidly changing compensation due to technological and industrial shifts.

When conducting a landscape analysis of advocacy in the disability space, Darnell found that RespectAbility was finding relative success creating and effectively helping *emerging* creatives get into the industry, but despite this progress, space for *mid-level* creatives was not yet being addressed by the organization and others like it. They explain that this was a critical population that was not being served, and though numbers-wise it was not a large group, in their words, "potential"-wise, it was huge.[75] Darnell states, "They [mid-level creatives] could potentially kind of eliminate the need for this type of nonprofit to exist and create a stable pipeline for disabled creatives to reach the top of the industry, which is just something that we don't have right now."[76]

Netflix is a current funder of the Inevitable Foundation and has been a partner on other Netflix Equity Fund Initiatives like Created By (where Inevitable nominated Ashley Eakin). This partnership has grown substantially in the last couple of years. Darnell explains that with the developing partnership, the "line to professional connections for disabled creatives can be even more direct."[77] They explain that working directly with a person at Netflix instead of multiple related, even distributed teams is an enormous benefit given the large size and even larger scale

[75] Darnell, interview.

[76] Darnell, interview.

[77] Darnell, interview.

of companies like Netflix.[78] It is hard not to be impressed by the work Inevitable is doing in creating professional opportunities for disabled creators. Initiatives like the Hire Disabled Writers Campaign, the Accelerate Fellowship (funded by Netflix), the Concierge Service – in addition to the empirical research concerning pay equity for talent with disabilities – serves as an important step towards establishing the networks and resources for disabled creators now and into the future. I believe the work currently being done by RespectAbility and the Inevitable Foundation will eventually be considered as impactful for the disability community in entertainment as GLAAD's is for the LGBTQ+ community in contemporary dialogues.

The Healing Powers of Dude Production and Development

The Netflix original series *The Healing Powers of Dude* (2020) follows Noah, a young boy with social anxiety disorder, and his emotional support dog, Dude. While Noah's social anxiety is central to each episode of the family comedy series, the show also features regular characters with other forms of disability, including Amara (Sophie Kim), who uses a motorized wheelchair because of her (and Kim's) congenital muscular dystrophy. Working in a traditional consultancy capacity, RespectAbility's Lauren Appelbaum, Tatiana Lee, and Ariella Barker worked with the series creators, writers, and the production team to ensure that Amara's character was portrayed authentically and sensitively. These figures' involvement extended to practical aspects of production, including casting, character development, and accessibility on set.[79] Series co-creators Erica Spates and Sam Littenberg-Weisberg describe disability representation [to Appelbaum] as one of their central interests in producing the show, and claim that Netflix shared

[78] Darnell, interview.

[79] Lauren Appelbaum, "Disability-Inclusive Netflix Show 'The Healing Powers of Dude' Receives Emmy Nominations," The Mighty, January 16, 2024, https://themighty.com/topic/disability/the-healing-powers-of-dude-disability-emmy-nominations/.

this interest and enthusiasm.[80] The creators' insistence that Netflix shares their commitment to equity in interviews works to mark Netflix as a progressive brand for disability representation through language that, as Caldwell writes, works to build a brand "explicitly around notions of cultivated difference" – in this case, difference can be understood not only as superficial market differentiation, but also as the category of identity and experience.[81]

Sam Littenberg-Weisberg gives a "behind the scenes" perspective on the inspiration for the *Healing Powers of Dude* via a promotional video on the Netflix Family Instagram account, sharing with viewers that the show is, "A love letter for my brother, and for our family."[82] Within the short reel, Littenberg-Weisberg reveals his brother Noah (the namesake for the series) likewise has social anxiety disorder and directly inspired the show's narrative. In interviews with Lauren Appelbaum from RespectAbility, he explains that he wanted to educate children about social anxiety and provide them a frame of reference and productive object to be used to talk about anxiety with their own families.

Other promotional material of the show from the creators' and actors' perspectives is shown via various YouTube channels, some authored by Netflix subsidiaries, and some by lesser-known entertainment companies. The two most noteworthy contributions are by Jace Chapman, the actor who plays Noah, and Sophie Kim, who plays Amara. Chapman delivers a ten-minute interview with Sam Davison from MEA Worldwide in which he details how he landed the role, prepared to be "Noah," and worked with emotional support animals to prepare

[80] Appelbaum, "Disability-Inclusive Netflix Show."

[81] Caldwell, *Production Culture,* 234-5.

[82] @Netflix Family, "What Inspired #TheHealingPowersOfDude Co-Creators Sam Littenberg-Weisberg and Erica Spates to Make a Show about Social Anxiety? Peek behind the Scenes to See How Sam Was Inspired by His Brother to Make the Show That Has Stolen Our Hearts,'" Instagram, January 22, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B7oVpDCJ4eY/.

for shooting. When Davison prompts Chapman about potential anxiety he faced when taking on the role, Chapman explains, "I was nervous, but never to Noah's extent," demonstrating the separation between anxiety as a disorder and anxiety as an everyday experience.[83] Chapman goes on to describe the kind of research he did for his performance, in turn highlighting the show's pedagogical function, albeit in a highly individualized way: "I didn't know what social anxiety disorder was prior to the audition, but I went and did my research, I read a lot of clinical articles. And when I got it, I talked to the real Noah, who the show is all about. I also talked to my family and friends – my cousin has social anxiety disorder, so I learned what it's like. But I also found out that less than 1% of shows depict social and mental disabilities. So, it's awesome to be part of this rising community."[84] It is perhaps a bit far-fetched to imagine a 13-year-old poring over clinical articles related to social anxiety disorder, and even more so offhandedly providing statistics about disability on-screen representation across the industry. When speaking with Rigelhaupt, who worked at RespectAbility as a disability consultant, she explained that part of her job was to prepare actors (especially able-bodied actors) for exactly these kinds of public engagements. Her job included writing bullet points for creative personnel to recite in interviews and coaching production members on why particular narratives or script decisions could impact disability portrayal negatively. This behind-the-scenes curation by disability consultants is erased during the promotional footage – it is most effective when the labor is rendered invisible and seamless. Instead, Chapman describes using the real-life Noah as his primary guide and source of information during his performance. "Noah told me a lot about what [social anxiety disorder is]

[83] MEAWW, "The Healing Powers Of Dude: Jace Chapman Reveals The Real Noah Ferris' Show Cameo," February 12, 2020, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QxmwY3Rh1-w.

[84] MEAWW, "The Healing Powers Of Dude."

like, and how it feels to have these emotions, so I kind of got my understanding from him."[85] There is a somewhat awkward tone in the interview, as the then 13-year-old actor seems unbothered by the subtler implications of the interviewer's questions about embodying a disability when he does not have one himself, but his deferrals to his close relationship with the show's direct inspiration (the real Noah) is seen by Chapman and his team as addressing this fact of the production. Though I have no evidence Jace Chapman specifically was coached by a disability consultant, his rhetoric lines up with the kinds of information my contacts at RespectAbility would feed to talent in similar arrangements as part of their consultant positions. Such collaborative messaging muddles any rigid distinctions between media industry and advocacy group work, and even shows how the goals, methods, and results of marketing and advocacy work can overlap.

A critical part of advocacy work, according to my interview subjects, is monitoring reception and making use of constructive criticism, since representation is never an exact science or even something consultants within the same organization can agree upon in every case. When asked whether he receives feedback on his performance of Noah, Chapman says he has gotten "hundreds, maybe even a couple thousands of messages from kids [with social anxiety disorder or other disabilities] saying that 'they have finally been heard' and that the series has really helped them. The most touching one, the saddest one, one of my mom's friends told her that her five-year-old son was watching and said, 'I thought I was the only one that felt this way.'"[86]

The Healing Powers of Dude was indeed celebrated for its "authentic casting," but it should be recognized that it fails to follow this up in *the* lead role. But with the character Amara,

[85] MEAWW, "The Healing Powers Of Dude."

[86] MEAWW, "The Healing Powers Of Dude."

the creators explained they wanted to portray both visible and invisible disabilities – hence the narrative and thematic need for a strong friend that would push Noah out of his comfort zone. When bringing up the Ruderman statistic that 95% of characters with disabilities are played by those without a disability, Lauren Appelbaum asks the creators why casting Amara authentically was important. Their response:

> First off, there is no one who could play Amara besides Sophie because she just embodies this character. But beyond her amazing acting, Sophie brought authenticity to the part, and even helped us make sure we were being accurate with Amara. There were moments on set where Sophie told us she was unsure of a line, and we worked with her to rewrite it until she felt comfortable. We were also just so excited to discover a young actor in a wheelchair and possibly give them their first job. Representation is very important to us, as well as to Netflix. We understand the power of seeing yourself represented in media and that the more you see it the more it can become commonplace.[87]

The mention of Sophie challenging a script decision is worth noting. My interviewees corroborated the commonality of such talent interventions, explaining that because actors are generally the most represented for disabled creatives (rather than behind-the-camera personnel), they can become de facto disability consultants or even accessibility consultants, since they are the ones running into issues once on set. This also means disabled actors take on additional responsibilities of reporting these issues on top of their creative work. Saga Darnell mentioned this practice in our interview concerning the importance of disabled writers in disability productions. Darnell explains, "Before the actors get to set, almost all of the decisions are made. So, if the only person you have in a project about a disabled person is an actor, and that's what

[87] Lauren Appelbaum, "Netflix's Newest Series Takes Disability Inclusion to a New Level," RespectAbility, January 13, 2020, https://www.respectability.org/2020/01/netflix-healing-powers-of-dude/.

we're calling "authenticity," that person is going to get there and they're going to be like, oh, the wheelchair that we have actually doesn't make any sense. Can you just use yours? Oh, we don't really know how this works. Can you just act out how this would happen? All of a sudden? That person is kind of writing the script. That person is kind of acting as an accessibility consultant."[88] The blurring and convergence of professional roles (always towards *more* duties rather than streamlined duties) is something labor and production studies scholars have noted for decades, and which they explain as a symptom of the larger industrial convergence in the wake of digital technologies. Caldwell describes how this convergence is especially prevalent within the supervisory, logistical, and other middle-management positions: "Crossover activities are extensive today, and many of those who participate and/or "meddle" in script development, casting, and production are in fact non-production employees and executives from the company's business sector."[89] Adding onto this labor environment the collaboration of advocacy groups with media production companies blurs these distinctions even further.

Ability Magazine has been promoting disability awareness and access since 1995. The magazine has grown substantially in the last 30 years and has been helping people with disabilities get jobs through the organization Ability Jobs. *AbilityE's* website details that they are responsible for casting Amara in *The Healing Powers of Dude*, writing that before their involvement, Netflix's and *Dude*'s "casting people could only find 10 actors to audition that fit the age range who authentically used a wheelchair."[90] The site goes on to explain that it was because of the casting request from Netflix for *The Healing Powers of Dude* that AbilityE was

[88] Darnell, interview.

[89] Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 238-9.

[90] "Home page," abilityE, accessed January 26, 2024, https://abilitye.com/.

created and the company was able to find business from other casting projects – "so AbilityE was born to be the source to cast a wider net."[91] In an attempt to confirm whether this story is plausible, I spoke with a disability advocate and creative practitioner that asked to remain anonymous. This practitioner explained that this show and Amara's character were cast via a casting director, and *not* through AbilityE, stating, "No website sends talent directly to a major streamer… their claim is a broad overreach, and they were simply a connector, at most." The desire to claim responsibility for the casting speaks both to the burgeoning market for diversity casting services and also to the marketing imperatives these organizations face.

In a clarifying interview for *Ability* Magazine with Sophie Kim, interviewer Melinda (no last name noted) explains that it was *Ability* Magazine that Netflix reached out to for help with casting. In this and other press materials, *Ability* Magazine can be seen strategically attempting to "teach" the TV viewer about how casting works, how "authentic" casting differs from previous forms of casting, and how the AbilityE site works specifically with disabled talent and connects them to major entertainment industry entities like Netflix. Melinda explains, "You know what I loved about this [casting]? Netflix could have chosen any actress. An actress who maybe doesn't necessarily use a wheelchair. They could have cast a typical actress and had her sit in a wheelchair and do the part. Sometimes that happens. But Netflix decided to really go out and search for a wonderful actress who authentically uses a wheelchair every day and gave the role to her. What do you feel about that?"[92] Sophie responds, "I thought that was really great of them. I think it means a lot to the community, because it means that they really care. To do that, it makes

[91] "Home page," abilityE.

[92] "Netflix's 'The Healing Powers of Dude' Sophie Kim and abilityE," *Ability Magazine*, accessed January 26, 2024, https://abilitymagazine.com/netflixs-the-healing-powers-of-dude-sophie-kim-and-abilitye/.

their option a lot smaller. It's true. When I first read it, I thought, "That's the first time I've ever heard of that." There have been a couple roles with authentic disabled people playing them, but it's the first time I've ever heard, 'This role is just for authentic wheelchair users.' That's really great. I'm really happy that they did that."[93] Sophie explains the benefit of authentic casting as helping young viewers and disabled viewers feel a sense of belonging when watching the show: "When you're part of a really small community and you don't see others like you out in the world or even on the screen, it can be hard to relate. You feel alone sometimes, you know? And to see someone who goes through what you go through every day, that means a lot."[94]

Interview with Danielle Pretsfelder Demchick

To get more insight into casting practices, I interviewed casting director Danielle Pretsfelder Demchick. Pretsfelder Demchick has been a casting director since 2004 and spent 14 years working at children's entertainment network Nickelodeon. Currently, she is the co-VP of Advocacy for the Casting Society of America, where she is a leader in the Equity in Entertainment committee. She is also a faculty advisor for RespectAbility's Children Content Lab. During our conversation, Pretsfelder Demchick shared that her interest in diversity representation came from her own family life; she shared how she grew up in a family that encompassed diversity in terms of religion, gender, and ability. She also had formative experiences with the entertainment industry as a child actor. She described going through the audition and casting process as a child and noticing how many other kids looked like her – a young able-bodied girl – but none that represented the members of her family that were disabled.

[93] "Netflix's 'The Healing Powers of Dude' Sophie Kim and abilityE."

[94] "Netflix's 'The Healing Powers of Dude' Sophie Kim and abilityE."

"There wasn't anybody disabled in the project," she told me, "but when I would be going to school, when I would be going to synagogue, when I would be having a family dinner, the person next to you is autistic. The person on the other side of you is dyslexic. The person over there is deaf." [95] She goes on to explain that as she advanced in the industry and she began to take control over shaping the audition process, she was determined to make sure actors with disabilities were being represented and given opportunities to make it on-screen. But she quickly ran into problems, even at a company like Nickelodeon with broad networks in the industry; there were not many diverse actors on the company's internal radar, and in terms of production practices, audition locations and sets themselves were often not accessible. "I had a project come to me where they wanted to do all these signature Nickelodeon theme songs in ASL. And they were like, so we'll find someone who signs. And I was like, well, we wouldn't find someone who speaks Spanish to play Dora. We'd find someone who's Latina to play Dora."[96] Nickelodeon was enthusiastic about the idea but was skeptical about having the resources to make this happen in the desired time frame for the production.[97] After trying and failing to find a represented actor for the part, she reached out to another casting director who had contacted a school for the deaf for a different part. After reaching out to the school in question, Pretsfelder Demchick found her star for Nickelodeon's ASL theme songs, who went on to serve as an ASL signer for the Super Bowl, making history as the first deaf female performer for a half-time show.[98] "And that was

[95] Demchick, interview.

[96] Demchick, interview.

[97] Demchick, interview.

[98] Rachel McRady, "Rihanna's Super Bowl ASL Interpreter Goes Viral for Performance," *Entertainment Tonight*, February 23, 2023, https://www.etonline.com/rihannas-super-bowl-halftime-sign-language-interpreter-justina-miles-goes-viral-with-historic.

like the start of something for me, where I won. I got to show this person does exist."[99] This initial "win" would motivate her to continue working with Nick to create a systematic database for actors with disabilities and gain the attention of RespectAbility. The system that Pretsfelder Demchick created ultimately expanded into a larger operation than one woman could manage and utilize, and when Pretsfelder Demchick was finally able to bring in more staff to help with the project, she unsurprisingly advocated that a disabled associate be selected. This is how she came to work with Ava Xiao-Lin Rigelhaupt.

Pretsfelder Demchick says her casting system project grew out of a need to address some common missteps media companies make when trying to incorporate diversity into their programming. For instance, she described how Nickelodeon's creative team would often decide to include disabled characters almost as finishing touches to a project at the "11th hour," rather than as organic characters with narrative roots in the show. Through her work at CSA's Advocacy Branch and at RespectAbility, Pretsfelder Demchick knew this was something she needed to push back on and consider better ways of implementing this creative decision. Her casting system not only allowed for more comprehensive and representative talent searches, but it also put consideration of accessibility and representation at the front-end of the project and focused on consistent, appropriate storytelling strategies; she explained, "They were casting disabled roles, which I love because I love this community. I wish that people would see that disability inclusion means having the whole project seen with that same view, not considering it like specialty casting, but we're not really there yet."[100] I asked Pretsfelder Demchick how she created a database of disabled talent, and she explained that social media, specifically Facebook,

[99] Demchick, interview.

