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Disability in television crime drama: Transgression and access

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Abstract

Crime is one of the most persistent genres in recent television history. Disability is a narrative device often used in this genre to provide information and motivation for criminals, increase the vulnerability of victims and in some cases attribute almost superhuman powers of deduction to the lead investigators. As such, the most common analysis of these images relies on the identification and criticism of stereotypes. Yet as recent theorization in disability studies argues, focusing on negative stereotypes has seen research into disability and television stagnate. Proceeding from the argument that it is important to consider both representation and accessibility in any study of disability and television, research into Australian audiences with disabilities was held to discover what they thought about both the representation of disability on television and the potential for alternative modes of access. The crime drama emerged as a popular genre amongst people with disabilities. Responses to this question reveal impairments have a material impact on the kinds of television people with disability are able to enjoy watching. This is in contrast to prior research into disability and television, which identifies crime genres as a disabling representation of disability. These insights reveal that forms of storytelling are important and indeed acknowledged by the disability community, who seek out popular forms of television despite television's traditional role in subordinating this group and excluding them from participating in the industry.

Keywords

disability

television

crime drama

survey

accessibility

audiences

Television has marginalized people with disability through both representation on screen and a lack of accessibility to this medium as audiences (Ellis 2014b; Ellis and Kent 2011; Goggin and Newell 2003; Jaeger 2012). Whereas most research into disability and television has focused on the potentially disabling prejudice that is perpetuated through on-screen representations that conflate disability with super-heroes, villains or tragic individuals, the changing technology of digital television encourages research exploring how people with disability access television. Proceeding from Goggin and Newell's (2003) argument that it is important to consider both representation and accessibility in any study of disability and television, research into Australian television audiences with disabilities was undertaken to discover what they thought about both the representation of disability on television and the potential for alternative modes of access (e.g. captions, audio description, etc.). The research began with an online survey of Australians with disabilities held during the final months of the simulcast period before analogue signals were switched off in Australia to make way for digital television between September and November 2013. The survey proceeded from the view that digital technology offers flexibility regarding the way information is presented to the viewer (Ellcessor 2011; Ellis and Kent 2011; Goggin and Newell 2003; Weber and Evans 2002) and specifically targeted television audiences with vision, hearing and mobility

impairments. The primary objective of the research was to understand potential benefits and challenges of the digital television switchover for Australians with disabilities, and to ask questions about accessibility, representations, use of online media and audiences' media participation.

This article draws on qualitative insights gained through an open-ended question in the survey regarding the specific programmes respondents enjoyed watching:

- What is your favourite television show?
- Why is this your favourite television show?

To this question, 10 per cent of respondents made some reference to the impact of their impairment on their selection of favourite show. This approach advances a social understanding of disability as a complex identity involving both physical difference and social stigma while recognizing cultural aspects of disability.

Responses to this question reveal that impairments have a material impact on the television formats people with disability are able to watch and enjoy. Intriguingly, crime drama emerged as a particularly significant genre in responses to this question. While respondents to the survey considered crime a fairly neutral genre with respect to its representation of disability, crime drama emerged as an accessible mode of representation for people with a number of impairments who relied on the repetition of visual and aural material characteristic of this genre in addition to more traditional accessibility features such as closed captions.

This is in contrast to prior research into disability and television, which identifies crime genres as a disabling representation of disability (Barnes 1992; Cumberbatch and Negrine 1992). These survey insights reveal that forms of storytelling are important, and

acknowledged as such by members of the disability community who seek out popular forms of television despite the medium's traditional role in subordinating this group and excluding them from participating in the industry. Tellingly, recent studies into the television crime drama suggest audience enjoyment depends on the predictable format and repetitive mode of storytelling (Lee 2003; Manis 2009; Turnbull 2010).

This article examines critical disability approaches to the televisual crime genre in light of the need for further research. It begins by outlining three approaches taken by disability studies to the study of disability and television: content analysis; audience research; inaccessibility. It then discusses the particularities of the crime genre, particularly with reference to social change and minority group interests.

