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## The Routledge Companion to Disability and Media

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### Disability Media Work

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# DISABILITY MEDIA WORK

*Katie Ellis and Melissa Merchant*

## Introduction

This chapter addresses disability and the media from the perspective of people with disability working in the media. While there has been explicit academic and industry focus on improving representations of disability in the media, the topic of disabled media workers has not gained as much attention. People with disability experience higher rates of unemployment than the non-disabled population; this is particularly the case during times of economic hardship when employers are less willing to hire this group.<sup>1</sup> During the recent US recession from 2007 to 2009, the number of disabled people in the workforce shrunk by more than 10 percent compared to a 2 percent reduction in the non-disabled workforce.<sup>2</sup> The International Labour Organization reports that while people with disability make up 15 percent of the global population, 80 percent of whom are of working age, the right of people with disabilities to decent work is frequently denied.<sup>3</sup> As of 2012 in the United States, “only 32.7 percent of working-age adults with disabilities were employed, compared with 73.6 percent of adults without disabilities.”<sup>4</sup> In the United Kingdom, 46.3 percent of working-age disabled people were in employment in 2012, compared to 76.4 percent of working-age non-disabled people, this represents a 30.1 percentage point gap between non-disabled and disabled people, equalling more than 2 million people.<sup>5</sup> In Australia, the 2012 labor force participation rates showed that 52.8 percent of persons with disability who were of a working age were employed, whereas 82.5 percent of persons without a disability who were working age were in employment.<sup>6</sup>

Employer fear regarding decreased productivity, increased supervision and prohibitive costs associated with accommodations are often cited as a main reason for the lower employment levels of people with disability.<sup>7</sup> This fear is apparent in the UK creative media sector where only 5 percent of the workforce identified as having a disability in 2014 according to Creative Skillset. “This figure has remained constant since 2003 and is significantly lower than the 11 percent across the wider UK working population in 2014.”<sup>8</sup> There have been attempts within the media and from people with disability to respond to this low figure, including the 2003 report *Disabling Prejudice: Attitudes Towards Disability and its Portrayal on Television*, which was undertaken by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 2003; the report considers triggers for increased acceptance of depictions of persons with disability, one of which was “incidental inclusion—disabled people’s involvement in all levels of programming and production.”<sup>9</sup> However, the focus of the report is predominantly on the representation of

persons with disability within media texts, rather than persons with disability working in the media industry. This is also true for academic research in the field and as such, the issue remains under-represented in academic research. This chapter aims to address this shortfall, and covers two important areas of research in the context of people with disability working in the media: employers' concerns when hiring people with disability; and disabled employees' reservations, both when applying for positions and once employed. The chapter focuses on the employment of journalists and actors with disability in the media industry in the United Kingdom, United States and Australia.

There is limited research in the field of participation in the media industry by persons with disabilities, what does exist largely comes from the United States, United Kingdom and Australia—although there is a small amount of research from Spain and Canada, which is addressed in the chapter.<sup>10</sup> In response to anti-discrimination legislation introduced during the 1990s, governments and media institutions in these locations introduced initiatives to include people with disability in the media workforce such as quotas and commemorative films celebrating the introduction of disability discrimination legislation. More recently, cadetships have been made available to regional journalists with a disability by the Australian public broadcaster, the ABC.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the BBC has introduced a number of quotas around the employment of people with disability.<sup>12</sup> Within the academic literature, scholarship about media work focused on journalists with disability during the 1990s<sup>13</sup> whereas interest in actors with disability dominates today, perhaps in response to actor-led initiatives emanating from the United Kingdom and United States. This research on media employment in the 1990s and today coincides with the passing of anti-discrimination legislation such as the Americans with Disability Act in the 1990s and more recently the twenty-fifth anniversary celebrations of these Acts as well as initiatives such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities 2006.