[100] Demchick, interview.

was one of the most generative places for identifying and contacting talent. It is important to remember that Pretsfelder Demchick was searching for child actors with disabilities, which in terms of communications and procedure, she needed to work within established frameworks for engaging parents and getting consent for any professional relationships she wanted to establish. She was adamant her casting methods avoid "voyeuristic" tendencies made all too easy by social media affordances and particularly the openness of public Facebook groups. She mentions being obvious about her presence and her intentions, using introductory posts to state why she was there, and her desire to find interested talent, etc. Her networking strategies reveal the extent to which social and digital media enable new forms of industrial practices (in this case casting searches) through algorithmic curation – she describes finding actors through her "For You" recommendations in addition to her manual research.

Again, we see how social media logics and affordances made possible a grassroots-style casting process that enabled the creation of a network of underrepresented actors whose markers of difference make it harder for them to gain the attention and recognition of the big established media institutions. That advocacy groups can take advantage of social media's mass datafication and uncontrolled sharing of personal information is perhaps one positive trend from these broader societal shifts, as this feature allows underrepresented advocacy groups to create space and reduce the friction associated with finding underrepresented talent – which, as my interviewers describe, is one of the most common refrains from media companies looking to excuse their lack of diversity on- and off-screen. In plain terms, Pretsfelder Demchick's casting system for disabled actors exists because someone in a place of power leveraged the available resources and did the tedious-but-necessary legwork necessary to make it happen. Advocacy groups are essential to the media industry exactly for these kinds of interventions driven by

passionate individuals. The Inevitable Foundation has done similar work (networking and database creation) for writers. The Concierge system is an online database that connects showrunners, producers, executives, etc. with disabled writers for developing projects. Inevitable also helps disabled creatives gain financial security through the Disabled Consultant Futures Fund, which "radically increases the leverage of disabled creatives who are asked to consult by providing them a back-up offer to confidently negotiate to be hired as writers, directors and actors — if those are their desired roles. If those aren't their desired roles," the organization website explains, "or if they aren't able to be hired in those roles on equitable terms, the Fund will buy back their time by paying them 150% of their first offer to fund their own creative pursuits."[101] The organization also created The "Cost" of Accommodations Report with an accompanying calculator and accommodations database for disabled talent to show employers how much their accommodations would cost on set before production. The project is intended to make a point about the unfair bias of media companies in applying cost-benefit analyses to disabled talent in ways that they do not for able-bodied hires. The cynical misconception that disabled talent "cost too much" to bring on and accommodate throughout production is often an unspoken (and patently untrue) bias that undermines efforts to conduct more diverse hiring practices. Per Inevitable's website, "The "Cost" of Accommodations Report [is meant for] examining the real consequences for disabled talent when their accommodation needs go unmet, and demystifying the true financial cost of accommodations by creating the first set of budget templates and accommodation benchmarks for the industry."[102] All of these tools, reports, and

[101] "Disabled Consultant Futures Fund — Breaking down Barriers Keeping Mid-Career Disabled Screenwriters from Reaching Their Full Commercial and Creative Potential.," Inevitable Foundation, accessed March 17, 2024, https://www.inevitable.foundation/futures-fund.

[102] "The 'Cost' of Accommodations Report — Breaking down Barriers Keeping Mid-Career Disabled Screenwriters from Reaching Their Full Commercial and Creative Potential.," Inevitable Foundation, accessed March 17, 2024, https://www.inevitable.foundation/cost-of-accommodations-report.

initiatives are designed to eliminate excuses using companies like Netflix's most prized tool: empirical data. Darnell explains that they have created a system for the industry to not only eliminate the long-held myth that there is no disabled talent but also make it so easy for studios and production to make better decisions that they, "don't have to try very hard" to hire disabled talent.[103]

Advocacy groups continue to work towards addressing one of the entertainment industry's fundamental and existential barriers of entry for disabled talent: logistics and accessibility of the workplace. For Pretsfelder Demchick, what makes the RespectAbility and Netflix partnership (through the Children's Content Lab) so special is its explicit goal of helping disabled talent with travel, time and resource management (taking small chunks of time over long periods off for work), dealing with financial strain, and related practical matters of a career in media production. As the casting director for the Children's Content Lab, Pretsfelder Demchick worked with the program's 12 creators to cast all their original content for the lab.

Though Pretsfelder Demchick is personally and professionally invested in supporting access for people with disabilities in entertainment, as someone that does not identify as disabled, she wanted to make sure she was also educating herself about disability studies to better serve her clients and the industry. Currently, she is completing a master's degree at CUNY in disability studies. She explains this course of study "kind of just gives me that credential that makes people take it more seriously. It is also really important for me to know the history of the "ugly" laws. You know, [instances in media when] we did see disability representation, but it was exploitive, like those sorts of things. And also it makes me better at the access elements of it

[103] Demchick, interview.

and understanding the educational barriers and the language deficiencies and things that come with disability. And that makes me a better casting director."[104]

Textual Analysis of *The Healing Powers of Dude*

The Healing Powers of Dude pilot, "Second Step: Homeroom" (released January 13, 2020) opens on Noah Ferris (Jace Chapman) and his family sitting outside of Roosevelt Middle School on Noah's first day. His mom, Karen (Larisa Oleynik), sister Embry (Laurel Emory), and dad Marvin (Tom Everett Scott) are trying to build Noah up for his first exposure to the new school. They mention as a final motivator that Noah's therapist, Dr. Castanov, confirmed Noah is "totally ready," suggesting the work that has already gone into preparing for the day ahead. The family's conversation comes from a caring place, but its tone conveys the family's sensed need to manage and direct Noah's emotions, sometimes without recognizing that he is present. "Why don't we just ask Noah how he's feeling," sister Embry interjects. Noah looks nervous, but insists he is ready to "get out there" and make other friends. The audience is meant to understand the central role Noah's family plays not only in dealing with his anxiety, but also in serving his social and emotional needs – the big step involves making friends outside his family circle. As a final self-check before heading out, Noah ensures he doesn't have "social anxiety disorder face" by forcing an odd smile. The family does not seem convinced by the false confidence, but recognizes Noah's need to jump into the deep end of middle school social life anyway. As a sign of support, his father gives Noah a hand drawn map of the school. Embry cuts through the family's collective concern with a humorously blunt suggestion to never smile like that again, indicating how her character, perhaps, will be more straightforward about Noah's behavior than his parents will.

[104] Demchick, interview.

Considering Embry's role, it's worth noting there is female supporting character for a male disabled lead in three of my case studies: *The Healing Powers of Dude*, *Atypical* and *Special*. While the sample size is too small to generalize into a convention of disability-centric programming, this character dynamic and central relationship is something those studying disability representation should continue to monitor; in the shows I have analyzed for this project, these female supporting characters are inexorably either the sister or best friend and act as barometers of the disabled lead's behavior. Their role is practical in the diegetic sense – they help the lead to maintain what they believe is a flattering sense of "normalcy" in various social situations – but they also seem to serve as proxy for or perhaps even a way to disarm an imagined uninformed, able-bodied-viewer who might share some of the same frank observations about the lead's appearance or behavior throughout their performance of a given disability.

As Noah walks to the school's entrance, we meet Amara (Sophie Kim). While orienting himself to the new environment, Noah unwittingly blocks the accessibility button at one of the school's entranceways, making it impossible for Amara to navigate her motorized wheelchair inside. When Noah realizes he has inconvenienced another student and they are waiting on him to correct the situation immediately, we see his anxiety suddenly ramp up, which is visually represented in a special effect wherein his head begins uncontrollably expanding like a balloon. Amara notices his panic and tries to ask if he's ok, but Noah quickly becomes overwhelmed and runs back to his parents car in the parking lot. The "head balloon" special effect is meant not only to represent Noah's subjective feelings of social anxiety disorder in a way younger audiences can immediately grasp, but also to present the notion of visible vs. invisible (or less visible) forms of disability. The image of Noah's head expanding is juxtaposed with both cuts back to the objective perspective (wherein his head is not expanding, and he is simply holding

his head and saying “no”) and with Amara’s obvious confusion about Noah’s state of mind given his lack of overt external displays. The ordeal during Noah’s first day motivates his parents to get Noah an emotional support animal (ESA), despite Noah’s protestations, to accompany him at school and in daily life. They select a small long-haired dog who becomes the titular “Dude.”

As a narrative, thematic, and educational device, Dude acts as another lens through which the audience can understand Noah’s experience of social anxiety disorder. In combination with diegetic sound cues (like heartbeats) and special effects (head balloon), Dude (voices by Steve Zahn) uses dialogue to narrate and comment on Noah’s thoughts and feelings. In another gesture towards the highly subjective experience of social anxiety, the show opts to have Dude’s dialogue only audible to the audience, and occasionally other dogs. Beyond his witty and upbeat dialogue, Dude exhibits a self-reflexive attitude towards his “job”; the dog’s backstory includes a failed attempt to train him to work as a service dog, with his service as an ESA understood by Dude to be a lower-stakes responsibility that nevertheless serves those dealing with a variety of emotional conditions. “I mean how hard can this be?” he asks, “I let you pet me when you’re feeling down, and you give me treats.”

Soon, Dude becomes integrated into Noah’s fear-inducing interpretations of the world around him, emphasizing the role of the ESA as an extension of the owner and a critical companion. In a later scene, Noah is swarmed by students wanting to pet and play with Dude. Noah understands the harmlessness of his peers’ actions, but his anxiety soon takes over and transforms the students into mindless zombies fighting to capture and eat him and Dude. Even as this aesthetic strategy lacks subtlety, it effectively dramatizes and educates young viewers and their families about the unrelenting and often irrational nature of anxiety, and underlines how even having a conscious awareness of the irrationality of these feelings is no defense from their

sudden, visceral effects. While other characters are not given direct insight into Noah's visions, the character exhibits visible indicators of his discomfort through body language, including sweating, hyperventilating, looking away, or in more extreme cases, vomiting in front of authority figures.

In 1969 Dr. Cedric Clark wrote an editorial for the Journal of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. At the time, Clark was a Post-Doctoral Fellow at USC's Annenberg School of Communication, the university and department responsible for many of the quantitative diversity reports utilized by Netflix and other Hollywood disability consultancies over sixty years later. In the issue, Clark writes about the relationship between representations of ethnic minorities on television and broader social contexts. "Television reflects the social structure of society by selection and presentation of characters associated with its structural divisions," he writes, citing four stages of "ethnic minority group" representation seen in media: non-recognition, ridicule, regulatory, and respect.[105] Though Clark is examining media representations of race and ethnicity, his model can (and has been) adapted to other underrepresented groups on television. In her text *Disability in the Media: Examining Stigma and Identity*, Tracey Worrell applies this thinking to disability representation. Worrell writes, "Many minority groups, such as individuals with a disability, seem to fluctuate between the first and second stages where there may be irregular increases in individuals with disabilities in the media; However, these images aren't always positive representations."[106] Worrell uses "social cognitive theory" to understand representations of disability in television programming and how

[105] Cedric Clark, "Television Quarterly," ed. Manning White, *Published by The National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences in Cooperation with the School of Public Communication, Boston University* III, no. 2 (Spring 1969).

[106] Tracy R. Worrell, *Disability in the Media: Examining Stigma and Identity* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), x.

they influence attitudes about disabled individuals.[107] In 2014, communications and media researchers Chen, Feng, and Leung began examining this topic specifically in terms of children's attitudes and perceptions. Worrell uses their work and explains, "As media consumers may not have much direct experience with individuals with disabilities, and the popular press is often seen as a realistic view into society, this presentation may increase viewers perception of the normative beliefs regarding disability. If one believes these images echo and accurately represent how others may feel about individuals with disabilities, stereotyping and stigmatization may be perceived as normal."[108]

As Noah continues to face challenges in the chaotic middle school social environment, Dude proves to be a positive influence in forcing Noah to engage others and begin adjusting. For instance, Dude intervenes by urinating on bullies gathered around a boy named Simon, who Noah ultimately befriends after Simon expresses understanding about Noah's social anxiety (and thanks Dude for saving him). After the bullying incident, Simon refers to Noah as his "amigo" in a certainly less-than-subtle but innocuous underlining of Simon's Hispanic ethnicity. As a character, Simon provides the comic relief balancing out the tension of Noah's anxiety and rounding off the curtness of Amara (who also joins the friend group). Within the case studies *The Healing Powers of Dude*, *Special,* and *Atypical,* the main white male character has a best friend or friends of color (in *Dude,* Amara is Asian). According to Erin Andrews, "Historically, disability rights work and disability culture scholarship have been dominated by White voices; people of color and members of other marginalized groups have been forced to make choices between involvement and disability activism or joining other efforts to promote equality such as

[107] Worrell, *Disability in the Media.*

[108] Worrell, *Disability in the Media,* 33.

lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender-plus (LGBT +) rights and combating racism. Disability is off the radar of most other social justice efforts, and the disability rights movement has largely ignored intersectional identities."[109] GLAAD's "Where We Are On TV" Report examines the breakdown of LGBTQ characters as they intersect with other racial and ethnic identities and disability. This report and others like it indicate that the already limited amount of disability representation is, like mass media in general, largely dominated by white, cis males. This is evident in *Special*, *Atypical*, *As We See It*, and *The Healing Powers of Dude*, though the two later shows also have an Asian female character with a disability represented.

Although the show's primary focus is one its main character's experience of Social Anxiety Disorder, the show also takes the time to explore Amara's disability in instructional scenes depicting the proper ways to take into consideration and accommodate her character's needs. For instance, when Amara and Simon want to come to Noah's house one day after school, the characters are shown preparing the house to allow easy passage for Amara's wheelchair; at the same time, the family is seen planning how to mitigate Noah's potential discomfort and fear about hosting his new friends in his private space. After Noah's father constructs a front door ramp, Amara is shown approving and complimenting it. In another episode, RespectAbility consultants Appelbaum, Lee, and Baker successfully convinced Spates and Littenberg-Weisberg to include a location featuring an *inaccessible* front doorway to serve as a "teachable moment" for audiences.[110] Constructing accessible spaces was a concern on the show's set as well; Saga Darnell provided a surprising detail about the accessible trailers which needed to be accessed

[109] Erin Andrews, *Disability as Diversity: Developing Cultural Competence*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 70.

[110] Appelbaum, "Netflix's Newest Series Takes Disability Inclusion to a New Level."

during *The Healing Powers of Dude*: "There are two ADA accessible film and TV trailers in the entire continental United States. There are like 50 to 100 film and TV productions usually happening at any given point in time in the continental United States. That kind of tells you everything you need to know. You know about disability representation, about where we are."[111]

Amara is also the focus of a plotline involving a school musical in episode five "Middle School Musical," wherein the show *directly* addresses issues in disability casting. Amara auditions for the lead in the school musical but does not get the role and is instead placed in the chorus. When she asks the theater director why she was denied the role, the director becomes flustered and admits that "although [Amara] did a great job singing, so lovely, it's a musical with, um, a lot of…[pantomimes tap dancing]." As a consolation, the director elaborates, "And Tinsley [the student who got the part over Amara] can sing and dan- you know, um…she just seemed like a better fit for the part…You're going to be great in the ensemble though. Remember, there are no small parts, only small actors."

The director's biting final statement echoes rebukes for diversity-focused casting (and in a broader labor context, hiring) that diminishes complaints about parity in the entertainment industry and portrays marginalized creatives asking for more as ungrateful or unworthy of facing the challenges that come with "making it" in the industry. Amara does in fact internalize the director's words and later tells Simon that she did not get the role simply because "the other girl was just better." The remainder of the episode has Noah and Simon working to demonstrate to the director how much better Amara is than Tinsley in various stagecraft tasks in an effort to win her the part after all, but despite Amara's evident superior talent, the director believes Amara to be a sore loser. Later commenting on their failure, Amara says "Mrs. Wakowski [the director] is

[111] Darnell, interview.

too close-minded to see me in the part because I can't dance *exactly* like Tinsley." Of course, while this representation of casting bias opens up interesting and complicated questions for a children's show, the resolution is predictably neat and optimistic. Noah records a video of Amara singing, which becomes an overnight viral sensation to the point where Amara's homeroom teacher praises her in class the next day. In an additional victory, the theater director admits she was mistaken for not casting Amara and says she is "ashamed" of her behavior. Ultimately, an arrangement is worked out where Amara and Tinsley alternate nights as the lead in the musical, a compromise that works in the show's narrative but, again, elides unpacking the more complex realities of resolving these issues within the entertainment industry – and even within *this show*'*s* casting environment.

