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Development of the People or Props Tool: Integrating Prejudice Reduction Psychology Insights to Improve Representations of Disability on Screen

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Plain English Summary

Introduction

This article explains the design process of a tool to improve representations of disability in the media.

Disabled people are often represented in a way which makes the audience less likely to feel empathy for them. Lots of films often show disabled people as evil, or like children. This reinforces bad ideas about disabled people in the minds of the people who view this media. To try to fix this problem a tool was developed using ideas from Psychology. This tool has two parts, a short checklist and a longer set of general advice.

Summary of Research Approach

This project used the Delphi Method, which is when you have a group of experts who go over the current state of the design and discuss how to improve it. Once a consensus is reached on what should change these are implemented and the new design is given to the experts and the process repeats multiple times. For this project the researcher formed an initial list of recommendations which were based on prejudice reduction research based on Contact Theory, which is about how prejudice is reduced when people are exposed under specific conditions to the people they are prejudiced against.

Summary of main points of paper

Prejudice against disabled people is widespread in society, 67% of the British public admit to feeling uncomfortable talking to disabled people. 43% claim to not know any disabled people, so the main way they encounter them is through the media. Disabled people are eight times more likely than other minority groups to say that how they are represented in the media is inaccurate.

Disabled people are often not included in writing, producing or acting in media about disabled people. This leads to many harmful portrayals which reinforce the prejudice of the people who make it. These unrealistic portrayals directly impact the quality of life of disabled people. Having disabled creators and sensitivity readers involved from the start would be ideal. However, this involvement is unlikely because of the current lack of representation of disabled people employed by the media industry. Therefore, having a quick tool to have a minimum baseline standard for representation is needed.

This article developed a tool that had two parts, a short test which could be used on a piece of media to offer a pass or a failing score, and then a longer piece of advice if the media had failed. The items in the test included the following elements:

Quickscore:

1. Authenticity - Is the actor playing the disabled character disabled?
2. Frequency - Are there more than 2 disabled characters?
3. Embodiment - Is the story told from the disabled persons point of view?
4. Status - Is the disabled character treated equally to other characters?
5. Depth - Is the character defined by anything other than their disability?
- 6 Stereotyping - Does the character avoid tropes and stereotypes?

(These include treating the disabled character like a child or having them do evil things)

Recommendations

1. More representation is better, but only if other conditions are met.
2. Show disabled characters as human, not superhuman or as if they were children.
3. Show disabled characters having common shared goals with non-disabled characters.
4. Avoid showing them as competing for limited resources with non-disabled characters.

5. Avoid showing somebody faking a disability.
6. Try to make the portrayal as authentic as possible.
7. The more the audience sees themselves and identifies with the disabled character the better.
8. Pleasant feelings should be associated with the disabled character.
9. Do not portray their lives as not worth living or worth less than the lives of others.
10. Have a high variety of portrayals.
11. Show disabled community, and disabled people taking care of each other.
12. Show disabled people sharing different group identities with non-disabled people.
13. Talk about money, do not try to take the politics out of being disabled.
14. Tell stories that counter existing stereotypes about disabled people.
15. Avoid portrayals that show them as asexual or sexually abnormal.
16. Avoid conflating evil and disability.
17. Do not give them super powers to make up or overcompensate for being disabled.

Please note the above Quickscore and Recommendations are significantly simplified from the original version.

Summary of main implications

Prejudice is likely to be generated against any group that is oppressed and has low amounts of social power. So, the best way to deal with prejudice is improving equality in society itself. As long as there is economic pressure to exclude disabled people, it is likely media portrayals will attempt to dehumanise them. But humanising portrayals of disabled people are also important to achieve social change.

This tool is primarily intended for media creators to improve portrayals of disability but has a variety of other uses. The psychology of prejudice reduction works just the same with other minority experiences so the tool should be able to be easily adapted by swapping in different stereotypes for the relevant group. The quickscore can be made to produce information which can tell investors the likely response from disabled people as a market segment, it can also be used by funding bodies to decide if projects get funded.

Having an overall framework for what increases prejudice may also help counter propaganda efforts, by clarifying and bringing attention to the methods used to dehumanise marginalised groups within society.

More information

The Quickscore is not intended to be used on its own and should always be paired with the Recommendations. Additionally, this tool is not intended to replace disabled employees or be a substitute to their involvement.

This research was a dissertation project by Richard Amm, a disabled psychologist on a MSc Disability, Design and Innovation MSc at University College London (UCL). No funding or institutional interests to declare.

Additional Simple English information about this project can be found in the free zine titled 'Disability Film Analysis Tools' by the Disability Action Research Kollektive (DARK)
<https://linktr.ee/disabilityark>