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## The Routledge Companion to Disability and Media

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### Authentic Disability Representation on US Television Past and Present

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# AUTHENTIC DISABILITY REPRESENTATION ON US TELEVISION PAST AND PRESENT

*Beth Haller*

Authentic representation of disability on US television has been occurring off and on since the 1970s, primarily as guest starring roles in series. Rightfully, concern in recent years has focused on the lack of disabled characters on television. The US LGBTQ organization GLAAD's 2018 report found that, "The amount of regular primetime broadcast characters counted who have a disability has slightly increased [from 2017] to 2.1 percent, but that number still vastly under-represents the actualities of Americans with disabilities."<sup>1</sup> Clearly, this is important research, and multiple studies have confirmed it.<sup>2</sup> However, this chapter focuses on the importance of actual disabled people appearing on television, not only their inclusion as characters often played by non-disabled actors. This chapter defines authenticity as a performer who openly discusses their physical, mental or cognitive disability, whether visible or invisible. This chapter argues that the exclusion of these authentic disabled performers is a social justice issue,<sup>3</sup> and when a non-disabled actor performs disability, it is a form of aesthetic disqualification, as disability studies scholar Tobin Siebers theorized.<sup>4</sup>

Disabled arts blogger Scott Jordan-Harris explains that disabled people have "the same right to self-representation onscreen that we demand for members of other groups who struggle for social equality."<sup>5</sup> Viewers are outraged by the misrepresentation of race in TV and film, but "when we see disability being exploited onscreen, we are conditioned to applaud." Although writing about art and photography primarily, Tobin Siebers argues that aesthetic disqualification is a political process that foments minority oppression. "Disqualification is produced by naturalizing inferiority as the justification for unequal treatment, violence and oppression," he writes in *Disability Aesthetics*.<sup>6</sup> The US entertainment industry's ongoing failure to hire disabled performers, thereby perpetuating inauthentic representation, is a form of aesthetic disqualification and disability oppression, this chapter argues. Jordan-Harris explains the paradox from the many years of performances of non-disabled actors,<sup>7</sup> many of whom garner prestigious awards for "playing disabled"<sup>8</sup> (known as "cripping up"<sup>9</sup> by disability activists). He writes:

The insurmountable irony of the focus on whether able-bodied actors are "convincing" in disabled roles is that, if we were truly concerned with convincing performances, no able-bodied actor would ever have been cast as a disabled character. When a hearing actress is cast to play a deaf woman, the majority of her performance is devoted to

asking herself a stream of questions about deaf life in an effort to pass as a deaf person. When Marlee Matlin is cast as a deaf woman, those questions do not need to be asked. No viewer needs to be convinced Marlee Matlin is deaf. Her performance is automatically authentic.<sup>10</sup>

Self-representation from disabled performers has been around since the early days of cinema when disabled circus performers starred in Tod Browning's 1932 film *Freaks*. Film historian/cartoonist Edward Ross writes that it is a "film that confronts images of disability head-on, featuring a cast of people with disabilities who worked as 'sideshow freaks,'" and *Freaks* creates "the most complex depiction of disability ever committed to film."<sup>11</sup> Disability studies scholar Rachel Adams believes the film created a new framing of disability for audiences: "Rather than using the camera to further degrade the disabled actor, as some negative reviews suggested, *Freaks* proves that film may be instrumental in creating great tolerance to various kinds of difference."<sup>12</sup>

The authentic disability representation that began in *Freaks* has finally found more solid footing on US television, as reality TV created an expectation of actual disabled people being hired. The turning point that resulted in more starring roles for disabled people in scripted television and reality TV came in 2006, when a reality show about little people drew significant audiences for the TLC cable channel.<sup>13</sup> *Little People, Big World (LPBW)* documented the lives of Matt and Amy Roloff, a couple with dwarfism who live on a small farm in Oregon. They have four children, one of whom is also a dwarf. TLC called *LPBW* "the most comprehensive television documentary ever about the lives of little people."<sup>14</sup> Research about mass media audience members with disabilities in 2013 found that people with disabilities surveyed considered *LPBW* to be empowering.<sup>15</sup>