The final scene I want to examine is when Amara and Simon try to distract a neighbor to help Noah. This scene is particularly interesting because RespectAbility advocated for it to be put in. When Simon and Amara approach the neighbor's front entry way Amara lets out a deep sigh, "Steps. Awesome" Simon immediately hops into action, "Don't worry. I'll carry you." Simon struggles, gasping, "Simon, my chair weighs over 400 pounds" he continues his efforts, "Almost there" clearly annoyed Amara says, "Just go ring the doorbell." RespectAbility consultants Appelbaum, Lee, and Baker suggested that Spates and Littenberg-Weisberg should include an inaccessible front door as a "teachable moment" for audiences.[112] The series serves as an example of how on-screen disability representation comes to fruition. The advocacy groups involved in trying to create disability representation also work with academic research groups housed within universities and social impact entertainment organizations to better understand the

[112] Appelbaum, "Netflix's Newest Series Takes Disability Inclusion to a New Level."

state of disability representation, as seen by audiences in on-screen representation, and through data concerning the employment by disabled creatives.

Academic and Social Impact Entertainment Research Reports

The UCLA Center for Scholars and Storytellers (CSS) is one of the leading organizations researching, in their words, "insights and tools that are useful for content creators crafting authentic and inclusive stories for youth (ages 2-25)" in order to "support the mental health of the next generation so they can thrive and grow."[113] The center was founded in 2018 by Dr. Yalda Uhls, a former movie executive who shifted industries and got her PhD in Developmental Psychology at UCLA. Uhls explains that she researches how media impacts young people, stating, "I sort of just had this "ah ha" one day. Kids spend so much time with media, more time than they spend with their parents and in school. So, what they're seeing matters."[114] The mission of the organization is clear: bring together academics, storytellers, and youth. Uhls has a quote on the main page of the website describing these categories as "siloed worlds," and until the last ten years (and because of this organization and those with similar goals), it has been.

In 2014, the UCLA Theater Film and Television Department created the Skoll Center for Social Impact Entertainment with an endowment from Jeff Skoll. The organization's research arm is responsible for producing a social impact entertainment report, which I worked on as a graduate research assistant in 2017-18. The same year that the Skoll Center was founded, the first UCLA Hollywood Diversity Report was disseminated from the Ralph Bunche Center for African American Studies. The report is currently in its 10th year and is now created through

[113] "What We Do," Center for Scholars & Storytellers, accessed January 27, 2024, https://www.scholarsandstorytellers.com/our-work.

[114] Center for Scholars and Storytellers, *CSS Branded Video*, 2022, video, https://vimeo.com/771429979/63664faa18.

growing partnerships with UCLA's Social Sciences Department, and the Entertainment and Media Research Initiative in the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment (IRLE) at UCLA. The Hollywood Diversity Report, though housed in an academic institution, is primarily funded by Netflix. And as I explored in chapter one, the University of Southern California's Annenberg School is responsible for several Hollywood impact studies (some funded by Netflix). USC houses the first ever media impact group Hollywood Health and Society, created in response to the AIDS epidemic by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in 2001. CSS is the first organization to focus its media efforts specifically on adolescents.

University:	**Organization:**	**Year Founded:**	**Disability Industry Report:**	**Tools:**
University of Southern California	Hollywood Health & Society	2001	TV Monitoring Project, Media Impact Project	Consultation, Tip Sheets
University of California, Los Angeles	Skoll Center for Social Impact Entertainment	2014	State of SIE Report	Education and Special Initiatives
University of Southern California	Annenberg Inclusion Initiative	2016	Inequality in 1,600 Popular Films, Inclusion in Netflix Series and Films, Mental Health Conditions Across 300 Popular Films: A Research Update from 2016 to 2022	Inclusion Rider, The Inclusion List
University of California, Los Angeles	Center for Scholars and Storyteller's	2018	Authentically Inclusive Representation Report, Disabled Audience Report, Media & Teen Mental Health Report	Videos and Podcasts, Tip Sheets
University of California, Los Angeles	Media Entertainment Initiative	2022	Hollywood Diversity Report	N/A

Figure 3

Figure 3 shows the entertainment impact organizations that are housed within the University of California, Los Angeles, or the University of Southern California. This table

provides the relevant disability reports that each organization produces, as well as any other tools or resources provided. The five organizations above are leading the industry in academic diversity reports that are used industry wide.

The CSS created the "Disabled U.S. Audience Perceptions of Representation on Screen Report" in 2021. The 14-page report begins with a title page that features a photo of Tatiana Lee, then Senior Entertainment Media Associate for RespectAbility and currently Apple TV+'s Accessibility Lead. After the project description outlines the data gathered for the report, there is a "Note from RespectAbility" page authored by RespectAbility's Entertainment & News Media Team. The opening paragraph of the report explains that while the entertainment industry is becoming more diverse, disability is often missing from the conversation even though the percentage of Americans with disabilities is over 20%: "However, opening the umbrella for the one-in-five people in the U.S. with a disability is the right thing to do, as well as economically smart, given the fact that according to Nielsen Research, consumers with disabilities represent a $1 billion market segment. When you include their families, friends, and associates, that total expands to more than $1 trillion."[115] After utilizing data from a GLAAD report about disability representation in television the "Note" ends with a call for quality representation, "It is not only important to increase the representation, but also to ensure that the narrative is good. It's not enough to just be included – we have to be included in an authentic way, telling diverse, complex stories of the disability experience, and avoid falling into the trap of inspiration porn, which assumes that anyone with a disability must have it so much worse, and uses people with disabilities to make nondisabled people feel good about themselves."[116] There were three major

[115] Maira Karan, Stephanie Rivas-Lara, and Yalda T Uhls, "Disabled U.S. Audience Perceptions of Representations On Screen" (Center for Scholars and Storytellers, 2021).

[116] Karan, Rivas-Lara, and Uhls, "Disabled U.S. Audience Perceptions."

findings of the report (1) "Women with a disability feel notably less well-represented than men with a disability," (2) "Women with a disability reported feeling as though their representation has stayed the same while men with a disability reported feeling as though representation of their identity has increased in the past 1-2 years," and finally (3) "Women with a disability reported wanting better quality representation while men reported wanting more quantity in terms of representation."[117]

The report's "goal" was to "examine disabled audience demands for diverse, authentic, and inclusive media content and whether this varied meaningfully by gender, sexual orientation, or race/ethnicity.[118] In 2021, I interviewed one of the researchers involved in this report, Dr. Maira Karan. Dr. Karan was in her fifth year of her PhD when she was a lead researcher for the report created by the Center for Scholars and Storyteller's at UCLA. Karan was working on her dissertation and explained that she was asked by CSS founder Dr. Yalda Uhls to be part of this project because of her research interests. During my interview, Karan explained, "My research is looking at adolescent brain development. So specifically, how positive behaviors like sociality and empathy develop during adolescence and how the brain sort of supports that development."[119] Her expertise led to her work with Uhls on "audience appetite" and youth consumption of media and media effects. The CSS was commissioned by the Starz Network to do a US nationally representative survey study through their #TakeTheLead Initiative, examining audience desire for multicultural media content. Karan explains that she had a "brainstorming" session with Uhls to see how else they might utilize this data to better understand "minoritized or

[117] Karan, Rivas-Lara, and Uhls, "Disabled U.S. Audience Perceptions."

[118] Karan, Rivas-Lara, and Uhls, "Disabled U.S. Audience Perceptions."

[119] Maira Karan, interview with Brittany Green, Zoom, Zoom, October 25, 2021.

marginalized identities" and the idea to examine disability both in terms of "neurodiversity and physical disability" came to fruition. The researchers immediately thought to bring in other experts. When I asked Karan how they came to RespectAbility, she explained, "let's partner with a community organization to see, like, what do they think about this work? Kind of get their stamp of approval, so to speak, just to make sure that we were putting out the right kind of work and making sure that our report had a larger reach in terms of who is reading up about that stuff."[120]

When discussing my intention for my doctoral research – i.e., bringing perspectives on research organizations, disability consultancies, and production personnel together to create a more holistic story about disability representation – Karan expressed similar interests. "I feel like there's just there's so much missing in terms of doing that interdisciplinary work and connecting all these different dots because, I mean, even with us, a large part of the reason in terms of why we went to RespectAbility was because we wanted to have that community voice. We didn't want to publish something in isolation and be like, oh, well, we're seeing this thing in our data, like, cool. And that's often, I think, how like academic research goes in, like in the sciences is like you publish something and it kind of goes into the ether and like some people will read it who are doing that really specific work."[121] In my research I have yet to find a project that provides a landscape of current disability focused academic research organizations, advocacy groups, and stories from production personnel with disabilities or advocates. I hope this project begins to fill that void. I have found evidence that there are a plethora of diversity focused organizations creating "impact reports" that are often for too specific of an audience to make the

[120] Karan, interview.

[121] Karan, interview.

desired impact. The Inevitable Foundation is aware of this, Darnell explained to me, saying "I felt kind of trapped in the reality of scholars sharing depressing statistics with each other in order to make more depressing statistics to share with each other. There was just a disconnect for me that I think exists for a lot of scholars, now I have the information and what can I do with it."[122]

When talking about CSS specifically Karan states, "But I think the best part about it is that it really does do what it says it's going to do, which is bridge the two worlds of entertainment and research to really try to answer some of these important questions. And there are great companies, right, that do a lot of this work too, like Nielsen and stuff. But sometimes they're things can be a little less successful."[123] Just a year after this interview in 2022, Nielsen revealed that its analytics software Gracenote would be tracking disability representation on legacy TV programs.[124] In the new "Inclusion Analytics," the company will be collecting data about disability broken down into the categories of: neurodivergence, intellectual/developmental, visual, hearing, physical, and mental health.[125]

An article by the Bureau of Internet Accessibility, *Nielson to Track Disability Representation in Entertainment Content* utilizes quotes from Lauren Appelbaum. RespectAbility is essentially being brought in as an authority on disability representation in TV, to give their "stamp of approval," as Karan mentioned. My research indicates that RespectAbility currently *is* the authority for disability representation in media entertainment. The five data

[122] Darnell, interview.

[123] Karan, interview.

[124] "Nielson to Track Disability Representation in Entertainment Content," Bureau of Internet Accessibility, March 23, 2023, https://www.boia.org/blog/nielson-to-track-disability-representation-in-entertainment-content.

[125] Jennifer Maas, "Nielsen-Owned Gracenote to Track Disability Representation on TV," *Variety*, December 8, 2022, https://variety.com/2022/tv/news/disability-representation-tv-data-nielsen-gracenote-1235453240/.

points that Nielson is using to provide analytics on disability representation were created with RespectAbility.[126] RespectAbility was the organization chosen by Nielson to help create data points that will impact future studies and research. Internet and data scholars like Safiya Nobel and Wendy Chun have created robust scholarship about the biases inherent in data, and the great lengths taken by tech companies to have data appear neutral. After quoting Appelbaum, the post makes a similar rhetorical move to other disability advocates, talking about the money. The Nielson article states, "And while disability representation is an ethical issue, it's also a vital concern for marketers and brand advocates. According to Nielsen, individuals with disabilities are 17% more likely to engage with a brand when an advertisement is placed within inclusive content and features people from the disability community."[127] The collaboration and curated nature of the relationship between Nielson and RespectAbility is changing disability representation at the levels of data aggregation and public perception. I believe this relationship should be further explored in disability media studies research because it examines the practice of legacy media organizations working with advocacy groups to gain visibility and capital concerning the representation of underrepresented groups.

Conclusion

The Healing Powers of Dude was not picked up for another season. The show is what Kasey Moore Founder/Editor in Chief for non-affiliated fan site "What's on Netflix" calls "ghost cancelled."[128] There is a tremendous amount of praise for Netflix concerning its commitment to

[126] "Nielson to Track Disability Representation in Entertainment Content."

[127] "Nielson to Track Disability Representation in Entertainment Content."

[128] Kasey Moore, "'The Healing Powers of Dude' Season 2: Has Netflix Canceled or Renewed?," What's on Netflix, September 6, 2021, https://www.whats-on-netflix.com/news/the-healing-power-of-dude-season-2-has-netflix-canceled-or-renewed/.

disability representation, both by the platform through self-congratulatory public relations and marketing strategies and by the creative practitioners that I personally spoke to, and those in published promotional materials online. Yet, *The Healing Powers of Dude*, despite its potential as a productive example of disability representation, did not attract enough viewers or make enough money to justify its renewal in the eyes of Netflix. After all, Netflix is not an advocacy group for underrepresented populations in film and television, it is rather a profit-driven enterprise. Caldwell states,

> Ironically while it is almost impossible to determine the personal identities of the employees who create branding and syndication tax inside of NBC, HBO, the WB, or Viacom, the very branding and syndication text they create have as their primary function the construction and cultivation of corporate or network identity branding initiatives in particular attempt to establish a conscious awareness of quality and corporate individual individuation within the ever growing clutter of programming and stifling multi-channel market competition understood this way one can profitably view branding syndication and marketing theory as forms of "industrial identity theory.'"[129]

The "industrial identity" of Netflix is a "conscious awareness" of diversity compared to the "quality" branding of the companies Caldwell identifies above.

As we saw in this chapter, media theorists confirmed that the tactics of advocacy groups in the 80's-90's—providing consulting and expert information to entertainment industry executives and producers—is the best strategy to get more positive representations of diversity on screen. Whether or not SVOD platforms like Netflix care about positive disability content can really only be confirmed in their spending. 100 million dollars over five years for the Netflix

[129] Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 234.

Equity Fund, a small portion of which goes to disability programming, does not seem a significant amount of money when you consider the company's current market valuation is 267.61 billion, or its expenditure on its production budgets (30 million dollars per episode to produce *Stranger Things*).[130]

When talking with Ava Rigelhaupt about when an impact for disability representation is fully realized, she explained that it happens when the show is on screen. Explaining that the diversity work produced by advocacy groups and funded by SVOD services are necessary but are not common knowledge for the average television viewer interested in leisurely bingeing. Rigelhaupt states, "That's what I hope to see out of these equity funds and incubators and stuff. More of the stories on *Deadline* that they [shows] were bought and produced by Netflix."[131]

This chapter provided a history of advocacy groups in the entertainment space as they worked to shape disability programming. Advocacy groups can best be understood as products of both the socio-political circumstances of the time period and the industrial and technological shifts within media industry. My research of advocacy groups like RespectAbility and the Inevitable Foundation has provided a look behind the curtain of two organizations that are gaining recognition as standard-bearers of disability advocacy in the entertainment space. More than just pleading with the entertainment industry to green-light disability programming to make SVOD's more money both organizations are working with other Legacy Industry organizations to better understand pay for new positions like disability consultant, accessibility consultant.

Similar to the goal of the Center for Scholars and Storyteller's of bringing together the "siloed worlds" of academia and youth focused entertainment, my dissertation, and this chapter

[130] Julia Stoll, "Most Expensive Netflix Series 2023," Statista, accessed May 15, 2024, https://www.statista.com/statistics/1249573/most-expensive-netflix-original-series-production-cost-per-episode/.

[131] Rigelhaupt, interview.

in particular, aimed to connect the worlds of advocacy and entertainment research organizations, as well as the public relations management by and for Netflix, through the experiences of disability creative practitioners. The textual analysis of the *Healing Powers of Dude* highlighted the creative strategies used to represent social anxiety disorder and the consulting strategies of RespectAbility, and the accompanying para-textual analysis of the series revealed the commercially unsuccessful show as, nevertheless, a rich case study for understanding "authentic" casting, the PR strategies used by RespectAbility to bolster positive representation, and the contradictions of advocacy consulting work today.

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Chapter 3

Atypical and *As We See It*, The Rhetoric of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

"If you have met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism." This well-known quote from Dr. Stephen Shore, autistic professor of special education at Adelphi University, suggests the stakes of autism representation in media and culture; the most illuminating, instructive, and informed representations of autism should make it clear that there is no single version of this unique disorder.[1] By definition, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), "a developmental disability caused by differences in the brain," manifests differently in each person, but often looks "one size fits all" when being represented in film and television, most prominently in shows like the medical drama *The Good Doctor* (2017-).[2] This chapter examines two shows' production histories and the texts themselves to understand how images of autism are created through a process of negotiation between the priorities of media industry entities, advocacy groups, and audience reception. The shows consist of comedy-drama *As We See It* (2022), produced by Amazon Prime and legacy TV show runner Jason Katims, and Netflix's *Atypical* (2017-2021), created by Robia Rashid.

Studying these two series together, even though *As We See It* was not produced or commissioned by Netflix, provides a more well-rounded and indicative case study for exploring the range of visual, narrative-based, and industrial rhetoric's used to represent ASD, as well as the changing nature of disability language. Through the lens of rhetoric, I will look at the current fascination with ASD within the last 10-15 years, and the understanding and use of varyingly

[1] "Main Page," DrStephenShore.com, accessed May 5, 2024, https://drstephenshore.com/.

[2] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Basics About Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)," December 9, 2022, https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/facts.html.

defined terms like "authenticity" and "normalcy, employed within each series. The Ruderman Foundation is a Jewish philanthropic organization that has been the leader in disability funding in entertainment for nearly 20 years. The Ruderman Foundation (as it pertains to the entertainment industry) is perhaps best known for its White Paper Reports, specifically the *Employment of Actors with Disabilities in Television* (2017) which uses the troubling statistic that 95% of characters with disabilities are played by able-bodied actors to motivate change within the industry.[3] Though the Ruderman Foundation "quietly" pulled its disability funding in 2021, the organization is still synonymous with disability advocacy in entertainment.[4] The organization boasts a nearly 80 million dollars' worth of funding for people with disabilities in the last 18 years, much of that being seen in the entertainment sector through research, partnerships, awards, and philanthropy. The 95% statistic is heavily utilized in advocacy and industry press material and informs "authentic casting" practices.