To do so this article draws on three case studies of television crime drama that signal future directions for research into disability on television. First, proceeding from Rebecca Mallett's (2009) argument that moments of transgression rather than stereotypes should be identified, blogger analysis of moments of transgression and disability awareness in individual episodes of *Law and Order* (1990–2010) and *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* (1999–) are considered. Next, a textual analysis of the 'Disabled' episode of *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* (Season 11, Episode 17) highlights how crime drama interrogates social issues related to disability. Finally, primary research with people with disabilities regarding their favourite television show considers the importance of both transgression and accessibility.

Disability, culture and television

In his seminal book *The Politics of Disablement* (1990), Michael Oliver argues that people with disability are never presented as people with ordinary problems; they were always super-heroes, villains or tragic individuals. As a result, research informed by the social model

of disability has taken a particular approach to the study of culture and by extension, television. Theorists have considered the ways disability is used in cultural discourse to communicate certain ideas about humanity and disability. As Dan Goodley explains,

The disabled person is ubiquitous, used as a metaphor for sinister, evil, ungodly, lacking, brave, fragmented and unviable. Disabled people have a perpetual place in cultural representations, reflecting deep seated cultural conflicts. (2011: 15)

These stereotypes have been clearly identified and articulated within disability studies over the last 30 years. As a result, disability media studies has been dominated by content analysis with studies focusing on revealing ‘problematic media representations of people with disabilities and their issues’ (Zhang and Haller 2013: 321; see also Müller et al. 2012). The crime genre has been consistently identified as one such problematic representation (Barnes 1992; Cumberbatch and Negrine 1992; Ellis and Goggin 2015; Longmore 1987).

For example, in an article first published in 1985 and reprinted in 1987 and 2003, Paul Longmore offers scathing criticism of on-screen representations of crime and disability. He is especially critical of the ways disability is conflated with evil within this genre:

Giving disabilities to villainous characters reflects and reinforces, albeit in an exaggerated fashion, three common prejudices: [...] disability is a punishment for evil; disabled people are embittered by their ‘fate’; disabled people resent the nondisabled and would, if they could, destroy them. (2003: 134; see also Kriegel 1987)

Similarly, Robert Bogdan et al. located the tendency of television representations to use disability as shorthand for ‘murder, violence, and danger’ (1982: 33) along an extensive cultural history going back to the early nineteenth century. They further added that these portrayals contribute to the public’s negative attitudes towards people with disability. In his later work on freak shows Bogdan reflected on his entry to the field of disability studies as being prompted by his son’s observation regarding villainous characters on television; ‘if they look bad they are bad’ (Bogdan 1990: vii). Television effects theorists have similarly argued that the negative symbolism characteristic of this genre has a cumulative effect on audiences (Gerbner 1970).

Guy Cumberbatch and Ralph Negrine’s (1992) content analysis of disability on prime time television over a six-week period remains the most comprehensive study of disability and television to date. They focused on identifying stereotypes and inconsistencies, and also targeted crime drama for its inaccurate and damaging portrayals of people with disabilities and mental health conditions. Specifically, characters with mental illness were three times more likely than non-disabled characters to be portrayed as criminals (1992: 67). Characters with disability were also more likely to be portrayed as victims of violence (1992: 138). Like Oliver (1990), they argued that depicting those with disability as ordinary people with ordinary problems was vital to prompting greater social inclusion. This type of research continued into the 1990s and 2000s with theorists identifying damaging stereotypes and reflecting upon their possible effects (see Barnes 1992; Darke 2004; Ellis 2008; Nelson 2003; Quackenbush 2011).

Katherine Foss (2009) also identifies the workings of symbolism in her analysis of the representation and relevance of disability to the ongoing narratives of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000–), which for nine seasons featured a lead investigator with a hearing impairment. She remarks that, as his hearing degenerates, Gill Grissom begins withdrawing

socially from his team, and his disability encourages a self-imposed isolation. This is visually mirrored in Grissom's weight gain and increasingly sloppy appearance in Season 3. By comparison, after he has restorative surgery in Season 4, Grissom again starts taking pride in his appearance, with weight loss and a neat beard. Foss concludes that the contradictory representations of hearing loss as a source of stigma in *CSI* reveal ongoing cultural debates. Although she proceeded from the assumption that media representations of deafness influence public perception, Foss's study itself did not investigate audiences of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*. While these studies engage in exhaustive textual analysis to offer important insights into the workings of representation and changing cultural values, they do not account for the responses of audiences with disability who may or may not be consuming these programmes, or the contradictions that emerge within readings of these popular programmes.

