

The Representation and Portrayal of People with Disabilities in Irish Broadcasting

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Introduction

In 2007 the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland (BCI) and the National Disability Authority (NDA) embarked on their first research collaboration to gauge how people with disabilities are represented and portrayed in Irish broadcasting today. For the purpose of this research, “representation” refers to the extent to which people with disabilities are present in the programmes, whereas “portrayal” refers to the nature of the representation (i.e. how individual or groups with disabilities are represented).

The aim of this collaboration was to carry out research that would inform broadcasters, policy makers and the public (including people with disabilities) and would be used in the development of voluntary guidelines on the fair and accurate representation of people with disabilities in broadcast media.

The research involved 3 separate projects on the representation and portrayal of people with disabilities in broadcasting:

1. A review of legislation, policy and practice in other jurisdictions
2. A survey of Irish people’s attitudes to the representation of people with disabilities in Ireland
3. A content and discourse analysis of Irish broadcasting

The combined findings provide new insights into the representation and portrayal of people with disabilities in Irish broadcasting. They also provide a foundation for the establishment of voluntary guidelines on the representation and portrayal of people with disabilities in broadcasting in the Republic. This document contains a summary of the key findings of each report. The full reports can be read online at www.nda.ie or www.bci.ie.

Disclaimer

The Broadcasting Commission of Ireland (BCI) and the National Disability Authority (NDA) have funded this research. Responsibility for the research (including any errors or omissions) remains with the organisation who conducted the research. The views and opinions contained in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of either the BCI or the NDA.

1. A Review of Other Jurisdictions

Introduction

This study was led by Marie McGonagle and Shivaun Quinlivan at the Faculty of Law, National University of Ireland, Galway. It set out to examine the legislation, policy and practice that governs the representation of people with disabilities in a selection of other countries. The countries covered were the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Germany, Malta, Spain and Sweden.

The approach and methodology involved desk research, which was followed by contact with various research networks and direct approaches to individuals and organisations, mainly for clarification or to access documents referred to in online sources.

The study contains individual reports on each country, broken down into sections, which include:

- an outline of the relevant disability and broadcasting legislation
- a brief explanation of the role of the broadcasting regulator and a list of the main public service and private broadcasters (television and radio)
- a detailed examination of the provisions of relevant codes and guidelines
- a look at other initiatives taken by regulators, broadcasters, broadcast representative associations or disability organisations or networks. The research focused on the way these initiatives are implemented and subsequently monitored, assessed and reviewed to determine their effectiveness

In addition to these individual reports, there is a brief comparative study of the countries chosen, which aims to identify common threads, as well as dissimilarities in approach or practice and developing trends.

Key Findings

In all the countries studied as part of the jurisdictional review, detailed provisions and measures to improve the representation of people with disabilities in broadcasting are relatively new. In some, they are only being developed or planned.

- The least structured regime is to be found in the United States, largely as a result of the strong protection for freedom of expression in the First Amendment. The most structured and comprehensive system is found in the United Kingdom
- In most countries, broadcasting legislation obliges broadcasters to have regard to diversity, including ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity. Canada is a good example of a country where such provisions have been broadly interpreted to include people with disabilities
- The standards and practices relating to people with disabilities are generally set out in codes or guidelines. Many of the codes or guidelines, while general, are broad enough to encompass disability, while others specifically embrace disability
- Most codes or guidelines result from broadcasting legislation but do not have the force of law; rather they are co-regulatory (established and implemented through the co-operation of regulators and broadcasters) or self-regulatory (where broadcasters are encouraged to draw up codes or guidelines themselves, to monitor compliance and provide a complaints mechanism). The exception is Malta, where the provisions of codes and guidelines developed by the regulator are part of the law (Requirements 2007)
- Some countries' codes and guidelines are complemented by regulators' and/or broadcasters' diversity plans, equality plans or action plans. These provide a basis for ongoing activities and the assessment of progress in improving the representation of people with disabilities in broadcasting
- In addition to the codes and guidelines, a variety of initiatives have been introduced in most countries, mainly by disability organisations or government departments (usually health departments) and sometimes by broadcast or arts associations or employment organisations. The most common initiatives of this nature include: the development of resources (e.g. websites, databases, style books and educational materials); training programmes (often in universities and schools, some for journalists and some for people with disabilities who are interested in participating in broadcasting); and support measures (such as scholarships, internships, prizes and training workshops).
- The part played by research undertaken in the various countries is noteworthy. It has informed and shaped many of the initiatives taken and has assisted in the assessment of their effectiveness and progress.
- The overall picture emerging from the report is that, in the past, there was very little, usually negative, portrayal of people with disabilities in broadcasting. There was very limited awareness of disability as a concern for broadcasters or as an issue that broadcasters should address.