Ruderman's decision to pull funding from disability related initiatives and research like these White Papers will have major implications for disability representations in the entertainment industry. Jay Ruderman, president of the foundation told the *Jewish Telegraph*, "We felt when we decided to transition onto our next focus that we should do it in a strategic and transparent way," going on to state, "The announcement was to tell the community that we feel that we have reached a milestone and that we have achieved certain successes in the field."[5] The

[3] "Employment of Actors with Disabilities in Television," Ruderman Family Foundation, accessed April 17, 2023, https://rudermanfoundation.org/white_papers/employment-of-actors-with-disabilities-in-television/.

[4] Asaf Shalev, "Ruderman Foundation Ends Disability Giving, Opens Void in Jewish Inclusion," *The Jerusalem Post*, February 23, 2021, https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/ruderman-foundation-ends-disability-giving-opens-void-in-jewish-inclusion-659971.

[5] Asaf Elia-Shalev, "The Jewish World's Biggest Donor to Disability Inclusion Has Quietly Pulled Its Funding," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, February 23, 2021, https://www.jta.org/2021/02/23/united-states/the-jewish-worlds-biggest-donor-to-disability-inclusion-has-quietly-pulled-its-funding.

president of RespectAbility Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi responded to this news by stating, "The Ruderman's deserve tremendous credit for bringing the issue of Jewish disability inclusion forward" and commented on the creation of services and leadership opportunities while also recognizing the "uncertainty" that many within the disability community now feel.[6]

This chapter relies on the work of disability theorists Lenard Davis, Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, Jay Dolmage, James C. Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson to complicate understanding of disability rhetoric in television. I will be looking at paratextual material that focuses on ASD in television like the Television Academy's *The Power of TV: Ensuring Authentic Disability Inclusion* (2024), the South by Southwest (SXSW) panel entitled, *Big Brain Energy: The Power of Neurodivergence in Media* (2024), and the Amazon Prime and Easterseals Panel *#ActuallyAuthentic* (2022) produced for Sundance.

For this chapter, I was able to speak with industry and educational personnel with distinct perspectives into the representation of autism in media. These figures include: journalist, author, and advocate Kristen Lopez, former editor of *TheWrap* and former film editor for *IndieWire*; Ava Xiao-Lin Rigelhaupt, an autistic creative, alum of RespectAbility Entertainment Lab (2020), and former Ruderman Inclusion Ambassador (2019-2020); Dr. Michelle Dean, Associate professor of Special Education at California State University Channel Islands, who spoke with me about the consulting she did for the series *Atypical* (she was the first person hired in the production to promote autistic inclusion and authenticity); and Tal Anderson, an autistic actress and series regular in *Atypical,* played a minor role in *As We See It,* and who spoke to me about her experience on each set and her perception of the state of the industry concerning disability representation and advocacy. Several critical themes and questions emerged from these

[6] Elia-Shalev, "The Jewish World's Biggest Donor to Disability Inclusion."

interviews and other research towards this chapter, including debates about whether to disclose one's disability during hiring, intensified public interest in advocacy groups that focus on disability, and the increased (but incomplete) integration of disabled voices into the data analytics space of organizations like Nielsen and IMDB.

Autism has a long history of representation on the silver screen, with many crediting Dustin Hoffman's portrayal of Raymond Babbitt in *Rain Man* (1988) as the most influential depiction of ASD. In *Representation Matters* Aspler, Harding, and Cascio draw on work from Sonya Freeman Loftis and state, "*Rain Man* drew on the trope of the autistic savant, an autistic person with extraordinary skills in a specific, limited area, often corresponding with significant difficulties in other areas of life. Reliance on the savant trope carries the same risks as similar "supercrip" narratives, valuing autistic people only for their savant abilities – which most autistic people do not have – which devalues autistic life overall."[7] There were earlier depictions, like *A Child is Waiting* (1963), and other one-off episodes of television, however minimal and inauthentic. A reprint from the *New York Times* in the *Lakeland Ledger* (1978) described an "upcoming" episode of medical drama *Quincy M.E.* (1976-1983) where, as indicated in the episode title, the series would tackle, a "Little Known Affliction."[8] The story utilizes the then "dictionary" definition of autism, "A state of mind characterized by daydreaming, hallucinations and a disregard of external reality."[9] The article provides a narrow and inaccurate description of autism but reflects the attitudes of ASD in the late 70's and reveals the presence of technical

[7] John Aspler, Kelly D. Harding, and M. Ariel Cascio, "Representation Matters: Race, Gender, Class, and Intersectional Representations of Autistic and Disabled Characters on Television," *Studies in Social Justice* 16, no. 2 (March 11, 2022): 323–48.

[8] "'Quincy' Episode to Deal with Little-Known Affliction," *Lakeland Ledger,* October 8, 1978, 12D.

[9] "'Quincy' Episode.'"

consultant, Dr. Edward Ritvo. This example highlights the long-standing practice of hiring consultants for marginalized identities and reveals the ways the series tried to educate viewers about ASD in a positive manner despite inaccuracies.

Late 2000's media contained popular depictions of autistic-coded characters like Sheldon from *Big Bang Theory*, Temperance from *Bones*, and Abed from *Community*. These characters were never confirmed in the show or by creators to have ASD but fans and critics were quick to "speculatively diagnose" them on the internet and in trade press.[10] "Representation Matters" authors state, "Most of these characters were portrayed as highly logical, successful, and socially inept, with atypical and quirky behaviours played for laughs."[11] In the article, "Why Sheldon Cooper Can't Be Black: The Visual Rhetoric of Autism and Ethnicity," Malcolm Matthews comments on the racial undertones of representations of autism in white characters specifically: "Irrespective of motive, intent, or agenda, the visual rhetorical conflation of autism and whiteness in portrayal potentially fuels a racial narrative that equates ethnic whiteness with intellectual superiority."[12] Matthews article grapples with the lack of scholarship on the intersection of autism and "ethnic whiteness" and argues that

> The portrayed white autistic, within the larger realm of disability narratives, is a rhetorical construction that reflects hidden ethnic prejudices and disguises the reinforcement of performative racial stereotypes. Specifically, I have aimed to demonstrate that the portrayed autistic techno-savant, represented by Sheldon Cooper, is

[10] Malcolm Matthews, "Why Sheldon Cooper Can't Be Black: The Visual Rhetoric of Autism and Ethnicity," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 13, no. 1 (2019): 57-74.

[11] Aspler, Harding, and Cascio, "Representation Matters."

[12] Matthews, "Why Sheldon Cooper Can't Be Black," 57.

> a rhetorical vehicle for bundling whiteness, masculinity, and techno-centrism as a means to satisfy certain culturally informed racial expectations.[13]

In addition to satisfying "culturally informed racial expectations," the "autistic techno-savant" may be seen as making disability palatable to an able-bodied audience of presumed white viewers. In addition, the technically savvy, highly intelligent, but socially inept character of Sheldon or Shaun Murphy from *The Good Doctor* (2017-) play into familiar tropes conveying safe and agreeable depictions of ASD, rather than portrayals of people on the spectrum that may be non-verbal or prone to agitation or "meltdowns."

The shows *Atypical* and *The Good Doctor* fall within the "autistic techno-savant" trope, and both shows utilize non-autistic actors in the lead roles. By comparison, Freeform's *Everything's Gonna Be Ok* (2020-) and Amazon's *As We See It* (2022) are the first series to begin creating more holistic and authentically cast portrayals of ASD in scripted television which expand racial and gendered depictions (excluding the character Jack (Rick Glassman), a white computer engineer). In the past few years, a veritable cache of reality television and dating shows on SVOD's like Netflix are not only representing disabled cast members but include disability as part of the show's premise, a touch that both recognizes and fetishizes the disability in question. Reality television – particularly such shows as Netflix's *Love on the Spectrum* (2019-) – is not the focus of this analysis. However, these shows represent a rich critical opportunity for scholars of disability in media going forward and build on the visual, thematic, and marketing strategies utilized in the above-mentioned scripted programming. Some have already taken up the task of studying these works. In "Hey look, I'm (not) on TV: autistic people reflect on autism portrayals in entertainment media" (2022), autistic scholar Sandra Jones uses

[13] Matthews, "Why Sheldon Cooper Can't Be Black," 69.

interviews with autistic viewers to explore how they can indulge "an even more extreme version of inspiration porn" by "treating autistic people as objects of pity or curiosity."[14] She adds, "Although some commented on identifying with some of the 'contestants' on these shows, there was a general agreement that the way they are manipulated and presented is dehumanising and demeaning."[15] Many other respondents commented on the series tendency to "infantalise" people on the spectrum through the show's framing and heavy-handed sentimentalism.[16] I highlight reality television and this studies' response for two reasons: to bring academics with autism into the popular and academic conversations, and because this series and others on Netflix contribute to the larger cultural understandings of ASD and disability representation for SVOD platform audiences.

Media scholars are documenting and working to make sense of the unique hold autism has on media culture and within audiences in recent years. Tasha Oren writes, "Along with its appearance in popular texts, autism has gained currency through the emerging political and socio-cultural notion of neurodiversity and its call to expand our understanding of cognitive difference beyond and outside the framework of disability."[17] Oren discuses media representations of autism as part of a *meta-myth-making* process, wherein popular culture and media engage each other in a "two-way mediation" between neurotypical and neurodivergent folks.[18] Oren states, "How we got from *Rain Man* to Sheldon Cooper is a complex cultural

[14] Sandra C. Jones, "Hey Look, I'm (Not) on TV: Autistic People Reflect on Autism Portrayals in Entertainment Media," *Disability & Society* (November 29, 2022): 1-18.

[15] Jones, "Hey Look, I'm (Not) on TV," 11.

[16] Jones, "Hey Look, I'm (Not) on TV," 11.

[17] Tasha Oren, "Autism in Translation: Temple Grandin as the Autistic Subject," in *Disability Media Studies*, ed. Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick (New York: NYU Press, 2017), 222–44.

[18] Oren, "Autism in Translation," 224.

narrative that involves both "real world" developments and their various uptakes within popular culture."[19] This quote mirrors the sentiment of Ron Becker in his work on queer identities in popular media. In "Gay-Themed Television and the Slumpy Class: The Affordable, Multicultural Politics of the Gay Nineties," Becker explains that in the 1990s, socio-political movements and the "Socially Liberal, Urban-Minded Professionals" or "Slumpy Class" coincided with a demand for gay themed programming. "For those looking for an affordable politics of social liberalism," he writes, "supporting gays and lesbians fit the bill, and consuming gay-inclusive television offered members of the Slumpy class a convenient way to affirm their open-mindedness.'"[20] Like the Gen Xers of the 1990's, the Gen Z crowd of the 2020's utilizes social media and televisual content as ways to stay politically active, which, debatably, requires low levels of commitment. Supporting programming that not only represents disability but does so in an "authentic" way through casting, consulting, and representation of people with disabilities within production is a current way to be seen as socially progressive, if primarily in a symbolic fashion (though viewership does contribute to industry profits, the lack of viewership data on streaming platforms makes assessing economic impact of viewership a vague, imprecise task). I argue that ASD is a disability that has been primed for current televisual representation since the mid to late 2000's. In 2007, *New York Times* critic Caryn James noted autism's trendiness among wealthy media elites, saying it "has become to disorders what Africa is to social issues, the celebrity cause du jour."[21] Speculating on the cause of autism's sudden visibility, James posits that it is

[19] Oren, "Autism in Translation," 225.

[20] Ron Becker, "Gay-Themed Television and the Slumpy Class: The Affordable, Multicultural Politics of the Gay Nineties," *Television & New Media* 7, no. 2 (May 1, 2006): 184–215.

[21] Caryn James, "Hollywood Finds Its Disorder Du Jour," *The New York Times*, April 29, 2007, sec. Movies, https://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/29/movies/29jame.html.

due in part to "the nature of the disorder itself. A condition that thwarts the ability to communicate and express emotions, autism seems ready-made for symbolic use."[22]

Atypical Production Information

Before delving into the textual analysis of *Atypical,* it will be helpful to first provide some background information on its development process and philosophy. Writer-producer Robia Rashid created *Atypical* in 2017. Before acting as showrunner on the series, she was a writer and supervising producer for the CBS hit sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-2014).

In the words of the Netflix synopsis, the show follows a white American teenager with autism whose "bid for more independence" (getting a girlfriend) "puts his whole family on a path of self-discovery."[23] The synopsis places Sam (Keir Gilchrist) and his navigation of dating with autism at the center of the narrative, and his family's "self-discovery" as secondary. In fact, the family can only become introspective now because of his independence, i.e., not spending so much time preoccupied with the effects of Sam's autism. Rashid explained that her inspiration to do the show connected to both having someone in her life on the spectrum (which she declined speaking about) and her desire to tell a different kind of dating genre narrative; Rashid tells Maria Elena Fernandez of *Vulture*, "That point of view seemed so interesting to me — and such a cool way to tell a dating story."[24]

Rashid explains that though Netflix did not come to the project until she was finished with the pilot, she explains that when writing, *Atypical* just felt, "more like a Netflix show." Elaborating on this sentiment, she says, "I guess it felt like a non-network show to me. [Netflix]

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[22] Caryn James, "Hollywood Finds Its Disorder Du Jour."

[23] "Atypical," Netflix, accessed March 29, 2024, https://www.netflix.com/search?q=aty&jbv=80117540.

[24] Maria Elena Fernandez, "'Atypical' Creator Robia Rashid on Depicting Autism on TV," *Vulture,* August 15, 2017, https://www.vulture.com/2017/08/atypical-showrunner-robia-rashid-interview.html.

felt like a place where creators had room to explore a little bit and I definitely knew that this show needed space. I don't ever want to fall into jokes or be too cutesy. I want there to be edge and heart, so I knew that a place where there's this freedom to explore with tone and content would be a great home for this show. Netflix always felt like that kind of place to me."[25] Perhaps Rashid is conflating a space to explore "edge and heart" with niche storylines and authorial control.

In addition to its focus on one male teen's experience of autism, *Atypical* is also a dramedy about a white, middle-class, nuclear family in Connecticut that centers around familiar coming-of-age themes and messy marriage dynamics. While the series originally had autism as the focus of the show – specifically the ways in which autism is a burden or hindrance to the family and their own lives – the second season (with the help of consultants) ushers in nuance to its storytelling by introducing new elements to its representational domain, including queer representation via the sister's (Casey, played by Brigette Lundy-Paine) discovery of her bisexuality. Season one received serious backlash for its representation of autism, most significantly from the autistic community. One issue within popular discourse was that the main character Sam, a 17-year-old boy on the autism spectrum, is played by neurotypical actor Keir Gilchrist. The lack of authentic casting and the portrayal of Sam's journey into dating have been heavily criticized in the trade press and audience blogosphere for conflating Sam's mistaken approaches and attitudes to dating (which some have labeled toxic masculinity) with symptoms of ASD.[26]

[25] Fernandez, "'Atypical' Creator Robia Rashid."

[26] Crippledscholar, "#ActuallyAtypical: A Media Roundup of #ActuallyAutistic Thoughts on the Netflix Series Atypical," *Crippledscholar* (blog), August 28, 2017, https://crippledscholar.com/tag/atypical/.

Regardless of the criticism, Netflix had high hopes for *Atypical*'s ability to relate to neurodivergent audiences, as evidence by its social media campaign for the show centering around the hashtag #FirstTimeISawMe (referencing a revelatory identification experience for viewers with autism). Abbey White writes about the reception of the hashtag in a *Vox* article, explaining that what was intended as a "celebration of inclusive media and Netflix's own diverse programming" (which began as a marketing campaign with Netflix enlisted celebrities,) "clearly struck a nerve, inspiring plenty of people with a variety of identities and backgrounds to speak candidly about how specific television characters have impacted their perceptions of themselves."[27] One such critic was Alice Wong, a disabled activist, writer, editor, and community organizer, tweeted her criticism, "As long as Hollywood uses non-disabled actors in disabled roles & whitewash POC characters, it'll be a while b4 I can say #FirstTimeISawMe."[28] Wong founded and is Director of the Disability Visibility Project, an online community that helps promote media and culture with positive representations of disability.[29]

Writing for *Time,* TV critic Sarah Kurchak joined the social media criticism: "In a small mercy, enough criticism of the show's abysmal autism inclusion did force the production team to make some small changes."[30] Kurchak details what she refers to as the show's ensuing "small changes" like the addition of David Finch as a consultant and autism advocate, efforts to bring in several autistic actors to play roles, and involvement of inclusivity advocacy group The Miracle

[27] Abbey White, "What the #FirstTimeISawMe Hashtag Reveals about Representation in Media," *Vox,* August 2, 2017, https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/8/2/16075344/firsttimeisawme-hashtag-netflix-media-representation.

[28] White. "What the #FirstTimeISawMe Hashtag Reveals."