Rebecca Mallett argues that the ongoing focus on stereotypes has seen research into disability and television stagnate, and recommends theorists instead 'pay attention to the transgression of established boundaries' (2009: 6). Although content and textual analysis has remained the most popular approach to the interrogation of disability on screen, some theorists have turned to audience research (Ellis 2014b; Ross 1997; Wilde 2004a, 2004b, 2010). This research has recently extended to include online audience interpretations, with particular reference to the ways bloggers identify cultural issues and debate the potential for social change (Ellis 2014c; Quinlan and Bates 2008; Quinlan and Bates 2009; Rodan et al. 2014).

Alison Wilde's ongoing work in active audiences and disability media studies offers insights into the ways the media acts as an agent of disablement (Wilde 2004a, 2004b, 2010). She calls for disability media studies to broaden its scope beyond the assumption of a

homogenous audience accepting fixed meanings (Wilde 2010). Like Mallett she offers a critique of stereotype-focused research in her investigation of disabled audiences:

[...] rather than focussing upon stereotypes [...] the central question about better portrayals and the social engagement with disability issues, is about how to achieve cultural recognition on equal terms, to work towards cultural images where being depicted as good, evil, wise, ordinary, extra-ordinary or changeable, is as possible for people with impairments as it is for other people. (2004a: 5)

Increasingly, these critiques are offered in interrogations of television as a vehicle for the social engagement of disability issues (see Ellis 2014a, 2015; Ellis and Goggin 2015; Haller 2010; LeBesco 2006; Mallett 2009; Walters 2013). While genres such as drama (Ellis 2012a), comedy (Haller 2010) and reality TV (Wilde and Williams 2011) are increasingly recognized as important vehicles of disability social engagement, crime drama remains outside the scope of this analysis despite the frequent appearance of disability in this genre.

A third, but under-theorized area of enquiry related to disability and television is the inaccessibility of television itself. Gerard Goggin and Christopher Newell's observation that 'for many people with disabilities [television] has been difficult to see or hear, impossible to watch or listen to, absent cultural technology' (2003: 90) offers a vital starting point for any investigation of disability and television. Like Goggin and Newell, Paul Jaeger's (2012) primary focus is increasing the accessibility of digital technologies for people with disabilities. He draws on examples of television's representations to argue that people with disability remain subject to inaccurate and demeaning portrayals. For Jaeger these representations, which he contends impact upon the lived experience of people with

disabilities, could be countered by the affordances of accessible digital media and user generated content.

Digital television offers improved picture and sound quality, and more content than analogue television. While digital TV may provide people with disability access to television for the first time, there is also the possibility that if key issues of accessibility and usability are overlooked during its implementation, digital TV could further isolate this group (Goggin and Newell 2003).

Television access

Despite notable exceptions such as Wilde's (2004b) observation that people with disability often turn to television as a source of cultural entertainment due to the inaccessibility of the outside world, the use of television itself has gone largely unexplored within critical disability studies. Digital forms of television have been identified as having the potential to enable people with disabilities to access the medium, via features aimed at mitigating against the difficulty some audiences have seeing, hearing, watching and listening (Ellis 2012b; Goggin and Newell 2003; Slater et al. 2010; Utray et al. 2012). Drawing on Slater et al.'s (2010) investigation of the advances in digital and broadband television, it can be seen that several features could become more widely available as a result of digital television, including:

- Audio descriptions – a track of narration that describes important visual elements of a TV show between dialogue
- Captions – presentation of the audio component of audio-visual content as text on screen
- Lip-reading avatars – an animated talking face for lip readers
- Signing avatars – animated hands providing sign language interpretation

- Spoken subtitles – reading aloud of interlingual subtitles, which can be generated as a separate audio track by the broadcaster or created by the receiver using text-to-speech software
- Clean audio – provides the speech without any background music or other sounds.