- However, over the past few years, as part of an increased awareness of the basic rights of individuals generally, and a realisation of the role and importance of broadcasting in representing diversity and minority viewpoints, ethno-cultural and race issues, disability has emerged as a specific focus.
- As society has been confronted with the need to provide equal opportunities for people with disabilities and to confront stereotypical images, broadcasters have become more engaged, often prompted by initiatives taken by disability organisations. In some countries, there has been a particular focus on mental health disabilities and the need to de-stigmatise it. To that end, broadcasting has become a vehicle for public awareness campaigns and a forum for tackling stereotyping and negative portrayal.

Overview of Individual Countries

United States

There is no obligation on broadcasters in the US to reflect diversity in programme content. The strong freedom of speech guarantee in the First Amendment to the US Constitution creates a framework within which neither the government nor the Federal Communications Commission can regulate content beyond that which is obscene. The emphasis, therefore, is on the provision of information and the raising of awareness of disability issues. This is instigated mainly by government bodies linked to departments of health, and by arts organisations, journalism educational associations and disability organisations.

Efforts in the US to improve the representation of people with disabilities are hampered by the restrictive concept of diversity used by broadcasters as relating to women and racial minorities. They do not share the broad all-encompassing concept of diversity that is used in Canada, for example, in which people with disabilities are now very prominent.

Progress in the US will depend on the willingness of broadcasters to co-operate with initiatives and on increased use of the public broadcasting funding system to produce programming that addresses the needs of, and issues concerning, people with disabilities.

In relation to children's programming, the US took the lead in disability representation. In the 1970s, children with disabilities and adult role models were included in "Sesame Street" and are now present in "Blue's Clues", "Zoom" and other popular shows.

Canada

The broadcasting industry in Canada strives to promote Canadian programming, expression and culture, and to represent all sections of the community. The representation of people with disabilities in the broadcast media is a live issue in Canada and many initiatives are being examined or are under way to advance this objective. The broadcasting regulator, the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), has been instrumental in advancing this goal.

The CRTC makes it obligatory for commercial broadcasters to develop corporate diversity plans and to file annual diversity reports. This means that broadcasters must develop and monitor initiatives, and remove any barriers to achieving diversity on an ongoing basis.

In many respects, Canada is an excellent model of best practice in the representation of people with disabilities internationally. It has many examples of useful initiatives that could be adopted in Ireland. Of particular interest are a report from the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB) entitled “The Presence, Portrayal and Participation of Persons with Disabilities in Television Programming” (2005) and the CAB Diversity in Broadcasting website www.cab-acr.ca/diversityinbroadcasting.

Australia

Broadcasting legislation in Australia helps to ensure a more positive representation of people with disabilities. It obliges broadcasters to develop codes of practice that take into account programme content that is likely to incite or perpetuate hatred against or vilify any person or group on the basis of physical or mental disability.

Nevertheless, an examination of these codes reveals that, where such provisions are present, they are couched in terms of negative obligations, which can be excused on a number of grounds, such as in the context of artistic works, including comedy or satire.

However, the development of the government-funded Mindframe Media Initiative, which is guided by the National Media and Mental Health Group, provides innovative approaches to the depiction of mental health disabilities in the media. Divided into a number of projects, the initiative targets key areas such as the provision of useful resources and education for journalists e.g. through the *Response Ability* project.

A project entitled StigmaWatch promotes the accurate, respectful and sensitive depiction of mental health disabilities and suicide. It exposes cases of media stigma and encourages those responsible to change their practices. Members of the public who notice incidents of stigma in the media can report them to StigmaWatch. These reports are verified and then posted on its website. This is a contemporary, interactive and useful monitoring and evaluation tool that targets all aspects of media coverage of mental health disabilities. It not only highlights stigmatisation but also rewards good practice through its good news files.