[29] "The Disability Visibility Project (About Page)," Disability Visibility Project, June 3, 2014, https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/about/.

[30] Sarah Kurchak, "Atypical Fell Short as Both Autistic Representation and Entertainment. At Least It Was Eclipsed During Its Own Time," *Time,* July 16, 2021, https://time.com/6080754/atypical-autism-representation/.

Project.[31] Kurchak believed these moves "managed to contribute a tiny fraction to the racial and gender diversity that is so desperately needed in autism representation and give the series its better moments."[32] Two characters of color were added to the show through a plotline involving an autism support group, and most of the characters added were women. The cast and crew of the series joined these new members in the show's community outreach efforts, which included a town hall with disability group The Color of Autism. Though Kurchak calls these contributions, "valuable steps" towards "amplifying marginalized autistic people," she insists they are not enough without also hiring writers and regular cast members with autism.[33] The arguments raised by Kurchak echo the notion that representation of diverse and authentic people in all aspects of production are essential for positive representation and reception.

Response to Bad Press= Consulting

As the first Autism Consultant for *Atypical,* Dr. Michelle Dean (Associate Professor of Special Education at California State University Channel Islands) had a lot to say about her role and disability representation in general when I spoke with her in March 2024. Dean explained that although she read every script and watched each cut of the series, the primary function she served during production was to determine which characterization details would be considered "developmentally appropriate" for Sam, which implicit values or ideas would be contentious or perpetuate potentially misleading information or therapy that is not scientifically supported or not supported by the Autism community, and how to make a scene or storyline feel more

[31] Kurchak, "Atypical Fell Short."

[32] Kurchak, "Atypical Fell Short."

[33] Kurchak, "Atypical Fell Short."

"authentic."[34] Dean explained that most of her consulting took place in pre-production, but there were a few instances where she advocated for cuts after the episodes were shot. Dean gave the following example: in one episode, there was a sign in the office of Sam's therapist that promoted a controversial form of therapy, and she suggested that they wipe the sign out in post because they may not want to "advertise" something contentious in the ASD community, further explaining that at times writer's might suggest "buzz words" or "fads" that they had read about, but if they were not supported by science, Dean educated the writer's about potential controversy surrounding that practice.[35] In social media comments about their hiring practices and "authenticity" Netflix displays a defensive and curt tone and appeals to Michelle's role to pacify any viewer complaints: "Although there are limited autistic people within the show team, we enlisted a full-time consultant, Michelle Dean."[36]

Around the same time, and in response to the same criticism, the show also hired David Finch, who Dean referred to as an "autistic self-advocate." Finch is a consultant and author of *The Journal of Best Practices: A Memoir of Marriage, Asperger Syndrome, and One Man's Quest to Be a Better Husband* (2012). The production team utilized this text as a pedagogical resource for education both cast and crew and even the show's central characters to learn about ASD. In the season one episode "D-Train to Bone Town," Sam's therapist Julia (Amy Okuda) gives the book to Sam's father Doug (Michael Rapaport), who later thanks Julia and says she is "like my personal autism school." In an interview for *Variety, Atypical* lead Keir Gilchrist

[34] Michelle Dean, interview by Brittany Green, Zoom, March 21, 2024.

[35] Dean, interview.

[36] Atypical (@Atypical), "@pgzwicker Although There Are Limited Autistic People within the Show Team, We Enlisted a Full-Time Consultant, Michelle Dean.," Twitter, July 27, 2017, https://twitter.com/Atypical/status/890666610268164097.

describes how critical the memoir was to his performance of Sam, calling it "the most helpful piece of research."[37] In another interview with *Entertainment Weekly,* Gilchrist reiterates how the book was "*super* helpful, super well-written, and [it] really pushes you in the headspace of a high-functioning person who's on the spectrum."[38] Finch's consultation is highly regarded by Rashid as well as the other organizations that also consulted on the project, including Elaine Hall. For her part, Rashid finds the subject of autism, explored in books like Finch's, *fascinating,* "It's a great time to be curious about autism because there is so much information, there are so many books out there, there are websites and blogs."[39]

The plethora of information about ASD produced in recent years has put pressure on consultants like Michelle Dean to keep up with academic and popular discourses through research. Dean's published research on ASD representations tracks both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of this growing body of literature; in a 2021 co-authored paper on ASD in film and television, Dean counts 87 characters with ASD discussed over 26 articles with article dates beginning in 2006 and ending in 2020.[40] Currently, Dean is interviewing autistic actors about their experiences in the entertainment space. She is discovering how actors are facing uncertainties about disclosing their ASD to employers out of fear they will be typecast, made to play a harmful stereotype, or otherwise spread misinformation about ASD.[41] The "culture of

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[37] Malina Saval, "'Atypical' Star Keir Gilchrist on How He Prepared to Play an Autistic Teenager," *Variety,* September 21, 2018, https://variety.com/2018/tv/features/keir-gilchrist-atypical-netflix-1202951654/.

[38] Bacle, Ariana, "'Atypical' Star Keir Gilchrist on New Netflix Show: 'Everybody's Kind of Odd,'" *Entertainment Weekly,* August 10, 2017, https://ew.com/tv/2017/08/10/netflix-atypical-keir-gilchrist-interview/.

[39] GoldDerby, "Robia Rashid ("Atypical" Creator) on Exploring Diversity in the Autism Community," May 8, 2019, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dq3w_7GqaBU.

[40] Michelle Dean and Anders Nordahl-Hansen, "A Review of Research Studying Film and Television Representations of ASD," *Review Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 9 (June 21, 2021): 470-479. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40489-021-00273-8.

[41] Dean, interview.

disclosure" has been a theme in disability discourse highlighted by Dean, Kristen Lopez, and various entertainment industry professionals via panels like The Television Academy's *The Power of TV*, and SXSW's *Big Brain Energy*. Dean explained that funding to promote the causes of those with disabilities, which she refers to as, "the last minoritized group to the table," is essential.[42] She expressed the sentiment that film and television has a power and reach that academic articles cannot compete with and recognizes the responsibility of the entertainment industry to use this power to improve conditions for disabled talent and people in society. "I feel like we need to be very thoughtful or call to attention the impact of these disabilities on the lived experiences of people," she says. "When we perpetuate autism as a young white male who is a genius, who has traditional repetitive interests, we are really being a disservice." More than simply misrepresenting ASD, however, this type of content is not entertaining, she claims. "It's now becoming boring TV, if you ask me, because we've played that character so many times."[43] white, male, savant as described by Malcolm Matthews research in 2019.

While *Atypical's* representation of autism evidently leaves much to be desired for audiences, critics, and those in the disability community, Dean does give the show credit for resonating with family members of those with ASD. She described receiving countless letters from, generally, mothers who "felt seen and heard" because of the series' depiction of the family dynamics around supporting Sam in school, work, and his social life. This type of audience response is indicative of Kristen Lopez's description of "caretaker entertainment," a recurring theme in disability narratives (much like "inspiration porn) which privileges the point of view of the caretakers of the disabled character.

[42] Dean, interview.

[43] Dean, interview.

As We See It Production

While it is not a Netflix original show like *Atypical*, the Amazon Prime show *As We See It* (2022) is worth examining as a point of comparison, to bring *Atypical's* cultural meanings and representational strategies into relief. Like *Atypical, As We See It* focuses on characters with autism, and its creator, Jason Katims, uses trade interviews to underline his commitment to and passion for telling stories about autism in mainstream media. Unlike *Atypical, As We See It* cast three autistic actors for its leads at the outset, including Rick Glassman (Jack), Sue Ann Pien (Violet), and Albert Rutecki (Harrison).

Creator Jason Katims gained experience depicting autism in his previously created show, *Parenthood* (2010-2015). In interviews, Katims has explained how his investment in autism representation stems from his son Sawyer's experiences, and Katims cites his son as the direct inspiration for the autistic character Max (Max Burkholder) in *Parenthood.*[44] After the show concluded, Katims was eager to continue to contribute to ASD representation in his next project, an American adaptation of the Israeli show *On the Spectrum* (2018). This show focuses on three mid-twenties autistic adults navigating life in Tel Aviv. Describing the message and intention of the show, Katims says, "I set out to create a neurodiverse coming of age story and ended up with a coming-of-age story."[45] Even with the focus on autism, which Katims believes might lead some audience members to believe they are not part of the show's target demographic, Katims

[44] Eric Deggans, "Review: Amazon's 'As We See It' Provides an Incisive and Emotional Look at Autism," *NPR*, January 21, 2022, sec. TV Reviews, https://www.npr.org/2022/01/21/1074872954/review-amazons-as-we-see-it-provides-an-incisive-and-emotional-look-at-autism.

[45] "'What's So Special About Being Normal?' Jason Katims Discusses 'As We See It,'" *Creative Screenwriting*, June 1, 2022, https://www.creativescreenwriting.com//whats-so-special-about-being-normal-jason-katims-discusses-as-we-see-it.

explains that *As We See It's* themes are universal for people "regardless of having a connection to neurodiversity or not."[46]

In retrospect, *As We See It* appears to have been more prepared to take on the responsibilities of representing autism than *Atypical.* In an interview with *Vulture,* Katims expressed that hiring autistic people in all aspects of production was a primary "focus" of this show. Katims was determined, after hiring a neurotypical actor for Max in *Parenthood,* to not make the same mistake now that his status affords him more control in his projects.[47] *As We See It* follows the lives of Jack, Violet, and Harrison as they navigate life in their shared apartment in Los Angeles with the help of their aide Mandy and their family. Sosie Bacon was cast as behavioral aide Mandy, and Chris Pang was cast as Van, Violet's older brother and caretaker. Joseph Mantegna plays Jack's father Lou, a role created by Katims specifically to deal with parenthood on the spectrum. The trio have all known one another since pre-school and at 25 are traversing the relatable issues of jobs, friendship, and love. Wanting to act or appear "normal" (in this context, neurotypical) is one of the show's recurring themes, especially for Violet, who wants to date and experience a genuine adult relationship. After an argument with neurodiverse friend Douglas (Andrew M. Duff), who expresses romantic interest in her, Violet explains she doesn't want to be with him because she wants a "normal" boyfriend. Douglas rebuts, "What's so good about being normal, anyway?" Violet struggles to answer the question which also functions as the show's major provocation, according to Katims, who wants the show to "challenge" viewers' understandings of normalcy.[48]

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[46] ""What's So Special About Being Normal?"

[47] Jennifer Zhan, "Prime Video Sees No Future for As We See It," *Vulture,* October 21, 2022, https://www.vulture.com/2022/10/as-we-see-it-canceled-jason-katims-amazon-prime-video.html.

[48] ""What's So Special About Being Normal?"

Critics noted the different tack taken by Katims with *As We See It* compared to other shows representing ASD in recent memory. Writing for *Vulture* in 2021, Brady Gerber argues television is "in the midst of a quiet sea change in how autism is depicted onscreen," citing shows like Netflix's *Douglas* (2020) and *Love on the Spectrum* (2019-), as well as *As We See It.* "Pop culture, historically a source of hurt and lies about autism shared by neurotypicals and well-intentioned parents — in which the most well-known autistic celebrity is a Sesame Street puppet — is increasingly opting instead to show more real, and older, autistic people," Gerber writes. "The children who were a part of the big wave of diagnoses in the late 1980s and '90s are now adults, and entertainment is finally, fitfully, catching up."[49] Amazon appears to have minimally invested in *As We See It's* marketing despite its generally favorable reception. In terms of collaboration with advocacy groups, the streamer did partner with Easterseals, a disability advocacy organization that, "provides essential services and on-the-ground supports to more than 1.5 million people each year," including autism services, medical rehabilitation and employment programs."[50] Together, Easterseals and Amazon Studios created a "Voices" panel series that took place at Sundance called #*ActuallyAuthentic: How Prime Video's* As We See It *Delivered on Neurodiverse Inclusion.* Amazon additionally partnered with The Inevitable Foundation to create fellowship opportunities offering $25,000 stipends, workshops, and mentorship opportunities for disabled creatives, demonstrating the involvement of streamers beyond Netflix in this media industry-advocacy network.[51] In reference to Amazon's fellowships, Katims says "I was inspired

[49] Brady Gerber, "You Don't Have to Be a Superhero," *Vulture*, February 17, 2021, https://www.vulture.com/article/autism-spectrum-adult-characters-tv-analysis.html.

[50] "The Story of Easterseals," Easterseals, accessed April 21, 2024, https://www.easterseals.com/about-us/history/.

[51] Angelique Jackson, "Prime Video Presents #ActuallyAuthentic Conversation With Jason Katims, 'As We See It' Cast (EXCLUSIVE)," *Variety*, January 24, 2022, https://variety.com/2022/scene/news/jason-katims-as-we-see-it-prime-video-actually-authentic-1235160539/.

to create *As We See It* when I learned there is an 80% unemployment rate for college graduates with autism. This unacceptable statistic underscores a deep need to raise awareness and effect real change, and this fellowship is a step toward creating much-needed opportunities."[52] The fellowship above, now referred to as the Accelerate Fellowship is currently entirely funded by Netflix. In the same article, Latasha Gillespie, Amazon Studios' head of diversity, equity, and inclusion states, "We're honored to join forces with Easterseals to celebrate the unique experiences of neurodiverse people, and encourage creatives with cognitive, intellectual, and physical disabilities to continue telling their stories."[53] The strategic combination of creative, advocacy-based, and industrial PR in one article, highlights Amazon's DEIA efforts and partnerships with disability advocacy groups, furthering the connection that media representations are products of the negotiation of goals between SVOD services and advocacy groups.

One of the main points of praise for *As We See It* relates to the variability of its depiction of autism – as opposed to *Atypical,* which was criticized either for depicting too few forms or expressions of ASD, or of flattening their differences. For instance, actor and comedian Ron Funches (who hosted the *#ActuallyAuthentic* panel) praised the show for not falling within the binary that many characters on the spectrum reside, characterized as either "A magical doctor or a tragic burden"…instead the characters are "somewhere in the middle."[54] Funches discusses the pervasive theme of craving "normality" and the "nuanced" nature of the word within the series and the entertainment industry. In her panel, Sosie Bacon credited the warm reception to a warm

[52] Jackson, "Prime Video Presents #ActuallyAuthentic."

[53] Jackson, "Prime Video Presents #ActuallyAuthentic."

[54] Easterseals Southern California, "#ActuallyAuthentic: How Prime Video's As We See It Delivered on Neurodiverse Inclusion," January 25, 2022, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1aRNjL29a1o.

on-set environment, which she attributes in part to Elaine Hall, the "On Set Advocate" on *As We See It.*[55]

Prior to her position on the Amazon show, Hall served as a consultant for *Atypical* in the wake of the pushback the show received from its inaugural season. The behind-the-scenes footage produced by Netflix on their official YouTube Chanel reinforces Hall's critical role by putting her interviews alongside those featuring *Atypical* series creator Rashid and the belatedly-hired eight autistic cast members. In the video Hall states, "Acting is a great equalizer, those with and without disabilities come together."[56] Beyond her consultancy work, Elaine Hall or "Coach E," founded the Miracle Project an "evidence-based program that uses theater arts to integrate traditional and creative therapies in an interactive, social dynamic."[57] The Miracle Project's website dedicates a portion to Media, TV, & News and emphasizes Hall's 20 years of disability advocacy (and specifically autism awareness efforts).[58]

As the show's consultant on disability, Hall becomes a key figure in Netflix's strategy for addressing complaints about *Atypical's* casting and representation. For example, in a behind-the-scenes video on *Atypical,* Rashid states (with not a little revisionism), "First and foremost it's a show about a family, but it's definitely about the autism community, so I wanted as much involvement from the autism community as possible. I loved the idea of this peer group and it's been more successful and more lovely and more fun than I even hoped for."[59] Of course, this

[55] Easterseals Southern California, "#ActuallyAuthentic."

[56] Netflix, "Atypical: Season 2: Behind the Scenes: Introducing Sam's Autism Support Group," September 5, 2018, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4kq3HWxbDVU.

[57] "About," Elaine Hall, accessed April 21, 2024, https://www.elaine-hall.com/about.

[58] "Media, TV & Film," Elaine Hall, accessed April 21, 2024, https://www.elaine-hall.com/tv-film.

[59] Netflix, "Atypical: Season 2."

involvement and outreach did not happen until the series was criticized and pre-production efforts did not include any people with autism. Enter Hall, whose consultancy services include coaching for non-disabled actors to portray a neurodiverse character (critical for *Atypical*).[60] Much of the promotional material around *Atypical* is a reaction to the criticism, and therefore represents a clean-up effort by Netflix and a subtle admission of guilt.

