

MEDIA REVIEW: An Audience's Guide to Disability in Mainstream Media: A Review of Beth Haller's *Representing Disability in an Ableist World: Essays on Mass Media*

When did autism become such a hot news topic? What are we to make of the character Timmy on *South Park*? (p. 168) What can a Doritos commercial tell us about our cultural understandings of disability? (pp. 199-200) What are news frames, and how can disability groups build their own? (pp. 71-73) And charity telethons - what is *with* those "pity-party" programs, anyway? (p. 137)

These questions are some of many that may have occurred to you as you absorb popular media. Yet, we have very few answers. Not many can explain how new and newly antiquated media alike relate to disability, or elucidate the pointed events that, through rampant mainstream media attention, become almost inescapable as they penetrate cultural understandings of disability.

American newspaper journalist Beth Haller began scribing disability themed stories in the 1980s after witnessing Gallaudet University's transformation following the 1988 *Deaf President Now* protests. She produced a feature article that followed the life of a deaf student and realized how little the public knew about deaf culture, and disability in general. A master's student at the time, she brought her curiosity about disability back to her journalism courses. She began digging through the library for academic research about media representations of people with disabilities. The pickings were scarce.

Jump ahead 20 years to find that Haller's name pops up in any scholarly search themed around disability and media. She is a leading authority on the topic. The publication of a collection of her most pertinent essays on advertising, news, entertainment, film and new media in *Representing Disability in an Ableist World: Essays on Mass Media* offers readers two decades worth of her most relevant research. Here, Haller investigates what it means in today's culture when our primary source of information about disability is media portrayals. She turns the media's ableist lens back onto itself to query how and why dominant understandings of disability are evolving. The central focus of the book balances on Haller's belief that "the media narratives that ignore, devalue or misrepresent disability issues reflect the ableism of society" - putting a quick end to the debate about her position on whether or not media shapes social action or reflects it.

The book's scope is wide, riddled with memorable examples and colourful quotes. After a clear explanation of ableism in

Author

Chelsea Temple Jones

Ryerson University,
Toronto, ON

Correspondence

Chels.temp.jones@gmail.com

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the introduction (and echoed throughout the entire text), Haller dives into new media – blogs, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and other forums – in the book’s first chapter. She writes, “No longer must people with disabilities put up with only mainstream media defining their issues”: anyone with Internet access can tell their stories without interference from mainstream news filters (pp. v, 1, 20). Haller argues, for example, that blogs function as a type of participatory journalism. Disability bloggers open online dialogues about personal and collective experiences of lived disability and theoretical understandings of disability, and link to disability-specific websites (pp. 3, 8–9). However, she also notes that web-based communication tends to be text-heavy and often unaccommodating for people with intellectual disabilities (p. 6). Even so, moving forward with technology has much potential, Haller argues, especially as technology adapts and the barriers begin to disappear (p. 20).

The second chapter centres on Haller’s preferred use of mixed (but usually quantitative) research methods, and positions her as a journalist-cum-academic with ever-growing ties to media practitioners covering (or making) disability and disability scholars seeking to understand media.

Following nicely, chapter three focusses on language as a “site of struggle,” and links media labeling practices to issues of identity (p. 60). Haller explains that language has always been an important factor in how we define cultural groups: our articulations of disability thus work to shape the general public’s understandings of disability and disabled people (p. 49). Here, she also describes the everyday, journalistic concepts of framing and news values (pp. 50, 55). Sweeping readers through a historical run-down of terms such as “handicapped,” “people-first,” “inspirational,” “wheelchair-bound,” “retard,” and others (pp. 50–55), she concludes this chapter by stating that her analysis offers “no definitive proof that the media are beginning to understand disability rights and disability terminology” but points only to the ways media-makers’ labeling of people has improved, which ultimately re-frames the way disability is treated in the media (p. 60).

