

**The Exclusion of Persons with Physical Disabilities
from Prime Time Television Advertising:
A Two-Year Quantitative Analysis**

Dennis J. Ganahl

Mark Arbuckle

Southern Illinois University

Abstract

This content analysis took two years and coded 2,999 prime time network commercials to study the level of inclusion of persons with physical disabilities. The data were collected as a census during the 1998 and 1999 February sweeps. Analysis was quantitative and descriptive. Findings indicated that persons with visible disabilities were virtually excluded in prime time television advertising based on a comparison with US Census reports.

The intent of this study was to establish a statistical benchmark. The premise of this research is straightforward: if commercials practice inclusion of persons with disability so will the American culture.

Literature Review

A commercial appearance by the paralyzed-actor Christopher Reeve during ABC's 2000 NFL Super Bowl broadcast was particularly controversial. The commercial for Nuveen Investments used computer animation to depict Reeve as walking during a fictitious award ceremony for spinal cord injury research. The commercial was the 'most disliked' and one of the six 'most liked' of the 61 ads shown during the Super Bowl game (Super Bowl, Jan. 1, 2000). One critic characterized the advertisement as "disgracefully misleading" and accused Reeve of distorting reality and offering false hope to those with spinal cord injuries (Krauthammer, 2000, p. 100).

Supporters of the commercial felt Reeve brought hope and attention to the community of people with disabilities. Similar controversies have erupted over professional golfer Casey Martin's physical disability (Chambers, 1998; Sandomir, 1998), and the Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial sculpture which depicted him with a cape draped over his wheelchair. High-profile examples like these, the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act have led to the creation of "the disability community [sic]" (Nelson, 1999; John, 1997; Nelson, 1992).

Elliott, Byrd and Byrd's (1983) study of prime time television programming utilized a broad definition of disability that included old age. They found 74 commercials aired during a one week period portrayed a disability. Fifty percent of those commercials were included because they addressed old age. Little additional research was done until Ganahl and Kallem (1998) found that persons with visually detected physical impairments were completely nonexistent in a small select sample of television advertising. Research from other fields suggests that accurate and proportional inclusion of persons with physical disabilities would yield positive social results and financial

rewards for advertisers.

Inclusion Is Socially Responsible

Television influences viewers. Gerbner's cultivation theory says that repeated television exposures can be the basis for acquiring opinions, attitudes and beliefs (Gerbner, 1998). Berger & Luckmann (1967) have also shown how media messages play a role in how information consumers "construct reality."

Kent, Cartwright and Ossorio (1984) found that college students felt uncertainty about appropriate role expectations when interacting with people who are paralyzed. Sagatun (1985) found persons without disabilities felt uncomfortable about initiating contact with persons with disabilities. Studies suggested a possible solution was increased exposure and interaction with persons with disabilities in non-stereotypical situations. Belgrave (1984) found when a person with a disability discussed normal or athletic activities, he or she was more likely to be accepted by persons who did not have disabilities.

Morrison and Ursprung (1987) found exposure to persons with disabilities acting on film in "normal" situations helped eliminate negative stereotypes associated with disability. Farnall and Smith (1999) found that positive portrayals of those with disabilities in movies and television produced positive feelings in viewers. Their study also found that personal contact with people with disabilities was sometimes associated with greater discomfort for persons without disabilities. They concluded that increased positive media portrayals would lead to greater understanding, sensitivity and comfort. In short, infrequent exposure to persons with disabilities led to negative stereotyping and awkward social interaction while increased exposure increased understanding and acceptance.

Inclusion is Fiscally Responsible

In addition to the social benefits, research suggested there were financial benefits for advertisers who utilized actors with disabilities. Research has shown it was financially rewarding to include ethnic minorities as actors in advertisements (Pollock, 1997; MaCaulay, 1996; Fong, 1996). To be most effective, a commercial should include actors who represent the cross-sections of the target audience (Hoffner, 1996; Downs, 1981; Donaldson, 1981). Logic suggests that commercials should include persons with physical impairments.

