

[Review] Katie Ellis and Gerard Goggin (2015) Disability and the media

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Disability and the Media by Katie Ellis and Gerard Goggin, London, Palgrave, 2015, 160 pp., £21.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0230-29320-5

This book forms part of the 'Key Concerns in Media Studies' series edited by Andrew Crisell and is aimed primarily at students and teachers of the media, although it will also have appeal to academic readers and disability activists and organisations. The authors were aiming to fill a gap for a general textbook on disability and the media by way of introduction to significant theories and concepts. They certainly cover much ground in a short volume and offer tantalizing glimpses into the power and reach of the media and its inevitable shortcomings. The book covers definitions of disability as well as some understandings of disability theory and addresses access, participation, representation, production and consumption using a wealth of relevant and recent examples.

The initial chapters of this book explore definitions of disability and challenge the reader to interrogate the assumptions of commonly used classifications and to explore the more nuanced meanings of what disability means. A case study of Miley Cyrus 'twerking with dwarves' (13) is used to illustrate a range of responses to the representation of disability in the media. Chapter Two offers a brief overview of disability studies, and both the medical and social models are referenced as a way to explore the social and cultural underpinnings of disability. Seminal texts by Zola (1989), Barnes (1992) and Watson, Roulstone and Thomas (2012) are cited as central to these debates and worthy of further study for those who want to deepen their understanding. Interestingly, this chapter does manage to take us beyond the binaries of the medical and social models, of positive and stereotyped representations into cultural disability studies and the ways in which culture and language can both perpetuate the 'otherness' of (dis)ability as well as offering sites of empowerment.

Chapter Three looks at the ways in which the media and disability relate to each other. The initial example of the film *The King's Speech* illustrates the power of the media to orchestrate conformity to the medium – to moderate a stutter - in order for the voice to 'fit' the conventions of radio. Ellis and Goggin go on to argue that the rapid development of the media and digital media has brought new challenges to some groups in the way that radio brought exclusion for deaf people and television brought challenges for the blind. The concept of access to, and participation in, the media are further explored through the advent of audio description to enable greater access to television for blind or visually impaired people.

A case study of the representation of disability in the news is offered in Chapter Four by considering the different 'frames' employed by news producers to detail the content of a news story, often portraying disabled people as deviant, disadvantaged or dependent. Ellis and Goggin also identify more progressive approaches such as the cultural pluralist model that allow for more positive framings, albeit still through the anchoring of certain meanings. The case study of the London Paralympics is helpful here in

illustrating both a welcome focus on disabled lives and achievements, and a less welcome dominant discourse of the 'supercrip' model of beating the odds (although the under-representation of athletes with learning disabilities is not acknowledged here). The rarity of incidental characters played by disabled actors is brought to our attention by the example of *Breaking Bad*, which is singled out for breaking ground as the character's disability becomes less salient than the character himself in the cult television series. A less progressive example is given in the TV series 'Glee' in which a non-disabled actor plays a character in a wheelchair dreaming of a cure. However, signs of progress and change are identified in comedy series such as *My Gimp Life* and *The Last Leg* where disability culture is emerging and re-appropriating power by owning the jokes about disability.

Ellis and Goggin finally turn towards media ownership and the means of production as a less researched area where disabled people are completely under-represented. They argue that without the pervasive employment of disabled people, representations of disability are likely to be narrow, little understood and marginalized in mainstream media. While the industry is extremely competitive, relying heavily on short-term, temporary or freelance contracts, there have been some recent developments areas such as community television, radio and new media which are helping to pave the way for people to develop skills and move into more mainstream media positions. The democratization seen through the proliferation of social media such as blogging, tweeting and forum discussions by disabled people is challenging stereotypes and making previously unrepresented voices more frequently heard. In conclusion to the book, the authors coherently summarize their arguments and identify challenges to disability and the media in relation to accessibility, representation, consumption, production and employment.

While *Disability and the Media* tries to be global in scope, it perhaps falls short in trying to do too much. The chapter on television, notably one of the shortest, can only scratch the surface of the images and programming experienced there. Advertising is not even attempted. A rich array of examples is identified for discussion but the representation of those with intellectual disabilities is explored less exhaustively. Ellis and Goggin demonstrate how far the media still has to go in relation to disability and that both the news and popular television offer very limited narratives and frames through which we come to understand versions of disability. The frustration that the authors feel is palpable as they surmise that the media have been 'spectacularly *crap*' (117; original emphasis) in their slowness to respond to the employment, representation, participation and consumption of disabled people. I would readily recommend *Disability and the Media* as an excellent introduction to some of the key issues in disability and the media for those seeking to join the debate.

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