## Background

Finding accurate and up-to-date statistics for how many people with disability are currently working in the media, particularly how many are journalists, is difficult. In Australia, the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), the union representing creative professionals including journalists and actors, does not keep records of how many of their members report having disability and it appears no independent study has been conducted on the number of media workers with disability. In 2016, Screen Australia carried out a study on diversity on Australian television; however, while there are references to disabled media workers expressing a desire for authentic casting and for more positive depictions of persons with disability on Australian television, this research largely focused on representations of persons with disability in television programming, rather than participation in the industry by persons with disability.<sup>14</sup>

As mentioned above, in the United Kingdom, the Creative Media Workforce Survey reported that only 5 percent of the creative media workforce identify as having a disability.<sup>15</sup> In the United States, the most recent figures located on newspaper employees with disabilities are from a 1992 study—the research showed that only 5.2 percent of major daily newspapers report employing at least one individual with a disability, which they say equals 133 people; of them, only 45 are reporters.<sup>16</sup> Although this US research is now over 25 years old, it seems that breaking into the media business in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States as a person with disability is still challenging today.

## Employers' Concerns

The notion of “employer fear” as the reason for the low employment figures of people with disability across all industries permeates the available literature. Lengnick-Hall, Gaunt and Kulkarni group employer concerns into three categories. First, employers are concerned about job qualifications or performance, citing concerns such as “people with disabilities will be less productive.” Second, employers fear increased costs associated with hiring people with disability, for example through necessary accommodations. Finally, concerns focus on the reactions of co-workers and customers.<sup>17</sup> Employers also voice a concern that, once hired, they would be unable to terminate the contract of an employee with disability for poor performance.<sup>18</sup>

These concerns are reflected in other studies that have a specific focus on the employment of people with disabilities in the media. Research from Canada, Spain, the United Kingdom and Australia all report a common industry concern—that people with disability would not be able to be productive enough to contribute to the fast-paced media workforce.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the research claims that employers who lack experience working with people with disability often overestimate the cost of accommodations<sup>20</sup> and believe such an undertaking would cost the company more money in the long run.<sup>21</sup> In reality, research in the United States conducted between 1992 and 1999 showed 71 percent of accommodations made cost less than USD 500, with 20 percent costing nothing at all and other studies report 51–54 percent of accommodations cost nothing.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the British report *Adjusting the Picture* specifically addresses the issue of fear and the misconception that employing people with disabilities will result in an increased cost and workload for other staff. The report identifies some simple accommodations that can be made to increase the employment of people with disabilities in the media—as both behind the scenes and on-screen workers—such as arranging furniture in more accessible ways, allowing flexible working hours, providing assistive technology and ensuring buildings are accessible.<sup>23</sup> These studies from different locations across the world reveal two important insights. First that people with disability may require accommodations to participate equally in the media and second that employers are concerned about how much these will cost.

## Disabled Employees' Concerns

In addition to employer concerns, prospective employees with disability also face challenges. The first issue that is often reported is the decision as to whether or not they should “out” themselves as having disability when they apply for a position—the fear is that if they disclose their disability in an application, they will not be asked in for an interview. Studies show that journalists applying for positions in the media industry have the same concerns—journalism graduate Tamara Marshall says she is not “confident enough” to mention that she wears a hearing aid on her CV, because she is afraid she will be discriminated against: “I always worry that I will never be perceived as someone who is as good as everyone else. I will always lack something, such as the same standards of professionalism and acceptance, within the workplace.”<sup>24</sup> Research shows that Marshall’s fears are not misplaced—when potential employees disclose disability on their CVs they are less likely to be granted an interview.<sup>25</sup> The fear is that employers may see them as too great a risk, both professionally and financially, and this is a common theme in discussions with journalists with disability: “Who wants to employ someone who will need expensive equipment provided, and who cannot 100 percent commit themselves to certain tasks like every ‘normal’ employee? My hearing impairment may be mild, but technically I am still disadvantaged.”<sup>26</sup>

