

Silent Scripts

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In the vast landscape of the film industry, the quest for representation and inclusivity remains an ongoing journey fraught with challenges and triumphs. Among the diverse voices seeking recognition and opportunity within this realm, individuals with disabilities stand as a vibrant yet overlooked community. Many aspire to contribute in multifaceted roles behind and in front of the camera. I want to explore the importance of fostering representation as well as inclusivity in the film industry. Focusing solely on individuals with disabilities and their aspirations to participate in various capacities.

Despite strides in recent years towards greater diversity in film, individuals with disabilities continue to confront formidable barriers on their path to meaningful engagement in the industry. The lack of authentic representation within film is only one facet of the many obstacles individuals with disabilities are trying to overcome. Equitable opportunities for individuals with disabilities underscore a pervasive issue of systemic exclusion, perpetuating narrow portrayals and limiting the creative potential of cinema. Against this backdrop, the urgency to address these disparities becomes increasingly apparent. This demands a concerted effort to dismantle entrenched barriers and cultivate a more inclusive and representative film landscape.

A prime example of this I have found within my own life. My brother, Patrick, is an individual with Autism who has an adamant love for all things film. Unique challenges and triumphs have colored his journey through life. Patrick's deep passion for movies became evident from a young age, his eyes lighting up with each flickering scene that unfolded before him. His creativity knew no bounds as he immersed himself in storytelling, weaving intricate narratives, dreaming up characters, and who out of his favorite actors would voice them with boundless

imagination. However, despite his unwavering passion and undeniable talent, Patrick's contributions to the cinematic landscape have yet to be recognized. The countless ideas he has crafted for sequels to beloved animated films, each brimming with innovation and heartfelt dedication, have been met with silence from industry giants. His letters, penned with earnest optimism and a genuine belief in the power of storytelling, have returned not with accolades or encouragement but with the cold indifference of standardized replies.

This poignant disconnect between Patrick's fervent creative spirit and the stark realities of the industry machinery has fueled my resolve to delve deeper into the intricacies of inclusivity within the film industry. As I witness the toll of unfulfilled dreams alongside untapped potential weighing heavy upon my brother's shoulders, I am driven by a steadfast determination to shed light on the barriers that hinder individuals like Patrick from realizing their aspirations. Why shouldn't a neurodivergent individual strive to stand on the Dolby Theatre stage and say "Thank you to the Academy"? Many of these individuals possess a unique blend of creativity, innovation, and resilience that sets them apart. These individuals are capable and the epitome of excellence, waiting to be discovered. The world has yet to witness the brilliance they bring. Their minds, untethered by conventional boundaries, hold the potential to reshape the landscape of cinema. Infusing the media with fresh perspectives and groundbreaking narratives. To deny them the opportunity to showcase their talents on the grandest stage is a disservice to them. Furthermore, it is an even more significant loss for the entire industry. It's time to recognize the immense value they bring whilst providing them with the platform they deserve to shine.

In 2021, BBC wrote an article on how today's stars push for disability inclusion. The article sheds light on the persisting issue of the mistreatment of disabled individuals in Hollywood. While the industry has made strides towards inclusivity in recent years, with films

like "Sound of Metal" and "CODA" gaining critical acclaim for their portrayal of deaf and hearing-impaired characters, the reality behind the scenes often tells a different story. Disabled actors and crew members continue to face significant barriers and discrimination in an industry that often overlooks their talents and contributions.

One particularly striking example is the case of deaf actor Troy Kotsur, who won critical acclaim for his role in "CODA." Despite his talent and success, Kotsur faced challenges in securing roles due to the industry's narrow-minded casting practices. Additionally, the article highlights the pervasive issue of able-bodied actors being cast in disabled roles. Further marginalizing disabled performers and perpetuating harmful stereotypes. This practice not only deprives disabled actors of opportunities but also reinforces harmful stereotypes and misrepresentations of disability in mainstream media.

Behind the camera or in front of it, mistreatment of neurodivergent individuals is prevalent. Behind the scenes, disabled crew members face challenges in accessing accommodations. Navigating inaccessible work environments. From inaccessible filming locations to the lack of accommodations for mobility aids or communication needs, the industry frequently fails to provide an inclusive workplace for disabled professionals. Moreover, disabled individuals may encounter biases and stereotypes that limit their career opportunities or relegate them to certain roles within the production hierarchy.