New Zealand

The representation in the media of people with disabilities is an area that has yet to be specifically addressed in New Zealand. Broadcasting objectives formulated by the Ministry of Culture and Heritage make no specific reference to improving the representation of people with disabilities. The legislation merely states that the Broadcasting Standards Authority should “encourage” the development of codes by broadcasters. However, it does specifically mention disability in relation to codes on the portrayal of people in programmes.

Since 1997, when the Ministry of Health initiated a project entitled Like Minds, Like Mine, there has been a particular focus on the issue of mental health disabilities. Considerable work has been done to raise awareness of mental health disabilities and to improve the representation in broadcasting of people with experience of mental health difficulties. The Mental Health Foundation has also been actively involved in this project. It monitors programming and provides grants and resources.

Germany

The media in Germany are independent from the State. This means that government agencies may not exercise any direct or indirect influence on programming content and that certain desirable programmes or broadcasts may not be subsidised from public funds.

A search of the German broadcasters’ programming archive databases reveals that there is a high level of representation of people with disabilities in German programming. ABM, an organisation for the advancement of disabled people in the media, for example, has produced more than 1,000 documentaries since 1989. Peter Radtke, the general manager and chief editor of a small TV station and film production company in Germany that deals exclusively with disability topics, recommends the establishment of a European network of journalists, with or without a disability, who are working in the field of disability, to exchange experiences and find ways of co-operation.

Malta

The broadcasting laws in Malta are unique. It has recently adopted a set of specific mandatory standards and practices directly relating to disability and its portrayal in broadcasting, with which all broadcasters (both public and private) have a legal duty to comply.

The requirements embrace the representation of people with disabilities in broadcast media as people first and foremost, with respective civil and human rights; as audiences consuming media content; as producers and makers of media content; as contributors; and as media workers and practitioners. They reflect input from both the National Commission for Persons with Disability and the Broadcasting Regulatory Authority.

People with disabilities who participate in programmes are protected from being exploited or being negatively depicted in such programmes. Broadcasting legislation also provides a clear and accountable channel for evaluating complaints regarding alleged breaches of the requirements.

Spain

While there is no legislation in Spain which directly addresses the representation of people with disabilities, new audiovisual legislation to be enacted will include a negative obligation not to discriminate against people with disabilities. In terms of codes and guidelines in place, the Self-Regulation Code on Television Content and Children contains a negative obligation to avoid the use of children and young people with disabilities for a “propagandistic aim” within the protected time frame established. There are also some non-official guidelines on the representation of people with disabilities in place but such codes, which largely relate to the use of language, were prepared without input from the media and there is little awareness or observance of them.

Co-operative measures to address the representation of people with disabilities in the media in Spain are in their infancy, with a manifesto co-ordinated by Fundación ONCE signed only in 2007. Fundación ONCE seeks to establish effective equal opportunities to help integrate people with disabilities into society. It aims, among other things, to increase both the visibility of people with a disability in mainstream programming and to improve their portrayal. Reports on their efficacy of the manifesto are not yet available but the indications are that they will have some success. ONCE is currently co-ordinating the European Media and Disability Project.

Sweden

While constitutional and broadcasting legislation provisions in Sweden go some way towards addressing the issue, Sweden's disability and anti-discrimination legislation has little, if any, affect.

A recently adopted action plan on media and disability, developed by the Swedish Disability Federation in collaboration with a number of major players in the broadcasting industry, is under way. It aims to develop and disseminate new and existing resources for the mainstream media industry and for disability organisations to demonstrate how more positive representations of people with disabilities can be achieved.

The action plan is an example of best practice in raising awareness and encouraging discourse and action to be taken in areas that have a significant impact on the way in which people with disabilities are represented in Sweden's broadcast media in terms of employment, access, education, research and, not least, the participation of people with disabilities in the broadcasting industry.

It is clear that the impetus for the most significant initiatives and research has come from disability organisations, e.g. the Independent Living Institute's Radio Independent Living. It produces 30-minute audio programmes about civil rights, cultural identity and solidarity. The downloadable sound files report on trends, projects and policies within and outside Sweden. The project makes use of the internet's cost-effectiveness in disseminating the programmes, to which users of ordinary home computers can listen.

