



THE RUDERMAN WHITE PAPER

ON EMPLOYMENT OF ACTORS WITH DISABILITIES IN TELEVISION

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THE RUDERMAN FAMILY FOUNDATION

One of our goals at the Ruderman Family Foundation is to change the public’s awareness of people with disabilities. More specifically, we make the argument that full inclusion of people with disabilities is not a matter of charity, but of civil rights. We researched this White Paper in order to further the awareness around this civil rights movement. We believe that the results we found will meaningfully contribute to the conversation of diversity in entertainment as a civil rights issue that needs to be addressed more systematically by the media and entertainment industry.

Our Mission

The Ruderman Family Foundation believes that inclusion and understanding of all people is essential to a fair and flourishing community.

Guided by our Jewish values, we support effective programs, innovative partnerships, and a dynamic approach to philanthropy in our core area of interest: advocating for and advancing the inclusion of people with disabilities in our society.

The Foundation provides funding, leadership, expertise and insight in the U.S. and Israel, with offices in both countries. Visit us at: <http://www.rudermanfoundation.org>

AUTHORS

Danny Woodburn is a veteran of over two dozen films and more than 130 television appearances, with regular and recurring roles on some of America's best known shows, most notably as Mickey on *Seinfeld*.

Recognizability has afforded Danny the opportunity to raise awareness of the need for inclusion and understanding of persons with disability, as an author and interviewee in Radio, TV, Film and print media, (*Huffington Post, CNN-HL News, CBC, WNYC, KPCC, TCM Projected Image, CBS Sunday Morning, Wall Street Journal, MSNBC, CinemAbility—2013 documentary*), as an orator at awareness events, fund-raisers, and symposiums on disability; (*Little People's Research Fund, The Inclusion Network of Cincinnati, AAPD, California RespectAbility Coalition, Disability Rights Legal Center, and ReelAbilities Film Festival*), and as a teacher (*California's EDD Media Access office, Actors for Autism, Meet the Biz, and the Partnership Resources, Inc.*).

He serves on the Ruderman Family Foundation's International Council on Disability as well as co-vice chair of the SAG-AFTRA Performers With Disabilities. In 2009 he received congressional recognition via the *Disability Rights Legal Center's DREAM Award (Disability Rights in Entertainment Arts and Media)*. In 2010 Danny was honored with the *Screen Actors Guild Harold Russell Award*.

Kristina Kopic is the Advocacy Content Specialist at the Ruderman Family Foundation. She has taught Research Writing and Rhetoric and Composition at universities throughout the Greater Boston Area including Emerson College, Bentley University, and Boston Architectural College. Kristina has also served as a writing coach for MIT graduate students and a literary editor. Some of her chief research and pedagogic interests lie in deconstructing social constructs that govern cultural norms and behavior—in particular the constructs of race, gender, and disability. Her focus is on understanding the role mass media plays in creating and reinforcing these constructs and, more importantly, the role it plays in subverting and changing them.

The views expressed in this document are solely those of the authors.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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LANGUAGE DISCLAIMER

We at the Ruderman Family Foundation want to acknowledge that language use in the context of disabilities is an important issue that generates both strong discussion and strong feelings. The most frequent point of contention is whether people-first or identity-first language should be used. While it is our policy at the Ruderman Family Foundation to use people-first language, we acknowledge that several segments of the disability community prefer identity-first language. The authors of this Ruderman White Paper have chosen to use person-first language which is bound not to be favored by some segments of the disability community. We are aware of these differences and, in the absence of any consensus, acknowledge and respect both perspectives.

The Ruderman Family Foundation and the writers of the Ruderman White Paper denounce the use of any stigmatizing or derogatory language.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Contents

Although people with disabilities make up nearly 20% of our population, they are still significantly under-represented on television. What compounds the problem is the fact that even when characters with disabilities are featured on the small screen, they are far too often played by actors without disabilities.

We conducted an investigation into the frequency of actors with disabilities on the top-ten television shows toward the end of the 2015-2016 TV season. We also did the same for the top twenty-one original content shows featured on streaming platforms. Finally, we conducted a survey of actors with disabilities to assess their perspectives and personal experiences in the television industry.

In addition to our data collection, Danny Woodburn also lays out his decades of experience in the television business and highlights the problems with our currently accepted definition of “diversity” as well as the systemic hurdles performers with disabilities have to combat in order to be employed in television.

Content Analysis

We used the American with Disabilities Act’s (ADA) definition of disability which is very broad and evolving and for comparison we also did an analysis in accordance with society’s more traditional definition of disability which focuses on visible physical and cognitive disabilities. We found that according to the ADA’s definition more than 95% of characters with disabilities are played by able-bodied actors on television. While streaming platforms had a better percentage, they also had a lower overall count of characters with disabilities. When looked at more traditionally, these numbers dwindle exponentially to only 6 (2.2%) characters with disabilities being featured on all the platforms (TV and streaming) and only two of them being played by actors with disabilities (0.75%). This lack of self-representation points to a systemic problem of ableism—discrimination in favor of able-bodied people—in the television industry. It also points to a pervasive stigma among audience members against people with disabilities given that there is no widespread outcry against this practice.

The overall experience of actors with disabilities as noted in our survey is a negative one. They repeatedly echo the frustrations and struggles against the systemic discrimination they face in the television industry.

Conclusion

This is nothing short of a social justice issue where a marginalized group of people is not given the right to self-representation. We must change this inequality through more inclusive casting, creating ability using Computer Graphics (CG), teaching the media to hold the industry responsible, avoiding stereotypical stories, and ultimately through the telling of stories that depict people with disabilities without focusing on the disability. We also provide a list of resources where actors with disabilities can be proactively reached.

SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Forgotten Minority

Television is America's number one leisure activity. The most current [American Time Use Survey](#) conducted by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that on average everyone over the age of 15 spends 2.8 hours a day watching television. Socializing and communicating comes in second with 0.72 hours on average. Given this sheer volume of time, it becomes clear that television is not merely entertainment, but also a lens through which we view the world. We spend more leisure time with the people we see on our small screens than we do with the real people in our lives. So it is no wonder then that over the years television has grown more representative of the society that spends so much time with it.

GLAAD's "Where Are We On TV" initiative has been tracking the general diversity of television characters on broadcast programming and cable for over a decade now. According to their [findings](#), in the 2015-2016 season we see more regular characters who are black (16%) and more regular characters who are female (at 43%) than ever before recorded. There is also an upward trend in the representation of characters who are people of color in general (at 33%), and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender characters are increasing in number as well. While it's clear from these numbers that white men are still disproportionately represented on television, the industry is making strides in the right direction. That seems to be true for all minorities and traditionally marginalized groups of people except for one: people with disabilities.

Before we can assess the data on disability on television, we need to note that the question of tracking such data in the first place is actually a particularly difficult one. The Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), that represents the majority of big budget television and film production companies, through its collective bargaining agreement with SAG-AFTRA, collects demographic information about the performers hired for speaking roles and stunt work. This is done through visual inspection and the information is collected in the aggregate; often times this is done through visual on-set counting done by a production assistant or 2nd assistant director, by filling out a standard form which is known as the Casting Data Report Form. This report does not include individual names but rather a total count of those who appear to belong to the following categories: Age (over and under 40), Gender (Male or Female), and Race/Ethnicity (Asian-Pacific, Black, Caucasian, Latino/Hispanic, North American Indian, Other/Unknown). These stats are divided into two types of roles; Lead or Supporting, with separate form used for

stunt performers. Disability has long been left out of the equation due to a variety of excuses such as the argument that existing laws prohibit such reporting on disability.

Fortunately, some LGBTQ groups have defined diversity to include those with disability. GLAAD has been credited by some as the first non-disability civil rights group to incorporate disability into the diversity discussion with regard to media representations. They added the tracking of disability representations in their network primetime television report starting in 2010.

GLAAD's 2015-16 report shows that unlike the upticks in all other categories, "[f]or the first time in two years, the percentage of regular characters depicted as living with a disability on [this type of] broadcast programming has dropped, down to 0.9% from 1.4% reported last year." This decrease is significant for two reasons. It is happening as other minorities are gaining more representation. And secondly, given that [the latest US census](#) estimates that 18.7% of Americans live with a disability, at 0.9% of representation among regular television characters, this is a grossly disproportionate under-representation of the largest minority in the country.

Why TV Representation Matters

Considering the reach and power of television, this kind of exclusion has significant consequences. A literature review of people's attitudes toward people with disabilities was [published in Research in Developmental Disabilities](#) in December of 2013. The researchers—Michelle Clare Wilson and Katrina Scior—looked specifically at the span of a decade (2003-2013) and only at studies that used the Implicit Association Test (IAT), a reliable and valid measuring tool for unconscious attitudes and bias. Their results showed that "[a]cross all studies, moderate to strong negative implicit attitudes were found." In other words, all study participants on average had negative associations with people with disabilities. What is more interesting, and also not surprising, is that caregivers as well as able-bodied students in inclusive classroom held more positive unconscious attitudes. The positive attitudes were contingent on exposure and interaction. The more time someone spent with people with disabilities, the more their implicit associations improved. These results contribute to the body of evidence that has been amassed since the 1950s when Gordon Allport proposed the [Contact Hypothesis](#). Broadly speaking, the hypothesis "suggests that increased contact with out-group members can help to improve attitudes towards them."¹

¹ Wilson, Michelle Clare, and Katrina Scior. "Attitudes towards Individuals with Disabilities as Measured by the Implicit Association Test: A Literature Review." *Research in Developmental Disabilities* 35.2 (2014): 294-321. Print.

While findings like these may not be surprising in an era of increasing multi-culturalism, it is important to remember that we are talking about implicit attitudes, not explicit attitudes. Explicit/conscious attitudes are frequently subject to social pressures and people are apt to profess opinions they believe are socially desirable. Wilson and Scior note that “[r]esearch into explicit attitudes towards individuals with disabilities suggests that these have become less negative over time. ... It would appear however from the results of the studies included in [their] review that relatively strong negative implicit attitudes remain.” So there is a troubling disconnect between how people say they feel about people with disabilities and the unconscious bias they hold on average. Given the Contact Hypothesis as well as common sense, it is no surprise that a historically stigmatized group of people that is virtually non-existent in the stories we tell on television is regarded with such bias and prejudice.

It is argued that when it comes to people with disabilities, television representation is imperative for stigma reduction. Due to factors such as frequent inaccessibility of public places, abysmally low employment of people with disabilities, and segregation in education, mainstream culture often doesn’t have the chance to organically encounter and interact with people with disabilities. So almost by default, most attitudes toward people with disabilities arise from the stories we encounter around us—stories which are woefully underrepresented in the most widely consumed medium: television.