The fourth chapter unapologetically unfolds for the reader recent media coverage of assisted suicide. Haller sets the scene by saying, “news frames are imbued with the power of the dominant able-bodied culture, which many times defines and classifies disabled people with negative messages,” including news framing that maintains and perpetuates the longstanding cultural belief that people with disabilities are “better off dead” (p. 67). The chapter offers a brief history of “the forerunners of assisted suicide”: eugenics and euthanasia (p. 69). What follows is a qualitative content analysis of relatively recent framings of assisted suicide in *The New York Times* (citing newsworthy figures such as Terri Schiavo and Dr. Jack Kevorkian) and a discussion on how people with disabilities have had to resist the “better off dead” mantra (pp. 69–71). Haller’s content analysis reveals five themes, or news frames – mainstream messages about disability. In her discussion of and, indeed, opposition to these mainstream messages, Haller offers readers guidance on where to find disability activists’ perspectives on the issue, perspectives conspicuously lacking in mainstream accounts (pp. 77–78).

The next chapter examines autism and inclusive education as the media’s most (currently) fashionable disability topic (pp. 87–104). Haller writes that while some parents of nondisabled children continue to fight against the inclusion of children with autism (and other disabilities) in the school system, disability advocates calling for inclusion over the past 25 years have succeeded in making the inclusion narrative stick. The result is an overly-simplistic media portrayal of autism: “So the media still write about some of the nuances of autism and inclusive education, but...I wonder if the news media will ever cover the complex issue of inclusive education with [a] multi-voice perspective ...” (p. 107). In a related vein, chapter six is a review of the ways in which disability media does (or does not) fit in with traditional journalism. Here, Haller describes the content and characteristics of a diverse group of American disability publications, as they appeared from the 1990s onward. Such publications have, historically, “filled the void” of mainstream media’s “spotty” and problematic disability coverage (p. 131).

The Jerry Lewis Telethon is used in Chapter 7 as a means of introducing the reader to disabil-

ity telethon discourse. This type of patronizing discourse is sometimes called “pity-party” talk, meant to describe ableist rhetoric that frames disability by objectifying the bodies of people with disabilities and describing disability as a grave misfortune in an effort to evoke pity and, ultimately, generate charity dollars aimed at healing or curing disability (or, at the very least, easing the suffering disability is said to cause) (p. 183). As Jerry Lewis puts it, “God goofed” when creating kids with disabilities (p. 145). “Happily,” Haller writes, “the subject of this chapter is becoming less and less relevant to the disability rights community.” The chapter opens with Haller’s description of Lewis as a fear mongering “oddball parent-child” and directs the reader to examples of disability activism against the telethon, such as the “Cure Jerry Lewis” video available on YouTube (pp. vii, 16, 139, 144). Critiquing the medical model of disability (upon which telethons are dependent), Haller expands upon the social model of disability; an understanding of disability which aims to demedicalize it and to redirect our attention away from the pathologizing view of disability as a state of being needing to be cured, healed, or eradicated towards a different and much broader social constructionist understanding of just what causes disability (140–141).

The “uneasy relationship” between disability and humour is the focus of Chapter 8 (p. 155). Haller’s coverage ranges from overt discrimination embedded in jokes aimed at people with disabilities (remember those horrifying Helen Keller jokes?) to a current brand of humor that some people with disabilities find empowering (remember the fear of laughing at disability that was evoked through horrifying Helen Keller jokes? Well, that fear is fading) (pp. 155–157). Presented are a number of the debates for and against disability-based humour. For example, Haller parallels disability jokes with ethnic jokes, which – genuinely funny or not – trigger nervous laughter and controversy. She cites examples of intentional disability humour in television shows such as *South Park* and *How’s Your News?*, as well as disability humour as it appears on mainstream comedies such as *Seinfeld* and *My Name is Earl* (pp. 168–169) – all of which have both supporters and critics. This chapter is indebted to cartoonist John Callahan’s use of humour in his portrayals of disability. Haller writes of how the cartoonist

both understood and influenced “disability as comedy” through his illustrations (p. 170).