United Kingdom

The representation of people with disabilities in the UK's broadcast media is very much a widespread and evolving topic. Disability equality obligations, embedded in both disability and broadcasting legislation, have compelled the UK's broadcasting sector (both public and private) to adopt a series of extensive measures aimed at advancing such representation, both on and off air.

Disability legislation places duties on public bodies, such as the communications regulator Ofcom and public service broadcasters (BBC and Channel 4), to devise disability equality schemes and action plans that outline how they intend to fulfil their respective disability equality duties. Communications legislation expands on the issue by placing both general and specific obligations on the regulator and broadcasters to respect the needs of people with disabilities in areas such as employment and training, access to services and broadcast content standards.

Ofcom plays a pivotal role in advancing the representation of people with disabilities within the UK's broadcasting sector. Under communications legislation for example, Ofcom has a legal duty to encourage the promotion of equal opportunities for people with disabilities in employment and training within the broadcasters it regulates.

To this end, Ofcom published a toolkit for broadcasters, containing practical ways to ensure equal opportunities for people with disabilities in employment and training within their organisations. In addition to encouraging broadcasters to monitor their workforces and provide access to training, Ofcom also requires public service broadcasters to submit an annual report containing information on the diversity of their organisations.

With regard to the representation of people with disabilities in programme content, Ofcom has a legal duty to set, review and revise standards for programme content for television and radio. Ofcom's Broadcasting Code 2005 makes specific reference to material that is discriminatory and causes offence to people with disabilities.

Summary

All the countries studied have undertaken a variety of measures at different levels, from legislative to purely voluntary, to improve the representation of people with disabilities in broadcasting. In most cases, the awareness of the need to improve the representation is relatively recent and the response is still at an early stage. However, countries can learn a lot from each other's experiences and there is a significant body of research that can provide guidance.

In terms of the detail of its approach, the UK stands out. It has adopted very detailed regulation and extensive consultation, analysis and review processes. In the UK, both disability legislation and broadcasting legislation require the broadcasting regulator and broadcasters to develop detailed schemes and action plans. These have led to the establishment of a multi-layered internal organisational structure within the regulatory body, Ofcom, and in individual broadcast organisations such as the BBC. It has also led to the undertaking of a wide range of activities and the development of a comprehensive system for engaging in extensive consultation, analysis and review.

The scale of activity may be warranted by the size and complexities of the UK broadcast sector. Ofcom, for instance, is a very large regulatory body, with jurisdiction over 100s of television and radio channels broadcasting within the UK and to other countries around the world.

Malta also stands out in a particular way. It has raised the principles and guidelines developed by the broadcast regulator (2002 Code) to the status of law. This is unusual in comparison to the approach taken by legislatures in other jurisdictions examined. It has done so only recently (2007) and it remains to be seen how this will work in practice. The principles are detailed instructions for dealing with disability issues and people with disabilities. Such detail would normally be included in codes or guidelines rather than in law.

In Malta, a breach of these principles can lead to fines or a programme being suspended or taken off air. To date this has not happened but the penalties for breaching the requirements are far-reaching and may be questionable on freedom of expression grounds.

The overall impression arising from this research is that there are some useful ideas for actions and supports to be found in all of the countries studied.

This report is available in full in an accessible format on www.nda.ie or www.bci.ie.

2. Public Attitudes to the Representation of People with Disabilities in the Republic of Ireland Broadcast Media

Introduction

The aim of this research, carried out by Lansdowne Market Research, is to provide information about public attitudes to the representation of people with disabilities in both radio and television broadcasting.

The information is derived from a representative population survey of males and females aged 18 and over living in the Republic of Ireland. A total of 1,013 interviews were undertaken face-to-face in respondents' homes throughout the Republic between 22 August and 8 October 2007.

Specifically, the research assessed the:

- awareness and attitudes of the viewer or listener to representations of people with disabilities in radio and television broadcasting;
- attitudes to language used in radio and television broadcasting to describe or to refer to people with disabilities;
- impact of representations of people with disabilities in radio and television broadcasting on viewing or listening;
- regular broadcasting viewing and listening habits, including measures of quantity or time and type of programming.