On *As We See It,* Katims explained that Hall not only supported neurodiverse folks on set, but also acted as an educator for neurotypicals. In addition to highlighting Hall's presence on set as valuable and formative, Katims was quick to remind viewers that there were neurodiverse people in all aspects of production, including: writers' room, set, production office, and post. Katims explains, "In terms of dispelling myths…" actors and crew members were not only "good at their jobs, they were great at their jobs."[61]

Caretaker Entertainment

As We See It and *Atypical* share an interest in those taking care of people with ASD. At *#ActuallyAuthentic,* Funches made a point of sharing his identification of *As We See It's* depiction of autism support systems given his experience caring for his son, who is on the spectrum. As Rashid did for *Atypical,* Katims similarly underlines how this was one of the intentions behind the show – to highlight "the people who choose to help the people that need help," as he says.[62] Though Katims states that unlike shows like *Atypical*, *As We See It* is concerned primarily with the perspectives of its three autistic leads, the show does narratively privilege caretaker characters like Mandy, Van, and Lou.

[60] "Media, TV & Film."

[61] Easterseals Southern California, "#ActuallyAuthentic."

[62] Easterseals Southern California, "#ActuallyAuthentic."

How does a focus on caretakers, their feelings, and their interpretations of ASD impact the way these shows' representations should be understood? In trying to understand these questions, I spoke with Kristen Lopez, former Film Editor at *TheWrap* and TV Editor at *IndieWire.* Lopez coined the term "care-taker entertainment" to identify a trope of disability programming and representation which encourages viewers to identify with caretakers or somehow privileges the caretaker's perspective (at the expense of the disabled character).[63] "[The term is] used," Lopez told me, "to discuss disabled narratives where the perspective is usually on either a caretaker of some form" like medical personnel or doctors, a "parent or a sibling," that is "struggling with raising or dealing with a disabled person," or "a love interest who is serving a dual role, which is that of being a romantic partner while also having to care for a disabled person."[64] The focus on the caretaker emphasizes thematic questions that reflect primarily on the able-bodied character, like "how do they go on? Have they made a mistake?" in taking on the care of the disabled character. [65] Both *As We See It* and *Atypical* feature plotlines depicting these conflicts which inevitably posit the disabled character as an obstacle.

Lopez also discussed a related predecessor term in disability media criticism: the "able-bodied buffer," which represents the "belief" from creatives and filmmakers that, "disabled people are such a magical, unknowable thing that there's no way an able-bodied audience will be able to relate to them unless there is an abled person or a neurotypical person that they can identify with."[66] She explains that this not only dehumanizes disabled talent and characters, it

[63] Kristen Lopez, "'As We See It' Review: Amazon Prime Drama Has Strong Cast but Dated Representation," *IndieWire*, January 20, 2022, https://www.indiewire.com/2022/01/as-we-see-it-review-amazon-prime-drama-1234689860/.

[64] Kristen Lopez, interview by Brittany Green, Zoom, April 4, 2024.

[65] Lopez, interview.

[66] Lopez, interview.

also insults the audience's intelligence.[67] The terminology that Lopez has created in which to understand arising disability tropes contributes to the larger discourse surrounding disability rhetoric in film and television. Currently, Lopez is writing a book about disability representation in film and television set to be released in 2025. Authors like Lopez are contributing to the emerging literature about disability tropes in media, like the existing: 'inspiration porn,' the 'super crip,' and the 'evil avenger.'[68]

This is not to say that caretakers do not have perspectives worthy of media representation, or that focusing on these figures inherently undermines positive representations of disability. Indeed, Lopez recognized that *As We See It's* Katims is the parent to a neurodivergent child. She only laments that "too often [caretakers are] the only voice in the storytelling." She further mentions "[hearing] from so many good intentioned creatives, citing the Farrelly brothers as a "good example" that are "inspired" or have admiration for a disabled friend or family member."[69] However, Lopez believes creators should focus on ensuring a plurality of voices and perspectives in their shows featuring disabled main characters, primarily by giving disabled or neurodiverse individuals creative roles.[70]

I also asked Lopez about the above-mentioned "culture of disclosure," or the conventions and expectations disabled media workers consider when deciding whether to disclose their disability to employers. Lopez described how often she hears from media company

[67] Lopez, interview.

[68] Jan Grue, "The Problem with Inspiration Porn: A Tentative Definition and a Provisional Critique," *Disability & Society* 31, no. 6 (July 2, 2016): 838–49; Alison Harnett, "Escaping the Evil Avenger and the Supercrip: Images of Disability in Popular Television," *Irish Communication Review* 8, no. 1 (November 2, 2016): 21-29, https://doi.org/10.21427/D7271M.

[69] Kristen Lopez, interview.

[70] Lopez, interview.

representatives that they "don't know" exactly how many disabled individuals the company employs, which gestures both towards the lack of prioritization of diverse hiring and, perhaps, the ambiguity of who "counts" as disabled for hiring statistics.[71] As in other industries, deciding whether to disclose one's disability to an employer is a personal choice with practical consequences, including possible discrimination based on identity despite the official protections of the Americans with Disabilities Act. In describing the entertainment industry, Lopez told me she considers it her job to figure out why non-disclosure persists and what can be done to make disclosure non-threatening, at the very least to promote accurate hiring statistics: "If there's still the culture of not disclosing, why is that? How can we limit that? So that when somebody asks the question of how many disabled people do you have in this company, there can be an answer."[72] I encountered many stories of non-disclosure in many of the industry panels I reviewed and interviews I conducted for this project. Until recently, the unspoken best practice in Hollywood was to hide one's disability. Some creatives (especially those with neurodivergence) described being discouraged by peers and confidants to forgo going to a doctor for help with their conditions because an official diagnosis would impede job prospects. These concerns were raised by *As We See It's* Rick Glassman, Sue Ann Pien, Michelle Dean, and even an audience member in the Television Academy Panel *The Power of TV*. However, the recent cultural tidal change, based in the neoliberal notion that difference categories can be rebranded as marketable, has resulted in messaging about "leveraging" your disability for financial gain.[73]

[71] Lopez, interview.

[72] Lopez, interview.

[73] Television Academy, "The Power of TV: Ensuring Authentic Disability Inclusion," March 7, 2024, video, https://www.emmys.com/video/event/potv-disability-inclusion.

This logic is being applied within media companies as well as within creative networks, too. Lopez and I discussed Netflix's internal report *Inclusion Takes Root,* detailing the company's efforts to increase the number of employees with disabilities. Lopez argued, "I think the transparency is needed, and I think if Netflix can showcase that, other companies really should follow suit because DEI, as we've seen, it's a good look."[74] Lopez explains that disability is consistently ignored in studio presentations on internal representation. She mentions an incident wherein an unnamed media company "showed me a pie chart with all of these things based on ethnicity and gender and LGBTQ" but did not include a disability, evidence to her that "too often [disability] is couched as a medical issue, as opposed to a personal identifier.[75]

Big Brain Energy: *The Power of Neurodivergence in Media* at South by Southwest (SXSW)

Disability advocacy group RespectAbility's presence at conferences related to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility (DEIA) has exploded over the last several years, especially in conversations happening around neurodiversity in media. One such event where the organization's growing influence can be felt is the recent *Big Brain Energy* panel, created to help the industry better understand neurodiversity. RespectAbility describes the intervention of the event as such:

> Neurodiversity and neurodivergence may feel like buzz words that are thrown around, but what do they mean, and why does it matter? In this session, neurodivergent experts within the media and entertainment industry shared their own perspectives on what it means to be neurodivergent, why authentic representation of neurodivergence is

[74] Lopez, interview.

[75] Lopez, interview.

necessary, and how employers, allies, and studio execs can foster and cultivate an inclusive environment where big brain energy can thrive.[76]

The quote above recognizes the industry's temperamental interest in issues of DEIA (i.e. "buzzwords" suggests media companies are only interested in performing conviction about inclusion when these issues are perceived as fashionable) while also acknowledging that talking about topics like neurodiversity can involve the use of selective but shifting terminology. In this case, RespectAbility's use of neurodivergence refers specifically to conditions like autism, ADD, ADHD, dyslexia, sensory processing disorders, and others.[77] Moreover, the use of the phrase "big brain energy," a play on a social media slang phrase connecting the size of a certain male sex organ to one's self-confidence, demonstrates the origin of these recent conversations in online popular culture and indicates how pop culture is one indication (to media companies and to advocacy groups) of broader interest in DEIA discourse.

Lawon Exum, the Director of Entertainment and News Media at RespectAbility, introduced and moderated the panel at South by Southwest (SXSW), an internationally known music and film festival and conference circuit that has been growing in size, prestige, an influence since 1987, when it was first held in Austin, Texas. Exum opened the panel with a comically cliché reference to the Oxford English Dictionary, in this case to define "neurodiversity." The gesture gives a sense of the introductory premise and the broad scope of the panel. By definition, neurodiversity differs from neurodivergence in the sense that the latter has a more social inflection related to norms and culture, or, as Exum explains, to differences "in

[76] "SXSW – Big Brain Energy: The Power of Neurodivergence in Media," RespectAbility, March 10, 2024, https://www.respectability.org/2024/03/sxsw-big-brain-energy/.

[77] "Neurodivergent: What It Is, Symptoms & Types," Cleveland Clinic, accessed May 4, 2024, https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/symptoms/23154-neurodivergent.

mental or neurological function from what is considered typical or normal."[78] Continuing in the cultural mode, he then began the discussion by questioning the social construction of normalcy.[79] The other panelists included Angel Williams, Co-Owner/SVP of Content Development Soldier Up Productions and a RespectAbility Lab Alum, Alexandra Miles, the founder of Project Blackbird, and most notable, Stacie De Armas Senior VP of Diverse Intelligence & Initiatives at Nielsen.

De Armas' commentary at the panel is the most relevant for this discussion given her unique professional status. In addition to her Nielsen position, De Armas also serves as an advisor and board member for RespectAbility. Her cross-industry experience (traditional media and advocacy work) clearly influences the way she spoke in the panel about the utility of data and the potential limits of its insights, particularly in cultural debates around topics like disability representation. Her presence further underlined both RespectAbility's legitimacy as an institutional force in contemporary media industry and how legacy media entities like Neilson are relying on the organization to build bridges between industry and advocacy for the future. "As an advisory board member [on RespectAbility]," she says, "I have had the privilege of really understanding the importance of data and how data can shift not only the perception of people with disabilities or people from any diverse community in Hollywood but also whether or not our content has the opportunity to get greenlit…and it's been my privilege to be able to extract some of this insights from the data we have at Nielsen to be able to help advance the

[78] "Big Brain Energy: The Power of Neurodivergence in Media," SXSW 2024 Schedule, accessed April 19, 2024, https://schedule.sxsw.com/2024/events/PP141505.

[79] "Big Brain Energy."

community."[80] De Armas brings data to the disability conversation via Nielsen, which has historically been the gold standard in viewer data in legacy media.

Netflix's branded identity as the diverse streamer, if thoughtfully curated, can gain access to a "lot of buying power." Pioneering in the areas of partnerships with USC and UCLA for diversity reports, disability advocacy groups for fellowships, and an influx of 'Original' reality programming about people with disabilities places Netflix apart from other SVOD platforms. In article "How Netflix Exemplifies Disability Inclusion while Competitors are Silent," Kristen Parisi DEI and Workplace reporter and wheelchair user states, "The company stood alone in the spotlight leading up to and following the anniversary of the ADA. The company celebrated Disability Pride Month (July) and is celebrating disability as a major part of their inclusive content strategy."[81] Parisi refers to "The Netflix Approach" as "an approach to disability inclusion that should be used as a model for every entertainment company – and then expanded upon," specifically amplifying disabled content by disabled creators.[82] Parisis's article was not wholly congratulatory, she criticized Netflix for failing to comply with certain aspects of ADA, lack of disabled executives, and questionable disability content.[83] It is clear that Netflix has made a strategized and concerted effort to highlight disability in the last five to seven years in ways that other streamers have not. Neilson unlike Netflix has a history of sharing data and ratings and is creating and commissioning this research on disability brand identification. RespectAbility is now a top partner and collaborator for both companies.

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[80] "Big Brain Energy."

[81] Kristen Parisi, "How Netflix Exemplifies Disability Inclusion While Competitors Are Silent," LinkedIn (blog), August 24, 2020, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-netflix-exemplifies-disability-inclusion-while-silent-parisi/.

[82] Parisi, "How Netflix Exemplifies."

[83] Parisi, "How Netflix Exemplifies."

Television Academy, *The Power of TV: Ensuring Authentic Disability Inclusion*

In 2024, the Television Academy hosted a disability- and inclusion- focused panel series that included representatives from both legacy media industry, streaming video on-demand platforms, and advocacy groups; I argue this panel is noteworthy for the way it reflects the differences in motivations, strategies, and goals for improving disability representation taken by legacy media and advocacy groups. In addition, through moments of inter-panel conflict between moderator Karen Horne (formerly of Warner Bros.) and panelists from the advocacy space like Tari Hartman Squire (Lights! Camera! Access!) and Lauren Appelbaum (RespectAbility), the panel reveals the tensions and shifting rules of engagement between media industry and advocacy entities.[84]

In total, the panel featured Tari Hartman Squire, CEO, EIN SOF Communications Inc. & Lights! Camera! Access!, David Renaud writer for *The Good Doctor* (2017-), Sue Ann Pien actress on *As We See It*, Eileen Grubba actress and advocate, and Lauren Appelbaum, Senior Vice President, Entertainment & News Media, RespectAbility. The panel was moderated by Karen Horne a high-profile DEIA practitioner in Hollywood, serving as the former Senior Vice President, Talent Development and Inclusion at NBC Universal for over a decade. In 2023, Horne was laid off by Warner Bros from her most recent executive position as Senior Vice President of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion - North America. The WB cited company "restructuring" rather than lack of funds as the reason for her departure.[85]

[84] Caitlin Huston, "Warner Bros. Discovery Lays Off Diversity Exec Karen Horne," *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 30, 2023, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/warner-bros-discovery-lays-off-karen-horne-1235527341/.

[85] "Tari Hartman Squire," LeadOnADA, accessed April 17, 2024, https://leadonada.org/tari-hartman-squire/.

The introductory moments of the panel were utilized by Horne to relay the dismal statistics of the state of disability representation. She lamented that poor current state of media representation "should be horrifying to us all. But unfortunately, we have continued to accept this as the norm for the entertainment we consume."[86] Chiming in with some optimism about the potential real-world impact of authentic, instructive representation, Actress Sue Ann Pien referenced her intersectional identity, saying, "I am not only on the spectrum, but I'm also Asian and I'm queer. And so, for someone like me to watch TV and …I know how much my community is affected by what is acceptable, right? In the Asian community there is no such thing as a disability. There are not autistic people."[87]

Tari Hartman Squire, who was part of the team behind the Lights! Camera! Access! panel described in Chapter 1, redirected these reflections on the current state of representation and the hopes for a better future into a discussion of her advocacy work, positioning organizations like GLAAD and RespectAbility as the mechanism through which the panel's and audience's desired progress can be achieved industrially and politically. Hartman Squire also demonstrated the way advocacy organizations seek to disrupt the buttoned-up, heavily curated discussions of inclusion hosted by legacy media (represented in the panel by Horne). Her comments referenced individuals and agencies across the advocacy space and always conveyed the need for more participants in the conversation; "We have to thank Anita Hollander, who was the national chair of the Screen Actors Guild for the watchdog group [studying disability statistics]…She

[86] Television Academy, "The Power of TV."

[87] Television Academy, "The Power of TV."

approached them [saying] that this is an intersectional issue…I think the more we can join arms and support each other, rising tide raises all boats."[88]

The calling out of Anita Hollander fills in details about the history of the relationship between historically marginalized groups in entertainment advocacy. This is the first of many instances where Hartman Squire interjects "shout-outs" to other advocacy groups, people, and moments in history that have made a substantial impact in disability representation. Hartman Squire's celebration of others in the industry elicits a response during the Q&A from Andrea Jennings a disability strategist, and the chair of the City of Pasadena's Accessibility and Disability Commission. Jennings thanked Tari for taking the time to "recognize" the work of DEIA professionals that have made a systematic impact on the industry, and states, "I've done some research by talking to people that have been through programs to find out that after the program ends, they don't have follow up," furthering, "We have to be very careful of not doing performative actions." The performative actions that Jennings is referring to are Diversity Pipeline programs and DEIA events like the Television Academy's panel.

Though the panel was not focused on autism exclusively, the panelists spent much of the time discussing ASD. David Renaud, wheel-chair user and writer for *The Good Doctor,* spoke of his experience writing for the show and the controversy in show's early seasons around the casting of neurotypical actor Freddie Highmore to play the lead character, who is on the spectrum. Renaud states, "It matters to have people behind the scenes, advocating to tell the stories."[89] He acknowledges the criticism *The Good Doctor* has received, "We've become more inclusive," at the beginning of the series, inclusion "wasn't quite so great, and it's gotten better

[88] Television Academy, "The Power of TV."

[89] Television Academy, "The Power of TV."

and better and better, and people are advocating more and more and more for authentic actors playing these roles."[90]

Finally, the *Power of TV* panel included a significant reference to the culture of disclosure described above that suggests the future direction of attitudes towards the practice. Hartman Squire described working with Danny Woodburn, Nick Novicki, and representatives from the media database website IDMb Pro to create an "opt-in self ID" button for actor profiles. "For the first time," she explained, "people can feel safe identifying, we all believe that leveraging your disability can sharpen your competitive edge."[91] The helpful information provided by Hartman-Squire serves two functions, she identifies the culture of "non-disclosure" and connects it with emerging technology and software, like Gracenote by Nielsen that bring disability advocates into the data space. Danny Woodburn and Nic Novicki are heavily involved with disability advocacy in entertainment. As previously explored Novicki, is the founder of the Disability Film Challenge by Easterseals, and Woodburn is responsible for the Ruderman White Paper on actors with disability.