Research with actors with disability also reflects the same need to alter the work environment, including simple accommodations such as “access to food; a nearby bathroom; large print scripts;

having the director or production staff speak louder; assistance in walking long distances or climbing stairs or a place to sit while waiting.”<sup>27</sup> However, actors with disability responding to a survey by the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) in 2005 showed people are either unwilling or afraid to ask for such accommodations.<sup>28</sup> Although the SAG research and the aforementioned *Adjusting the Picture* report are now over a decade old, media interviews with actors with disability working in popular television today suggest things have not changed, despite the SAG’s ageing network—this will be discussed later in the chapter.<sup>29</sup>

It is, of course, illegal to discriminate against people with disability in all areas, including employment. In Australia, the *Disability Discrimination Act* states that it is unlawful for an employer to discriminate against a person on the grounds of disability unless “avoiding the discrimination would impose an unjustifiable hardship on the discriminator.”<sup>30</sup> In the United Kingdom, a potential employer or recruiter can ask about disability: to determine if a candidate is capable of carrying out tasks that are essential to the work; to ascertain if an applicant is able to attend an interview; to work out if any reasonable adjustments are needed in any selection processes; to assist in monitoring; to increase the number of persons with disability they employ; or for national security checks.<sup>31</sup> In the United States, the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA) stipulates that employers are not permitted to ask questions about disability before a candidate is formally employed.<sup>32</sup> However, for a person with a visible disability, it may not be possible to avoid a potential employer being aware of a disability and, as seen above, in spite of legislation against it, discrimination is therefore of concern in some hiring practices. For persons with invisible disabilities it is easier to choose not to disclose in the interview stage, indeed for some it may be an option not to disclose disability at all.<sup>33</sup> In 2015, it was reported that that in the United States the most commonly cited conditions that led to complaints of discrimination against employers were invisible disabilities.<sup>34</sup>

While updated research on this issue in the context of the employment of people with disabilities in the media is not available, the media is increasingly paying attention to this issue with several articles addressing the topic being published in both the mainstream press and on user-generated blog sites in recent years. Indeed, many sources on the topic of disclosing disability during the hiring process, including interviews and blogs with employment experts, will first flag whether or not the disability is apparent, and therefore whether or not to disclose. For example, Hannah Morgan, a journalism graduate who uses a wheelchair, chooses to disclose this on her cover letters as any interviewer would see immediately that she has disability and “an interviewer’s initial reactions can also knock a candidate’s confidence.”<sup>35</sup> Stephanie Anderson, writing on the Linkup Blog, adds to the debate:

A physical disability that requires use of a wheelchair is obvious when you meet an employer, thus your wheelchair is disclosing for you ... a cognitive disability, such as autism or PTSD, is often not apparent unless disclosed. Many disabilities, like sleep disorders and fibromyalgia, are hidden and therefore it’s your choice when and how you bring up the situation, if at all.<sup>36</sup>

Even after being hired, there are issues that journalists regularly face—these often surround concerns about tokenism, accessibility and ongoing prejudice. When Kay Maddox, a newspaper editor, had to take time off for major surgery relating to her spina bifida, she says that her employers only kept her on because she was “black, a woman, and disabled.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, a common theme that comes through multiple discussions with journalists who have a known and/or visible disability is that they have to work harder in order to overcome such accusations of tokenism or the prejudices evident in their colleagues and managers. Michelle Hackman, a journalist with vision impairment, writes that:

Those who make it in the field are the standout go-getters who seek out work-arounds to lessen the burden of the disabilities on employers. They are the few willing to put extra effort into their stories in the hope that audiences will view their reporting as equal to that of non-disabled journalists. And they are the ones willing to tolerate relentless, if latent, prejudice from sources and editors alike who often have trouble squaring disability with competence.<sup>38</sup>

Another common issue raised by journalists with disabilities is that they feel limited in the types of issues they can report on. While some choose to be reporters who focus on disability issues, others have no interest in specializing in that field. In Chelsea Temple Jones' examination of disabled journalists in Toronto, she writes of reporters who felt they were "tokenistic representatives of disability" who became the "go-to" adviser on disability.<sup>39</sup> Yet some, like Barbara Turnbull, a journalist with the *Toronto Star*, does not see her role as such:

I don't think disability. And it's not an area that I have traditionally been interested in covering ... sometimes I feel like I am betraying the disabled population because I choose not to write many stories that have to do with disability. But I always felt living it was enough.<sup>40</sup>

An interesting example of how the mainstream media perceives journalists with a disability can be seen in the story of Serge Kovalski, an American journalist with arthrogyrosis, a disability that affects the joints. As with many journalists in the 1980s, his career began as an admin assistant at the *Miami News* where he was eventually given the opportunity to write for the paper.<sup>41</sup> Kovalski then moved on to the *New York Daily News*, the *Washington Post* and, since 2006, the *New York Times*. In 2009, Kovalski was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Breaking News Reporting as part of an investigative team. There was no suggestion of tokenism on behalf of the Prize board—Kovalski's stories did not have a disability focus, and his own disability was not seen to have played any role in his success as a well-respected, highly experienced journalist. Indeed, over his career, Kovalski's articles have included reports on the Oklahoma City bombings, the Eliot Spitzer prostitution scandal (the story that won him a Pulitzer), the Boston Marathon bombings, the Aurora Batman shooting and, most recently, the new Harper Lee novel (for which he won the *New York Times*' Publisher's Award for journalistic excellence in 2015).<sup>42</sup> In summary, prior to late 2015, Serge Kovalski was simply an investigative reporter who had worked for a number of US newspapers.

That all changed when, as part of his presidential election campaign, Donald Trump used an article written by Kovalski in the *Washington Post* following the attacks on the World Trade Center as evidence that "thousands and thousands of people were cheering as the building was coming down."<sup>43</sup> Kovalski's response to Trump was: "I certainly do not remember anyone saying that thousands or even hundreds of people were celebrating ... that was not the case, as best as I can remember."<sup>44</sup> However, the issue here is not Trump's misguided use of rhetoric, but rather his actions a few days later in a campaign rally in South Carolina on November 24, 2015, when Trump mimicked the reporter's hand movements while saying, "Now this poor guy—you've got to see this guy, 'Ah, I don't know what I said! I don't remember!'"<sup>45</sup> When confronted about his ableist actions, Trump not only denied mocking Kovalski, he denied ever meeting him, something that was subsequently proven false.<sup>46</sup> On November 24, Trump was quoted as having stated in a Twitter post that Kovalski should "stop using his disability to grandstand and get back to reporting."<sup>47</sup> It is worth noting here that Kovalski has shown little evidence of such parades—his Wikipedia page, most of which is given over to the controversy,

was only created on November 27, 2015.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, he has remained out of the spotlight, preferring instead to focus on the subjects of the articles he writes.

Within traditional media, there are some jobs that allow persons with disability to remain in the background. These “invisible” jobs mean that the public do not see a face or a body, and therefore the work can belong to anyone. This was the case with Serge Kovaleski—his interviewees may have known he had disability, but his readers did not. Yet, following Trump’s comments, Kovaleski was thrust into the spotlight. His “outing” caused an immediate public reaction, with people both inside and outside the media springing to his defence against Trump. Arguably, the incident was purely another example of the ways disability is used as a narrative prosthesis within culture<sup>49</sup>—Kovaleski was clearly constructed as the poor disabled man, subject to the taunts of someone with more physical and cultural power. He occupied a position of pity and disempowerment. However, while such portrayal of disability *in* the media has been a key focus of disability media studies for over 30 years—including the rise in research into media accessibility in the last decade—the representation of people with disability *employed* in the media remains an under-researched area. Kovaleski’s story is a good example of this—the media focus on his maligned misrepresentation was far greater than any previous spotlights on his journalist work.