The show was not without its critics. The author of *Little People: Learning to See the World Through My Daughter's Eyes*<sup>16</sup> and the father of an LP daughter, voiced his concern: "Every little person is intimately familiar with the supremely unpleasant experience of being the subject of scrutiny. *Little People, Big World* lets viewers satisfy the need to stare: It's voyeurism without the fear of being caught."<sup>17</sup> But even with problematic aspects in the TLC reality series, this chapter argues that shows like *Little People, Big World* and disabled actors in guest starring roles from the 1970s on ushered in the more prevalent current scripted and unscripted television series featuring disabled people as the stars. The disabled performers on these shows harken back to what Edward Ross explains was the power of *Freaks*: "The film seeks our identification and emotional engagement" with disabled people.<sup>18</sup> In modern terms, these authentic performances on US television similarly influence audiences to have a better understanding of the disability community, because actual disabled people have visibility and power in this televised public sphere.

### Research About the Impact of TV Stars with Disabilities

In the 1980s, several scholars evaluated authentic disability representation on television when disabled actors appeared on television, looking at their impact on audiences. Blind actor Tom Sullivan guest starred on a number of TV shows from the 1970s through the 1990s, and researchers Tim Elliott and Keith Byrd studied the audience response to Sullivan's non-stereotypical presentation of blindness in the hit show *Mork and Mindy* (1978–1982). In addition to viewing the episode, the researchers discussed misconceptions and stereotypes about blindness with participants. Elliott and Byrd found that the viewing and discussion of stereotypes created a non-threatening environment for participants, allowing them to shift their misconceptions and to accept accurate information about disability.<sup>19</sup>

Research in the 1990s about the first TV show to feature an actor with Down syndrome in a starring role, *Life Goes On* (1989–1993), had similar findings. An experimental study in 1999 looked at both a documentary with an independent person with Down syndrome and the Corky character with Down syndrome from *Life Goes On*. The research participants saw active, socially engaged people with Down syndrome and that helped counter negative stereotypes of people with disabilities. Most importantly, the participants began to see people with Down syndrome as having equal status in society.<sup>20</sup>

This research illustrated several decades ago that media representations of disability have the power to change audience beliefs about disability. So why did authentic disability representation on TV gain a better foothold in the 2000s and beyond? This chapter argues that these authentic television representations allowed more information about disability issues to make it into the public sphere in several ways: TV production teams became more aware of disability rights issues because of better news coverage and put that knowledge into plotlines; disabled actors shifted from guest starring roles to principal character roles; and reality TV's birth as a popular genre gave actual disabled people power and visibility within television.

### Disability Issues in the News Influencing TV Content

TV writers do not write in a vacuum. They may be writing for a hit 1970s show about a medical unit during the Korean war, *M\*A\*S\*H* (1972–1983), but before they head off to the writers' room at a TV studio in Los Angeles, they might see news stories in their morning newspaper about the 1977 disability rights protests at the San Francisco office of the US Department of Health, Education and Welfare.<sup>21</sup> Decades of mass media research has confirmed how the news media put topics into the minds of readers, for example, agenda-setting theory.<sup>22</sup> News media coverage of disability issues reminds everyone, including TV writers and showrunners, that people with disabilities exist. In addition, once disability is in the mix for a plotline, other personal connections to disability emerge. In the case of the TV show *M\*A\*S\*H*, the blind actor Tom Sullivan appeared in an episode in 1976, the late actor William Christopher, who played Father Mulcahy, had an autistic son<sup>23</sup> and actor Gary Burghoff, who played Radar, has a disabled left hand from birth.<sup>24</sup>