Textual Analysis and Embodied Rhetorics

I argue the differences in on-screen representation in *As We See It* (2022) and *Atypical* (2017) can be traced in part to the differences between their production contexts and engagement with advocacy groups. Amazon's *As We See It* was developed from the very beginning with the intent of utilizing authentic casting practices, whereas Netflix's *Atypical* had to do extra work to achieve (and emphasize in the show's narrative) a more representative and conscientious mode of disability representation – and it did so only after early waves of criticism from audiences,

[90] Television Academy, "The Power of TV."

[91] Television Academy, "The Power of TV."

critics, and disability activists. *As We See It*'s approach to disability representation is also more measured and critical than *Atypical's,* especially when thinking about the relationship between disability and constructions of "normalcy." This disparity can be attributed to differences in tone, genre, and audience, though it sells family-oriented comedy short to suggest it is incapable of moving audiences to think deeply about serious and complicated ideas.

As We See It begins by foregrounding its thematic interrogation of normalcy. In the pilot, Van (Chris Pang) vents his frustration about Violet using the app-based dating scene because she is on the spectrum. When Van suggests she try meeting dates through her local drama club (only for people with ASD), Violet rejects the idea and says she wants "normal guys." In an intentionally ambiguous conflation of disability with marginal subcultures, Van reminds Violet, "You're not fucking normal." The scene's complexity is made more powerful through the emotional intensity of the performances; Van's comment connects Violet's frustration with romantic failure and incompatibility in modern dating life to the frustration audiences are made to believe Violet feels about her autism, even if these feelings are unknown to the character, or even counteracted throughout the show.

Sue Ann Pien explains how her performance of Violet was informed by her own experiences with autism. She told *People* how she felt an intimate connection to Violet: "Growing up as a person on the spectrum, I acted to hide the things about me that were so innate…For so many aspects of Violet, I didn't really have to act. I just had to pull from my own experiences, my history, who I am, what I went through."[92] In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemarie Garland-Thompson argues for understanding disability as part of the "cultural construction of

[92] Mauch, Ally, "'As We See It' Star Sue Ann Pien on How Being on the Autism Spectrum Led Her to a Career in Acting,"*People*, February 3, 2022, https://people.com/tv/as-we-see-it-star-sue-ann-pien-on-how-being-on-the-autism-spectrum-led-her-to-a-career-in-acting/.

bodies," which involves "reframing "disability" as another culture-bound, physically justified difference to consider along with race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality."[93] In Garland-Thompson's view, then, the disabled figure is seen as culturally "deviant" because they are premised on "assumptions that support seemingly neutral norms."[94]

By emphasizing how much of her personal experiences she utilized for her performance, Pien (and other disabled creatives who deploy the same rhetoric) demonstrates how disabled subjectivities relate to acting via the concept of performativity and "masking." In relation to autism, masking is described as, "autistic individuals' tendency to hide, suppress, or camouflage their autistic traits, autistic identity, or autism diagnosis," and the practice can comprise "unconscious or conscious attempts to mimic the behavioral, cognitive, or sensory styles of non-autistic neurotypical people."[95]

Masking is thus a mode of real-life performance by a neurodiverse individual meant to convey a construction of normalcy to neurotypical "audiences." Some of the most heart-wrenching scenes of *As We See It* involve characters confronting their inability to "mask" in certain social situations. For instance, in episode seven "Outed" when Jack (Rick Glassman) learns his new girlfriend is aware of his autism, he asks behavioral aide Mandy, "I thought I was passing…Is it obvious to everyone that I'm not normal? Am I not passing?" He wonders aloud whether he needs to go around his social circle with a pre-planned explanation of his condition, but backtracks, insisting that his girlfriend simply "needs to see that I can be normal."

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[93] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 5.

[94] Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies,* 6.

[95] Joshua A. Evans, Elizabeth J. Krumrei-Mancuso, and Steven V. Rouse, "What You Are Hiding Could Be Hurting You: Autistic Masking in Relation to Mental Health, Interpersonal Trauma, Authenticity, and Self-Esteem," *Autism in Adulthood,* September 7, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2022.0115.

In his work on disability discourses, Lenard Davis argues for understanding disability as "the set of social, historical, economic, and cultural processes that regulate and control the way we think about and think through the body."[96] These processes are established in part through representations in media and culture. In *Enforcing Normalcy,* Davis explores the social nature of disability discourse by tracing the etymology of terms like, "normal," "normalcy," "average;" he argues that figures like French statistician and eugenicist Adolphe Quetelet contributed most prominently to a generalized notion of *normal* as an imperative in the early 19th century.[97] Quetelet's (1796-1847) concept of 'l' homme moyen', or the average man, posited normalcy as both a physical and moral condition.[98] Any articulation of the prototypical or "average" necessarily establishes conditions for deviance as well (in this case, disability becomes a category of deviance). In studying early 20th century film representations of disability (which include amputation, kyphosis, and blindness), Davis argues that "the cinematic experience, far from including disabilities in an ancillary way, is powerfully arranged around the management and deployment of disabled and 'normal' bodies. Disabled stories, stories of people's bodies or minds going wrong, make compelling tales."[99] Davis suggests the aesthetic appeal of these early 20th century representations lies in their reinforcement of the "normal body" through depictions of their opposite: examples of "departure from the ideal body."[100] This visual and ideological framework, Davis argues, continues in contemporary media.

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[96] Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso Books, 1995), 2.

[97] Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy,* 26.

[98] Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy,* 26.

[99] Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy,* 153.

[100] Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy,* 154.

The Rhetoric of ASD

This project argues disability is just as much a rhetorical concept as an embodied one. In this sense it draws from the work of scholars like James Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson, whose edited collection *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture* explores how public rhetoric (verbal and visual) make disability intelligible in broader cultural discourses. It also builds on the work of Jay Dolmage, who argues in *Disability Rhetoric* that "bodies continue to change, as do attitudes about them, and the rhetorical entailments of these bodily transformations continue to be negotiated."[101] This variability can be observed in the shifting frameworks of disability representation in film and TV, especially those concerning ASD. This theory and many of the disability-related studies of rhetoric and representation can be traced back to Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics and discursively produced bodies.[102]

Atypical

While *Atypical* delves into questions of normalcy, the show's primary goal in representing ASD, I argue, is to educate and correct misconceptions about autism for an audience of presumed neurotypicals. This pedagogical function can be observed most obviously (and literally) in scenes that depict the education process; in these moments, expert figures point out misconceptions about ASD and provide carefully crafted, sometimes lengthy explanations for why a certain thought pattern, behavior, or attitude about ASD is misguided.

For instance, the series' fourth episode "A Nice Neutral Smell" shows a support group session for parents with children with ASD. The scene's overt educational address speaks to real-

[101] Jay Timothy Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 2.

[102] Shelly Tremain, ed., *Foucault and the Government of Disability* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005).

world parents, family members, and "caretakers" by trying to answer questions about the long-term prognosis of ASD. The scene is additionally characteristic of the show's approach to modeling a style of informed parenting, caretaking, and friendship that audiences can aspire to in their own lives. During the session, one mother says of her child with ASD, "I know it may seem silly to be celebrating a 15-year-old making a three-word sentence, but, honestly, it was one of the top-five moments of my life. We had a pizza party." The moderator and expert figure in the group, Kathy (Wendy Braun), confirms this milestone is indeed worth celebrating in the context of ASD, and ensures the pedagogical message hits home by adding that "it is so easy for those of us with higher-functioning kiddos to forget what it's like for some of our other parents."

Sam's father Doug is also at the support group, and even as in previous episodes he has demonstrated a certain aloofness to the notion that he needs to be taught by others how to support his own son, in this scene he is shown being scolded and taught "correct language." In an effort to "work on [his] skills" with Sam, Doug tentatively shares a recent incident in which Sam caused a disturbance at his daughter's track meet. "I honestly didn't know what to do," he admits, "…and my autistic kid was…" – at which point Kathy interjects with a point of order; she reminds Doug to use "people-first language," then explains the terminology (saying ""kid with autism," person before diagnosis") as a way to avoid dehumanizing those with ASD.

Thrown off slightly by the suggestion he dehumanizes his son accidentally in daily life, Doug continues by describing an experience of parenting a child with ASD the show clearly believes is relatable to a large portion of the audience who either know someone with ASD or whose imaginings of ASD conform to these preconceptions. "The whole thing really threw me off," Doug says, "because we'd been getting along well. And he's been seeing a therapist lately. And I felt like he was getting better." Kathy interjects again, to adjust Doug's hope that Sam

somehow recovers from ASD through support and expert guidance. “There is no getting better in autism,” she instructs, “It’s a neurological condition, not a curable disease.” Doug’s wife, Elsa (Jennifer Jason Leigh) softens Doug’s mistakes by reminding the class he means no ill-will or disrespect to his son or their fellow parents’ families. She instructively translates his feelings into more considerate and informed language that we imagine she learned at previous support group sessions: “He means that Sam is having more success using his replacement behaviors in response to environmental stimuli.” When Elsa explains the same ideas as Doug, only using the “person-first language” and “correct” lexicon to speak about her son’s behavior, she is met with praise. This exchange mirrors the kind of pedagogical instruction given to the audience about ASD and demonstrates how the point of view (POV) often privileges the parents, caretakers, or siblings of the autistic character.

In broader culture, activists are speaking out about the need not only to talk about disability, but to do so in respectful, specific, and agreed-upon terms that need to be taught to the public. In 2016, after President Barack Obama’s State of the Union address neglected to include disability but did include other marginalized groups, Lawrence Carter-Long posted on Facebook, ““It’s 2016. “Disabled.” Go ahead. Say the word. It’s way past time to dump the silly euphemisms and not be shy about getting good and righteously pissed off about being omitted … Put disability front and center. Consciously. Intentionally. Often. “Disabled.” It’s okay. Simply #SayTheWord. Sing it. Own it. Please.”[103] The next day, to bolster the #SayTheWord social media campaign, Carter-Long followed up with, “DISABLED. #SayTheWord: Person first. Person last. Doesn't much matter. What we've got to do is make sure the words "disabled" and

[103] Lawrence Carter-Long, “DISABLED. #SayTheWord: Person first…,” Facebook post, January 14, 2016, https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10153856306264287&set=a.111988734286.94353.503889286&type=3&theater.

"disability"--and the people they identify--are in the mix. Somewhere? Anywhere??? No. Every-freaking-where! Nothing without us."[104] This post helped to fuel a conversation and research about the differences between "person-first" vs. "identity first" language, i.e. I am a person with a disability, or I am disabled. Much of the identity-first language movement is happening with the autism community, especially as parents are heavily involved in advocacy and political movements.[105] The changing language and disability rhetoric from 2016-2024 is a major shift and will contribute to what we see on screen.

Conclusion

Despite its admirable approach to representing disability and inclusive hiring practices, *As We See It* was cancelled after just one season. Commenting on the cancellation to *The Hollywood Reporter,* Katims says:

> Creatively, my Amazon execs were fully invested in the show. My understanding is internally, at Amazon, it was a show that was well liked. I think it comes down to numbers; they needed more people watching than those who watched. They don't divulge specifics about that to anybody. I don't know the details unfortunately. I know that the decision was made not based on anything creatively. They just needed more eyeballs."[106]

The series was reviewed favorably by the trade press, including *The Hollywood Reporter*, *The Guardian, Rolling Stone,* and *The New York Times*, in addition to receiving a 97% audience

[104] Carter-Long, "DISABLED."

[105] Lydia Brown, "Identity-First Language - Autistic Self Advocacy Network," Autistic Self Advocacy Network, March 2, 2012, https://autisticadvocacy.org/about-asan/identity-first-language/.

[106] Lesley Goldberg, "Jason Katims on 'Dear Edward' Finale, 'As We See It' Cancellation and What's Next," *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 24, 2023, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/jason-katims-dear-edward-finale-season2-as-we-see-it-fnl-parenthood-1235358778/.

score on Rotten Tomatoes.[107] *As We See It* was also praised by audience members that identify as part of the autistic community.[108] During my interview with Ava Xiao-Lin Rigelhaupt, we discussed both the representational politics and entertainment value of *As We See It* and *Atypical*. Rigelhaupt explained that she watched all of *As We See It* but never finished *Atypical*, "I wasn't a fan of it, because it's not authentically cast…it's like fine autism representation, the actor is really great. But it is just like Freddie Highmore in *The Good Doctor*, it's really good acting."[109] In comparison to shows like *Atypical* and *The Good Doctor,* which have a larger supporting cast and storylines that do not deal specifically with ASD, she explained, "While *As We See It,* was really amazing representation it was maybe just a little bit more niche in terms of what people were willing to watch and what kept people anxious for the next show."[110] Rigelhaupt posits that the show was not heavily advertised, and had much "more of a focus on autism," and perhaps viewers pigeon-holed it as "the autism show."[111] *Atypical* fared much better, with four seasons and nearly 40 episodes before the show came to an ending that was fitting and final, rather than artificially cut short by financial or production machinations. Though *Atypical* did not receive favorable press in its first season from people within the autism community, it was praised after integrating more autistic voices, consultants, and PR work. The series and the PR work the

[107] "As We See It: Season 1," Rotten Tomatoes, accessed April 28, 2024, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/as_we_see_it/s01.

[108] Kerry Magro, "My Review Of 'As We See It' As An Autistic Adult," Kerry Magro (blog), January 30, 2022, https://kerrymagro.com/my-review-of-as-we-see-it-as-an-autistic-adult/.

[109] Ava Xiao-Lin Rigelhaupt, interview by Brittany Green, Zoom, January 24, 2024.

[110] Rigelhaupt, interview.

[111] Rigelhaupt, interview.

company employed to do better by the disability community has been noted and continues to develop the branded image of diversity of Netflix.

I had the privilege to speak with Tal Anderson, who happened to work as an actress on both *Atypical* and *As We See It*. Anderson states, "The two seasons I worked on *Atypical* as Sid, continue to be a highlight in my career. As my first major role, I feel fortunate to have had such a positive production experience, working with so many talented people both in front of and behind the camera. There were so many autistic cast and crew members, and even more who had either an autistic, or a disabled family member, so there was a lot of knowledge, and understanding in the environment in general."[112]

In addition to acting, Anderson is also a writer and director. When we talked, she had recently finished her 6th film for the Easterseals Disability Film Challenge, and she cited the incredible work done by Nic Novicki for the "entertainment industry disability community."[113] Anderson explains that though she has not yet worked with RespectAbility or the Inevitable Foundation on any of their current initiates or pipeline programs, she closely follows their work and impact. She has previously worked with The Entertainment Industry Foundation and the Awareness Ties disability non-profits as an ambassador and is a contributor for *Aware Now* Magazine. And though Anderson has not worked with either RespectAbility or Inevitable yet, she plans to submit for the Accelerate Fellowship through Inevitable and funded by Netflix, stating, "My writing career hasn't reached a level to qualify for it [fellowship]." Anderson explained, "Disability representation in Hollywood has gotten a little better, but I think it still has a long way to go. The state of the industry being as up in the air as it currently is, will definitely

[112] Tal Anderson, email correspondence with Brittany Green, April 22, 2024.

[113] Anderson, email correspondence.

set representation back, in my opinion. In an environment (especially in television) of reduced programming, and fewer scripted productions, the opportunities for disabled performers to be considered for fewer available roles will definitely be reduced. I just hope that doesn't mean that we have to start over, or that we will return to just being grateful for any mention of a disabled character in any media. The world is actually a very diverse place, and we not only need to see authentic representation, but we also need to see disabled people just living their lives on screen as doctors or lawyers, or sons or fathers, and their story can be ANY human story."[114] Anderson expresses, "I believe, that advocacy for disability representation can't wait for Hollywood to figure out what they're going to do. As an advocate myself, I try to incorporate that into everything I do, just to keep the conversation going, which is why I continue to stay involved in organizations that push the inclusion and advocacy narrative."[115]

This chapter aimed to understand the rhetoric and cultural constructions of ASD in the entertainment industry through the analysis of two streaming shows, *As We See It* and *Atypical*. This chapter's approach was informed by the voices of multiple women with disabilities in the entertainment industry via interviews, the pedagogical information disseminated in the explored panels, and the paratextual and production information about both series. Many aspects of performance studies—particularly the intricacies of authentic casting practices, the tensions of disabled actors being "pigeonholed" into disabled characters, and the self-reflexive utilization of lived experience in acting, especially for neurodivergent actors, were interrogated within this section.

[114] Anderson, email correspondence.

[115] Anderson, email correspondence.