The importance of accessibility features can be demonstrated by the comments of audience members with hearing and vision impairment who participated in a trial of audio description that was conducted on the Australian public broadcaster ABC from March to November 2012 (Ellis 2013). This twelve-week trial was the first and only instance of audio description on Australian broadcast television. One viewer reflected on the importance of audio description to the television experience:

As [my vision and hearing] deteriorate I am finding watching TV less enjoyable and even more so since experiencing audio description on ABC TV during the technical trial. (Ellis 2013)

This viewer struggled with the lack of audio description on other channels and reflected in particular on the difficulty of watching a programme that moved quickly between characters and locations:

[I] got very frustrated as there are snippets of text on screen [which] could be dates but I cannot read them. It is difficult to work out which city or even at times country a scene is set without [audio description]. (Ellis 2013)

By comparison, viewers are often eased through crime drama through both visual and audio identifiers. Crime dramas often follow a predictable structure where information is commonly presented both verbally and visually (Manis 2009). Susanna Lee describes this process as ‘word-made-flesh’ and comments that this strategy enables narrative coherence (2003: 85). As a narrative strategy, the complementation of image and audio holds significance for audiences with disability who may experience difficulty watching television. For example, an audience member with a vision impairment can follow the ‘wall-to-wall dialogue’ (Manis 2009: 194) while a person with hearing impairment gains narrative understanding through visual imagery including ‘location cards’ that indicate the progression of the narrative through several locations (see Lee 2003: 84).

Disability and the crime genre

Disability features heavily in television crime drama, where characters with disability are depicted as ‘good, evil, wise, ordinary, extra-ordinary and changeable’ (Wilde 2004a: 5). Just as the inclusion of female detectives within crime drama has been celebrated for being reflective of social change (Brunsdon 2013; Fiske [1987] 2006), the inclusion of protagonists (detectives, profilers, medical examiners) with disability, such as Gill Grissom on *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, Dr Spencer Reid on *Criminal Minds* (2005–), Temperance Brennan on *Bones* (2005–), Robert Goren on *Law and Order: Criminal Intent* (2001–2011) and *Hannibal*’s (2013–) Will Graham similarly reflect social change regarding the position of people with disability in the workforce. With reference to Wilde’s list, Goren and Reid are extraordinary, Brennan changeable, Grissom is wise while Graham is both good and evil.

As already discussed, several theorists have called for television characters with disability to appear as more ‘ordinary’; that is, taking on the mundane aspects of everyday life, participating in activities the audience can identify with, or do themselves. Francis Bonner describes ‘ordinary’ television as having ‘a claim on reality’ (2003: 3). While

Grissom, Reid, Brennan, Goren and Graham would not typically be considered ‘ordinary’, they do take on aspects of everyday life that would reflect the experience of their viewers, such as initiating relationships with co-workers, having children and dealing with some of the mundane aspects of everyday life.

Wilde and Mallet’s critiques of disability-media-focused research outlined above also reflect recent arguments regarding analysing audience motivations for engaging with the television crime genre. While existing analyses of crime drama can be divided into those that focus on effects research, the portrayal of minorities and representations of the justice system (Eschholz et al. 2003: 163), more recent research has called for an understanding of audience motivations and analysis of why audiences find crime drama appealing (Brown et al. 2012). In addition, as Aaron Doyle argues, the focus on media effects assumes a homogenous audience reacting in the same way to the same depictions. He identifies a mode of research that explores the ways television crime texts offer a cultural reworking of morally ambiguous issues as particularly problematic (Doyle 2006). The observation that these programmes reflect shifting social values (Brunsdon 2013; Jermyn 2013; Tasker 2012) also holds significance to disability theorization surrounding this genre.

According to Phillip Lane, while ‘early television crime drama portrayed an ordered universe where evil was punished and good triumphed’, crime dramas following *Law and Order* engaged with existential themes characterized by ‘uncertainty, ambiguity and doubt’ (2001: 137). In 1984 David Marc described the television crime drama as a conservative genre whereby social order is retained by the end of the episode to reassure the audience and teach them appropriate social behaviour (Marc 1984). As Sue Turnbull (2010) explains, crime dramas offer reassurance through narrative resolution and a familiar format. Regular characters (such as the detectives and district attorneys in *Law and Order*) encounter the unfamiliar (in the form of crime) and ultimately resolve social order within one or two

episodes. For Turnbull the pleasures audiences derive from this genre can be explained by the predictable format. Allison Leotta (2012) argues that audiences enjoy crime drama because it plays on and relieves fear. Susanna Lee describes this as a process of exploring ‘the desire for reassurance and the simultaneous sense of the impossibility of that reassurance’ (2003: 81).