Newer dramas on American television openly base their plots on stories from the news and therefore some disability-related storylines emerge. *Law & Order* and its progeny, *Law and Order: SVU*, have both promoted the series with a tagline that says the shows are “ripped from the headlines.”<sup>25</sup> Both shows have addressed disability storylines, but one of particular note was a *Law and Order: SVU* episode about the 2007 Ashley X case, in which the parents of a 6-year-old disabled girl had doctors stunt her growth so she would stay small.<sup>26</sup> The January 22, 2008 episode, called “Inconceivable,” focused on the theft of frozen embryos from a fertility clinic. The detectives talk to everyone who had an embryo in the stolen tank, which leads them to parents who mirror the Ashley X case and case who had e who had embryos undergoing genetic testing. The scene involving genetic testing features the short-statured actor, Meredith Eaton.<sup>27</sup> The *Law & Order: SVU* episode illustrated that the writers of that episode had understanding of the disability issues involved in the Ashley X case. The dialogue shows police detective Olivia Benson vocalizing the disability rights perspective in the Ashley X case and LP actor Eaton speaks for people with physical differences who select to have children who look like them.<sup>28</sup> Clearly, the writers and production team for the show read US news media coverage of the Ashley X case, as well as making a commitment to authentic casting by hiring a guest star who is a little person.

Authentic representations of the deaf community started to emerge on US television when the ABC Family show *Switched at Birth* began in 2011. It was the first US TV show to include multiple main characters who are deaf, played by previously unknown deaf actors, as well as

established deaf actors such as Academy Award-winner Marlee Matlin.<sup>29</sup> The show focused on two teenage girls and their families who find out their daughters were accidentally switched in the hospital nursery on the day they were born. One of the girls is deaf: Daphne, played by Katie LeClerc, who does not identify as deaf but has Ménière's disease that causes intermittent deafness.<sup>30</sup> Issues of race and class emerge in the show as well. Daphne was raised in the working-class Latino community, and Bay, the other switched teen, has been raised in a wealthy white family.<sup>31</sup> This show, too, clearly had a production team influenced by news about the deaf community when it featured an all-ASL episode in 2013 that focused on the closing of deaf schools in America and on the anniversary of the 1988 Deaf President Now protest, which closed Gallaudet, a university for deaf people in Washington, DC, until a deaf president was appointed.<sup>32</sup>

*Switched at Birth* creator Lizzy Weiss explained that it was actually the ABC Family network<sup>33</sup> that “suggested making one of the kids disabled.”<sup>34</sup> Weiss was familiar with American Sign Language because she had attended a “classical theatre of the deaf” course in college. She said, “I had in the back of my head a little bit of background at least about how beautiful the language was. So I said, ‘What if one of the girls is deaf?’” The network thought it was wonderful idea, so she began researching the deaf community, including spending time at a deaf high school in Los Angeles called Marlton, on which she modeled the *Switched at Birth* school, Carlton.<sup>35</sup> Weiss says of the school visit experience:

I learned so much that day and spoke to dozens of deaf teenagers about their lives and their experiences. And so, this is, of course, in the middle of writing the pilot, and I said to the network, you know, deaf kids wouldn't voice orally. We would have to have those scenes only in ASL, and no sound and they said, “Great. Let's do it.” And frankly, we just kind of grew and grew from there.<sup>36</sup>

To accommodate the narrative structure of a TV drama, Weiss said it became clear from the beginning that the show would need to use simcomm (simultaneous communication) for the hearing or deaf characters who were signing so they could speak and sign at the same time. She knew this wasn't the norm for two actual people speaking in ASL, but the production team worried about having a show that was heavily captioned, which might lose the hearing teen audience who would have to pay attention to the screen to read during captioned scenes. However, the show became popular very fast—it was the highest-rated premiere ever on the ABC Family network with 3.3 million viewers.<sup>37</sup> This gave the production team more freedom to be innovative so that by season three, the audience was so comfortable with captions, that the show featured less simcomm and more all-captioned scenes.