Many advertisers achieved positive results in the late 1980s and early 1990s when they utilized actors with disabilities to market products. A 1987 Levi's 501 advertisement featuring a person in a wheelchair wearing Levi's received an "overwhelming positive response" (Enrico, 1987, p. 36). Target stores used children with physical impairments in their advertisements eight times and received many positive responses (Goerne, 1992).

Some companies have developed products for persons with specific physical needs. This "physiographic" segmentation had been used by IBM, Xerox, AT&T and others to sell products to persons with disabilities (Jaben, 1992). Bank of America created a car loan for people of low-to-moderate income who used wheelchairs because their cars were so expensive (Lunt, 1994). National City Bank provided special services for the blind including talking statements (Hotchkiss, 1996). Toys "R" Us formed a partnership with the National Parent Network on Disabilities and put out a toy catalog for "differently-abled" children.

Large Market for Differently-Abled Prospects

More than 107 million Americans (41%) of a total population of nearly 263 million were recognized as having some disability status in 1994-95 (Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1996). The most common debilitating conditions were Arthritis, 12.4 % of the total population; visual impairments, 3.2 %; hearing impairments, 8.6 %; and deformities or orthopedic impairments, 12.1%. Statistics for 1994 showed that nearly 17 million people, or 6.5% of the total American population, utilized some form of visually detectable assistive technology. These visual devices included hearing and seeing devices such as braille or white canes (not including eye glasses) and anatomical or mobility devices (Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1996). The literature suggests that portrayals of persons with disabilities in commercials could benefit society and produce financial rewards to companies willing to include such character portrayals.

Statement of Problem

Television shapes the perception of reality which creates a virtual TV culture. As a result, many people are intensely interested in how disability is portrayed in the media. Beyond the ethics of doing good for good's sake, persons with disabilities represent a significant percentage of the target market for many products, yet in advertising people with disabilities remain an invisible group.

Research Question

RQ 1: With what frequency will prime time television advertising portray persons with visually detectable physical impairments and how will these rates compare to their actual proportion of the overall U.S. population as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau in 1994?

Research Method

Researchers in this study conducted a content analysis according to the primary research principles discussed in Krippendorff (1980) and Riffe, Lacy and Fico (1998). The sample included censuses of prime time commercials for two consecutive years. In 1998, the census included ABC, CBS and NBC, and in 1999 the census included ABC and FOX. Each network was video recorded for twenty-one hours (Sunday through Saturday) during the 7:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. CDT time slot. The data collections occurred during the February sweeps rating period each year. Prime time was chosen as the best day-part to generate a general audience data set from the hundreds of thousands of commercials.

Protocol

A description of the study's objectives and data processing was written to orient the data coders. Next, a dictionary of variables and values and operational definitions was written with instructions to the coders. Coding sheets were created and amended during coder training sessions. Reliability was assessed using a random selection of samples for each variable. Variables and their values were selected to increase reliability.

Variables

There were two steps in coding actors for this research. First, actors were coded if

they had primary or secondary acting roles in the commercials. Second, actors were evaluated for any physical impairment. Determining whether an acting role was primary or secondary for each character achieved 88% agreement at 95% probability with a Scott's Pi of .67 for the 1998 data. Coding acting roles achieved 85% agreement at 95% probability with a Scott's Pi of .69 for the 1999 data.

A primary actor was defined as someone "visually substantiated" through most of the ad while interacting with the product and directly affected by its benefits. Primary actors usually had speaking roles. There was not a primary actor in every ad. Secondary actors were "visually substantiated" for at least several seconds and sometimes had speaking parts. This research did not include actors who had their backs to the camera or were a blurred image.

A physical impairment was defined as a visible and non-correctable impairment which was of a physical, sensory or developmental nature. This variable was designed to "shadow" the statistic cited by the U.S. Census Bureau (1996) that 6.5% of the U.S. population used visible, assistive technology. Therefore, assistive devices such as wheelchairs, braces, canes, communicating with sign language, visible prosthetics or birth defects and medical conditions would be visually detected and counted. A commercial may have aired more than once during the data collection. Each showing was counted because it accurately exemplified Gerbner's concept of cultivation via repetitive images. Video taped copies were made and used for coding.