Launched into the ninth chapter, the reader is treated to an examination of film images of disability. Here, Haller places readers in the middle of R-Word debates currently flowing across the U.S. on radio and online (pp. 184–185). According to Haller, debates about the term “retard” hit a crux in 2010 when U.S. President Barack Obama’s Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel, called a political advertising plan “fucking retarded” in *The Wall Street Journal* (p. 184). Youth, in particular, responded fiercely, identifying themselves as disability advocates or self-advocates and leading rallies across the U.S. to encourage other high school students to stop saying the R-word (p. 185). The campaigns and debates continue to expand, and to garner strength and more diverse supporters. This chapter is further notable for its mention of disability tropes in mainstream films such as *Avatar* (2009), *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), and *Tropic Thunder* (2008).

Finally, in the last and tenth chapter, Haller, perhaps surprisingly, argues that advertising is slowly but most certainly improving the public’s understandings of disability. Although the difficulty in writing this chapter, Haller explains, was in finding the advertisements amid news media, her analysis of specific advertisements show important trends: the “supercrip” message of disabled people overcoming barriers is, regrettably, still present, and disability continues to be advertised as a “tragedy” (pp. 198, 199). However, “disability pride” is beginning to appear in mainstream ads for products such as Doritos and advertising companies are starting to boast about breaking through and out of disability stereotypes; both of which would seem to signal the beginnings of a more general perception that people with disabilities are a worthwhile audience (pp. 200, 203).

Overall, *Representing Disability in an Ableist World: Essays on Mass Media* is a comprehensive yet unpretentious body of work devoted to understanding how and why disability appears in the media as it does. Haller positions herself in her writing early on, but takes her place backstage after describing her relationship with the topic and with her collaborators. Haller’s choice to write journalistically for audiences inside and

outside the academy who share her curiosities is a courteous move, since anyone poking through the literature on this topic will find Haller's work scattered amongst both heavily-jargoned academic publications and casually written blogs (including her own Blog called *Media dis&dat*). Her clear and intelligent writing is thus a welcome mid-way point for readers. However, I did feel that a nice addition to the book would have been illustrations – especially of the many films, cartoons, and advertisements referenced throughout the book. I feel these would have served to support and reinforce her arguments in a way that readers would find useful.

Perhaps most attractively, Haller adds relevance to her writing by embracing the ever-changing media landscape with an optimistic slant, suggesting that new media – even the kinds we don't know about yet – will come to enhance the ways people with disabilities communicate with the public and forever change how the masses understand disability. The timing of her reflections couldn't be better – new media can no longer be written off as a passing fad, and the accessibility of it is only set to improve. That is, as long as Facebook stops ignoring petitions for accessibility (p. 6); Second Life keeps up its reputation as a community builder for people with disabilities (p. 11); Twitter remains “endlessly useful” (p. 14); and more venues for communication emerge.

Any means of communication that does not have to be filtered through mainstream media is a tool for people with disabilities to tell their own stories (p. 20). Sometimes, these methods are the result of covertly changing media landscapes as much as they are a result of disability activism. For instance, Haller tells us the “death” of telethons results partly from changing perceptions of disability and the protestations of disability activists, but also from changes in television production as audiences turn away from their television sets and hop online (p. 152). Haller urges that we – the media audience – need to rethink our assumptions about disability representation, and how we react to it. Ableism dominates in the contemporary media landscape, but perhaps not for long if people with disabilities continue finding ways to deliver their own messages. As viewers, we can choose to be optimistic, or not. Either way, the change is unstoppable.

The book draws upon both qualitative and quantitative research, but Haller makes a strong argument for her almost-exclusive use of content analysis: “[Content analysis] allows me to assess what the news media say about disability through the sources they use, the images they use, and with what effect” without having a huge impact on research subjects (pp. iii-iv, 25, 28). She cites herself once in a while, which can be read as a testimony to the absence of research in this area and a call for other researchers to join the conversation. Haller tells us: “Few scholars have analyzed disability media in any systemic way at all” (p. 115).