Several theorists argue that the public gains the majority of their experience of crime through the media (Brunsdon 2013; Doyle 2006; Gerbner 1970; Gray 2008; Lee 2003; Manis 2009). As a result, research into the television crime drama has tended to focus on audience effects, beginning in 1970 with Gerbner’s ‘cultivation analysis’ of crime drama. He argued that audiences were exposed to certain messages through television crime that culminated in the acceptance of these messages (Gerbner 1970). In the 1990s a Glasgow Group study of the effects of the media depiction of people with mental health conditions as violent threats made a similar argument. The study found that despite professional experience to the contrary, nurses tended to believe the media narrative that people with mental health conditions were unpredictable and violent (Philo et al. 1994).

Blogger analysis

Blogger lauredhel’s critique of the representation of disability and illness in ‘Dignity’ (McKay 2008), an episode of *Law and Order*, both explores the narrative as an assault on the lives of people with disability, and recognizes moments of transgression. For lauredhel, the episode, which introduces critiques around the termination of foetuses with disability, provides an opportunity to discuss the way culture is saturated with

[...] images of the village idiot, the pitiable invalid, the circus freak, the insane murderer, the disfigured outcast, the crippled villain. We have been raised to see people with disabilities as disgusting, repulsive, frightening, and even evil. We have

been socialised to see people with disabilities as either impossible to love or desire, or the object of 'deviant' fetish. (lauredhel 2009)

She goes on to explore the useful critiques introduced through the episode:

And we live in a world where mothers of children with disabilities struggle. We live in a world where women with children are disproportionately poor, where some are denied healthcare on the basis of disability, where carers are badly underpaid, where childcare and respite and educational options are constrained. We live in a world where we know that children with disabilities will grow up to deal with all of the negative attitudes that the moral and medical models bring to society. (lauredhel 2009)

Both the blog post and the episode of *Law and Order* that resulted in these critiques recognize transgression and demonstrate workings of resistance. Although people with disabilities are consistently represented as victims in need of protection in crime drama, 'Inconceivable' (Zalla 2008), an episode of *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, was celebrated within the disability blogosphere for raising and dealing with important disability issues. 'Inconceivable' dramatized the Ashley X controversy – a news story regarding a couple seeking hormonal and surgical treatments to ensure their severely disabled daughter, Ashley, remain an infant. However, the episode also explored issues of disability prejudice. While investigating the theft of frozen embryos from a fertility clinic, detectives Bensen and Stabler encounter a couple who have stunted the growth of their severely disabled daughter to ensure she remains an infant. Detectives Tutuola and Lake question a couple who wish to have a 'little person' baby in the same episode. As Beth Haller notes:

Law & Order: SVU has been doing its disability homework for this episode. The dialogue shows Olivia Benson vocalizing the disability rights perspective in the Ashley X case, and Meredith Eaton Gilden is allowed to speak for people with physical differences who select to have children who look like them. (2008)

This episode uses disability as an important character-making trope and introduces cultural critiques interrogating disability-specific issues, with discussion continuing online. Michelle Jarman observes that representations of disability in popular crime fiction highlight an intersection between ‘a growing awareness and understanding of disability rights, from one perspective, and a haunting fear which illness and disability continue to evoke in an ableist culture’ (2012: 209). Significantly, Shelly Manis argues that *Law and Order* relies on both form and content to interrogate rather than advocate dominant ideology. Focusing in particular on *Law and Order* as a ‘verbally dominated format’, Manis argues that both the format and content allow audiences to negotiate and engage meaningfully with ‘complex philosophical ideas that structure our civilisation’ (2009: 194).

‘Disabled’: The victim of crime

The *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* episode ‘Disabled’ begins with a man wearing a hook prosthesis being given a bus driving lesson from an older man. As the older man offers supportive praise and promises to ‘takeover at the next stop’, a group of people with a variety of impairments sitting in the bus call out variations of ‘the kid’s got to learn, before you retire Tony’. Both drivers become concerned when there is no-one waiting at the next stop because their expected passenger Cara Raleigh is ‘never late’. Tony tells the younger man to go up to her apartment and check on her. The drivers discover Cara lying on the floor of her

apartment, badly beaten and whimpering. The scene then cuts to a hospital where a doctor informs two detectives, 'Cara Raleigh, 41 years old, confined to a wheelchair'. The doctor goes on to list Cara's injuries, culminating in the revelation that Cara has been raped – in the doctor's opinion she could not have consented to sex because she is a non-verbal quadriplegic. The scene ends in close-up on Cara's face as a single tear rolls from her eye.