Main Areas of Questioning

Respondents to the survey were asked a range of questions that addressed areas such as whether those interviewed recalled seeing or hearing people with disabilities on radio or television, and whether their presence would affect their likelihood to view or listen.

- Respondents were asked to think back to the last time they noticed a person with a disability on television and the last time that they noticed a person with a disability on radio.
- Respondents were asked how big the role was of the person with the disability, how relevant was his or her disability to the TV or radio programme and what genre did the programme fall into.
- Respondents were asked what impact did they think the increased inclusion of people with disabilities would have on their viewership or listenership of programmes in which people with disabilities were present.

- Respondents were asked their opinion of how people with disabilities are generally talked about on television and radio.
- One of the objectives of the study was to assess the acceptability and likelihood to view or listen to programming with people with disabilities present, across a number of programme genres. To facilitate respondents' visualisation of what such programming might be like, 15 different hypothetical programme scenarios were presented. Each scenario was developed to represent a specific disability in a specific genre of programme. The interviewees answered a range of questions in response to these scenarios.
- Finally, respondents were asked: "Thinking about the terms that people use to talk about people with disabilities on television and radio, how do you feel about each of the following words or phrases?" They were given a list and asked to rate each word or phrase on a 5-point scale from "totally acceptable" to "totally unacceptable".

Key Findings

Recall of people with disabilities

- People with any form of disability were more widely recalled from television programming than from radio programming. However, half of the overall sample could not recall any person with a disability on television and nearly 80% could not recall such a person on radio. Those who themselves have a disability are more sensitised and more likely to claim such recall from TV or radio.
- The most frequent disability recalled on television was physical disability (25%). Other disability types were less likely to be recalled on television, although mental health and hearing disabilities were recalled slightly more often than others (8% and 7% respectively). There was no specific disability recalled more than others on radio.
- Where respondents recalled a person with a disability in a TV programme, they mainly thought the person played a major role; on radio, such individuals were thought to have been in more secondary roles.
- Talk shows accounted for nearly half of the radio programmes where people with disabilities were recalled, ahead of news and current affairs. The types of TV programmes where they were recalled were more varied, with news, drama, soap operas, current affairs and special interest shows for those with disabilities to the fore.

Affect on likelihood to view

- Most members of the overall sample said that the inclusion of more people with disabilities on TV would have no impact on their likelihood to view – with 1 in 4 feeling that it would make them more likely to view. Attitudes were very similar in relation to including more people with disabilities on radio.
- Those favourable to more inclusion believed that this might help them learn more about disabilities, hear a different point of view and be generally more supportive of the rights of those with disabilities.
- A minority (7% for TV and 5% for radio) would be less likely to view or listen in such circumstances. They attributed their resistance to the sadness they felt about the person with a disability and/or a general feeling of discomfort. Respondents were also slightly less likely to view or listen to people with a speech disability than other disabilities.

Depiction of people with disabilities

- Just 1 in 10 respondents thought that people with disabilities are generally talked about in a negative way on TV or radio. More than half of the respondents thought that TV coverage was generally positive but this fell to 4 in 10 for radio.

Context of depiction

One of the objectives of the study was to assess the acceptability and likelihood to view or listen to programming with people with disabilities present, across a number of programme genres. In this regard, interviewees were presented with 15 hypothetical programme content scenarios for TV or radio, in which people with a disability were involved. Each scenario was developed to represent a specific disability in a specific genre of programme commonly found on television and radio. These scenarios included 3 for radio and 12 for television. (Physical and sensory disabilities were not tested on radio because they would be less likely to be apparent to the listener.) Scenarios were developed to be plausible and probable for Irish broadcasting.

The 3 styles of programming chosen were entertainment, current affairs and programming including sexuality. The disabilities featured were vision, hearing, physical, learning and mental health.

It was evident from the responses received that some of these programme scenarios were notably less acceptable to the public, in particular the depiction of people with a physical, mental health or learning disability in a scene of a sexual nature.