This book also offers significant contributions to the discussion of disability representation in language. While Haller does not deeply penetrate the semiotic realm of cultural and disability studies, she does point out the ramifications of the use of disabling language that works to shape the public's understandings of disability (p. 49). Here, Haller echoes Simi Linton in describing how the ableist language used by media practitioners is disseminated on a large scale, and therefore plays a central role in molding how we understand and articulate our understandings of disability and how people with disabilities come to understand themselves amid this backdrop of generally ableist media (pp. 54–55).

This book is clearly a product of the United States, which may be a drawback for some. Canadian readers may feel a little left out as they read about American media such as *Pelswick* and *How's Your News?* (pp. 55–61). In conversations about language, when much work has been done in Canada by scholars and journalists alike, Haller roots her conversation about language in the wording and implementation of the *Americans with Disabilities Act* and its important role in “maintaining a narrative of civil rights” applied to people with disabilities that, according to her content analysis, encouraged a sincere shift in disability-based language amid American newspapers in the following years (pp. 49, 55–60).

Nevertheless, the themes in this book can be projected across the border. For instance, questions of how the public comes to understand the disabled body in society as it is presented by Jerry Lewis's Muscular Dystrophy Association

Telethon are equally relevant to how these representations are replicated by the Kinsmen Kinettes Telemiracle Foundation annual telethon in Saskatchewan. Both charity circuses infantilize and make pitiable people with disabilities in an effort to win the sympathetic pledges of presumably non-disabled audience members (p. 140). Additionally, Haller's narrative about media coverage of assisted suicide offers grounding for our discussions about current and historic events in Canada, especially with the Royal Society of Canada's report (2011) urging a new national debate on the topic nearly two decades after Sue Rodriguez¹ brought the issue into the Canadian public sphere. Haller's writings about media coverage of assisted suicide are also relevant to our collective memories of the killing of Tracey Latimer by her father in 1993,² an event which made international headlines. The topic of assisted suicide, as I've learned through my own research, remains a sore spot for many journalists with disabilities who covered these events while working for mainstream news outlets. Canadians still do not fully understand why disability appears in the media as it does in this country, and how it shapes our understandings of disability. Haller's text resonates with our media experiences and will help us better understand media trends moving forward.

By following the newsworthy curiosities we wonder, for example, Where did *The Ragged Edge*³ go? Why did newspapers such as *The New York Times* refer to people as "handicapped" as late as the 1990s? (p. 26) What's with "King Gimp" Dan

Keplinger's association with Cingular Wireless? (p. 196) And, did the Black Eyed Peas really get away with that song?⁴ Haller has penned a fundamental addition to the newly emerging discussions about disability and media with online, multi-media sources you likely haven't even heard about. These examples will leave you mulling over the messages you receive each day, and searching your memories for media ableism you may have once dismissed.

Representing Disability in an Ableist World: Essays on Mass Media is an academic bricolage to be read alongside journalists' writing on disability, including that by Joe Shapiro, Paul Longmore, and others. Haller's work transforms our conceptions about how the mass media handles disability by comprehensively examining representations of disability emerging in our constantly changing media terrain. In that it navigates the fields of disability studies and media studies, *Representing Disability in an Ableist World: Essays on Mass Media* is a wide-reaching overview to better understand the ways in which people with disabilities are represented en masse and to answer some of those questions you've been pondering for a while now.

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1 Sue Rodriguez learned she had amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease, in 1991. She advocated for assisted suicide and twice took her case to the Supreme Court of Canada. She lost both times. Her advocacy earned much mainstream news attention. In 1994 Rodriguez ended her life with the assistance of an anonymous physician.

2 Saskatchewan farmer Robert Latimer was convicted of second-degree murder after killing his 12-year-old daughter, Tracey, in 1993 by piping carbon monoxide into his truck. Tracy had cerebral palsy. Latimer's case reached the Supreme Court of Canada in 1997 and triggered much public debate about "compassionate killing." By 2010 Latimer was released from jail and granted full parole.

3 *The Ragged Edge* is an American disability activist publication that began in 1980 under the name *The Disability Rag*.

4 In 2003 The Black Eyed Peas released a song with the title, "Let's Get Retarded," which reached the number two spot on *Billboard* magazine's Canadian chart and was later re-released as "Let's Get it Started."