The hearing writers for the show made a commitment to authenticity for the show by taking sign language classes and spending time at a deaf school. In addition, the production had both an ASL master and deaf consultant on set at all times. A kind of multicultural collaboration arose on the set as deaf performers who speak using sign and hearing writers who use verbal communication crafted stories that tried to respect multiple perspectives. *Switched at Birth* writer Joy Gregory gave the example of how a script note she received from deaf actor Sean Berdy, the Emmett character, educated her about a scene focused on his character's speech therapy. At the beginning of the series, Emmett only speaks in sign language and never vocalizes, but after he falls in love with the hearing character, Bay, he becomes interested in trying to use his voice for her. Gregory said she wrote the episode about his speech therapy and wanted it to begin with an opening shot “of a close-up of his ear and of the hearing aid being put in.”<sup>38</sup> Berdy emailed her saying, “I hope you understand this is very sensitive to the deaf community. Please don't do this so close up.” The production's deaf consultant told her, “It's a symbol of oppression to some members of

the deaf community, and it's like you're featuring it too much." Gregory changed the scene and says she is thankful Berdy gave her that note.<sup>39</sup>

In the series, the complexities of deaf-hearing communication played out when the biological hearing family of the Daphne character does not make much of an effort to learn sign language. In that episode, Daphne confronts her biological family members about their reliance on her lip-reading instead of really learning ASL. "I speak really well so sometimes hearing people forget or don't really understand that I am [points to her ears and says] nothing. So I need you to speak slower, look at me when you talk and be patient," Daphne says. Katherine, the mother, apologizes for the group.<sup>40</sup>

The writers for the show also said they tried to avoid presenting lipreading as a perfect communication method. "We don't want it to be the deaf super power where you can just read lips from a mile away," explained *Switched at Birth* writer Chad Fiveash.<sup>41</sup> Fiveash said they even left lipreading problems in episodes to be more realistic. He gave an example from episode six, season three, where Daphne says, "I don't think I caught that" about someone speaking to her. "I feel like it makes our show that much more real, while reminding people that it's not a superpower, you really have to be facing this person. You really have to [have] respect," Fiveash explained.<sup>42</sup>

*Switched at Birth's* commitment to authenticity was clear throughout its run. *Switched at Birth* often added new characters, exploring multiple identities, wheelchair users and children with Down syndrome. In season three, a wheelchair-using character joined the show. The character, Campbell, was played by RJ Mitte, who is an actor with cerebral palsy (although he does not use a wheelchair in his off-screen life). A disability advocate in Wisconsin posted her joy about *Switched at Birth* focusing on the Daphne character getting an education about physical disabilities through the new character, when as someone disabled by an accident, he tells her he wants to walk again. She explains to him why she does not long to be hearing again: "Hearing people don't often understand, but being deaf is part of who I am. I wouldn't change it."<sup>43</sup> The disability advocate's Facebook post explains the significance of this exchange on *Switched at Birth*:

Thank you, *Switched at Birth*, for yet again understanding the nuances of identity for people with disabilities. And now for delving into cross-disability issues. ... AMAZING, thoughtful discussion. Probably over simplifying the issue, but I was impressed that they tackled it at all since it's TV. And to be clear, Campbell's injuries seem to prevent him from participating in wheelchair sports. Oh how I love this show.<sup>44</sup>

The deaf community honored *Switched at Birth* for its authenticity. The National Association of Deaf (NAD) gave creator/showrunner Lizzy Weiss its Series Breakthrough Award in 2014, which is awarded to media creators and performers who "help increase awareness of the importance of authentic inclusion of the deaf and hard of hearing community."<sup>45</sup>

### **Disabled Actors Shift from Guest Starring Roles to Principal Character Roles**

Disabled actors working in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s who were able to get recurring roles or star as main characters on TV shows reinforced for producers that a disabled actor could carry a show. Deaf actor Linda Bove appeared on *Sesame Street* from 1972 to 2002,<sup>46</sup> which is the longest recurring role in TV history for a deaf or disabled person. Actor Geri Jewell, an actor with cerebral palsy who was on *Facts of Life* from 1980 to 1984, became the first person with a disability to have a recurring role on primetime TV.<sup>47</sup>

Most importantly, when Chris Burke starred in *Life Goes On* (1989–1993), he proved that an actor with Down syndrome could carry a prime-time television show. The show was a family drama focused on not just Chris Burke's Corky character with Down syndrome, but on his two sisters and his parents. The starting plot of the series centered on the Corky character being mainstreamed at a regular high school where his younger sister attended.