- A comparison of reactions to the representation of people with 4 different types of disabilities in entertainment programming shows that programme scenarios presenting people with vision disabilities are most acceptable, followed by programme scenarios featuring hearing, physical and mental health disabilities, which were rated very similarly.
- Reaction to the acceptability of the inclusion of people with vision, hearing, physical, mental health and learning disabilities during current affairs programme scenarios was strongly positive. Less than 10% rated any of the scenarios tested as “very” or “fairly unacceptable”. With the exception of mental health and hearing disabilities, more than 60% rated each of the scenarios as “totally acceptable”.
- The depiction of people with physical, mental health or learning disabilities in a scene of a sexual nature on television was “totally” acceptable to less than one third of the respondents. However, to put this in context, it should be noted that, in any circumstances, only 7% of those aged 18 or more regarded explicit sex scenes on television or explicit conversations about sex on radio as “totally acceptable”.
- The involvement of someone with a visual or hearing disability in a programme scenario depicting a scene of a sexual nature was more acceptable but could still be “off-putting”, as could the inclusion of someone with a mental health disability in a current affairs programme scenario. However, the inclusion of a person with a disability in entertainment or current affairs programming scenarios was most acceptable to the overall sample.
- People with disabilities who were interviewed for this research did not always find the scenarios more acceptable than their non-disabled counterparts. In particular, the depiction of a person with a disability in a sexual scene in television and radio programming appeared to be more unacceptable to them. For example, in response to a scenario describing someone with a physical disability in a sexual scene, people with disabilities were less likely than the overall sample to rate such a scenario as “totally” or “fairly acceptable” (34% compared to 44% of the overall sample).
- However, people with disabilities were generally more conservative about explicit sex on television and radio than the overall sample. Some 26% of people with disabilities reported that sexually explicit material is “totally or fairly acceptable” compared to 30% of the general population.

Language used about people with disabilities

People were asked how they feel about certain words and phrases used to talk about people with disabilities on television and radio.

- “Spastic”, “psycho” and “schizo” were least acceptable. On balance, “blind”, “deaf”, “the disabled” and “slow learner” were most acceptable.
- The most unacceptable word was “spastic”, with 68% of the respondents reporting this term as “totally unacceptable”, while 18% thought it “fairly unacceptable” and 2% “totally acceptable”.
- Most acceptable was the term “blind”: It was rated as “totally unacceptable” by 8% of respondents, while 36% thought it “fairly acceptable” and 43% “totally acceptable”.
- The use of the word “handicapped” to describe disability divided opinions, much like the use of the words “dumb” and “sufferer”.

Summary

Overall, the research suggests that the great majority of the Irish public are prepared to view and listen to television and radio programming in which people with disabilities take part. However, the level of acceptance will depend both on the context and the type of disability featured.

This report is available in full in an accessible format on www.nda.ie or www.bci.ie.

3. Representations of People with Disabilities in Irish Broadcast Media – Content and Discourse Analysis

Introduction

This research adopted 2 parallel approaches to examine the representation of people with disabilities in Irish broadcast media. An 8-person team, led by Dr Roddy Flynn at the Centre for Society, Information and the Media in the School of Communications, Dublin City University (DCU), conducted a content analysis. They analysed 408 hours of programming (804 programmes) broadcast by Irish television and radio stations from February to July 2007. The sample was drawn from prime-time television broadcasting (6-10pm), and from weekday and Sunday radio broadcasting, including national and local radio.

The programming was categorised in terms of the extent and nature of the representation of people with disabilities. The data results were based mainly on clearly observable content, such as the presence or absence of individuals with disabilities in radio or television programmes. In this context, “clearly observable” presented an obvious difficulty on radio since physical disabilities are inaudible. Therefore, the examination of radio material included only spoken references to disabilities or comments that identified an individual as having a disability. However, less overt content, such as whether the representation of people with disabilities in a given programme was stereotypical, prejudicial or discriminatory, was also categorised.

In addition to the content analysis, Dr Debbie Ging, a member of the DCU team, examined programming identified as featuring a person with a disability or referring to disability using a discourse analysis. This analysis aimed to establish if there were recurring themes in the language used to talk about disability. It also enabled a closer look at the complex contextual factors that shape media messages.

The analysis revealed a number of noteworthy representational and discursive trends and absences that might be used to inform future broadcasting policy on the issue of disability.