### Now Media: Web Series and Disability Acting

Only three people with an obvious disability have ever won an Academy Award.<sup>50</sup> A SAG study into disabled actors found that “no matter what the role, having a disability was not considered an advantage, even when auditioning to play a character with a disability.”<sup>51</sup> Rather, these roles go to established actors who can attract a greater audience.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, when Marlee Matlin, a Deaf actress, won an Oscar early in her career for *Children of a Lesser God*, a film in which she portrayed a character who was also D/deaf, critics referred to her as a “pity vote” and declared her career as DOA, “deaf on arrival.”<sup>53</sup> The criticism arose because Matlin was a Deaf woman who was playing a D/deaf character, therefore she wasn’t really “acting.”<sup>54</sup> Significantly, when non-disabled actors portray disabled characters in film, they are often awarded for their “efforts” with Oscars—between 1927 and 2012, portrayals of this genre accounted for 16 percent of the winners in both best actor and actress categories.<sup>55</sup>

Conversely, while there is a dearth of disabled actors in film, as other chapters in this volume illustrate, there has been an increased number of characters with disability appearing in popular television in recent years, however they are not necessarily portrayed by actors with disability. For example, the American independent media-monitoring group Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (GLAAD) report an increasing number of characters with disability appearing in prime time television over a five-year period from 2010 to 2015.<sup>56</sup> They began collecting data on disability in 2010, and in 2015 this number started decreasing and fell to below 1 percent.<sup>57</sup> Significantly, a number of these disabled actors have appeared in the most popular television programs such as *Switched at Birth*, *Sons of Anarchy*, *Breaking Bad*, *Game of Thrones* and *American Horror Story*—including characters such as R. J. Mitte’s Walt Junior in *Breaking Bad*, Peter Dinklage’s Tyrion Lannister in *Game of Thrones* and Marlee Matlin’s numerous offerings in programs as diverse as *The West Wing*, *The L Word* and *Switched at Birth*. However, these portrayals of a disabled character by a disabled actor are notable exceptions—just as with film, research shows it is rare for people with disability to be cast in television roles, even those portraying people with disability.<sup>58</sup> The American-based Ruderman Foundation conducted research into how often people with disability were cast in televised roles portraying characters with disability. They found that only 5 percent of characters with disability were portrayed by actors with personal experience of disability. An earlier study conducted by SAG found that less than 0.5 percent of dialogue spoken on television is by a person with disability.<sup>59</sup>

In parallel to this quantitative content analysis research, researchers have interviewed actors with disabilities to discover qualitative insights regarding the barriers they face to gaining employment. Just like the comments made by their journalist counterparts above, actors with disability claim a pervasive prejudice against them within the entertainment industry. For example, returning to the common issue of disability disclosure at application or interview, actors' concerns regarding this were highlighted within a 2012 study conducted by Lori Breeden in the Los Angeles area. Some respondents feared disclosing their disability to the industry, believing the response would result in prejudice and less opportunities to audition for roles, even though, in contrast to this perception, research by SAG discussed earlier suggests accommodations required by most disabled actors are not costly or hard to deal with:<sup>60</sup>

I didn't know whether I wanted to be included in their books [Media Access Office PWD roster featuring profiles and photos] that go out to the industry. Because all that did was alert all the people who didn't know that they should be keeping me out of the door that they should be keeping me out of the door. So it was a tough call for me ... People are afraid to hire us ... it [upsets me], because they are afraid to hire us because they think we're going to make a stink, because they think we're going to be harder to deal with, and I don't like that perception at all!<sup>61</sup>

Despite this, Breeden also discovered an increasing sense of community among actors with disabilities. The same respondent described being mentored by another disabled actor who encouraged her to use her disability as a strength:

"Use it in your work, use it, use it, use it. Don't hide it, don't put it away for anyone else, use it, make it part of all your characters." And I'm like, "Wow that's weird!" And that's hard too because ... it is this thing that so many people are like, "Ooh, she has something wrong with her ..." if I put it out there on display then I don't know. But maybe that's the way to go. Maybe to celebrate it.<sup>62</sup>

In response to this lack of available acting jobs yet a desire to "use" it, as Breeden's respondent articulates above, many actors with disability have therefore turned to web series, most famously Teal Shearer, actor in and creator of *My Gimpy Life*. *My Gimpy Life*, which takes an irreverent look at disability and pokes fun at disability social constructions, initiated a genre of similarly themed disability-focused web series such as *Very Special Episodes*, *Uplifting Dystrophy*, *Stare at Shannon* and *Don't Shoot the Messenger*.<sup>63</sup> These series embrace a disability humor approach to social disablement and include such issues as inspiration porn, inaccessible public space, problematic online dating and prejudice towards disabled actors. The creators of each express a desire to use disability and represent it in a more authentic way to emphasize the importance of disability diversity in media.