*Life Goes On* tried to make sure the show presented realism about Down syndrome beyond hiring an actor with the disability. The pilot was screened for high school students with Down syndrome who were being mainstreamed to get their feedback. The production had technical assistance from the Los Angeles Down Syndrome Parents Group. The National Down Syndrome Society embraced the show.<sup>48</sup>

The creator of the show, Michael Braverman, said they used actor Chris Burke to gauge what the Corky character could do in reality. "In terms of Corky, we ask, 'Could Chris do this?' and we'd translate that to Corky's character," Braverman said. Chris Burke is also the person who helped get the series onto television. Development executives from Warner Brothers saw a failed TV pilot starring Burke and asked Braverman to write a show for him. It became a family drama because Burke's disability meant there was a limit to how many lines he could learn, so a family drama gave the show five main characters instead of one.<sup>49</sup>

The show's music composer, Craig Safan, who had created the music for *Cheers*, actively sought the composer job for *Life Goes On* because his son has Down syndrome. He helped check the authenticity of the show from the production side. Mr. Safan believes that the series realistically portrays what it is like to have a child with Down syndrome. He recalled in 1989 how, just hours after the birth of his son six years ago, the doctor in the hospital advised him to institutionalize his child even before his wife learned that her infant had Down syndrome. A similar experience was recounted, in a flashback of Corky's birth. "There's still a great amount of misinformation from the medical community," Mr. Safan says.

The whole subject of Down's and disability in children is something our generation did not know about. We did not believe it was in our future. Reality may be stretched on this series, but the question is, at the end of a show, do you feel something about a family having a disabled kid? Have you come to some emotional thing inside yourself about Down's syndrome?<sup>50</sup>

The show's authenticity using an actor with Down syndrome reportedly influenced a friend of one of the show's writers to decide not to terminate her pregnancy after a diagnosis of Down syndrome because of the positive portrayal of a young man with Down syndrome on the show.<sup>51</sup>

This chapter argues that the authenticity from actors like Linda Bove, Geri Jewell and Chris Burke connects directly to the many disabled actors who became principal characters on US scripted TV shows from 2004 on. As mentioned, multiple deaf actors were cast in *Switched at Birth* (Sean Berdy, Ryan Lane, Marlee Matlin as main characters and other deaf actors as deaf school student characters<sup>52</sup>) and several actors with Down syndrome have become stars or recurring characters on shows such as *Secret Life of the American Teenager* (Luke Zimmerman played a main character's brother 2008–2013), *Glee* (Lauren Potter played a mean cheerleader 2009–2015) and *American Horror Story* (Jamie Brewer was a main character in several seasons 2011–present). RJ Mitte, an actor with cerebral palsy, played the disabled son character in the critically acclaimed series *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013), which heightened the drama of the immoral main character Walter White. A longtime friendship with someone with cerebral palsy convinced Vince Gilligan, creator of *Breaking Bad*, to only cast a disabled actor in the son's role.<sup>53</sup>

Actor Micah Fowler, a wheelchair-using actor with cerebral palsy, broke into network television by starring as teenage JJ in the ABC prime-time comedy *Speechless* in 2016. The series is a comedy about life when a nonverbal disabled person is part of the family. Fowler, who is not nonverbal but uses a wheelchair, plays the oldest son who uses a laser pointer with a letter board with his attendant or a family member voicing his words. *Speechless* creator Scott Silveri grew up in this family; he has an older brother who is nonverbal and uses a wheelchair.<sup>54</sup> Silveri made a commitment to authentic casting from the beginning. Speaking in 2016 Silveri explained:

It was important to me that we cast someone with a disability because first of all; just for the reality of the show, we didn't want to be faking it. And to do a show about inclusion and to get it wrong so fast ... I didn't want to mess it up in the most obvious way. Because the show has found a home on the network, I am hoping that experience will be replicated, because people are seeing that these stories are stories that can find an audience.<sup>55</sup>

Even as a person with a disabled family member, Silveri did not rely on his personal experience with disability, he hired consultant Eva Sweeney, a California woman with cerebral palsy who uses a laser pointer with a letter board and an attendant who voices for her. In fact, when Silveri met her, he scrapped the idea of the JJ character using a computer speech device. Silveri has said that adding the attendant character (played by the African American actor Cedric Yarbrough) allowed for storylines that are more diverse by having a non-family member introduce perspectives from outside the family.<sup>56</sup> Silveri says Sweeney's role as a consultant on the show has given it many disability specific plotlines.

"It was really helpful asking Eva what kind of things she'd like to see on the show, but also what kinds of things she *didn't* want to see," Silveri says. "She was the one who turned me on to inspiration porn," the concept of relegating a person with a disability into a source of inspiration simply by virtue of their existence. "This show brought that to the masses; I'd be lying if I said I was even aware of that a year ago."<sup>57</sup>

Sweeney visited the *Speechless* writers' room and answered questions about her life, especially in high school, and her communication method. She says the writers had good questions that indicated they could write an authentic disabled character. She also read many of the scripts for the first season and nixed ideas like having JJ learn to walk. In terms of disability, Sweeney said, "Don't tell stories about him overcoming it; tell stories about him living with it."<sup>58</sup> In 2017, the show added even more authenticity checks by hiring disabled comedian and YouTube sensation Zach Anner, who has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair, as a writer on the show.<sup>59</sup> Anner says he tries to make the disabled character an honest portrayal.

Often, characters with disabilities are either inspiring or they are an object of pity to make other characters look better. And I feel like with what *Speechless* is doing, we're finally getting characters with disabilities who are complicated, they're funny, sometimes they can be jerks. And it's just great to see finally characters with disabilities that have depth and nuance, because that's been one of my biggest goals is to teach people that sometimes people with disabilities and cerebral palsy can be a-holes. And I feel like I've done a really good job of proving that to people.<sup>60</sup>

*Speechless* has the potential to lead to more disabled actors being hired in the next few decades, with less "cripping up" (a non-disabled actor playing disabled) on TV. As American disabled



actor and comedian Maysoon Zayid has said about “cripping up,” “If a person in a wheelchair can’t play Beyoncé, Beyoncé can’t play a person in a wheelchair.”<sup>61</sup> Zayid now has a development deal with the ABC broadcast network to turn her life story as a disabled Palestinian American into a sitcom called *Can Can*.<sup>62</sup> *Speechless* promotes inclusion on many levels as Lawrence Carter-Long, formerly of the US National Council on Disability, says, “*Speechless* matters because inclusivity on TV promotes inclusivity in life.”<sup>63</sup>

In addition, it is not just physical disabilities that are being represented by disabled actors on current US television. Many actors are more open about their mental health diagnoses, learning disabilities or chronic illnesses and one show in particular has woven that into the innovative musical comedy series, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015–present). Creator/star Rachel Bloom has talked about her anxiety and depression diagnosis and how she brings those life experiences into the show.<sup>64</sup> People with mental health diagnoses, as well as the psychologist community have praised the show.

Another of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*’s major strengths comes through: compassion. “The majority of shows and movies that deal with themes of mental illness usually portray the mentally ill person as an antagonist; a ‘psycho’ that deserves to be locked up, punished, or even killed for their erratic, dangerous behavior,” psychologist Carmen Harra, Ph.D., tells *SELF*. But the first two seasons are spent building up compassion for Rebecca as a complex character with some very obvious “quirks.”<sup>65</sup>

The character authenticity shines through when actors who know how someone with an invisible or physical disability exists in the world play the role.

### Disabled People and the Birth of Reality TV

Finally, although complaints about reality TV abound, these shows put actual people with disabilities into the public sphere, where they are in front of the cameras to show audiences their lives. In addition, when their shows became hits, disabled people were given jobs as producers so they had more control of the reality shows that featured them.