Key Findings – Content and Discourse Analysis

The findings outlined below summarise the “extent” of the representation of people with disabilities (i.e. the number of times people with disabilities appear or are referred to) and the “nature” of this representation (i.e. the manner in which people with a disabilities and disability issues are discussed).

In determining whether programme material included representations of disability, the research adopted a “common-sense” approach to identifying disability. Appearances of people with disabilities were categorised according to whether they experienced 1 of the following impairments:

- visual;
- hearing;
- physical;
- generalised learning disability;
- mental health;
- other.

In considering these summary findings, it is important to understand how the research distinguished between “appearances” of a person with a disability and “references” to disability as a subject. “Appearances” included individuals who were obviously present. However, “appearances” also included clearly identified individuals with a disability who, though not present, were extensively discussed in terms of their disability (e.g. a radio sermon on Helen Keller or a radio news bulletin making reference to a particular individual in terms of their disability).

“References” to disability as a subject were limited to discussions that primarily focused on disability in the abstract (e.g. discussions on alcoholism, autism etc.) rather than on the individuals with these disabilities.

Extent of the representation (i.e. the number of times people with disabilities appeared or were referred to)

- Of all radio and television programmes analysed, 20% made some reference to disability, either by featuring a person with a disability or including a spoken reference to disability.
- Of the 804 programmes examined, 67 (8%) featured the appearance of a person with a disability. Some 39 (58%) of these 67 programmes were television programmes and 28 (42%) were radio programmes. In other words, 10% of all television programmes featured a person with a disability compared to 6.5% of all radio programmes.
- A further 95 programmes (12% of the total) included a spoken reference to disability only (i.e. these programmes did not feature any individual with a disability). Of all television programmes, 13% featured a spoken reference compared to 11% of all radio programming.

- Of the 7,723 individuals appearing in the programme sample, 88 (1.1%) were recorded as having a disability; 51 of these appeared on television and 37 on radio. Since 5,011 individuals appeared on television and 2,212 on radio, people with disabilities accounted for 1% of all individuals on television and 1.8% of all individuals on radio.
- Only 5 of the 804 programmes examined (less than 1%) were recorded as disability-focused (i.e. programmes that were entirely and explicitly on and about the subject of disability). Of these programmes, 3 were broadcast on television and 2 on radio.
- People with disabilities are more likely to be obviously present in drama, comedy and lifestyle programming and are less evident in news, sports and music programming.
- Two-thirds of the people with disabilities in the programme sample were regarded as playing “minor or incidental” roles. People with disabilities were more likely to play minor/incidental roles on radio. On television, 30 people with disabilities (59% of people with disabilities represented on television) were regarded as playing “minor or incidental” roles. On radio, 31 people with disabilities (84% of people with disabilities represented on radio) were regarded as playing “minor or incidental” roles.
- Of all disabilities represented in the programme sample through appearances and references, depression was the most commonly represented form of disability, followed by representations of autism and addiction.
- In occupational terms, people with disabilities appearing in programming are most likely to be represented as students or as individual experiencing unemployment as a direct result of their disability. However, in one-third of cases, insufficient information was offered about the individuals to allow the audience to determine the occupational role played by people with disabilities.
- Programming acquired from outside Ireland is significantly more likely to feature people with disabilities and references to disability than domestically produced programming. Although domestically produced shows accounted for more than 80% of the programmes looked at during the research, they accounted for less than 60% of programming featuring a person with a disability and just under 70% of those programmes referring to disability but not featuring a person with a disability. This is because drama and comedy, which appear to feature a relatively high proportion of people with disabilities and references to disabilities, dominate the imported programming broadcast on Irish television.