Casting directors and producers often prioritize able-bodied actors over disabled performers, fearing that accommodations for disabilities might disrupt filming or require too much patience. Neurodivergent individuals, such as those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), face particular mistreatment on movie sets

due to the specific challenges they encounter in navigating the fast-paced and unpredictable nature of film production.

One prevalent form of mistreatment is the lack of understanding and accommodation for their neurodiversity. Movie sets can be chaotic environments filled with loud noises, bright lights, and frequent changes, overwhelming individuals with sensory sensitivities common in neurodivergent conditions. Without appropriate accommodations—like quiet spaces for breaks or adjustments to filming schedules to address sensory needs—neurodivergent individuals may struggle to perform effectively or experience significant distress.

Moreover, neurodivergent individuals may encounter discrimination or bias from colleagues who fail to understand or appreciate their unique perspectives and ways of interacting. This can lead to exclusion from social interactions, stereotyping, or underestimating their abilities. Additionally, the fast-paced and high-pressure nature of film production can exacerbate executive functioning and organization challenges, further fueling misunderstandings or negative perceptions of their competence.

When disabled characters are portrayed, they are often played by able-bodied actors, further erasing authentic representation and reinforcing harmful stereotypes. This practice not only deprives disabled actors of opportunities but also perpetuates the marginalization of disabled experiences and perspectives in mainstream media. In 2021, a report found that 3.5% of TV series regular characters were disabled in 2020. A separate study put the number of disabled characters at 12% in 2018 - but found that most of the portrayals were negative. (BBC)

Furthermore, when disabled characters are depicted, their stories are often reduced to tropes or caricatures, failing to capture the complexity and diversity of disabled experiences. My mother finds herself unable to watch any film or TV show that depicts disabled individuals, and

the reason is deeply rooted in her frustration with the repetitive portrayal of disability in mainstream media. To her, it's not just about representation but authenticity and respect. Time and again, she encounters characters with disabilities who are written in the same formulaic manner, speaking with the same cadence and exhibiting identical personality traits.

What enrages her is the reduction of complex human beings to mere caricatures of disability. Each time she tunes in, she witnesses the same tired tropes: the inspirational hero overcoming insurmountable odds, the pitiable victim seeking sympathy, or the saintly figure whose sole purpose is to inspire able-bodied characters to greatness. But disabled individuals are so much more than these tired archetypes. They possess intricate personalities, diverse experiences, and multifaceted identities that are too often overlooked or dismissed in mainstream media. By perpetuating these narrow portrayals, filmmakers not only fail to represent the rich complexity of human experience accurately but also contribute to the marginalization and stigmatization of disabled individuals in society.

For my mother, myself, and countless others, the frustration lies not in the absence of disabled characters on screen but in the absence of authentic, nuanced portrayals that reflect the true diversity and complexity of the disability experience. It calls for storytellers to dig deeper, challenge stereotypes, and embrace the full spectrum of human diversity in their narratives. This lack of authentic representation not only alienates disabled audiences but also contributes to the perpetuation of ableism in society at large.

In exploring the landscape of disability representation in the film industry, it becomes evident that many studies echo similar sentiments and advocate for comparable measures to promote inclusivity and diversity. Charles A. Riley II's book, "Disability and the Media: Prescriptions for Change," published in 2005, is a seminal work that critically examines the

portrayal of disability in the media and proposes strategies for promoting greater inclusivity. In this comprehensive study, Riley delves into the experiences of individuals with disabilities working in the entertainment industry, shedding light on their challenges and offering recommendations for fostering a more inclusive media landscape. One notable insight from Riley's book is the pervasive lack of representation and misrepresentation of individuals with disabilities in mainstream media. Riley highlights how this underrepresentation perpetuates stereotypes and marginalizes individuals with disabilities, reinforcing societal prejudices and barriers to inclusion. He underscores the importance of challenging these stereotypes and advocating for authentic portrayals that reflect the diverse experiences and perspectives of individuals with disabilities. He calls for greater awareness and sensitivity among media professionals, urging them to actively seek out and amplify the voices of individuals with disabilities in both on-screen and behind-the-scenes roles. Additionally, Riley advocates for implementing inclusive hiring practices, accessibility standards, and supportive workplace policies to create a more inclusive and equitable media environment.