In addition to including at least six characters with a disability and introducing issues of importance to the disability community, the opening scenes from 'Disabled' are also illustrative of the format of the television crime drama genre – the visual representation of Cara following her attack is juxtaposed with a verbal account of the scene. The scene is an example of Lee's word-made-flesh strategy as information is presented in a number of ways through wall-to-wall dialogue and location cards (see Lee 2003; Manis 2009) yet the representation of a disabled woman as a powerless victim of (several) crimes would likely be seen as problematic within the disability studies literature.

'Disabled' employs disability stereotypes while also exploring three major issues of importance to the disability community – abuse (both physical and sexual), sexual relationships and communication. The episode also introduces the notion that other people's attitudes have a considerable socially disabling effect, as well as exploring issues of poverty and abandonment.

Crime and victimization is a significant issue for members of the disability community who are four to ten times more likely to experience abuse (West and Gandhi 2006). Despite this, when people with disability report abuse they are unlikely to be believed. This is interrogated in 'Disabled' when Executive Assistant District Attorney Blaine hesitates to prosecute the rapist, who claims he had 'pity sex' with the victim, out of a fear that he sounds believable. Further, some people with disability do not report abuse because they are 'fearful of further reprisal or losing a needed caretaker. As a consequence, people said they

were often willing to tolerate a certain level of abuse' (West and Gandhi 2006). Again, in 'Disabled' detectives Olivia Bensen and Elliot Stabler discover that Cara has been abused for an extended period of time by her sister Janice when there emerges a video of Janice beating Cara with a sock full of soap. However Cara did not report the abuse because she would lose her caretakers – Janice and Janice's son Damian. The doctor who first treated Cara in the emergency room, and relayed details of her injuries to the detectives, comments that it is not unusual for people with Cara's disability to present with such injuries. Detective Stabler comments that 'care givers, family members get frustrated, lash out'. Through the dialogue of the doctors, detectives and district attorneys the audience is told about the abuse often experienced by people with disability, including at the hands of their own family. Another detective, Finn, explains that 'over half disabled women are physically or sexually assaulted', while Captain Cragen reveals that 'the disabled usually get abused by family members'.

Throughout the episode the detectives comment that both Finn and Blaine are acting more 'hostile' than usual, perhaps taking on a more protective stance towards Cara because she is disabled. Blaine, who would normally avoid trial at all costs, and the usually composed Finn, are particularly affected by the case and seek to gain justice on Cara's behalf. Finn reveals his own experiences putting his grandfather (who raised him) in a nursing home, while Blaine, who was initially willing to plea bargain, takes on the position of protector when he sees the video: 'I'm going to nail Janice Raleigh's ass to the wall for abuse and sexual assault'.

However, despite his initial enthusiasm, the detectives must later convince Blaine to go to trial after it becomes apparent the bus driver Tony Griegs is the perpetrator. Griegs claims he and Cara have a consensual relationship and that he felt sorry for her. When Blaine becomes concerned that Griegs sounds plausible, the doctor agrees that 'a lot of people are

uncomfortable around the disabled'. Detective Bensen then states that 'lots of disabled women have healthy sexual relationships'.

As they search for a solution to the case, or at least find a victim who can communicate, Detective Bensen watches old video footage of Cara singing. Detective Stabler urges that 'she's not the same person', and suggests Cara may be expecting too much. Detective Bensen asserts Cara was expecting too little and apologizes to her for treating her like an invalid. She proceeds to give Cara the 'stiff upper lip' talk in an example of the nondisabled person 'getting tough' on the person with disability to overcome their individual limitations (Norden 1994). As Detective Bensen convinces Cara that she needs to speak for the others who cannot, the episode introduces the notion that people with disability may communicate in a range of alternative ways. As will be shown, it is this idea that informed the empirical work I have undertaken to examine the variety of forms of communication people with disabilities engage in.