It seems that we as a culture have just recently seen a wide-spread and seemingly rapid shift in attitudes toward another minority: the LGBTQ community. We can safely argue that this shift would not have come about as quickly without the small screen. In 2012, then University of Minnesota professor, Edward Schiappa and his team conducted several comparative media studies and [as reported by NPR](#) found “that the presence of gay characters on television programs decreases prejudices among viewers.” They did not find any huge shifts, but rather incremental shifts in attitude that on average built up starting primarily with the hit show “Will and Grace” in 1998. In November of 2012 enough shows had accurate portrayals of gay and lesbian characters that [The Hollywood Reporter](#) published poll results with the headline: *'Glee' and 'Modern Family' Drive Voters to Favor Gay Marriage—Even Many Romney Voters*. The tag-line referring to Romney voters effectively signals that this attitudinal shift was not confined to the segments of the population we consider politically liberal to begin with. Given this power of television shows, it becomes essentially irresponsible of writers, producers, and networks to continually exclude people with disabilities from the kind of wide-spread representation that leads to real and tangible stigma reduction.

Characters with Disabilities vs. Actors with Disabilities

What is an even more compounding injustice when it comes to the representation of people with disabilities is the fact that even if we see characters with disabilities on screen, they so often aren't played by actors with disabilities. In our current media atmosphere, we have become used to a group's right of self-representation. A white actor on screen in blackface is unheard of nowadays because we as a nation recognize that there is absolutely no reason why a black actor wouldn't play that part. Sadly Hollywood still [white-washes Asian characters](#) on occasion, but these choices are followed by [public outrage and nation-wide criticism](#). However, when an able-bodied actor plays a character with a disability, the criticism is limited. It's as if the nation in general dismisses the abilities of people with disabilities to such a degree that it doesn't even occur to them to wonder why they are seeing Artie in *Glee* played by the able-bodied Kevin McHale.

The usual counter to the idea that people with disabilities need to be given self-representation on the screen is that there just aren't any good actors with disabilities. This claim is of course false and echoes so many similar claims throughout history about the inadequacy of a traditionally marginalized group. Such stereotypes used to be considered common knowledge until they were challenged and are now just found ridiculous and socially unacceptable. It is tremendously unlikely that out of 18.7% of the entire population (more than 55 million people), there are no people who are remarkable actors. What is much more likely is that this population is systemically excluded from consideration due to the unconscious or conscious bias of the industry gatekeepers. With few and far between exceptions, we don't get to see actors with disabilities on television and so our preconceived notions are rarely challenged.

Our goal is to strongly challenge this lack of representation and above all, lack of self-representation of people with disabilities on television. By demonstrating this pervasive exclusion and examining its underlying causes we aim to educate members of the industry and the media as well as the general public about this social injustice. After laying out our data and evidence, we will offer best practices in making an effective and lasting change on the small screen and in the real lives of people with disabilities and their families.

SECTION TWO: EVIDENCE OVERVIEW

Methodology

We approached the evidence collection for this White Paper in three ways.

- 1) We were interested in the amount of self-representation on specifically the most watched television shows on cable and broadcast television. We consulted [Nielsen ratings](#) for the top rated shows in March 2016, a period toward the end of the 2015-2016 television season. Because we wanted to focus only on scripted, dramatized productions, we had to eliminate sporting events, documentaries, reality TV and other categories not corresponding with our target. Therefore, the television shows we identified are not the top ten viewed programming, but specifically just the top ten scripted, dramatized shows. The specific shows we looked at are: *The Big Bang Theory*, *The Walking Dead*, *NCIS: New Orleans*, *Criminal Minds*, *NCIS*, *NCIS: LA*, *Criminal Minds: Beyond Borders*, *Scorpion*, *Madam Secretary*, *Modern Family*. Once we selected the television shows, we took note of all the regular and recurring characters on the latest season with disabilities. From there we researched the actors for any public record of having the disability they play on the screen.
- 2) Because television is changing so rapidly thanks to technology, we had to take streamed shows into account. While Nielsen factors in online viewing of television programming into their ratings system, there are many high-quality original shows that are only available on streaming platforms. Accounting for the popularity of this segment of entertainment is difficult because streaming does not have a uniform ratings system and because online privacy settings can occasionally interfere with gathering accurate data. Netflix, for example [declines to provide ratings](#) for their original content. Given this obstacle, we tried to find comprehensive lists of ratings to get a sense of the most-watched shows. We decided to use [Tom's Guide list of The Best Online—Original TV Shows 2016](#) which reviews and recommends top shows from Amazon, Hulu, and Netflix. While this list is not as accurate as Nielsen's list in terms of viewership, we feel confident in Tom's research methods to give us a good sense of popular shows across all three streaming platforms. We eliminated animated shows and documentaries for this list to narrow it down to scripted, dramatized shows. From there we reviewed most recent regular and recurring characters with disabilities. And, as with our cable and broadcast study, we researched the actors playing those characters to find out whether there is any evidence that those actors have the disability they are portraying on screen.

- 3) Finally, we wanted to get a sense of the experience actors with disabilities have had in Hollywood when it comes to television. While Danny Woodburn will present his anecdotal evidence regarding his own experience, we also reached out more widely to actors with disabilities through a survey. The survey primarily seeks to determine the amount of opportunity actors had to be cast and the frequency with which they are cast to act on TV. It also gives actors a chance to briefly explain their perspective in their own words.

Unfortunately, the technology we used for the survey was not screen reader accessible. Due to this limitation, we put out a reader accessible disclaimer directing users to email directly for an accessible version. The exact survey questions and all other details are listed in the sub-section “Survey of Actors with Disabilities.”

The survey was posted on Danny Woodburn’s Twitter and Facebook accounts, inviting television actors with disabilities to fill it out. It was also distributed through the following organizations and people:

- Gail Williamson: Agent representing people with disabilities at KMR
- Gloria Casteneda: of the Employment Development Department of California and former lead contact for Media Access Offices of Southern California (devoted to employment of people with disabilities in the film and TV industry) The Media Access Office of the California EDD are currently no longer in effect and was closed due to an end to the government funding, but the activism on Ms. Casteneda’s part is still in effect.
- David Zimmerman: Casting Director, head of DSZ Productions: Which develops Television and Film industry classes with a focus on creating opportunity for performers and artists with disabilities.
- Actors for Autism
- SAG-AFTRA
- Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts
- ReelAbilities
- Nic Novicki: 48 Disability Film Challenge
- Anita Hollander: the National Chair of SAG-AFTRA Performers With Disabilities

Definition of Disability

The definition of disability is constantly changing and evolving. Traditionally

depictions of disability over the years have been very geared to the visually physical (wheelchair users, Multiple Sclerosis (MS), Muscular Dystrophy (MD), Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), deafness, blindness, amputees, congenital anomalies) and cognitive (Down Syndrome, Autism). However more recently society has come to understand depression, anxiety, alcoholism, addiction, and even morbid obesity as fitting under the umbrella of disability given better understanding of the role that the physical realities of the brain play in human behavior. To reflect this evolution, we defer to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), but we also offer analysis of our data using the more traditional view of disability that most viewers would be familiar with.

The ADA's definition is as follows:

The ADA defines a person with a disability as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity. This includes people who have a record of such an impairment, even if they do not currently have a disability. It also includes individuals who do not have a disability but are regarded as having a disability. The ADA also makes it unlawful to discriminate against a person based on that person's association with a person with a disability.

We've identified our list of characters with disabilities in accordance with this definition. Even if characters no longer are addicted to drugs or alcohol, we marked them as having a disability. Using this broad list as a starting point, we can always narrow it to reflect more traditional views of disability for analysis as needed.

Actors with Disabilities in the Top Ten Shows

Based on the week we selected, this is the breakdown of characters with disabilities in the top ten shows:

Characters with Disabilities in the End of March 2016 Top Ten TV Shows

	Character	Actor	Show	Disability	Comment
1	Sheldon Cooper	Jim Parsons	The Big Bang Theory	While Bill Prady has repeatedly stated that Sheldon's character was neither conceived nor developed with Asperger syndrome and OCD in mind, fans widely speculate that he has those disabilities.	No public record of actor having this disability.

2	Raj Koothrappali	Kunal Nayyar	The Big Bang Theory	Social anxiety	No public record of actor having this disability.
3	Lucy	Kate Micucci	The Big Bang Theory	Social anxiety	No public record of actor having this disability.
4	Negan	Jeffrey Dean Morgan	The Walking Dead	Psychopathy, sociopathic tendencies	No public record of actor having this disability.
5	Abraham Ford	Michael Cudlitz	The Walking Dead	Explosive aggression and volatility	No public record of actor having this disability.
6	Jessie Anderson	Alexandra Breckenridge	The Walking Dead	Depression	No public record of actor having this disability.
7	Will Dixon	Robert Bruce Elliott	The Walking Dead	Alcoholism	No public record of actor having this disability.
8	Denise Cloyd	Merritt Wever	The Walking Dead	Anxiety	No public record of actor having this disability.
9	Cade LaSalle	Clayne Crawford	NCIS: New Orleans	Bipolar Disorder	No public record of actor having this disability.
10	Patton Plame	Daryl Mitchell	NCIS: New Orleans	Paraplegia	Yes, actor has the disability portrayed on screen.
11	Spencer Reid	Matthew Gray Gubler	Criminal Minds	Hints of schizophrenia, drug addiction.	No public record of actor having this disability.
12	Diana Reid	Jane Lynch	Criminal Minds	Paranoid schizophrenia	No public record of actor having this disability.
13	James "Jimmy" Palmer	Brian Dietzen	NCIS	Claustrophobia and tinnitus	No public record of actor having this disability.
14	Sam Hanna	LL Cool J	NCIS: LA	Coulrophobia—fear of clowns	No public record of actor having this disability.
15	Nell Jones	Renée Felice Smith	NCIS: LA	ADD	No public record of actor having this disability.
16	Sylvester Dodd	Ari Stidham	Scorpion	OCD, fear of heights, germs, planes, tight spaces, boats	No public record of actor having this disability.

17	Ralph Dineen	Riley B. Smith	Scorpion	Anxiety in regards to physical contact.	No public record of actor having this disability.
18	Happy Quinn	Jadyn Wong	Scorpion	Pistanthrophobia—fear of trusting	No public record of actor having this disability.
19	<u>Megan O'Brien</u>	Camille Guaty	Scorpion	Multiple Sclerosis	No public record of actor having this disability.
20	Harrison Dalton	Jason Ralph	Madam Secretary	Drug addiction	No public record of actor having this disability.

Due to ADA's broad definition of disability, there were a total of 20 characters who fit our criteria. Out of those characters only three had, what would be thought of as, a visible disability. And out of all twenty actors, only one had the disability portrayed on screen. In terms of percentages, that means that only 5% of actors who played a character with a disability had a disability.