"The Lights! Camera! Access!" (LCA) Established in 2015, the initiative is dedicated to revolutionizing disability representation in film and television. At the core of LCA's mission are three primary objectives: increasing disability employment in media, enhancing portrayals to dismantle stereotypes, and expanding accessible media through adaptive features. These features include open captions, audio descriptions, and American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters. Through its comprehensive approach, the organization provides educational opportunities and career incubators tailored to individuals interested in pursuing roles in film and media.

This incubator initiative addresses some of the significant barriers individuals with disabilities often face when seeking employment opportunities in these sectors. Through the

career incubator, participants receive comprehensive training tailored to various roles within the film and media industry. This includes but is not limited to screenwriting, directing, producing, acting, cinematography, editing, and sound design. This program typically covers script development, production planning, technical skills, industry networking, and career development strategies. Moreover, the LCA career incubator offers mentorship accompanied by guidance from industry professionals who provide insights, advice, and networking opportunities. This form of mentorship allows participants to navigate the complexities of the entertainment industry. The mentorship aspect of this program is crucial as it provides practical knowledge. This also instills confidence whilst fostering professional relationships that can be invaluable for career advancement.

LCA represents a much-needed paradigm shift in the film industry. It challenges traditional norms, advocating for inclusive practices that empower individuals with disabilities to participate fully in all aspects of media production. The effectiveness of this initiative in empowering individuals with disabilities fosters a more authentic representation both on screen and behind the scenes cannot be overstated. Since its inception, the "Lights! Camera! Access!" initiative has garnered national recognition. Media conglomerates such as CBS and NBC acknowledge its impactful contributions to promoting inclusivity and diversity within the entertainment industry.

Legal frameworks such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) serve as linchpins in sculpting industry practices. Hiring and accommodating individuals with disabilities being at the forefront. Enacted in 1990, the ADA stands as a cornerstone of disability rights legislation. The act prohibits discrimination against qualified individuals with disabilities across various sectors. This includes the multifaceted world of entertainment. Despite the ADA's noble

intentions and legal safeguards, navigating the complex employment terrain within the film industry remains fraught with challenges for disabled workers. The practical implementation of ADA regulations within the entertainment sphere unveils the intricate interplay between legal mandates and on-the-ground realities. While the ADA lays down the framework for equal access and opportunity, its efficacy hinges on robust enforcement mechanisms. It shows itself at times to have a nuanced understanding of disability accommodation.

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014 is another pivotal legal instrument in the disability employment landscape. This federal legislation aims to enhance workforce development efforts. Aiming to promote economic self-sufficiency for individuals with barriers to employment, including those with disabilities. The WIOA champions innovative approaches to vocational rehabilitation, job training, and employment services through its provisions. Focusing on fostering inclusivity in addition to expanding opportunities for marginalized populations.

In practice, the WIOA facilitates partnerships between state/local workforce development agencies, vocational rehabilitation programs, educational institutions, and employers to bolster workforce participation among individuals with disabilities. WOA prioritizes skill development, job placement, and retention strategies tailored to the unique needs of disabled workers. These endeavors are aimed to dismantle systemic barriers and cultivate a more inclusive labor market.

Through this research, I have discovered that the film industry has the potential to be a powerful platform for promoting disability inclusivity and representation. However, there are crucial steps to be taken. Advocacy and awareness campaigns are essential for reshaping the narrative surrounding disability in Hollywood. Collaborating with established advocacy organizations alongside disability rights activists will amplify the impact of these campaigns.

Disability Rights Today (DRT) is a prime example of this. DRT offers a wealth of resources and expertise in advocating for the inclusion of people with disabilities across various industries, including entertainment. Through publications, online platforms, and community engagement initiatives, DRT provides valuable insights mixed with guidance that promotes disability inclusivity in Hollywood. By partnering with DRT, advocacy campaigns gain access to a wide range of resources. These resources include research reports, policy briefs, and toolkits that can help filmmakers with disabilities make connections. This creates space for individuals with disabilities to network in Hollywood with added support.

