

*Women in Film and Television Vancouver. Fall Newsletter 2004*

## **MEDIA AND DISABILITY**

People with disabilities are one of Canada's largest minorities, 14.6% or 3.4 million people, yet we have little representation in media. (1) In January 2004 the CRTC passed a ruling requiring private broadcasters, to reflect positive portrayals of people with disabilities in their programming, in on air positions, and to reflect these changes in their December 2004 annual reports. For anyone moving towards this kind of integration I would recommend the report as a useful resource: *CAB's Draft Action Plan to Examine Issues Concerning the Presence, Portrayal and Participation of Persons with Disabilities in Television Programming*. (2) These recent developments came only after a campaign by Don Peuramaki, and many others, to get disability back on the CRTC's agenda. Momentum towards equitable representation has been building for some time, says Don, a producer with Fireweed Media Productions, formerly of D-Net (Disability Network) a CBC TV, disability news program, which broadcast over 200 award winning programs including 70 documentaries 1990 - 97.

With the development of digital media, decreasing the cost, size, and weight of equipment, media making has become more accessible for many. People with disabilities are one of many communities, taking up cameras and telling our own stories. Barriers to full participation in media still exist, and there is a diversity of experience with technology; from no experience due to inaccessibility or poverty, to people who use technology everyday e.g. to communicate instead of speech. The cross over between adaptive and media technology, is resulting in innovative approaches to, and inventive uses of media technology.

Disability Film Festivals have occurred in the US, UK, Russia, Netherlands etc, for some years. In 2001 the Calgary SCOPE Society held the first International Disability Film Festival in Canada, Picture This, featuring films by or about people with disabilities. The Toronto Projections Film Festival, June 2004, featured films by people with disabilities. Such festivals are a great way to showcase the talent and diversity of work, within the community. However, it is important to integrate films by people with disabilities into film festivals generally, and not just in specialized or one-off screenings, to bring our work to a larger audience, and avoid "ghettoizing" films and filmmakers. We are media makers first, and people with disabilities second, which means our films may or may not deal with disability.

Why are we under represented in film and television programs, and production? Similar to visible minorities, First Nations, lesbian and gay, it comes from a history of segregation in society, marginalization, treated as "other", by the mainstream. The idea that we don't know what's good for us, can't live our own lives, is carried over into the media where we are not considered capable of formulating, telling, and producing our own stories. This kind of patronizing paternalism has led to negative, inaccurate and stereotyped media portrayals. Such as "inspiring innocent angels", "supercrips", "axe wielding psychos", "I'm disabled but I can still get the girl", storylines, and made for TV "crip of the week" movies.

Barriers to media makers with disabilities integration into media training programs and the industry are: structural, (e.g. lack of wheelchair access); funding (e.g. for sign language interpreters, note takers, adaptive technologies); services, (e.g. lack of accessible transit, appropriate tutors); attitudinal, (e.g. "those poor

helpless/stupid/dependant cripples/blind/deaf"); fear based (e.g. "you're different/we don't know how to work with people with disabilities/what if it's really complicated/what if we do the wrong thing); time, (e.g. lack of flexible work hours,). Many more media makers with disabilities, are making their own media in their own time, in the more cooperative, arts, new media, independent: filmmaking, music and theater communities, than in the highly competitive and deadline driven movie and TV industries.

The majority of people with disabilities live below the poverty line, because of disability benefit rates, employment discrimination, part time and/or low paid jobs. "The most inescapable reality for women with disabilities is poverty. In Canada 74% of women with disabilities are unemployed."(3). Few of us are going to be able to afford to go to film school in the absence of designated scholarships, we are learning media through access studios, skill sharing, internships, self teaching.

People with disabilities are 9.9% of the working population aged 15-64. Reported rates of disability increase with age; 15 - 24, 4%; 25 - 44, 7%; 45 - 64, 16.3%. (4)  
Within the film and television industry people with disabilities are engaged at the following rates. (5)

#### Employer % of Persons with Disabilities

CBC-Radio Canada 1.9%

Large private broadcasters 1.6%

Small private broadcasters 0.3%

Film and television production – employee identified 0.5%

National Film Board of Canada 1.5%

New Media – paid employees 1.8%

New media freelancers 4.6%

Teaching staff of screen-based programs, 0.7% - 2.0%.

Students in screen-based media programs, 0.4% - 1.4% ."

It is important to not over generalize, but closely analyze these stats in terms of how women, Aboriginal, and people of color are likely to be represented within them. Which means women with disabilities as teaching staff of screen-based programs, could be as low as 0.6%, and visible minority women with disabilities, 0.03%. Female media students with disabilities may be only 0.5%, and Aboriginal women with disabilities, 0.05% of film students. Clearly we have a long way to go to achieve representation at anything like our real presence in society. (7)

Media makers with disabilities are making our own films, lobbying for fair representation, funding, TV programs, training and mentorship programs. A recent local initiative is ACCESS NFB, which in the first 2 months has made contact with over 50 media makers with disabilities in the BC/Yukon area. The NFB will be holding a meeting with these media practitioners October 27th, which may result in a future screening and networking industry event. Increasing integration into all levels of the industry can only enrich the community of media producers and consumers, by bringing a diversity of experience, styles, innovations and stories to the larger community.

Meg Torwl is a filmmaker completing post-production on her feature documentary "Towards the day...we are all free", about women refugees in Canada from nine nations, and recently was Project Coordinator with ACCESS NFB, an outreach project to media makers with disabilities. To contacts <accessnfb@nfb.ca> Meg <megtorwl@yahoo.com>

1. 4. Stats Canada. Participation and Activity Limitation Survey: A profile of disability in Canada 2001
2. 5. The CRTC ruling, Broadcasting Public Notice CRTC 2004-2, clause 52. CAB Action Plan [www.cab-acr.ca](http://www.cab-acr.ca)
3. DAWN Ontario. Fact Sheet on Women and Disability
5. 6. 7. Frame Work: Employment in Canadian Screen-Based Media - A National Profile. Women in Film and Television Toronto Report. 2004. [www.wift.com](http://www.wift.com)

Resources: (reference to 100's of films made by people with disabilities)  
(Canada) <[www.picturethisfestival.org](http://www.picturethisfestival.org)> and <[www.enablelink.org/abilitiesfestival](http://www.enablelink.org/abilitiesfestival)>  
(US) <[www.gosprout.org/film](http://www.gosprout.org/film)> (UK) <[www.disabilityfilmfestival.net](http://www.disabilityfilmfestival.net)>  
[www.disabilityworld.org](http://www.disabilityworld.org) - lists disability art/film festivals worldwide