Percentages of Characters with Disabilities based on the end of March 2016 Top Ten TV Shows

Characters with non-visible disabilities	90%
Characters with visible disabilities	10%
Actors with disabilities	5%
Shows that featured characters with disabilities (out of 10)	80%

Actors with Disabilities in Popular Original Content Streaming Shows

Based on our criteria, only eight of the twenty one shows listed in Tom's Guide for top streaming shows featured characters with disabilities. This is the breakdown:

Characters with Disabilities in top 21 Original Content Streaming Shows in 2016

	Character	Actor	Show	Mode	Disability	Comment
1	Matt Murdock/ Daredevil	Charlie Cox	Daredevil	Netflix	Blindness	No public record of actor having this disability.
2	Peter Russo	Corey Stoll	House of Cards	Netflix	Recovering addict/ alcoholic	No public record of actor having this disability.

3	Douglas Stamper	Michael Kelly	House of Cards	Netflix	Alcoholic & recovered from Traumatic Brain Injury	No public record of actor having this disability.
4	Miss Hudspith	Fionnula Flanagan	Gortimer Gibbon's Life on Normal Street	Amazon Prime	Blindness	No public record of actor having this disability.
5	Lee Harvey Oswald	Daniel Webber	11.22.63	Hulu Plus	Schizoid personality disorder	No public record of actor having this disability.
6	Mary Cox	Emma Greenwell	The Path	Hulu Plus	Addiction	No public record of actor having this disability.
7	Chip	Will Arnett	Flaked	Netflix	Recovering alcoholic	Actor is on record as being recovering/relapsing alcoholic
8	Jessica Jones	Krysten Ritter	Jessica Jones	Netflix	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder	No public record of actor having this disability.
9	Malcolm Ducasse	Eka Darville	Jessica Jones	Netflix	Drug Addiction	No public record of actor having this disability.
10	Crazy Eyes- "Suzanne Warren"	Uzo Aduba	Orange is the New Black (OITNB)	Netflix	Delusions and hallucinations	No public record of actor having this disability.
11	Tiffany "Pennsaturday" Doggett	Taryn Manning	OITNB	Netflix	Methamphetamine addiction	No public record of actor having this disability, though there is a public record of erratic behavior.
12	Lorna Morello	Yael Stone	OITNB	Netflix	Obsessive compulsive disorder	No public record of actor having this disability.
13	Nicky Nichols	Natasha Lyonne	OITNB	Netflix	Drug addiction	Actor is on record as recovered drug addict.
14	John Bennet	Matt McGorry	OITNB	Netflix	Amputated leg	No public record of actor having this disability.
15	Carrie Black	Lea DeLaria	OITNB	Netflix	Anxiety and anger	No public record of actor having this disability.

16	Angie Rice	Julie Lake	OITNB	Netflix	Methamphetamine addiction	No public record of actor having this disability.
17	The Cat	Mark Povinelli	Mad Dogs	Amazon Prime	Dwarfism	Yes, actor is on record as having the disability portrayed on screen.

While methamphetamine addiction does result in visible outwardly signs, such as marked tooth decay, we do not consider it a visible disability. Tooth decay in and of itself is not a disability and is a phenomenon that can develop without the use of drugs. Therefore, we deem meth addiction as a non-visible disability. With that said, out of these sixteen characters, only three had visible disabilities. And only two out of the sixteen actors had a disability. In both cases, it was the same disability their characters had. The percentage breakdown is below:

Percentages of Characters with Disabilities based on the Tom’s Guide Recommended Original Content Streaming Shows

Characters with non-visible disabilities	76.5%
Characters with visible disabilities	23.5%
Actors with disabilities	17.6%
Shows that featured characters with disabilities (out of 21)	42.8%

The Numbers for the “Traditional” View of Disability

As noted, we are using the ADA’s definition of disability when conducting our study. We acknowledge that this is a very broad definition that reflects society’s evolving understanding of disability and its diversity of manifestation. So as a point of comparison, if we narrow our definition to include a much more traditional view of disability, which is focused largely on visible and congenital disabilities, the numbers shrink to a fraction of the identified list. Instead of a total of 37 (based on ADA definition), we are left with just 6 characters. Two characters in cable and broadcasting (Patton Plame and Megan O’Brien) and four characters in streaming (Daredevil, Miss Hudspeth, John Bennet, and The Cat). This number is six times lower than the broadest definition possible. Out of those six characters, only two of them are played by an actor with a disability. (Daryl Mitchell as Patton Plame, Mark Povinelli as The Cat.)

Furthermore, based on the traditional definition, out of the 31 shows we looked at (21 in streaming, 10 in cable), only six depict characters with disabilities. That amounts to only 19.4% of sampled shows. This number may even seem high to some readers. To provide a bit more context, we added up all the regular and recurring characters in the 31 shows and arrived at 265 total characters. In terms of percentage, that comes out to only 2.3% of characters being characters with disabilities.

But the numbers get even lower when we look at performers with disabilities. Given this amount of characters, the self-representation of people with disabilities is miniscule, as shown in the table below.

Percentage of PWD characters played by performers with disabilities out of total number of characters in shows

According to ADA Definition	1.5%
According to Physical & Congenital Definition	0.75%

Survey of Television Actors with Disabilities

How many actors with disabilities are there total? It is hard to determine the exact number, but understanding ActorsAccess gives us a good estimate. ActorsAccess is the primary actor’s registration site of its parent company, Breakdown Services.* Its founder, Gary Marsh, states there are approximately 600,000 active users out of a total number of 850,000 members. In addition, an actor can be registered by their talent representative. Of those actors the total number of actors with disability equals a little over 4000 members. Once an actor is in ActorsAccess, it automatically updates the information an actor's agents/managers is using when making submissions.

Pam Dixon, the past President of the Casting Society of America had a hand in helping design the people with disabilities (PWD) section of Breakdown Services. The way the site works for the PWD community is that when an actor is submitted for a role, his/her disability is not listed; however, if a Casting Director is searching for a PWD then the results deliver actors that match the need of the role. This functionality is very important because while a disability should not hinder an actor from being considered for a role, the system promotes actors with a specific disability when it is part of the story of a particular role.

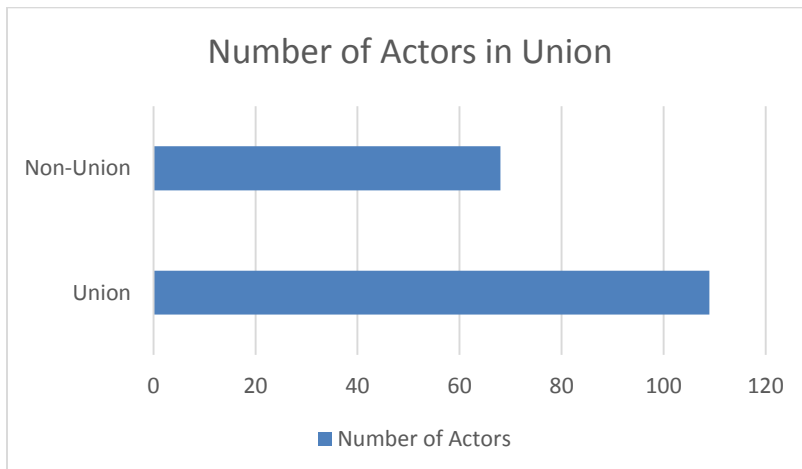
One such search by a casting director revealed that, by disability category listed below, the following portion of 1375 PWDs listed themselves specifically by their disability. It is important to note that ActorsAccess is not set up to single out disability unless such a search is entered by its user.

- Amputee Arm - 31
- Asperger's Syndrome - 81
- Deaf or hard of hearing - 245
- Mobility Disability - 184
- Amputee Double - 14
- Autism - 51
- Down Syndrome - 230
- Wheelchair - 135
- Amputee Leg - 44
- Blind or Low Vision - 69
- Intellectual Disability - 98
- Amputee Single - 25
- Cerebral Palsy - 55
- Little Person - 113

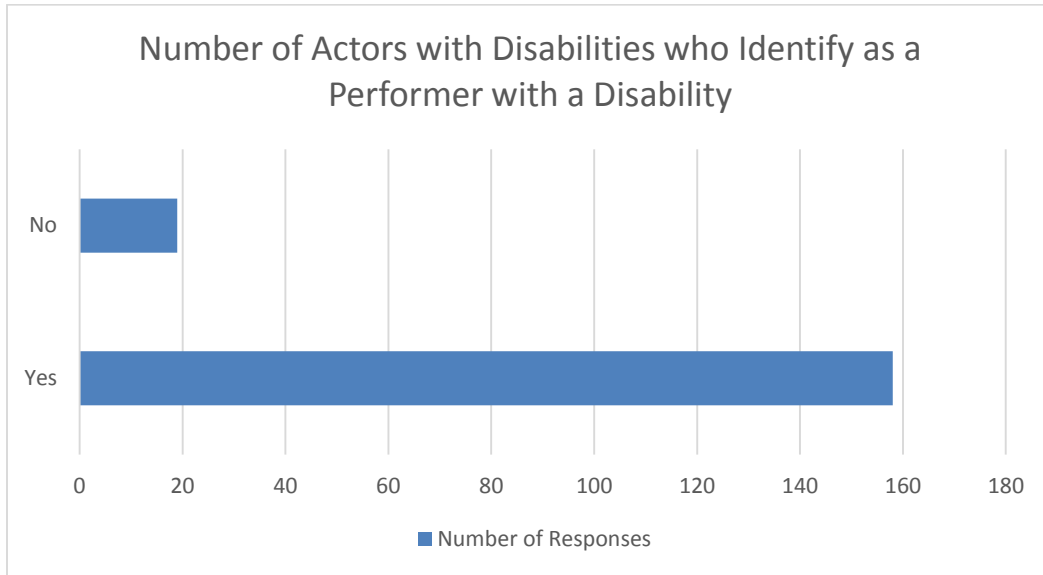
**[Breakdown Services is the universally trusted source for casting directors and by default producers for posting roles in Television and Film. Agent and managers access these breakdowns and submit clients accordingly]*

There is no way to approximate how many of these actors our survey reached, but 177 completed it. Below is the breakdown of the survey questions along with their answers.