The survey: Disability on television – access and representation

Between September and November 2013, I undertook an online survey of Australians with disabilities in order to understand the potential benefits and challenges of the digital television switchover for them. In light of accessibility features potentially becoming more available as a result of digital transmissions, the survey focused on both accessibility and representation, and gave respondents the opportunity to make more in-depth comments through several open-ended questions. Participants were recruited through an e-mail invitation sent to Australian disability organizations and university disability officers, and the survey was advertised on listservers and social media groups. A total of 341 people took part in the survey: 67.4 per cent were female and 32.6 per cent male. The responses were spread across a range of ages and impairment types; however, the majority of respondents were between the ages of 22 and 34 and had mobility impairment.

An open-ended question asking respondents what their favourite television programme was saw crime drama emerge as a dominant genre. Responses to this question reveal impairments have a material impact on the kinds of television people with disability are able to watch and enjoy, as the following comments illustrate:

[I enjoy] the storyline [of *Bones* and *Castle* (2009–)], and both shows have captions available so that I can enjoy it to their full capacities.

[I enjoy watching] crime shows because I can watch repeats and still get enjoyment as my memory has been affected by multiple sclerosis.

Law and Order [is my favourite show] because most of what happens is spoken.

These insights reveal that certain forms of storytelling are important and indeed acknowledged by the disability community who seek out popular forms of television, despite television's traditional role in subordinating this group and excluding them from participating in the industry. These insights also support recent studies into the television crime drama, which suggest audience enjoyment depends on the predictable format and repetitive mode of storytelling (Lee 2003; Manis 2009; Turnbull 2010).

A number of respondents answered that they most enjoyed the television crime genre because they experienced difficulty watching television due to the effects of their impairment. Given the recurring narrative structures of much crime drama, these respondents were able to meaningfully watch the programme when accessibility options were not available on television. Similarly, several survey respondents stated that they enjoyed popular crime dramas due to their entertainment factor while others referred to crime shows that debate current issues, were character driven or explore the human body. As one respondent

commented with reference to the Australian crime drama *Crownies* (2011–), ‘*Crownies* is a great show that entertains us while still making us think’.

Entertainment is a key factor in audience attraction to this genre (Turnbull 2010). Throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, crime drama dominated global television ratings (Brown et al. 2012). While its popularity has dropped, in 2013 crime drama remained popular, with *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* specifically climbing ‘29% to its best rating in two years’ (Morabito 2013). Many of the survey respondents explained that they enjoyed crime dramas because they considered them ‘good quality television’ that was ‘entertaining’. Some saw these programmes as exploring ‘real issues’ and offering frameworks for how to deal with ‘life struggles’.

Other relevant insights from the survey demonstrate the continuing significance of exploring the relationship between disability and crime on television. A total of 80 per cent of respondents agreed that people with disability were portrayed as victims on television, while 52.7 per cent believed television representations constructed people with disability as ‘embittered by their fate’. However, despite crime drama being ranked in the survey as the third most stigmatizing television genre in its representation of disability, the specific programmes *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* and *Law and Order* were considered ‘neutral’ in their representation of disability by the majority of respondents.

Conclusion: Access and representation

A number of disability theorists have posited that the conflation of disability and criminal activity within crime dramas has a negative impact on the social standing of disability in the community. However, such arguments have typically relied on textual analysis rather than finding out what responses actual audiences have to such programming. As the *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* episode ‘Disabled’ reveals, although disability stereotypes such

as ‘better dead than disabled’ are invoked in crime dramas, which position people with disability as especially vulnerable to crimes, programmes can also confront a range of audiences with issues relevant to the disability community such as abuse, communication and the complexity of interpersonal relationships. This episode is illustrative of the survey respondents’ observation that crime drama offers a framework to explore real issues and offer solutions for life problems. ‘Disabled’ was selected as a case study because it is indicative of disability in crime drama where disability is both disparaged and privileged, with people with disability frequently appearing as both the victims and perpetrators of crime.

A key concern of disability media studies is the impact television representations can have on the public perception of people with disability and as a consequence the lived experience of this group. However, research into disabled audiences themselves is rare and we know little about what audiences with disability want from television. While this article is an attempt to begin this discussion via the reflections of people with disabilities and their engagement with crime drama, it is vital that further research takes place.

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