Additionally, developing training with education programs like LCA for industry professionals is essential to foster an understanding of diverse perspectives. Thus providing practical strategies for promoting inclusivity on and off-screen. These programs can equip industry professionals with the knowledge and skills to create authentic representations of disability in film. Inclusive casting and hiring practices are also vital in promoting representation in Hollywood. Yes, some universities offer film courses that individuals with disabilities can take, but having something tangible (such as a certificate) is invaluable. This may help them not be discriminated against in the hiring process. By encouraging casting directors, producers, and studio executives to prioritize inclusive hiring practices, individuals with disabilities can have equal employment opportunities in all aspects of film production.

Moreover, establishing initiatives as well as funding programs to support filmmakers, writers, directors, and disabled producers is vital for facilitating their participation in the industry. Ultimately, this leads to success. Financial resources, mentorship, and networking opportunities can help remove barriers. Assisting in creating pathways for individuals with disabilities to thrive in Hollywood.

Finally, fostering collaborative partnerships between industry stakeholders, disability advocacy groups, and government agencies is essential for developing opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Implementing inclusive policies, initiatives, and programs is crucial. By working together, these stakeholders can leverage their collective expertise expunging resources to drive meaningful change. This may segway into promoting diversity and representation in the film industry.

Ethical considerations in proposing recommendations to improve disability inclusivity in Hollywood require a nuanced understanding of the varying degrees of disability severity. Conditions such as Autism, Down syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, and others present unique challenges. Considerations for such disabilities must be carefully addressed. For instance, individuals with Autism may experience a broad spectrum of abilities and challenges. Common obstacles can be things such as sensory issues and mood instabilities ranging from mild to severe. Similarly, individuals with Down Syndrome or Cerebral Palsy may face cognitive and physical challenges that impact their ability to participate fully in the entertainment industry. Recognizing while respecting the diverse needs and experiences of individuals across this spectrum is essential. Specifically ensuring that the proposed strategies are both inclusive and accessible. By considering the unique experiences shoulder to shoulder with the challenges associated with each condition, ethical guidelines can guide the development of respectful, empowering, and inclusive strategies for individuals with disabilities in Hollywood.

The primary limitation of this study lies in the speculative nature of the proposed ideas. While rooted in insights from existing literature and informed by ethical considerations, it is essential to acknowledge that the effectiveness/feasibility of these ideas may vary in practice. Industry dynamics, cultural attitudes, and policy frameworks can significantly impact the

implementation of proposed initiatives. For example, the receptiveness of Hollywood decision-makers to inclusive casting. Hiring practices may vary, influencing the extent to which individuals with disabilities can access opportunities in the industry. Moreover, the success of these initiatives may require sustained efforts, collaboration, and advocacy from diverse stakeholders over time.

Numerous studies have shed light on the pervasive challenges faced by individuals with disabilities across various roles within the film industry. Discrimination and lack of accessibility remain significant barriers. This leads to hindering full participation and advancement in the field. For example, research by the Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund (DREDF) conducted in 2019 revealed alarming trends. The survey highlighted that individuals with disabilities frequently encounter negative stereotypes, attitudinal barriers, and systemic obstacles when seeking employment opportunities in the entertainment industry. These barriers manifest in various forms. One example is inaccessible audition venues and workplaces to implicit biases contributing to hiring discrimination. Individuals with disabilities often face additional challenges related to misconceptions surrounding their abilities, further exacerbating their experiences of marginalization. Despite progress in raising awareness about disability rights/representation, entrenched societal attitudes and industry norms continue to perpetuate exclusionary practices. This is what keeps these individuals from essentially reaching their dreams.

Despite these challenges, there have been notable efforts to promote disability inclusion while supporting individuals with disabilities in the film industry. The Easterseals Disability Film Challenge is an annual event that provides a platform for filmmakers with disabilities to showcase their talents and amplify their voices in the film industry. Founded by actor and

comedian Nic Novicki, the challenge invites filmmakers to create short films for a weekend. Participants are tasked with writing, shooting, and editing their films within a designated time frame, typically 55 hours. The challenge encourages filmmakers to explore themes related to disability, inclusion, and diversity, empowering them to share their unique perspectives and experiences on screen.

The Disability Film Challenge aims to break down barriers. Challenging stereotypes surrounding disability by showcasing authentic and diverse portrayals of disability in film. Through storytelling and creative expression, participants highlight the complexity of the disability experience. This offers audiences new insights and perspectives. The challenge also fosters collaboration and community-building within the film industry. Ultimately bringing together filmmakers, actors, writers, and advocates from diverse backgrounds to celebrate inclusion and diversity in filmmaking.