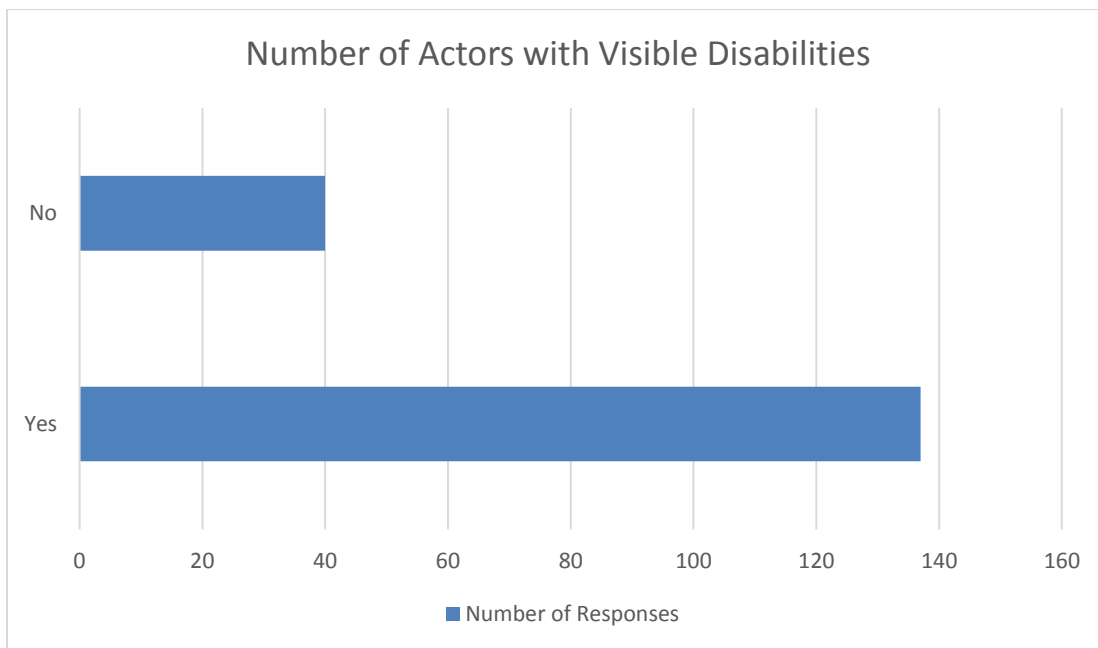
1. As a performer with a disability I am ...



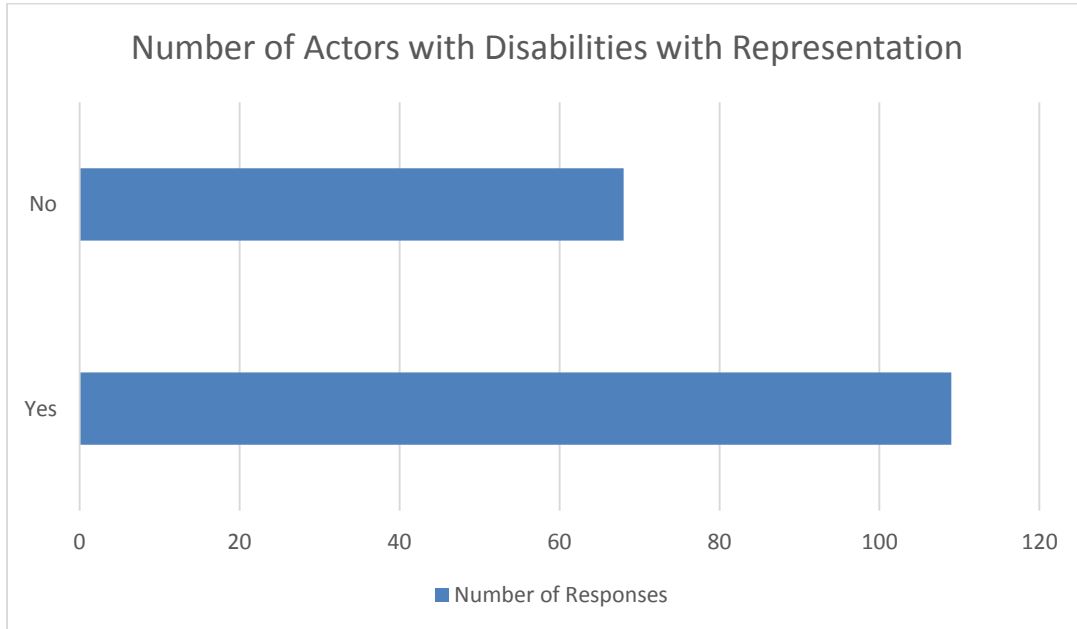
2. I identify as a Performer with a Disability ...



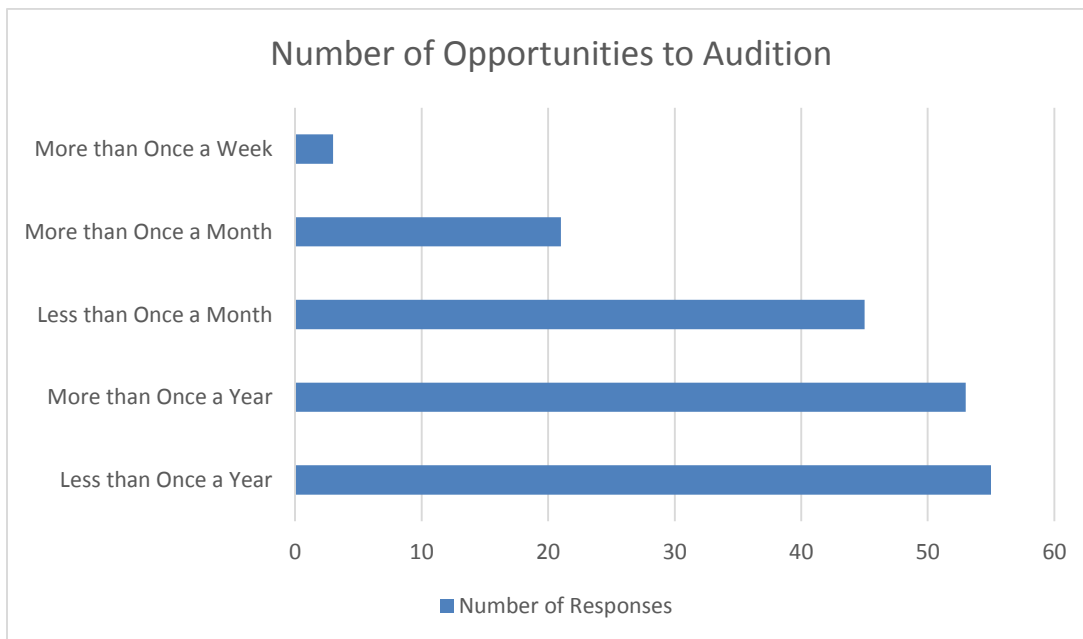
3. My disability is "visible" i.e. noticeable to people when we interact ...



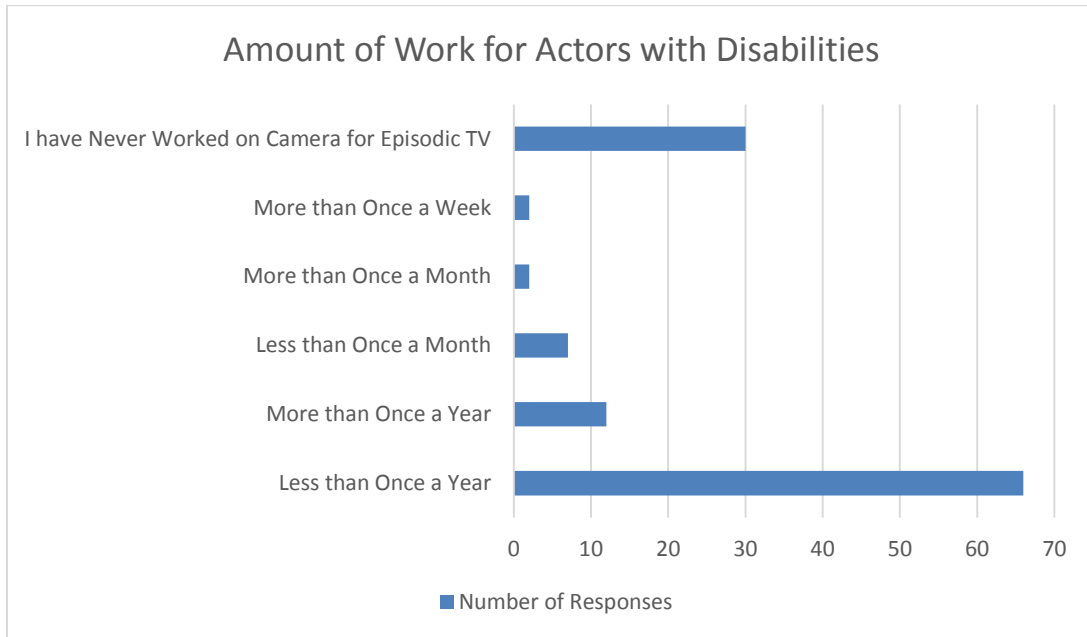
4. I have representation (an agent or manager to solicit work) ...



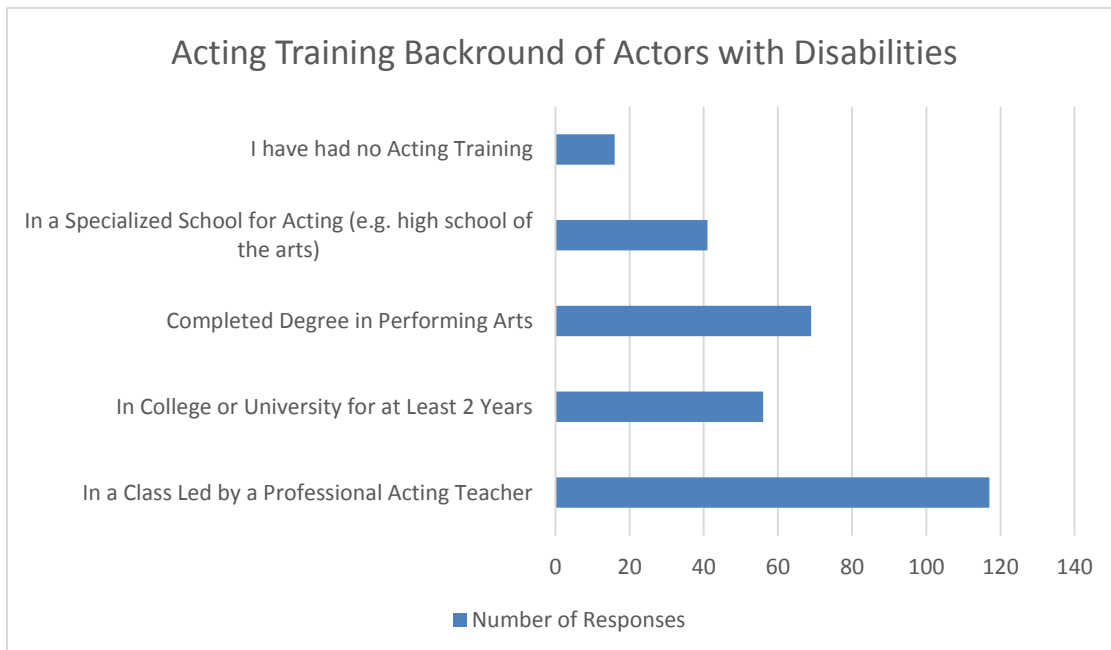
5. I audition or have opportunities for on camera TV roles ...



