

Actors with learning disabilities say: “Give us more roles on TV”

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Getting Things Changed

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About the research

Today people can watch TV wherever they are, and at any time. There are more TV channels than ever, which can be watched on mobile phones, on the Internet and on traditional televisions. The way different kinds of people are shown on TV can change what we know, and think, about other people. People with learning disabilities told us they want to be on TV, so that people know 'we exist!'

Some television channels are looking at how their programmes include different kinds of people. In 2017, a report showed that the TV industry has fewer disabled people working in it than any other industry in the country. The report also showed that fewer disabled people are on TV than other groups.

Our research aimed to find out why there are so few people with learning disabilities on TV. The research

was led by Beth Richards, an actress who has learning disabilities.

Beth ran a survey (with 180 responses) and did 18 interviews with people in theatre, TV and the media.

It was important to do research about people with learning disabilities on TV, because lots of media groups are trying to make changes happen right now. For instance, in 2017 Equity (the union for performers) wrote a diversity manifesto about how roles on TV are cast. But these documents are often hard to understand, and people with learning disabilities are left out.

Policy implications

- TV would show the world as it really is, and be more interesting, with more people with learning disabilities in programmes.
- The people who make programmes for TV should write their policies and programme information in language that does not use jargon. Documents should be available in easy language, with pictures.
- Auditions, rehearsals and filming for TV need to be in accessible places and be done in different ways, with more time, and sometimes not using scripts.
- Writers should write more diverse roles for people with learning disabilities. People with learning disabilities can also write these roles.
- There should be different roles and characters for actors with learning disabilities, in different kinds of programmes: shows for children and adults, news, drama, comedy, documentaries, everything!
- The Arts Council should fund more training courses and theatre groups that include people with learning disabilities.
- Actors with learning disabilities can bring new, creative ways of making TV. They can be actors, writers, story-tellers and producers.
- Actors with learning disabilities need honest feedback, so that they can develop or learn to be better actors. This is the same for everyone.

Some people think people with learning disabilities can't do things. Seeing more people with learning disabilities on TV could change their minds.

Key findings

- In TV many performers are self-employed. That makes things more difficult for actors with learning disabilities.
- There are physical access problems in TV. But also, actors with learning disabilities need more time in auditions and when making TV shows, and they need clearer information to understand what is going on.
- Most people in our research said that they would like to see more people with learning disabilities on TV, playing different roles. Programmes should tell us about people's real lives, not just their disability.
- There are lots of talented people with learning disabilities in theatre groups in the UK, but TV companies do not work with these groups enough.
- Actors with learning disabilities who are on TV have often had a lot of support, or a family member who has helped them to get on TV.
- People may need a personal assistant or supporter so that they can work more independently, but they do not often get that support.
- Many people think it is 'ok' to say that everything performers with learning disabilities do is brilliant, even when it is not. People with learning disabilities are saying this is patronising and hurtful, and need it to change.
- People with learning disabilities can make their own TV and films. They can change the TV industry, by doing things in their own way. TV could be better for everyone.

Further information

This research was part of a large grant, 'Tackling Disabling Practices: co-production and change', funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) ES/M008339/1, led by Val Williams. For more information about the project: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/gettingthingschanged/about-the-project/>

Email: gtc-sps@bristol.ac.uk

The Equity 'Manifesto for Casting' (2017) is a list of things that people who make theatre, TV and film need to do, to be more inclusive and accessible.

<https://www.equity.org.uk/campaigns/manifesto-for-casting/statements-on-diversity/>

The Diamond Report, 'The First Cut' (2017) collected information from the TV industry, and it showed that there are fewer disabled people working in TV than any other group (5.5% of the work force, compared with 17% of the population.)

<https://creativitydiversitynetwork.com/diamond/the-first-cut/>



I wish TV makers would think more creatively and give people with learning disabilities any role - romantic, fantasy, comedy, shop assistants, office workers. I'd like to play James Bond, Romeo, Dobby in Harry Potter or a detective or many other roles. **(Tommy Jessop, TV actor)**