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Coda

*Grace and Frankie/*Disability and Aging

I want to close this project with a coda on the relationship between aging and disability, as it is understood both in academic discourses and in media representations. In particular, I want to highlight the Netflix Original series *Grace and Frankie* (2015-2022), a show which, in probing the connections between these distinct categories of ability and/or identity, reveals how closely related these concepts are, and how disability can be represented as a concept relating to all viewer demographics (including able-bodied viewers).

Grace and Frankie (2015-2022) is currently the longest running Netflix Original Series and has received eleven Emmy nominations, six Screen Actors Guild Nominations and a Golden Globe nomination for Lily Tomlin's performance as Frankie.[1] The series was created by Marta Kauffman and Howard J. Morris, whose careers in television go back to the 1980s and include mega-hits like *Friends* (1994-2004) and *Home Improvement* (1991-1999). In addition to its distinguished creators, the show is unique for its all-star cast of veteran actors including Lily Tomlin, Jane Fonda, Martin Sheen, and Sam Waterson.

The show follows the odd-couple-style friendship of Grace (Fonda) and Frankie (Tomlin), who are suddenly confronted with a major life change in their senior years when their two lawyer husbands (Sheen and Waterston) come out as gay and reveal they've been having an affair for the past twenty years. What begins as a reluctant and resentful relationship between the two senior women ultimately becomes a fulfilling friendship based on the two women exploring independence, career opportunities, sexuality, romance, and family.

[1] Peter White, "Netflix's 'Grace And Frankie' To End With Seventh Season," *Deadline*, September 4, 2019, https://deadline.com/2019/09/grace-and-frankie-to-end-with-seventh-season-becomes-netflixs-longest-running-original-1202710410/.

Most of the show's storylines focus on how their aging is contributing to their accumulation of disabilities which threaten their newfound independence as single, entrepreneurial, women in their 70s. For instance, season three episode seven "The Floor," the plot is seemingly interrupted when Frankie throws her back out after a heavy sneeze and collapses. In an attempt to help her friend, Grace also throws her back out, and the two spend a large portion of the episode sliding around of the floor contemplating their situation and wondering what their families will think now that they've "fallen and can't get up." To make matters worse, their sudden immobility threatens their careers, as the two have a business meeting later in the day with a potential investor in their senior-focused line of vibrators (which feature oversized buttons that glow in the dark to help with deteriorating vision and adjustable grips for accommodating arthritis). Grace is shocked by her current incapacitation and reveals how difficult it is for her to adjust to a world that is not as accessible for her as it once was: "I expect this kind of thing from my wrists and ankles and my knees…and my hips. But my back was never like those assholes."

The episode is representative of the show's use of comedy to explore the more serious and even life-threatening changes associated with aging. It also posits disability as an inevitable stage of the aging process, specifically through the characters shifting status as "temporarily-able-bodied."[2] This scene and series also explores what Robert McRuer refers to as "compulsory able-bodiedness," where the able-body is a "non-identity" and the disabled body is one that is "lacking." [3] McRuer argues this distinction was created by neoliberal impulses to have

[2] Lennard J. Davis, "Crips Strike Back: The Rise of Disability Studies," *American Literary History* 11, no. 3 (1999): 500–512.

[3] Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: NYU Press, 2006).

economically productive subjects. This neoliberal context neatly matches the episode's use of an approaching business meeting as the central conflict; "How can I run a business when I can't even get off the floor?" Grace wonders. Rather than her own safety and well-being, Grace's primary concern is how this immobility will impact her ability to further her business interests.

The pair's immobilization is also posed as excluding them from other areas of social life, particularly romantic and sexual activity. Once Grace is finally able to slide across the room and reach a phone, her first instinct is to call Frankie's boyfriend Jacob (Ernie Hudson). Frankie objects, however, noting that "He thinks I'm a powerful goddess. He can't see me like this," implying that, even as Jacob is the same age, observing such an obvious sign of age-related frailty would radically and possibly permanently alter Jacob's view of her. Authors Sako and Oró-Piqueras explain, "Fonda and Tomlin's off-screen identities as successfully ageing female stars and long-time friends effectively help to create an intimate fandom around the show, making women's ageing into old age a relatable subject but at the same time keeping it at a safe distance for both the stars and the audience."[4]

Disability and Aging

Recent scholarship connects the discourses of aging and disability studies like Kelly, Aubrecht, Rice (2020), Putnam, Bigby, et.al (2023), Lamb (2015), etc. In work that explores this topic in relation to media representation, *Grace and Frankie* has been used to illustrate the overlap in these academic and discursive categories (see Pullen (2021), Fiedler and Casey (2020) Katsura Sako and Maricel Oró-Piqueras (2023)). Erin Gentry Lamb argues that disability and aging are frequently "conflated" in Western culture, with both groups facing and fearing

[4] Katsura Sako and Maricel Oró-Piqueras, "Successful Ageing and the Spectre of the Fourth Age in the Netflix TV Series *Grace and Frankie*," *Journal of Aging Studies* 65, (June 1, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2023.101113.

stigmatization. “Disability studies and age studies are both also invested in challenging problematic societal preconceptions about disability and old age,” Lamb writes.[5] These disciplines both utilize social models of thought whereby cultural and social constructions in society are at the root of the problem of stigmatization rather than the elderly or disabled person. This is highlighted in the work of Garland-Thompson and Davis, who were among the first to argue for a model that sees disability and aging as universal experiences – in other words, through the physical deterioration associated with old age, anyone who lives long enough will become disabled in some way. As Davis states, “The odds are pretty good that many “normal” people reading these words will become disabled within 20 or 30 years, and many readers with disabilities will become people with multiple disabilities.”[6] Another commonality between the categories of disability and aging is the idea of “productivity,” which is understood in the context of capitalism and the ability to be a good worker, citizen, etc. Historically these two identity categories were assumed as not contributing to the workforce or economy which is in large part responsible for their social and political marginalization in the United States.

An alternative and aspirational model of “successful aging,” first introduced by gerontologists John W. Rowe and Robert L. Kahn in the late 1980’s, has since been widely discussed in aging studies. The MacArthur model of successful aging, “encompasses three principal components: low risk of disease and disease-related disability; maintenance of high mental and physical function; and continued engagement with life, which includes relations with

[5] Erin Gentry Lamb, “Age and/as Disability: A Call for Conversation,” *Age, Culture, Humanities: An Interdisciplinary* Journal, 2, (January 1, 2015): 315–24, https://doi.org/10.7146/ageculturehumanities.v2i.130612.

[6] Davis, “Crips Strike Back,” 8-9.

others and productive activity, either paid or volunteered."[7] Rowe and Kahn updated their understanding of successful aging in 2015 in response to Minkler and Fadem's critique that "the term successful aging and its specific dimensions can serve to further stigmatize and marginalize people who, by virtue of their disabilities, may not meet narrowly defined criteria for 'aging well.'"[8] *The Journal of Aging Studies* (2023) published an article focusing on successful aging and the differences between the "third" and "fourth" ages as illustrated in *Grace and Frankie*. The authors explain these concepts and the ways in which the show utilizes them:

> The third age is typically associated with a period around the time of retirement and is imagined as a time of possibility and opportunity for healthy, active and productive subjects. In this third age imaginary, retirees are no longer passive and disengaged subjects but are conceived of as "human capital" (Shimoni, 2018). In our cultural imaginations, the fourth age is a time of decline that comes after the third age. Higgs and Gilleard state that "[t]he fourth age imaginary reflects society's interpretations of late life frailty, its abjection and helplessness and the need for care that accompanies evident dependency."[9]

The authors argue that Grace and Frankie's privileged position as white, wealthy, women with a desire to dominate in entrepreneurial spaces, specifically within the market of aging women with mobility issues and other physical impairments (i.e. Frankie's vaginal lube business, their vibrator company Vybrant, and finally their automatic rising toilet seat). The Rise Up toilet seat

[7] John W. Rowe and Robert L. Kahn, "Successful Aging 2.0: Conceptual Expansions for the 21st Century," *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 70, no. 4 (July 2015): 593–96, https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbv025.

[8] Meredith, Minkler and Pamela Fadem." Successful Aging:" A Disability Perspective." Journal of Disability Policy Studies 12, no. 4 (2002): 229-235.

[9] Sako and Oró-Piqueras, "Successful Ageing and the Spectre of the Fourth Age."

underscores their desire to be placed in the "third age" category and distances themselves from the "fourth age." The show simultaneously connects aging with disability as an inevitable space that all four of the elderly characters will become a part of but does so in a way that distances them from the care and dependency associated with the disabilities they work to avoid rather than embrace.

Kristen Lopez and I discussed *Grace and Frankie* and the connection between disability and ageing. Lopez took issue with the easy convergence of disability and age-related physical impairment, telling me:

> I often get the aging thing used as like a pejorative with disability. I've had elderly people come up to me when I get on my soapbox about disability and how it's bad [state of the industry in terms of representation], they're like, but one day we're all going to be disabled. And I'm like, that's not the same thing. They are analogous, yes, but the experience of being young and disabled versus being elderly and disabled are very different, you know? And at the same time, I was like, as an able-bodied person that knows this information and could very well be disabled, you should want to advocate while you're young and healthy for a better disabled world when you enter it.[10]

She explains a marketing connection with disability that has been highlighted by the partnerships between Nielson and RespectAbility. Tari Hartman-Squire, creator of Lights Camera Access 2.0, has built an entire company on disability-inclusive marketing. Lopez argues that TV needs to "do a better job illustrating disability," to show audiences that disability is more than an elderly issue, as "daytime commercials" about wheelchair lifts, bathtubs, etc. would have you believe. She explains that this was always a conversation she had with her mom, questioning, "I use a

[10] Kristen Lopez, interview with Brittany Green, Zoom, April 4, 2024.

wheelchair. Why am I not in this commercial? … That's because disabled things are only for old people."[11] Lopez says she understands why disability and aging populations are equated and relates to "the infantilization and the belief that you can't do things."[12]

Even with these issues, Lopez praised the show and highlighted some of the aspects I argue make the show effective at making disability a more widely understood and respected identity category. For instance, the show dedicates a significant amount of its runtime to showing how Grace and Frankie not only deal with their changing bodies, but also how they plan to market their products like the vibrator and the mechanical toilet seat to "women like them." In their review for the series, disabled writer Fifer Charlie Loftus says as a young person, "Being compared to disabled elders bothered me because *I didn't want to be seen as old.*"[13] Loftus also draws a connection to assistive technology, like that of The Rise Up toilet, or Robert's (Martin Sheen) rising chair, as an example of generalized and non-desirable technology, stating, "Although these devices may serve their functional use, they are ugly, clunky, and cumbersome. They do not allow disabled people to choose their own individual presentation. So much of the disabled experience is having your autonomy, uniqueness, and style taken from you. This is an experience often shared with elders (and those who experience adultism) as well. The ability to participate in fashion or decorate one's living space—not just for function but for beautification—is deeply significant."[14] Loftus states, "Like disabled people, elders' desires are

[11] Lopez, interview.

[12] Lopez, interview.

[13] Fifer Charlie Lotus, "This Isn't A Cane, It's A Weapon: Ageism, Ableism, and Grace and Frankie," Rooted in Rights, August 4, 2022, https://rootedinrights.org/this-isnt-a-cane-its-a-weapon-ageism-ableism-and-grace-and-frankie/.

[14] Lotus, "This Isn't A Cane, It's A Weapon."

often considered trivial, something that gets in the way of their care or medical needs."[15] In summary, this final section's examination of disability and aging is meant to provoke further research into the relationship between aging and disability within disability media studies specifically.

This project has attempted to blend the methods and interests of production studies with those of disability studies to contribute to the emerging field of disability media studies. As authors like Elizabeth Ellcessor, Mack Hagood, and Bill Kirkpatrick write in their book on this developing concentration, "We need perspectives and methodological tools to analyze how disability shapes media texts, technologies, and industries— and how our media, in turn, shape what it means to be "disabled" or "able- bodied" in contemporary society."[16] The authors state, "We require ways of understanding disability and media in terms of political and economic forces; epistemology (how we come to know the world) and phenomenology (how we experience it); the stories we tell about it and the goals and constraints of the media industries that circulate those stories; material technologies and official policies; and audiences' understandings of themselves and the world."[17] The theoretical underpinnings of disability studies, specifically drawing from scholars like Garland-Thompson, Davis, and McRuer (who complicate and interrogate terms like, "normate," "normalcy," and "compulsory-able-bodiedness") add dimensionality to critical media industry studies which brought together the study of media economics, cultural and industrial shifts, rhetoric, and textual analysis.

[15] Lotus, "This Isn't A Cane, It's A Weapon."

[16] Elizabeth Ellcessor, Mack Hagood, and Bill Kirkpatrick, "Introduction: Toward a Disability Media Studies," in *Disability Media Studies*, ed. Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick (NYU Press, 2017), 1–28.

[17] Ellcessor, Hagood, and Kirkpatrick, *Introduction*, 3.

By comparison, disability studies understands "disability" as more than a medicalized category, it is understood as a "narrative trope, cultural identity, lived experience, socioeconomic status, and political category."[18] Historically, both cinema studies and disability studies were wholly concerned with close readings and textual analysis of popular culture mediums. Disability media studies aims to move beyond textual analysis alone to understand "the role of media within economic and ideological circuits of production and reception."[19] My project concerns itself with a "socio-textual approach" that does not understand representations of disability as "positive" or "negative" but instead within "a broader context of media production, consumption, interpretation, and cultural impact."[20] In conducting interviews, I have also aimed to highlight the voices of disabled creatives, disabled academics, and disability advocates.

Production studies and media industry studies have provided me a framework and lens for my objects of study: interviews with entertainment creatives, advocates, journalists, and academic researchers. The tenants of the above disciplines instructed a "reading against the grain" to understand the highly coded rhetoric's involved in all aspects of entertainment communications (marketing materials, content) and interviews with practitioners (self-reflexive, and curated). Much like production studies, disability media studies approaches "media texts, audiences, industries, and technologies are inseparable from their specific social contexts, i.e., their attendant political, material, and economic conditions, since it is within specific contexts that particular meanings have particular consequences for social relations and power."[21]

[18] Ellcessor, Hagood, and Kirkpatrick, *Introduction*, 3.

[19] Ellcessor, Hagood, and Kirkpatrick, *Introduction*, 4.

[20] Ellcessor, Hagood, and Kirkpatrick, *Introduction*, 7.

[21] Ellcessor, Hagood, and Kirkpatrick, *Introduction*, 11.

The industry is constantly evolving. In the period that I researched and completed this project the entertainment industry progressed through Covid 19, the 2023 strikes for the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and the Screen Actors Guild (SAG-AFTRA) (both of which hinged on residuals over SVOD providers). Moreover, during my work, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) turned 30 in 2021. Through my three chapters and five case studies I have provided a production study of disability advocacy and representation in the streaming video on demand era, specifically at Netflix from 2015-2024. Each chapter allowed me to thoroughly explore agencies like RespectAbility and The Inevitable Foundation while focusing on conceptual points of interest within disability studies like intersectionality, inspiration porn, and internalized ableism, as well as aspects of production studies like authentic casting, diversity pipeline programs, and disability consulting. Focusing on Netflix allowed me to find a web of relationships in disability advocacy, bound together through funding from Netflix initiatives like the Netflix Equity Fund. Following Netflix's spending on DEIA projects and initiatives also provided a slew of objects of analysis in the form of promotional content that Netflix creates to self-congratulate about its DEIA efforts while it is still lacking in greenlit disability content. The voices of the advocates, consultants, creatives, and researchers allowed me to piece together a history of disability advocacy from 2015-2024 and uncover how these entities play an integral role in influencing the culture of production around images of disability.

"Bottom-line" rhetoric and the marketing of disability as a profitable demographic should continue to be heavily investigated, especially as these rhetoric's become central tactics of disability advocacy groups like RespectAbility in persuading media companies to invest in diverse media. I believe conversations around "disclosure culture" of disabled creatives will be a large field of research on the horizon as evidenced by scholars like Michelle Dean who is

currently conducting research on disabled actors' feelings about portraying disability on screen.[22] And with a major branch of disability research and philanthropy being lost due to the Ruderman Foundations recent decision to utilize its funding for other causes, how will the entertainment industry react and compensate?

Along with a shift in the entertainment industry, disability is gaining recognition, accommodation, and acceptance in other sectors, especially education with many colleges offering degrees in disability studies and universities like UCLA creating a monthly newsletter called *Spilling the DisabiliTEA* where UCLA's Intersection on Technology, Education and Accessibility share student spotlights, question disability representation in entertainment, provide accessibility tips, and share resources and information for students with disabilities.[23] When I began studying disability representation in 2015 it was the most underrepresented identity category in television, and that remains the case today. Organizations like RespectAbility and The Inevitable Foundation are changing that statistic in very systematic ways. This dissertation has thoroughly investigated the ways in which these organizations have worked within the entertainment space to promote the authentic and positive portrayals of disability that are so lacking in a content saturated SVOD landscape.

[22] Michelle Dean, interview with Brittany Green, Zoom, March 21, 2024.

[23] "Spilling the DisabiliTEA," UCLA's Intersection on Technology, Education and Accessibility, newsletter, March 21, 2024.

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