6. I work on camera for episodic / series television (on average) ...

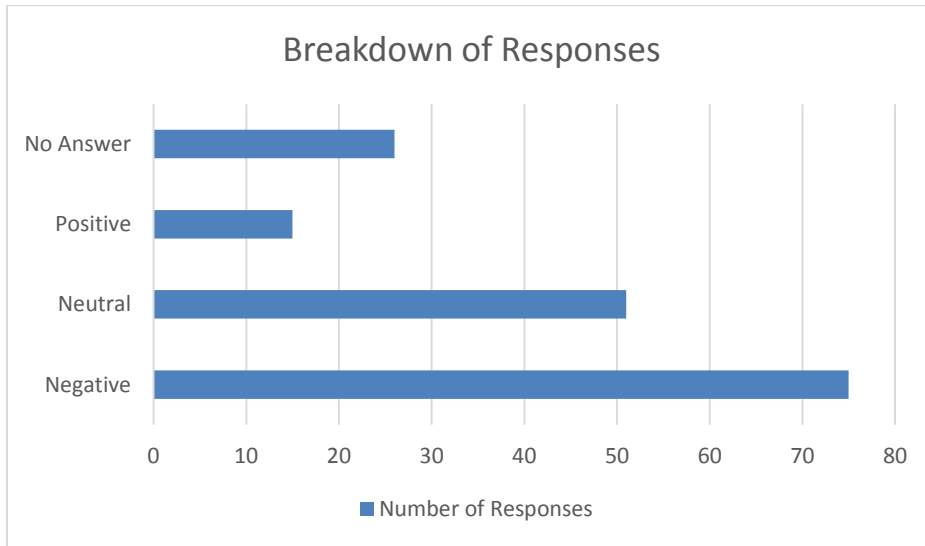


7. I have had acting training ... (note that on this question, respondents were able to check more than one answer)



8. Can you briefly describe your overall experience in the business as it pertains to your disability? Additionally, if there is one specific example or experience you wish to share anonymously, please share below.

While this question has given us valuable qualitative insight, we have quantified it for representation in this section. Below is a breakdown of the number of positive, neutral, negative, and no answers:



SECTION THREE: EVIDENCE ANALYSIS

Cable and Broadcast

While it is clear from our overall methodology that this is not a comprehensive investigation of the entire television landscape as it pertains to actors with disabilities, we believe that our results are representative of a pervasive problem.

When it comes to actors with disabilities being visible on television, the 5% number is remarkably low. Since there is only one actor among all regular and recurring characters that had a disability in our investigated segment, the addition of just one more actor would double the number to 9.6%. When dealing with such low numbers, fluctuations like these are likely and may at first seem significant, but it is very important to keep the overall picture in mind. According to our investigation, over 95% of characters with disabilities are played by actors without disabilities. This is a lack of self-representation that would be absolutely unacceptable in any other marginalized group of people. Imagine if 95% of female characters weren't played by actual women. Imagine if 95% of black characters weren't played by black actors. There would be wide-spread outrage and it is time we as a society become much more aware of this outrageous lack of self-representation among actors with disabilities.

Furthermore, the fact that we are looking at such low numbers of characters overall is compounding the problem of missing self-representation. It indicates that the very few potential opportunities for actors with disabilities are taken by able-bodied actors. If we recall GLAAD's assessment that the overall number of characters with disabilities in the 2015-2016 TV season was 0.9%, the problem becomes even more apparent. If only 5% of that 0.9% represents actors with disabilities, we can safely assume that about 0.05% of all actors on television are actors with disabilities. Yet we are talking about a group of people whose conservative numbers—conservative because it is likely that many don't self-disclose on the census—is 18.7% of our population. For the sake of comparison, if we say that 50% of all characters are men (the actual number is higher), but only 0.05% of them are played by men, then only 2.5% of characters on TV would be played by men. The same would go for women. Now if we look at the population as a whole, if male characters were represented on television in the same ratio as people with disabilities (18.7% of people have disabilities, about 49% of people are men), then we would only see 0.13% of men playing male characters on television. Both of these numbers are unacceptable.

Again, even though our study focused on a specific time frame, and even though it is likely that we might find what seem to be significant fluctuations if we were to look at a different set of ten shows, the fact of the matter is that to be representative of our society, our

estimate would have to be multiplied by 373. In other words, the current representation of people with disabilities on television is several hundred times below what it should be.

Original Content Streaming

When we look at our streaming results, we may think they look more promising. After all we found that 12.5% of characters with disabilities were played by actors with disabilities. That is nearly three times the number featured on television. However, the same small number fallacy applies here. We found only two out of sixteen actors had a disability. And these sixteen characters they played were collected from a pool of twenty-one shows, not just ten, as was the case in the TV study. And yet the count was lower than that of TV.

Streaming is often viewed as the outlet that is not subject to the same conservative casting constraints as standard television. We see a highly racially diverse cast on shows like *Master of None* and even transgender visibility on shows like *Orange is the New Black* and *Transparent*. Kenny Herzog from *Rolling Stone Magazine* has [made the argument](#) that there is a revolution on television in part thanks to streaming services. However, according to our assessment, streaming-only shows paradoxically seem to have a lower count of characters with disabilities than cable and broadcast television.

Survey of Actors with Disabilities

It is always hard to know what goes on behind the scenes of a show, but based on our survey, the glimpse we received was not encouraging for performers with disabilities. It is clear that the majority of respondents worked less than once a year and had negative experiences in the industry. Most of the qualitative survey responses discuss stigma and preconceived bias on the part of gate-keepers, such as casting agents and producers.

Here are a few eloquent comments that are largely representative of the negative experiences described:

“As someone who is very pro-active with my career, I find it increasingly frustrating that Able-bodied actors are still being cast in roles for People with Disabilities. It is like there is very little chance to be hired. Networks and Casting Directors just call us in so they don't get fined or in trouble, but over the years I have seen more of Stunt Casting.”*

*Stunt casting is a term meaning to get a name recognizable actor to play a role—in this context the character with disability role.

“The largest challenge I've had is folks' preconceptions. When they find out I'm low vision they worry that I can't do the job as well as others. I was told by many directors that I respect never to tell directors or casting directors about my disability, because I won't get called in.”

“A casting director told a buddy of mine who was running camera for the auditions that I had done the best by far and was more prepared than anyone else auditioning. When casting me was recommended, the producer—who was on speakerphone from L.A.—evidently shouted "ARE YOU NOT AWARE HE'S IN A WHEELCHAIR??!" That about sums it up.”

“A casting director who knew my work, said to me after an audition: "it's a shame you're so talented.”

The stigma permeating all these descriptions is palpable. Sadly, even in the relatively few instances where actors reported having had positive experiences, there was usually a “but” to qualify their statements. For example:

“My experience in the business has improved gradually over the 9+ years I have been auditioning being an actress with Mild Cerebral Palsy. I've found initially that casting directors genuinely develop a surprised reaction when an individual with a disability enters into the audition room because it becomes an interaction that they are not used to. Other casting directors that I have been acquainted with embrace the fact that I come into the space with my walker or scooter and go through the taping without even pausing. I did have a[n] experience over the last year that I knew was inevitable, I came in for a commercial audition where the break down requested for a young woman with blonde hair and bright personality to play a bride in the shoot. There were no limitations to physical disability so I went in... I went through the whole audition process but got into the room for the camera test in my manual wheelchair, and the director of the shoot had an extremely shocked look on her face even after she knew I specifically listed on my resume that I was a PWD. It was almost as if it could be inconceivable that a young woman with a disability could be the ideal bride that we're used to seeing.”

And even in cases where the actors didn't express any personally negative impact, they noted that the overall atmosphere was a problematic one:

“My experience as a performer with disabilities has been a positive one. Although, I would like to encourage “Hollywood” to use more actors with dwarfism, disabilities

and ethnic backgrounds in films and TV, to create a more realistic reflection of our world.”

To determine whether the reported discrimination, bias and stigma was reflected in the amount of work an actor received, we looked at the division between actors with visible and non-visible disabilities. We assumed that actors who could more easily hide their disability would have more opportunity to work and so we looked at just the actors who had said that they auditioned more than once a month or more than once a week. We did the same with those who reported they worked more than once a month or more than once a week.

To quantify “audition frequency” it is important to understand that able-bodied males with experience, youth, and representation may in fact get audition opportunities more than five times a week. The preferred casting focus will shift from time to time between differing ethnic backgrounds but disability is never part of that focus. Given this context, the results of our analysis were a little surprising.

As expected, actors with non-visible disabilities were over-represented in the pool of high frequency of auditions. 38% of actors with non-visible disabilities auditioned more frequently even though they comprised only 23% of the total pool of respondents. On the other hand, only 62% of those with visible disabilities did even though they comprised 77% of our respondent pool. However, when it came to getting work, the ratio was exactly reflective of the pool of respondents, as shown in the table below.

Higher Frequency Ranges for Auditioning and Acting among Performers with Disabilities

	Visible Disabilities	Non-Visible Disabilities
Total ratio of survey respondents	77%	23%
High Frequency Auditions	62%	38%
High Frequency Work	77%	23%

It is not clear based on our data why this might be. It would be interesting to see whether the results of such a survey would be replicated with more respondents.

While more research is always needed to understand the nuances behind phenomena, it is quite clear based on our examination that there is a phenomenon. Namely, there is a severe under-representation of actors with disabilities—and by extension of characters with disabilities—on television.

The Four Actors with ADA Defined Disabilities on TV and Streaming

We looked at a total of 31 shows across cable, broadcast, and streaming platforms and found only four actors with disabilities. It is important to note that even though these actors fit the ADA definition of disability, they may not self-identify as having a disability—especially in the cases of the non-visible disabilities.

Daryl Mitchell as Patton Plame on *NCSI: New Orleans*



Daryl Mitchell at the 2009 Emmy's-
-Image by Greg Hernandez.
[Creative Commons License 2.0](#)

Daryl Mitchell has [43 different TV and film credits to his name](#), including many as a series regular. He sustained a spinal cord injury in 2001, at which point he already had several impressive roles under his belt. The spinal cord injury left him paralyzed from the chest down. In an interview on Jenni Gold's documentary, [CinemAbility](#), he notes that he had to work extra hard in Hollywood on account of his race. And after the injury he felt like he had to work extra hard again just to break through the stigma that accompanied his wheelchair or as he is quoted as saying, it's as if "I'm Black all over again." He is a successfully working actor who has accumulated about as many movie and TV credits after his disability as he did before. He plays a [wheelchair-using computer specialist](#) on *NCSI: New Orleans*.