Nature of representation (i.e. the manner in which people with disabilities and disability issues were discussed)

- In 80% of the appearances of a person with a disability in the programme sample, disability was represented as central to the individual's identity.
- When people with disabilities are physically present during a programme, they are generally presented in serious roles. By contrast, spoken references to disability as a subject (made in the absence of a person with a disability) are twice as likely to be made in a comedic or light-hearted tone.
- Of the 88 people with disabilities identified as appearing in the programme sample, 73 were represented in a stereotypical fashion (e.g. as "pitiable" and "pathetic" or "sinister" and "aggressive").
- Despite this, the majority of programmes adopted a neutral attitude towards people with disabilities, neither showing a discriminatory attitude towards them nor likely to create prejudice towards people with disabilities as a group. It is important to understand that extensive stereotyping of individuals does not necessarily imply that they are represented in a discriminatory or prejudiced manner. References to disability as a general subject (rather than to specific individuals with disabilities) are also mainly characterised by a neutral (i.e. non-discriminatory, non-prejudicial) attitude.
- The words used to describe disability as a subject in non-fiction programmes, both on radio and television, complied with guidelines endorsed by the NDA and produced by People with Disabilities in Ireland (PWDI).¹ "People with disabilities" was the favoured term. The word "impairment" was never used. These programmes were nearly all Irish-produced.
- Words used to describe disability in fictional genres such as comedy, sitcoms, soap operas and cartoons often did not comply with the PWDI guidelines referred to above. Casual or comic references to mental illness and instability were by far the most prevalent. Most of these programmes were imported from the US.
- The treatment of mental illness differed radically in fictional (e.g. drama) and non-fictional programme genres (e.g. news).

In **news programmes**, mention of mental illness focused on disruptions to mental health services caused by the nurses' strike and discussions of the mental health of individuals such as the lone gunman who, in April 2007, killed 33 people at the Virginia Tech College in the US.

¹ People with Disabilities in Ireland (2000) "Making Progress Together, 2000", cited in National Disability Authority (2002) "Ask Me: Guidelines for Effective Consultation with People with Disabilities" (Dublin: NDA).

In non-fiction radio and television programme genres, such as chat shows and current affairs programmes, mental illness, depression, substance abuse and suicide were dealt with in serious terms. There was strong evidence of a social-model discourse (i.e. disabilities were primarily discussed as socially constructed problems and/or as personal traumas requiring holistic, therapeutic solutions rather than as conditions “suffered” by individuals who thus required medical treatment).

In fictional programme genres, however, such as soap operas, dramas and sitcoms, mental illness was dealt with in more individualised and medicalised terms. Negative stereotypes were more common than in non-fiction, exemplified by references to disability in terms of “freakishness” and “evil”.

- On television, representations of physical disability (i.e. appearances of people with disabilities and references to disability) were far more common in fiction than in non-fiction. In fiction, there was a preoccupation with unusual medical syndromes, particularly in hospital and crime dramas. Negative stereotypes, in particular freak imagery, were also more common in fictional rather than non-fictional programmes.
- The disabling conditions of alcoholism and drug addiction were discussed in radically different ways in fiction and non-fiction programme genres.

In **non-fiction** programme genres, in particular on radio chat shows and current affairs programmes, addiction to drugs and alcohol was presented as a social problem related to a variety of issues including: increased prosperity, peer pressure, lack of spirituality, glamorous media images and adults leading by bad example. These programmes were all Irish-produced.

In **fiction programme genres** (or quasi-fictional such as “reality-TV” and “Judge Judy”), which dealt with alcoholism or drug addiction, these issues were framed as hereditary or genetic problems, or as evidence of a weak or selfish personality. These programmes were all imported from the US.

- Disability was rarely portrayed as incidental in the programme sample. There was little evidence of the kind of “mainstreaming” developments that have been noted by some theorists in relation to the British media. Mainstreaming implies featuring people with disabilities in all varieties of programmes without necessarily drawing attention to their disability. In only a handful of examples in the sample, where a person with a disability made an appearance, their disability was irrelevant to their presence in the fiction or non-fiction programme.
- People with disabilities generally occupied a secondary position within the “hierarchy” of the show on which they featured. Virtually none of the people with disabilities noted in the sample were presented in positions of authority, i.e. as experts or presenters.

- In fact, only 1 person was definitely recorded as a programme presenter – a person with Down syndrome presenting a music show on Ros FM. None of the people with disabilities identified within the sample was an “expert” or “elected representative”.
- There were very few apparent examples of people with disabilities as makers of programmes. Only 2 examples of disability-focused programming were captured in the sample, on NEAR FM and Ros FM, both of which are community radio services.

This report is available in full in an accessible format on www.nda.ie or www.bci.ie.

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