Shannon Devido, creator of *Stare at Shannon*, a web series aiming to dispel social perceptions about disability via disability comedy, comments that web series offer an important alternative to disability representation in the mainstream media and entertainment that tends to represent a "skewed image" of "what they think people with disabilities feel and how they act."<sup>64</sup> Part of the problem, Devido explains, is a lack of disability visibility in the media and everyday life—people aren't sure how to react to people with disabilities, for example, is it okay to laugh? The potentially positive impacts of the web series' comedic approach to disability representation are evident—the actress was recently cast in a role on the Hulu original program *Difficult People*, which did not call for someone with a disability:

I play this crazy storyteller ... I get on stage and Billy Eichner and Julie Klausner are making fun of me ... Any actor with a disability has been pigeon-holed into playing



a person with a disability and normally they're sad and pathetic characters. In this, I get to play a funky role. She wears glasses, so my agent submitted me and I just kind of fit the acting style they were looking for. And it turned out I was the right person for the part, and that I think that specific role is so exciting to me because of that one fact [that it didn't actually call for a wheelchair]. Very, very, very rarely do you ever hear a casting director make that call, and *she* did.<sup>65</sup>

The web series discussed so far take a somewhat light-hearted approach to make these cultural disability critiques, yet other disability web series cross into other genres such as science fiction. Britain Valenti's science fiction web series *Interrogation*—set in a dystopian future where a team of ex-soldiers overthrow a totalitarian government—was created with disability diversity both behind the scenes and in acting roles. One of the rebels, Mikey, is portrayed by actor Scott Rosendall who describes his experiences as a working actor with disability as:

everything from star treatment to being downright insulted. While it's likely true there are more characters with disabilities portrayed on television and film today than ever before, the disparity between the percentage of disabled individuals in society and on screen is still glaring.<sup>66</sup>

However, while actors with disability report turning to web series out of desperation for work, it is not unusual for most actors—both disabled and non-disabled—to appear in a web series during the course of their career.<sup>67</sup> Web series offer important opportunities for diversity because they focus on attracting smaller or niche audiences. They can be a means to show more diverse representations in the mainstream and/or, through high production values and wide distribution, an end in themselves.

This has led to an increased number of web series being produced not only in the United States, but also internationally. Within Australia, the rise in the amount of material being produced is marked; a survey carried out by the Australian Bureau of Statistics showed 3,248 episodes in 2016, compared with 107 episodes in 2012.<sup>68</sup> In recognition of the work being done through online content, the AACTA (Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts) Awards now include a category for online videos or series.<sup>69</sup> Access to increasingly affordable digital technology has been seen as levelling “the playing field, allowing emerging talent to compete alongside bigger budget productions.”<sup>70</sup> In the United Kingdom, web series are also becoming progressively more popular and are seen as a possible stepping-stone to success in other mediums. The advantage, argues Adam Manuel of the *HuffPost UK*, is that people who produce their own web series are also self-distributors who have the ability to transfer their own files; while this may not necessarily lead to massive profits or offers of jobs with the big industry players, it can help those in the business to build up influence.<sup>71</sup>

Web series offer a unique opportunity for unseen stories via “new industrial arrangements, including the diversification of talent on- and off-screen.”<sup>72</sup> As Felicia Day, creator of *The Guild*, explains, web series offer a “place to tell stories and present characters that haven't been seen; to cast actors in roles that would never get hired by a network.”<sup>73</sup> Actors with disability, who describe never being hired, or even invited for auditions, are therefore finding opportunities for work and construct a disability narrative in this new medium.