Natasha Lyonne at Peabody Awards
2014--Image by Peabody Awards.
[Creative Commons License 2.0](#)

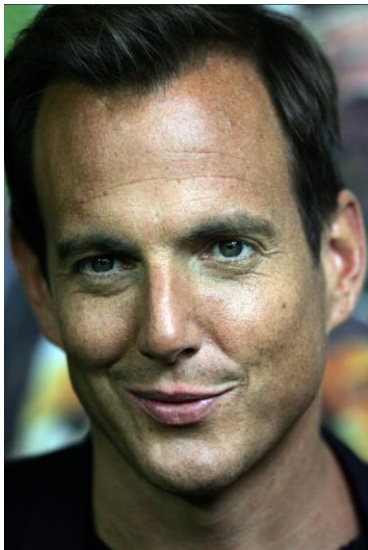
Natasha Lyonne as Nicky Nichols on *Orange is the New Black*

Natasha Lyonne [has 83 TV and film credits to her name](#). Much like Daryl Mitchell, she had a successful career before her disability. In her case, a drug addiction. [Tabloids followed the symptoms of her psychological disability](#) starting in 2001 until in 2005 she required surgery and intensive care to stay alive. She has since amassed several more TV and movie credits and speaks openly about her addiction. When asked

by [People Magazine](#) about the parallel between her and her character's addiction on *Orange is the New Black*, she said,

Believe me, there's no shortage of things for me to draw on when it comes to Nicky's backstory. But while I was filming a hospital scene [when Nicky undergoes open heart surgery after an overdose] it was weird because I had been through something so similar, but had almost nothing to draw on. I had my surgery for the same reason, as a result of drug use. But Nicky's feeling was "God, I'm still not dead yet?" For me, I had already been doing a pretty decent job of clean living before the procedure. I was like, "Gosh, I really hope this doesn't take me out." I'm grateful I'm okay.

Will Arnett as Chip on *Flaked*



Will Arnett at Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles Event Screening 2014--[Image by Eva Rinaldi](#).
[Creative Commons License 2.0](#)

Will Arnett [has 90 TV and film credits to his name](#). Also similarly to Mitchell and Lyonne, he was no newcomer to Hollywood when he began drinking very heavily in 2000. However, unlike the two previous actors, his disability developed a little earlier in his career. He is writing and acting in the Netflix original show *Flaked* where he plays a recovering alcoholic. Like Lyonne, he is open about his past as well as his present. Arnett has admitted in an interview with the [Hollywood Reporter](#) that he took his first drink in 15 years while working on *Flaked*. The magazine notes:

It is, without question, the most intimate, grounded piece of entertainment he's ever been involved in, and the first day of shooting was set to coincide with the 15th anniversary of his own sobriety. Where exactly that character — a quietly crumbling Venice, Calif., heartthrob named Chip, who spouts

AA mantra despite the fact that he is secretly drinking again — begins and the man playing him ends is something Arnett is still working through.

Mark Povinelli as The Cat on *Mad Dogs*



Mark Povinelli at the premiere of *Mad Dogs* in 2016--[Image: screen shot of interview by Red Carpet Report](#)

Mark Povinelli has [47 TV and film credits to his name](#). Unlike Mitchell, Lyonne, and Arnett, Povinelli didn't develop a disability, but was born with a type of dwarfism. [In a 2012 interview with *The Guardian*](#), he speaks out about the struggles he has faced in light of computer graphics (CG) limiting the roles for actors with dwarfism specifically. Several productions use CG to make average-sized actors appear smaller. He notes:

I mean, I've got no problem with Ian McShane playing a dwarf, if I'm allowed to play a lawyer or a doctor or all of the things we seem to be denied so often. I don't want the market on the fantastical characters – that doesn't interest me. I want the whole range. I don't begrudge McShane taking on that role but the coin should be flipped as well and we should be allowed to play actual humans. Because ... you know, it's pretty obvious but that's what we are. I'm not a leprechaun. I'm not an elf. I don't live in a forest. I'm a dad, I'm a husband, I'm a sports fan, I'm a theatregoer ... I'm everything everyone else is. And those are the things you want to portray.

It is without question powerful to learn about these four actors who have beat the odds against stigma in Hollywood. It is particularly powerful to see Lyonne and Arnett being open about their so-called “invisible” disabilities in the public spotlight. Like we illustrated with our survey of actors, due to the stigma that disability carries, actors who can hide their disability often do. While an actor cannot exactly hide a tabloid trail detailing their past, as is the case with Lyonne, she nevertheless could have chosen to stay quiet about her experience, but she didn't. The fact of the matter is that statistically speaking, it is extremely unlikely that no other character on the shows we examined was played by an actor with a disability. It is much more likely that actors are hiding their disabilities for fear of repercussion and career damage.

Therefore, visibility like this displayed by Mitchell, Lyonne, Arnett, and Povinelli is the necessary step in making television a better representation of our society and a more open place for the actors trying to break into the business. Additionally, it's a necessary step for the TV viewership, especially its vastly underrepresented viewers with disabilities. Just like TV characters influence our attitudes to groups of people we don't identify with, so do they

influence our view of groups of people we do identify with. As is the case with stories, fictional and real, seeing someone who we can relate to offers connection and validation.

Having said that, it is important to note that while these four actors have managed to break through the gate keeping system, it is not surprising to see that three of them were already varying degrees of well-established in the industry when they sustained or developed their disability. While Povinelli began his acting career with a visible disability, the other three did not have to try to make a case for themselves as an unknown actor with a disability. This is not at all to denigrate their hard work or talent, or suggest that they received a handout. This is merely to yet again draw the attention to the larger picture: a picture where people with disabilities are stigmatized and often dismissed out of hand without even being given the chance to act. An atmosphere where people with disabilities, like Daryl Mitchell noted, have to work extra, extra hard to receive chances actors without disabilities receive more readily.

The argument is often raised that TV studios cannot hire actors with disabilities because there simply aren't enough good actors who have disabilities. This of course is not a good explanation. The much more likely scenario—the one we believe we are illustrating—is that actors with disabilities are not given a chance despite talent and hard work.

Different Kinds of Disabilities, Different Kinds of Stigma

We of course would be amiss in our discussion not to acknowledge that there are different perceptions—and stigmas—in Hollywood and around the country when it comes to different types of disabilities. It is widely viewed that alcoholism and drug abuse are relatively prevalent in Hollywood and that they carry relatively little stigma there. We don't have any data to comment on whether or not alcoholism and/or drug addiction are significant barriers to employment in television. However, we do know that actors with visible disabilities are subject to discrimination because their disabilities are visible. As such, it goes without saying that efforts at remedying this inequity should be proportionately targeted at the groups experiencing the biggest barriers. Namely in this case actors with visible disabilities.

The Argument We Are NOT Making

While we hope that we have clearly demonstrated the utter lack of representation of actors with disabilities in television, it is equally crucial that we make it clear what we are not saying with our evidence. Inevitably some readers may say that you cannot demand that every character with alcoholism be played by an actor with alcoholism or even that every

character who uses a wheelchair be played by an actor who uses a wheelchair. And indeed that is not what we are saying. We are not making the argument that every single television character with a disability need be played by an actor with that disability.

The Argument We ARE Making

Instead we believe that it is absolutely unacceptable to have 95% of cable and broadcast characters with disabilities played by actors without disabilities. It is a matter of social justice to have a large segment of our population authentically represented in the mass entertainment that is television and scripted, dramatized stories. It is necessary to create an environment where actors with disabilities have access to play characters with disabilities. It is also necessary to reduce stigma surrounding “invisible” disabilities such as mental illness. Only by having actors who are open about those disabilities will we slowly create a society that doesn’t shun or shame a vast segment of its population. We have to tell stories about people with a variety of disabilities and we have to be fair in representing them accurately. Only then will we have more realistic stories that reflect our society.

We will not choose a number and say that this is how many characters with disabilities need to be played by actors with disabilities. But we are saying that it’s about time we start ensuring that it’s more than 5%.

SECTION FOUR: ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE BY DANNY WOODBURN

A Critical Misunderstanding of the Word “Diversity”

The diversity rhetoric outside of the disability community has consistently been focused on people of color, gender, and gender identity. As we have shown the numbers of these groups in the industry climb as PWD numbers fall. One factor is the exclusionary approach to the diversity discussion. The groups that get the voice are the ones that are on the rise and have more people in a position to make the public take notice.

The “Oscars So White” movement has led to numerous articles and discussions in the **New York Times** [*What It’s Really Like to Work in Hollywood* (*If you’re not a straight white man)—2/24/16], [*Why ‘Diverse TV’ Matters: It’s Better TV. Discuss.*—2/10/16], **The Los Angeles Times** [*Here are 100 people in Hollywood who could help fix the academy’s diversity problem*—6/5/16], **The Hollywood Reporter** [*Hollywood’s Casting Blitz: It’s All About Diversity in the Wake of #OscarsSoWhite*—3/2/16], **Variety** [*Critics and Pundits Weigh in on the Year In Cinema*—2/23/16], **NPR**, [*A Conversation With The Creator Of #OscarsSoWhite*—1/25/16], [*With ‘Superstore,’ America Ferrera Aims To ‘Move The Dial’ On Representation*—1/10/16] **Deadline** [*ACLU Urges New York To Pass Bill Linking Diversity To Film Incentives*—6/15/16], **NY Times** [*Film Academy Broadens Voting Pool After Oscars Criticism*—6/29/16], **The Los Angeles Times** [*How the motion picture academy moved the needle on its diversity push: we crunch the numbers*—7/11/16]. None of these stories mention the idea that disability ought to be part of the diversity discussion. The [Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences](#) (AMPAS) president, Cheryl Boone Isaacs, made a statement about the lack of a diversity landscape in the Academy Awards. That statement mentioned women and people of color essentially as the go-to on the topic of diversity. This quote led directly to a pointed focus in a number of the stories in this list, including the one in the LA Times (above) proposing a list of 100 people for the AMPAS to add to the voting body, which excluded any person with disability. Even after disability leadership spoke to Ms. Isaacs about altering her statement to be inclusive of disability or changing her approach on the ideas of diversity, AMPAS announced its invitations of new members which are 46% female and 41% people of color. In none of the articles about this announcement are persons with disability discussed as part of this missing landscape. While she encourages “the larger creative community to open its doors wider” it is still not wide enough for a wheelchair to get through.

This kind of “diversity” discussion then becomes accepted discussion by industry leaders and media alike. It not only alters how the world at large sees the ideal picture of diversity,

but how it responds with commitments by executives, directors and casting directors to address the issue for people of color and women in their casting choices. This leaves out the most under-represented group.

