

CHANGING CHANNELS

Improving Media Portrayals of Disability

ACTING IS A TOUGH line of work to get into, but for actors with disabilities, breaking into the business is fraught with even more challenges. Although 4.4 million Canadians – one in seven people – has a disability, we're conspicuously absent from popular media. When we do appear, it's often in roles that are stereotypical or degrading.

Little attention has been paid to rectifying the situation, but change *is* on the horizon. The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), the independent public organization vested with the authority to regulate and supervise all aspects of Canadian broadcasting, recently approved the Equitable Portrayal Code – guidelines that will provide broadcasters with clearer advice about how to improve their portrayal of identifiable groups, including people with disabilities. The Code came into effect on March 17th, 2008.

"For the first time, the CRTC has started asking questions around [the portrayal of disability]," says Don Peuramaki, a filmmaker and former producer for *D-Net* (later called *Moving On*), a 1990s television news show about disability.

Peuramaki was a catalyst in the creation of the Code. A few years ago, he dug up a 1988 report by the Standing Parliamentary Committee on the Status of Disabled Persons, "No News is Bad News." It listed 27 recommendations to improve the representation of people with disabilities in the media. "They did quite a lot of extensive research and they came out with quite a few solid recommendations," says Peuramaki. "I was just going through that report...and it's amazing how little has changed in 20 years. I mean, you could almost issue that report today."

In 2003, Peuramaki filed an intervention with the CRTC to call attention to broadcasters' unfulfilled promises. At that time, a cultural diversity task force created by the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB), which represents private broadcasters, was examining the portrayal of Aboriginal people and visible minori-



Leesa Levinson is the founder of Lights, Camera, Access!

ties, research called for by the CRTC. In 2004, in response to the intervention, the CRTC directed the CAB to review how people with disabilities were portrayed.

The CAB created subcommittees that included people with disabilities with connections to the media, such as Peuramaki, to provide input. Its consultants also interviewed stakeholders and researched best practices from Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. In 2005, the CAB presented its findings to the CRTC in the report "The Presence, Participation and Portrayal of Persons with Disabilities in Television Programming."

The findings were not a surprise. Among the many concerns were the "overall lack of coverage of disability issues by television news outlets" and the "stigmatization and stereotyping of persons with disabilities, where individuals are viewed as the objects of pity and depicted as having the same attributes and characteristics no matter what the disability may be..."

Over the next two years, the CAB drafted guidelines for portrayal that would eventually be extended to all identifiable

groups and become the Equitable Portrayal Code.

While the Code's effects will take time to appear, it has the potential to change the face of Canadian television. Theoretically, broadcasters who repeatedly fail to improve their practices could lose their licence.

"The principles of protection for all Canadians who are members of identifiable groups has been there," says Ron Cohen, national chair of the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council (CBSC), the independent organization created by the CAB to administer standards established by its members, including the Code. "This new Code provides a more specific recognition and advice to broadcasters, more specific advice about what is expected of them. It's absolutely enforceable. There's nothing voluntary about it whatsoever, as the CRTC said it's a condition of licence for all broadcasters in Canada."

The CBSC has received a funding commitment from CTVglobemedia that will enable it to publicize the Code, translate it into dozens of languages and provide it in audio formats. "It's timely, it's needed, it's important, and I believe it's the most advanced code of its type that I have seen in any of the regulatory environments in the world," says Cohen.

Changing attitudes will be the greatest challenge. A few years ago, Joanne Smith, who hosted CBC's *Moving On* from 1997 to 2007, did a story about the portrayal and participation of people with disabilities in the media. "I was actually shocked when I spoke to some casting agents and some executive producers specifically about hiring people with disabilities, whether it be for broadcasting or for acting, and I had some people point-blank tell me they didn't want to hire people with disabilities," says Smith.

Their "reasons" ranged from "no talent" to "too much politics involved with employment." A few months ago, Smith spoke to an executive producer who believes that disability is a hard sell and isn't sexy, and that people wouldn't want

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to see it on television, with the exception of the Bionic Man. (Despite having a loyal following, the last episode of *Moving On* aired in August of 2007. The CBC offered no explanation for its cancellation.)

One initiative that may change perceptions is Lights, Camera, Access! Toronto-based actor Leesa Levinson, who has lived with multiple sclerosis for two decades, is the founder and executive director of this resource centre for people with disabilities in the industry and those who want to be. It is under development, and funding will come from CTVglobemedia, as well as Heritage Canada in partnership with the University of Toronto.

Lights, Camera, Access! will offer a casting service, a referral system, workshops and services such as script consultation. Levinson, who served on the diversity committee of the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists (ACTRA) for members with disabilities, also wants to create a database of people who want to get into the industry.

Karl Pruner, president of ACTRA Toronto (www.actratontoronto.com), believes there is a role for Levinson's organization. "Unless we get performers with disabilities to get work, then other people [with disabilities] with talent may not self-identify

as performers, they may not seek out the training. If they don't seek the training, it won't be available or it won't be accessible," says Pruner.

ACTRA promotes inclusiveness by using appropriate language in contracts, encouraging the use of accessible audition spaces, and offering training for people with disabilities on auditioning and other topics. It also has a DVD for casting directors that features actors with disabilities.

ACTRA's diversity committee is also pushing for more work for members with disabilities. Pruner says that there are characters on TV who do jobs that, in reality, people with disabilities could do, and producers are asked to audition people with disabilities for those roles.

Peuramaki believes that if equitable portrayal existed, every seventh person who acts, directs, writes or produces would have a disability. The Code is a major step toward fulfilling that vision, but we're in for a long journey, and it's critical that people in the disability community – including *Abilities* readers – report any incidents of inappropriate portrayal to the CBSC so that the Code can be tested.

"We have to be careful, in terms of watching out for tokenism. Portrayal is not adequate – it has to be equitable por-

LEARN MORE

"The Presence, Portrayal and Participation of Persons with Disabilities on Television Programming," Canadian Association of Broadcasters

www.cab-acr.ca/english/research/05/sub_sep1605_research.htm

"Broadcasting Public Notice CRTC 2008-23," Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission

www.crtc.gc.ca/archive/ENG/Notices/2008/pb2008-23.htm

Canadian Broadcast Standards Council

www.cbsc.ca

Lights, Camera, Access!

www.lightscameraaccess.ca

trayal," says Peuramaki. "We need to be vigilant. Since we're barely on the radar screen, it's easy to fall off again."

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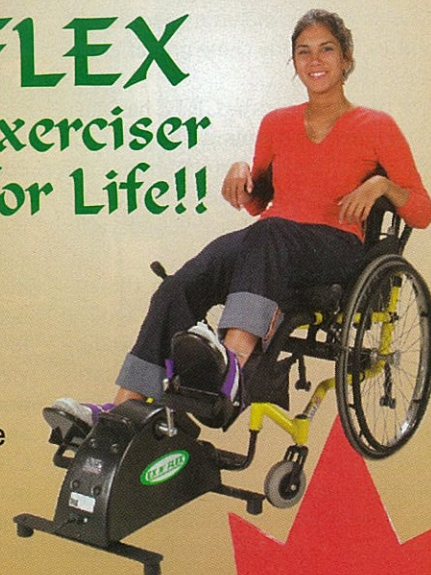
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