The ReelAbilities Film Festival is another significant event promoting disability inclusion and representation in the film industry. The festival showcases a wide range of films, documentaries, and shorts that explore disability-related themes. Founded in 2007, ReelAbilities aims to challenge stereotypes, raise awareness, and foster dialogue about disability through the power of cinema. The festival features films by and about individuals with disabilities, offering a platform for their stories to not only be heard but celebrated. ReelAbilities also hosts panel discussions, workshops, and community events alongside film screenings. This provides opportunities for dialogue and engagement on disability-related issues. By bringing together filmmakers, industry professionals, advocates, and audiences, the festival creates a space for meaningful conversations and collaboration.

Both the Easterseals Disability Film Challenge and the ReelAbilities Film Festival play crucial roles in advancing disability inclusion and representation in the film industry. By providing platforms for filmmakers with disabilities to showcase their talents and stories, these initiatives challenge stereotypes, amplify marginalized voices, and foster greater understanding and acceptance of disability in society.

The analysis's implications are profound for promoting DEI in the film industry. Addressing the barriers faced by individuals with disabilities requires multifaceted approaches that prioritize accessibility, representation, and empowerment. Initiatives spearheaded by the Ruderman Family Foundation and Easterseals are crucial in challenging stereotypes, amplifying diverse voices, and advocating for systemic change within Hollywood.

To improve opportunities for individuals with disabilities in the industry, stakeholders, policymakers, and advocacy organizations must collaborate to implement meaningful reforms. Industry stakeholders should prioritize accessibility and inclusion in all aspects of film production. From casting to post-production no portion of the process should be inaccessible. This includes providing accommodations for individuals with disabilities, promoting accessible workplaces, and fostering a culture of inclusivity within studios and production companies. Policymakers are crucial in advancing disability rights leading to promoting inclusivity in the film industry. Advocacy efforts should focus on enacting legislation that supports disability representation, ensures equal employment opportunities, and incentivizes diversity initiatives within the entertainment sector.

Productions should also actively seek out and support diverse talent. Providing space for individuals with disabilities both in front of and behind the camera. Their creative voices need to be heard. This involves providing mentorship, training programs, and funding opportunities to

empower aspiring creatives with disabilities. Most importantly, increasing awareness and understanding of disability issues is essential for promoting inclusivity in the film industry. Educational initiatives, public campaigns, and industry workshops can help debunk stereotypes. This leads to challenging stigma in time fostering greater empathy and appreciation for diverse perspectives.

This research has shed light on the persistent discrimination and limited opportunities facing individuals with disabilities in various roles within the film industry. Despite notable strides and initiatives aimed at promoting disability representation, structural inequalities persist, preventing full participation.

This study's significance lies in its contribution to deepening our understanding of inclusivity for individuals with disabilities in the film industry. By amplifying the voices and experiences of marginalized groups, the systemic challenges that must be addressed to cultivate greater diversity and representation in Hollywood have been underscored. These findings highlight the importance of recognizing the value of diverse perspectives. The imperative of proactive measures to promote equity and inclusion in the entertainment sector.

Looking ahead, powerful Hollywood officials should remain steadfast in their commitment to addressing systemic inequalities. Hollywood officials should be fostering a more inclusive industry. This entails implementing inclusive hiring practices providing necessary accommodations and support. Nurturing a culture of respect and belonging within the entertainment sector is crucial. By joining forces to confront these challenges and champion diversity and representation, a film industry that authentically reflects the breadth and richness of human experiences can be shaped.

In conclusion, this study serves as a clarion call for action to cultivate greater inclusivity and accessibility within the film industry. By acknowledging the importance of diverse voices, the industry can begin embarking on meaningful change. A more equitable and inclusive entertainment landscape that celebrates the talents mixed with the contributions of individuals with disabilities can be forged. Reflecting on the journey of this research, I am reminded of my brother Patrick; his passion for cinema and the creative spirit he possesses inspired this endeavor. Like many individuals with disabilities, Patrick's aspirations deserve to be recognized in an industry that often overlooks their potential. By striving to create a film industry that embraces diversity and inclusivity, we honor the unique perspectives of individuals like Patrick, enriching not only the entertainment landscape but also the foundation of our society.

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