Additionally, race and gender legislation is proposed—without objection, as a result of such biases. At the time of this writing, the state of New York with the WGAE and the sponsorship of State Senator Kemp Hannon and the support of the ACLU, in an effort to create diversity in the employment of writers, put forth a tax-incentive for production companies that hire minority writers of color and women. Left out once again, are people with disability as well as the LGBTQ community. History shows that diverse writers create diverse and realistic stories. Thus the objective of the law was geared to the more popular idea of diversity that could effect immediate change within those two groups as more writers of color and women writers gain opportunity under this incentive.

It has only been through direct activism and response to such oversight that a second story gets told—that of PWD. But the disability community’s response is often relegated to blogs and opinion pages or as a separate later story to be told after public outcry as opposed to mainstream media outlets. We can see a causal relationship as this lack of inclusion contributes directly to lack of access and creates biases about what diversity even is. For example, singer and actress Ali Stroker is the first wheelchair-user to land in a Broadway production in 2015’s *Spring Awakening* presented by the Deaf West Theater Company. During her run she responded to a tweet complaining that the production lacked diversity. The objecting person had virtually no understanding of what encompasses the concept of diversity by overlooking the fact that many of the performers were persons with disability.

It is interesting to note that the Nederlander Organization (one of the most prominent national theater owners), in an effort to create access for the actress remodeled a backstage area and dressing room accommodations for her so that they were fully accessible. This is a positive step in inclusive understanding that leads directly to greater access.

Inclusion Equals Access

Lack of access can begin on the training ground. We already understand the likelihood of a person with disability being unemployed and being less likely to have had equal access to education. In 2015, the US Dept. of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics [reported](#) that only 17.5% of persons with a disability were employed. In contrast, the employment-population ratio for those without a disability was 65.0 %—more than three times as much.

Outside of a formal arts education, actors are motivated by competition and desire to continue to pursue their craft on stage, or in company training grounds; New York’s

Broadway, Off-Broadway and Off-Off Broadway theaters, being a widely respected arena for such training. Many of these theater spaces are historic and predate the ADA access laws that came about in 1990. Access is often created for theater-goers, but not necessarily for performers. Therefore, the example set by the Nederlander Organization is unique. Often when seeking opportunity to train on respected stages, an actor with mobility impairment, or someone who uses a wheelchair, will find obstacles in their path to such training. Additionally, the Deaf West Theater Company (2015 Tony Nominee, *Spring Awakening*) offers a unique brand of theater experience—not only for the viewer, but for the performer—as a mainstream experience. Mainstreaming the idea of performers with disability training and working on the stage is still not quite within easy reach merely from a physical access standpoint.

Beyond training, the industry standards for costs of marketing have increased over the years. The actor needs a phone; professionally shot pictures; computer access; web-access; personal web-site; theatrical reels; voice over, singing, comedy, and other types of demo reels; costs of solicitation for agent and manager representation; union membership (\$3000) and/or dues; membership to any number of industry standard sites like; Actors Access, LA/NY Casting, Now Casting, Casting Networks, Casting Frontier, ShowFax, IMDB.com. Many of these sites do have free membership but that often limits what you can display, who you can reach, or what you can access. These expenses can easily reach \$5,000–\$7,500 minimum to start and thousands annually to maintain. This high price tag places a particular access barrier on performers with disabilities.

According to The National Endowment for the Arts, “in 2009 the unemployment rate for union actors (SAG) averaged 36.8 percent, and during the fourth quarter of that year, it topped 54.8 percent.” Thus the classic ‘actor waiting tables’ parable is a truism. Only about 5% of SAG-AFTRA union actors will make more than \$5000 per year, as would be the case with our numbers of survey respondents (96) who have never worked or worked less than once per year in television. Therefore, the need to supplement income for training, classes, living, and creating opportunity in an often costly web-driven, and membership needed industry is a hard fact of making it in this industry. People with disability having the greatest unemployment rate (and 95% within television) as well as the greatest likelihood of living on the poverty level, makes equal access to training and marketing nearly non-existent save for the unique, few exceptions.

Additionally, producers do not always ensure that access is available even in the audition process. One casting company held auditions for a character in a wheelchair on the second floor of a no-elevator building. But beyond that specific example, *any* audition, whether or not it is specific to ability, that is held in an inaccessible office space, creates an unconscious predilection *not* to look at people with disability. And the fact of the matter is that a number

of LA based casting houses work out of a Hollywood bungalow or an older studio lot with historic buildings that have no access to upper floors.

By putting the actor with disability in a position to ask for access we easily create an unconscious bias toward that actor who made a request prior to even interviewing for the job. Not everyone has an understanding of how the ADA works and how it is supposed to protect people with disability in the job search market. If we create an inclusive atmosphere from the on-set of the interview request, where a *producer* is the one who asks the casting director “How are you going to make this accessible?” then we will have created a fully inclusive experience for all.

Actors who are blind or deaf often need the scripts at least 24 hours advance so that they have a fair shot at studying them, either adapting them to their readers for learning the materials, or in the case of performers who are deaf getting an ASL interpreter to accompany them to the audition so that they may communicate with the casting director in the language they speak.

One actor from our survey states, “It is quite challenging to get an audition AND secure an ASL Interpreter at the same time.” This can be especially difficult considering the pace of television casting.

Bill Pugin, President of The Sign Language Company says some casting people are in fact under pressure to move quickly or just don’t understand the need for ASL as part of the process. Producers will then resort to stunt casting* so as not to have to deal with any kind of delay. But by studios having an initial understanding of the needs of any disabled performer and a desire to actually work with a qualified actor who is mobility impaired, blind, deaf, etc. then these so-called delays or “inconveniences” just actually become part of the everyday practice of auditioning people. That is how you reflect the reality by starting from a place of inclusion and access and not trying to plug holes on the sinking ship you knew you would be sailing.

Access Equals Authenticity

The story has been told by many in the industry that unless the character breakdown says “Black” or “African-American” then the go to submissions that arrive from agents, or what actually is picked up by casting assistants, will be a white actor. This example overlaps in the disability world. Unless a role is specific to disability then the disabled actor will often be overlooked as “that type,” as opposed to a representative of 18.7% of society. I myself have been submitted for a doctor role and was told pointedly by casting, “*He could never be a doctor.*” Despite the fact that Dr. Michael Ain, the Director of the Residency Training

Program and Associate Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital is a man with dwarfism, to them, it still seems too incredulous a choice for television.

This prompts the question: “Do we find reality less authentic than the staged drama of television?” Can we not exist on screen without a specific purpose relating to a particular disability? I am certain Dr. Ain does not go to work daily thinking he is a “Dwarf doctor” but rather just a *doctor*. With inclusive casting comes the notion of societally equal representations on the screen; a neighbor who is blind, a life guard who is an amputee, a computer code analyzer with autism—which is not such an uncommon occurrence.

The reality I speak of is overlooked in casting, because the press, as evidenced, tends to cover the popular diversity issues. In a commitment to more inclusive casting and employment reflective of society, JJ Abrams told the *NY Times* “that any candidate lists for jobs on the production or acting sides needed to ‘be at the very least representative of the country we live in. Which roughly breaks down to: 50 percent women, 12 percent black, 18 percent Hispanic, 6 percent Asian.’” The 18-20 % of the population of people with disability is left out of this all-important number. No malice exists on the part of Mr. Abrams for sure. In fact, it is clear his motivations are for changing society for the better and getting us closer to true representation, but society’s lack of understanding of the realities of true diversity play a role in this oversight.

The less people with disability seem to get to represent themselves on screen the more objection mounts within the community when portrayals are inauthentic. Social media has been a driving force for national protest within our community. So, when the disability community sees a dehumanizing characterization of someone with Down Syndrome, or dangerous suicide rhetoric around the portrayal of someone with paralysis or ALS, or inaccurate depictions of blindness or people who are deaf, or derogatory depictions of dwarfism, then the response time to objection is instantaneous. The way to address these protest is by giving the people who live the life depicted on screen a chance to create authenticity.

The objection to that sometimes is that it is not really acting. Marlee Matlin tells the story that one critic protested her Academy Award because she happens to be a deaf woman playing a deaf woman. But that of course doesn’t make sense. By that logic someone who is gay is not acting if they play a gay person. Or someone who can walk is not really acting if they play someone who can walk. A person is not defined by the disability, but rather the disability is a part of the overall humanness of the character. Marlee Matlin has proven herself as a great actor despite her Academy Award. But as Jamie Foxx has stated with regard to disability on screen, we want to see people on screen “wearing the same jersey as you.”

Understanding Stigma Pushback

There are many actors with disability that conceal their disability for varying reasons within the industry, but the primary driving force usually centers around perceived stigma of disability. Within the deaf community perceptions of deafness as disability fluctuate. Certainly society has a perception of deafness that imparts a label of disability. However, for a hearing person that has been at a party or in a household or a major event where the majority of people in attendance were deaf or hearing-impaired ASL users, then you as the hearing person who cannot sign become the disabled person in the room. This was my experience at the National Association for the Deaf Breakthrough Awards honoring Marlee Matlin. There weren't many conversations I could take part in, not being an ASL user.

But outside of that perception the stigma of disability is a major factor when individuals choose not to identify, especially when it comes to unseen disability. Michael J. Fox tells the story of concealing his Parkinson's for years after his diagnosis in 1991. His departure from the series *Spin City* and replacement by Charlie Sheen coincides with the revealing of his disease. Clearly Mr. Fox took another role as an advocate for medical and stem cell research, speaking publicly and to Congress on behalf of the importance of such research. At that time there was also a shift in his on-screen career for a while after that reveal. Recently, he has had series regular roles on *The Michael J. Fox* show, a comedy inspired by his life, as well as *The Good Wife* as Louis Canning who has tardive dyskinesia, a neurological condition displaying similar symptoms to Parkinson's Disease. But this evolution to on-screen depiction of his disability was not a rapid one.

David Lander, Squiggy of *Laverne and Shirley* fame, developed Multiple Sclerosis (MS) during his career. As he explained, it often caused his speech to be slurred, his movements to be erratic or off-balance. This created an assumption by co-workers and producers that he may have been drinking or partying too much the night before. He chose not to correct that perception because the stigma of being an alcoholic seemed less damaging to his career than the idea of having MS as a disability.

Jamie Lynn Sigler (*Sopranos*) did not reveal her MS for 15 years, only coming forth with the news this year. There were few in her circle that knew she was dealing with this diagnosis, but she kept the secret from her *Sopranos* co-workers with the exception of her on-screen father James Gandolfini. She has stated that "Sometimes all I needed was like five or 10 minutes to sit and recharge but I wouldn't ask, because I didn't want them to be suspicious." This idea of suspicion by your employers surrounding disability implies a very different view of understanding and not the one of support that gets publicly stated.

The reality is that many with disability fear the loss of their job or the loss of opportunity despite laws in place to protect such loss. The creative world of film and television can more easily get around such laws citing creative choices as part of an actor's longevity, or lack thereof, on a television show.