One of the first versions of the modern American reality show, *The Real World* on MTV in 1992, featured an actual person with an HIV/AIDS diagnosis, Pedro Zamora. President Bill Clinton credited Zamora with helping lessen the fear people had of those with HIV/AIDS.

President Clinton, noting that one in four new HIV infections is among people under 20, said in a statement from the White House: “Pedro was particularly instrumental in reaching out to his own generation, where AIDS is striking hard. Through his work with MTV, he taught young people that ‘the real world’ includes AIDS and that each of us has the responsibility to protect ourselves and our loved ones.”<sup>66</sup>

From the beginning, many reality TV shows included people with invisible disabilities or physical differences. *The Amazing Race* (2001–present), for example, has featured people on the autism spectrum,<sup>67</sup> little people, deaf people and an amputee.<sup>68</sup>

As mentioned, *Little People, Big World* (*LPBW*) began on the TLC network in 2006 and chronicled the lives of the Roloff family in Oregon; Amy Roloff said in 2010 that when they were approached about doing the show, they saw it as a good way to educate the public about dwarfism. “Nothing had depicted dwarfism in an everyday way,” she said.<sup>69</sup> *LPBW* ushered in a number of other reality shows about little people. The success of the show led to more than just reality shows about little people. *LPBW*’s producer also created *Push Girls*

for the Sundance channel, a 2012–2013 reality show about four Los Angeles women who are wheelchair users.<sup>70</sup> These reality shows had good ratings and proved to TV executives that TV audiences are interested in lives of people with disabilities, whether they have a connection to disability or not.

These reality shows are the ancestor of the hugely successful, Emmy-Award winning reality show *Born This Way* on A&E (2015–present), which features adults with Down syndrome gaining independence and navigating friendships, employment and romantic relationships. During its first season, it increased its ratings by 85 percent, which was the highest rating increase in A&E’s history.<sup>71</sup> *Born This Way* executive producer Jonathan Murray said in 2016 that television is no longer a vast wasteland but a place for enlightenment for audiences on many aspects of life, including disabled people’s lives. “For too long, people with disabilities, including Down syndrome, have been placed on the sidelines of life and the margins of primetime.”<sup>72</sup>

Murray, who helped create reality TV in America and was a producer on MTV’s *The Real World*, says *Born This Way* is more real and authentic than others, and the production team could not use the typical reality show “tricks” to create drama. Murray told *Deadline* in 2016:

We sort of knew we had something very genuine and very authentic ... had to go back to that and trusting the emotion of the scene and that the emotional connection viewers would have with the seven adults would carry through to commercial, and that’s very different.<sup>73</sup>

The focus of the show is on what adults with Down syndrome can do, not what they cannot do. Viewers with Down syndrome reported that *Born This Way*’s cast seem like people who could be their friends. However, the show has been critiqued in a way that echoed the criticism of *Life Goes On*—that the people with Down syndrome featured are quite articulate, independent and talented, whereas in real life, some people with Down syndrome are nonverbal and may need a caregiver or other support throughout their lives.<sup>74</sup> However, based on producer Jon Murray’s comments, it still appears that *Born This Way* may be one of the most authentic reality shows on television. The adults with Down syndrome are just living their lives in front of the camera. Their stories give visibility to Down syndrome in the public sphere, thereby giving audiences insight into these adults’ experiences that will demolish incorrect information about people with intellectual disabilities.

## Conclusion

This chapter illustrates the ways authentic disability representation advanced into the public sphere of US television through better news coverage of disability rights and subsequent TV plotlines, through disabled actors gaining visibility in principal character roles, through the personal connections producers, directors and writers began to have with people with disabilities that informed their creative decisions and through reality TV giving actual disabled people production power within that genre. Authentic disability representation pushes back against the aesthetic disqualification that Tobin Siebers theorizes produces oppression of disabled people in the arts. Authentic representation taking a more prominent place on television is an affront to the false belief that “disability is a personal misfortune or tragedy that puts people at risk of a nonquality existence.”<sup>75</sup> With disabled performers presenting their lived experiences as part of television narratives, audiences can begin to understand disability discrimination as a social justice issue, in which discriminatory attitudes and societal barriers cause problems for disabled people rather than their impairments.