### The Effluent Citizen

A final, important area in this discussion is the creation of impairment in media industries via unsafe work practices. Although outside the scope of this chapter, it is important to signal toward this emerging area of disability media research. As chapters throughout this volume illustrate, we

consume media in different ways using new technologies that are rapidly superseded. To keep prices low for consumers, these technologies are typically manufactured in third world countries where workers are subject to poor and inhumane working conditions. In 2013 it was reported that Samsung factory workers in Brazil were given just 65 seconds to assemble a television set and 33 seconds to assemble a mobile phone.<sup>74</sup> The disabling impacts of poor working conditions on workers' mental health at Apple Foxconn manufacturing plants in China first came to light in 2010,<sup>75</sup> yet in 2016 reports of excessive overtime and low pay continued.<sup>76</sup> Jack Qui places this Apple Foxconn alliance at the center of what he describes as a new form of slavery, so called "iSlavery," a system of alienation, domination and exploitation made possible by the first world's addiction to digital technologies and capital accumulation.<sup>77</sup> Qui makes links between the iSlaves of the twenty-first century toiling in Chinese factories and earlier systems of slavery such as the seventeenth-century transatlantic triangular trade system. The term iSlavery was first coined after several Apple Foxconn factory workers committed suicide in 2010. However, the disabling impacts of poor working conditions is not unique to Apple or China, Toby Miller also notes the impacts of our drive to upgrade digital products on factory workers in Mexico. These workers, described by Miller as "effluent citizens," are also subject to dangerous working conditions that affect their physical and mental health.

The effluent citizens, Miller explains, are "those working with and as the detritus of society."<sup>78</sup> Focusing on the impact of our consumption of media hardware on low-income workers in Mexico, Miller identifies a disturbing trend whereby both the manufacture and disposal ends of the production cycle create disability. First, these workers may acquire impairments working in factories to manufacture devices and hardware for the first world as outlined above.<sup>79</sup> Once these devices are superseded and therefore discarded, a second industry of informal workers, again in Mexico, take these machines apart to recycle them. At various stages in this cycle these low paid and despised workers are subject to dangerous emissions that affect both their bodies and alter their fertility and DNA, thereby also affecting future generations.<sup>80</sup> This is a critical area of future research that would benefit from disability media-focused analysis.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter we have sought to raise the topic of the employment of people with disability in media industries as a fertile area of future research. As a result of discriminatory attitudes and environments, people with disability experience higher rates of unemployment than their non-disabled counterparts. It has been shown that employers prefer not to hire people with disability, voicing concerns associated with productivity, cost (particularly regarding perceived accommodations) and interpersonal relationships. Employees with disability voice concerns over disclosure and fair representation. As a result, this population faces unique issues in relation to equal opportunities and employment.

In terms of traditional media, it is evident that there has been little academic engagement with the issue of under-representation of persons with disability working within the industry. The stories being told are largely coming from newspaper articles and online blogs. However, through these stories it can be seen that there is a reflection of the broader concerns expressed by persons with disability in relation to working. Entering the media industry is particularly challenging, given the existing prejudices to disability and a perceived inability to keep up with the fast pace of the sector. There is a genuine fear of how disclosure of disability will impact on being hired, holding a position and being promoted. Some journalists have indicated that, at times, they feel they have been hired as the "token" person with disability, calling into question the validity of their work. However, even those who have been successful in their field, such as Serge Kovalseki, still have the potential to be subject to mockery and ableism based solely on disability.

## Notes

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- 2 Tom Harkin, “Disability Employment: Are We at the Tipping Point?” *Huffington Post*, July 16, 2012, [www.huffingtonpost.com/sen-tom-harkin/disability-employment-are\\_b\\_1677380.html?ir=Australia](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sen-tom-harkin/disability-employment-are_b_1677380.html?ir=Australia).
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