Understanding Employer Pushback

The ADA guarantees rights to access and employment without discrimination, but this is a double-edged sword for those seeking employment. I recently heard of a small businessperson starting an ice-cream franchise. The businessperson was growing frustrated with their need to make the employee areas ADA accessible. Their response was "I don't plan to hire any handicapped people." Such a sweeping, pointed and unfortunate look at 20% of the population, which encompasses a vast arena of versions of disability, is not uncommon. Fears of litigation by patrons with disabilities, let alone employees, who feel that access may be denied them, is extremely rare but anecdotal evidence can often be fuel for lawyers to avoid the possibility.

This same fear overlaps into the show-business world, where legal concerns are the gears that work the machine. And often understanding and outreach take a back seat to custom, efficiency, and that fear. I and others in our survey have heard all manner of producer's comments that essentially close the creative door to hiring persons with disability. Creativity, inclusion, and diversity get overlooked without oversight, explanation, and understanding. Working in the industry comes with the understanding that new locations are involved, sets are built and struck on a weekly basis, and the casting takes place at the pace of the internet. But the number of days to shoot a ½ hour series and an hour-long series has not changed since I became a union actor in 1990, the same year that the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed. The ADA has put some in the legal world on guard and avoidance of potential issues is often the result.

However, history shows that adaption of the ADA has had sweeping overlap into bettering the lives of everyone. In those years prior to the passing of the ADA there was a belief that ramps and curb-cuts would never be used. But once they appeared so did wheelchair-users who before that could not readily navigate the outside world, and as an added benefit mothers with strollers could also navigate more easily. The deaf community has been using text-messaging systems for decades—now it is the most universally used form of electronic communication. New businesses, large and small, have an obligation to adapt and now understand what that means as guidelines have been in place. Old businesses have had 26 years since the ADA passage to adjust their practices, and at this stage of the game there is

no excuse to have not made the adjustment, to have not made the outreach, to have not innovated. Certainly in a field as creative as ours, such innovations are easier than in other fields. What they will find when our audience of 20% is represented is that the rewards for adapting will come back to them. According to [the National Disability Institute](#) those 50 million Americans who represent the under-tapped market have an aggregate annual income of more than \$1 trillion and \$220 billion in discretionary spending power. Certainly the door can be open a bit wider to allow more access.

SECTION FIVE: BEST PRACTICES

The systemic exclusion of people with disabilities from television is a complex and pervasive problem that will take a long time to remedy. However, it is imperative that we take steps in the right direction immediately with a few concrete practices.

1. The Gate Keeper Theory

Gillian B. White wrote a recent piece for the *Atlantic* titled [“Hollywood Has No Business Case for Booking All-White Casts.”](#) The piece largely focused on movies and film and reviewed the data from a study out of the University of North Carolina and McGill University. The conclusion was that “Persistent discrimination in Hollywood cannot be attributed to the preferences of the consumer, but must instead rest at the feet of the employer.” In other words, there is no evidence that audiences would not want to watch movies or television with people of color. This same argument applies to the disability community. We already know this based on popular shows, for example *Glee*, that use an able-bodied person to play a character with a disability. Audiences are primed for diversity and welcome it. Producers, casting directors, and all other employment decision makers need to be aware that this is not just about doing the ethical and socially just thing, but that it also makes business sense. This is one of the narratives that need to start spreading on the employment decision making levels of the television industry.

As [Mat Fraser](#), an actor with from *American Horror Story: Freak Show*, [said](#): “TV executives — bless their little, normative, unimaginative cotton socks — they're people that only want to produce something that was last year's hit. Because they're so scared that if they do anything their boss might not like they'll lose their job. They're wrong. Audiences are ready. They want to see us on TV.”

2. Computer Generated Ability

Out Computer Graphics (CG) technology has advanced tremendously in recent years. Television shows occasionally employ technology that used to be reserved for big-budget film productions just a decade ago. We are all used to CG, makeup, and prosthetics being used to create disability—think of Sam Worthington’s atrophied legs in *Avatar*, of Ansel Elgort’s missing leg in *The Fault in Our Stars*, or most recently of Jake Gyllenhaal being glimpsed in a wheelchair with a green screen attached for the filming of *Stronger*, the story of a Boston Marathon Bombing survivor who lost both legs in the terrorist attack. The list goes on. All of these are yet again examples of able-bodied actors playing a character with a

disability. In our actor survey several actors commented that the use of CG has eliminated the roles for little people because studios can just computer generate believable size differences on set. But there is no reason that CG has to be used to take opportunities from actors with disabilities.

This tremendous technology can as easily be used to create ability in actors with disabilities. Let's say a show is being filmed with a character who is an amputee and the story calls for a flash-back scene where the character has both legs. This is a prime example where an actor who is an amputee should be cast to play the role. For the flashback scene the studio can create a green screen prosthetic, much like Charlize Theron had her arm wrapped in green screen while filming *Mad Max: Fury Road* where she plays an amputee. We can use the CG to create a leg rather than to erase it.

And we know such effects are possible. Consider the [Nuveen commercial that aired in 2000](#) where Christopher Reeve walked on stage thanks to CG. In the wake of the tragedy of Paul Walker's untimely death, we've also seen the wonders of CG when the studio used it to finish shooting *Furious 7* with Walker's character still scripted in. CG is a remarkable tool and instead of using it to exclude, we can begin using it more and more to include.

3. Entertainment Journalists Need to Be More Critical of Television and Movies That Don't Use Actors with Disabilities

As with any deeply ingrained cultural construct, the stories we tell about it have the power to either reinforce it or change it. Entertainment journalists are the prime voices the public follows when it comes to reviews and assessments of entertainment. They should be the prime leaders in denouncing the exclusion of people with disabilities. This needs to start with the acknowledgment that speaking of diversity without including people with disabilities, is not diversity. We've listed several articles on the diversity debate in Hollywood that blatantly exclude disability from the conversation about diversity. That is unacceptable.

In addition to using an inclusive definition of diversity, journalists also need to be critical of problematic choices in the studios. Just like journalists were not silent on the artificial darkening of Zoe Saldana's skin for her role as Nina Simone in *Nina*, they need to speak up more and more in cases of ableist casting choices. We believe that if enough voices, especially voices in positions of power, speak up we can change the national conversation. We can begin to pay more attention to this social injustice, protest it, resist it, and ultimately change it.

4. Story Types Matter

While it is necessary to give people with disabilities greater exposure and self-representation on television, there is such a thing as the wrong kind of exposure. We can all likely think of a television show where disability was used solely as a plot device, to create pity or inspiration in the main character, and not as part of a three-dimensional, fully realized portrayal of humanity. Robert David Hall aptly noted in his interview for *CinemAbility* that "If society got its ideas about people with disabilities from TV they would think that basically we are either pathetic or super-people," alluding to the super-heroes with disabilities, such as Daredevil. This summer we saw the flip-side of that coin with the trope of the suicidal accident survivor which generated a lot of backlash and yet did better than projected at box offices.

We are not saying that there should be no superheroes with disabilities whatsoever. We are also not saying that a character with severe physical disabilities is never to be portrayed as suicidal. But these portrayals become a problem when they are effectively the only stories we tell about people with disabilities. It becomes another form of erasing disability by not portraying it as the multi-faceted, complex part of human existence that it is.

The disability scholar [Martin Norden lists several more tropes](#) that we often see characters with disabilities fall into. These include the "sweet innocent", the "obsessive avenger", and the "saintly sage." If TV writers were banned from replicating any of these common disability tropes for a decade and were simultaneously made to represent people with disabilities in proportion to the actual population living with disabilities, we would see a changed world. We would eradicate the degrees of bias and stigma that permeate our society right now.

Of course that is not going to happen, but luckily it doesn't need to happen that drastically for us to see narratives about disability shifting. There are shows that model inclusion relatively well. *American Horror Story* for example has hired several actors with disabilities. While there is some criticism that roles portraying people with disabilities as "freaks" falls into the realm of exploitation, the overall [critical consensus](#) seems to be that the characters are well-rounded and well-written. Another example of a show that hired several actors with disabilities to play characters with disabilities is *Switched at Birth*. Among its many deaf characters, the show hired six deaf actors. It also features some diversity within the disability community by having a lesbian deaf character, Natalie Pierce, played by deaf actress Stephanie Noguera. Unfortunately the show is set to be [cancelled after the next season](#) due in part to low ratings, but it remains one of the most disability friendly shows on television.

5. Tell Stories That Don't Focus on Disability

It may seem counter-intuitive to suggest more stories where disability is not the central theme of a character. However, consider the countless characters who are played by women where the fact that they are a woman is not the focus of their story. We are gradually arriving at a point where the same is happening for gay and lesbian characters. We need to see more actors with disabilities in roles that don't emphasize their disability, but where the disability is just a matter-of-fact. We need to see more doctors in wheelchairs, bank tellers who have amputated limbs, lawyers who have bipolar, and watch them solve medical puzzles and difficult caseloads independent of their disability. After all, the hallmark of inclusion is being able to have all aspects of one self fully integrated into society.

6. Where to Find Performers with Disabilities

Some of the countering we have addressed are the lack of inclusive rhetoric, lack of access to opportunity, access to training and lack of understanding, and creating an inclusive environment. Yet another counter to casting people with disability is that producers and casting directors have been quoted saying, "we do not know where to find them."

Here are several awareness campaigns and resources.

- 1) SAG-AFTRA has a list of those who self-identify as performers with disability
- 2) Media Access Offices of the California EDD (see also Media Access Awards)
- 3) IAM PWD Campaign (<https://www.sagaftra.org/category/hot-news/i-am-pwd>)
- 4) Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts (<http://inclusioninthearts.org>)
- 5) Talent Agency KMR where Gail Williamson represents PWDs
- 6) Actors Access, the actor's registration site of Breakdown Services. (<http://www.actorsaccess.com>)
- 7) The SAG-AFTRA and AMPTP (Association of Motion Picture and Television Producers), Joint Task Force on disability was established in 2011 for the purposes of raising awareness and understating obstacles and creating more opportunity for Performers With Disability.
- 8) Casting Directors that have received recognition from the Media Access Awards for their pro-active approach to casting PWDs 2010-2015 (<http://mediaaccessawards.com>)
 - Beth Lipari and Brice Newberg, CSA (2015)(Spring Awakening on Broadway)
 - Susan Bluestein, CSA and Jason Kennedy, CSA (2014)(NCIS)
 - Deedee Bradley, CSA (2013)(Switched at Birth, Veronica Mars)
 - Ronnie Yeskel, CSA (2012)(The Sessions, Curb Your Enthusiasm)

- Sharon Bialy and Sherry Thomas (2011)(Breaking Bad)
- Eric Dawson, Carol Kritzer, Robert J. Ulrich (2010)(Glee)