British arts blogger Scott Jordan-Harris confirms that authentic disability representation is a rights issue, and he worries when non-disabled actors take their jobs, disabled performers might be blocked from employment in the entertainment industry completely. He writes:

Indeed, if we are okay with disabled roles being played by able-bodied actors, we are okay with disabled actors being prevented from acting at all. Able-bodied actors can play able-bodied roles. Disabled actors cannot. If disabled actors cannot play disabled roles, they cannot play any roles at all—and they are excluded from film altogether.<sup>76</sup>

Authentic disability representations on US television have implications globally now that many more of its programs are available worldwide with subscription video-on-demand services (SVOD) like Netflix.<sup>77</sup> In addition, the United States and the United Kingdom export the most television series (factual, fiction and entertainment) programming internationally.<sup>78</sup> Data shows that even in this era of original streaming content, streaming viewers are watching series that previously appeared on broadcast TV 80 percent of the time.<sup>79</sup> “The leading SVOD services rely heavily on licensed series such as *This Is Us*, *The Blacklist* and *South Park*. Current broadcast series along with classics such as *Seinfeld* and *Breaking Bad* drive engagement, retain viewers and entice new subscribers,” according to a 2018 study from 7Park Data. Interestingly, *Breaking Bad*, which featured disabled actor RJ Mitte, is considered classic TV in the 7Data report.<sup>80</sup>

US television writer Allen Rucker, who is a wheelchair user, has big hopes for streaming TV programs to provide more authentic disability-related content because technology now allows America’s disabled directors, actors and writers to create their own content that they can put online themselves. Rucker observes:

For the first 50 years of its existence, TV was akin to a monastic order, rigidly controlled by network and studio clerics. Now it’s much more like the very earliest days of Hollywood—if you have a good idea, a little talent, a cool camera, endless perseverance and a boatload of chutzpah, you can take a shot. And if you have a disability, I just named a half-dozen venues where you can get your wheels wet. Or, along with the rest of America, you can just sit back and watch a whole new world of disability TV materialize on your video device of choice.<sup>81</sup>

In 2018 he listed off streaming shows that hired disabled actors like YouTube Red’s *Step Up: High Water*, which has an amputee dancer on the show, Eric Graise; *One Day at a Time* on Netflix with a recurring character played by wheelchair user Santina Muha; and *The Close* on the Sundance channel with deaf showrunners/stars Shoshannah Stern and Josh Feldman.<sup>82</sup> Existing television series franchises are populating their casts with more disabled or deaf actors as well. AMC’s *Fear The Walking Dead* added wheelchair-using actor Daryl “Chill” Mitchell in August - 2018,<sup>83</sup> and deaf theater actor Lauren Ridloff joined *The Walking Dead*’s ninth season in November 2018.<sup>84</sup>

Disability representations on television and film are not always perfect, but casting disabled actors and hiring disabled writers, consultants and production team members can help guide these productions into a more authentic space. The US news media is also beginning to better understand the issue of the entertainment industry hiring disabled performers, as evidenced by the controversy in July 2018 of Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson playing an amputee in the film *Skyscraper*. The *Washington Post* covered the topic thoroughly, citing an open letter written by a double amputee actor Katy Sullivan, who asked Johnson never to play a disabled person again.<sup>85</sup> While also discussing film actor Scarlett Johansson stepping away from playing a transgender man, Sullivan summed up the true importance of authentic disability representation:

The outcry is about inclusion. TRUE inclusion. This is also the truth for performers with disabilities being sidelined so that able-bodied actors can “play at” what it’s like to live life with a disability. What we lose in that is the genuine, authentic perspective.<sup>86</sup>

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