Limitations

Local station and network promotional commercials were not evaluated for this study. An annual census was used to establish longitudinal benchmarks. This research did not consider wearing eyeglasses, obesity or old age as visually detected physical impairments.

Results

Persons with visible impairments were portrayed far less frequently in the commercials than their 6.5% of the population as reported by the Census Bureau (1994). As shown in Table 1, ten of the 1,662 1998 television commercials and five of the 1,337 1999 commercials used at least one actor with a visible physical impairment. Of the 2,999 commercials, only 15 (0.5%) cast persons with physical disabilities in acting roles.

Table 1

Number of Commercials with Persons
with Disabilities: 1998-1999

Commercials	Ads with P-W-D	Ads without P-W-D	Total Ads
1998 Number	10	1,652	1,662
1998 Percent	0.6%	99.4%	100%
1999 Number	5	1,332	1,337
1999 Percent	0.4%	99.6%	100%
Total Number	15	2,984	2,999
Total Percent	0.5%	99.5%	100%

Table 2 shows that 12 of the 5,751 primary and secondary actors were identified in 1998 as having visible physical impairments. Of these 12 persons, 10 were primary actors and two were secondary actors. Primary actors were able-bodied 99.26% of the time. Secondary actors were able-bodied 99.95% of the time. During 1999, six of the 2,746 primary and secondary actors had visible physical impairments. Three persons were primary actors and three were secondary actors. Primary actors and secondary actors were able-bodied 99.8% of the time. The total for the two years was 8,497 primary and secondary actors. In all, 18 (0.2%) actors were identified as having visible physical impairments.

Table 2

Primary and Secondary Actors with Disabilities
in Commercials in 1998-1999

1998	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
	Primary		Secondary		Total	
Actors with Disabilities	10	0.74%	2	0.05%	12	0.2%
Without Disabilities	1,354	99.3%	4,385	99.95%	5,739	99.8%
Total	1,364	100%	4,387	100%	5,752	100%

1999	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
	Primary		Secondary		Total	
Actors with Disabilities	3	0.3%	3	0.2%	6	0.2%
Without Disabilities	1,086	99.7%	1,654	99.8%	2,740	99.8%
Total	1,089	100%	1,657	100%	2,746	100%

Total 1998-99	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
	Primary		Secondary		Total	
Actors with Disabilities	13	0.5%	5	0.08%	18	0.2%
Without Disabilities	2,440	99.4%	6,039	99.9%	8,479	99.7%
Total	2,453	100%	6,044	100%	8,497	100%

To be proportionally representative of the population with disabilities, television commercials needed to include persons with disabilities in 6.5 % of the acting roles based on the 1994 census data. This would require 534 additional acting roles for persons with

disabilities.

Discussion

Advertisers want their products to be associated with images of power, credibility and appeal. There seems to be a TV cultural perception that a physical disability lessens personal power and magnetism. As a result, advertisers may question the logic of including persons with disabilities in commercials promoting their brands even though the literature indicates that inclusion would benefit both groups.

The challenge for advertisers to include persons with disabilities may appear to be a no-win situation. If advertisers include a person with a disability, they open themselves up to criticism created by hurt and sensitive feelings. If advertisers do not include a person with a disability, they are criticized for their lack of inclusivity. However, these are false choices. The authors offer the following recommendations to the advertising community.

1. Advertisers should do good things, like include persons with disabilities for the sake of doing good things, not to get credit for appearing to do good things. This is a difficult corporate ethical concept for an industry that openly advocates, "Image is Everything."

2. Increase the representation of persons with disabilities to a level proportionate to their actual U.S. Census population numbers. In addition, there should be a diversity of disabilities shown so that everyone feels welcome in the virtual TV culture.

References

- Belgrave, F. (1984). The effectiveness of strategies for increasing social interaction with a physically impaired person. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 14, 147-161.
- Berger, P. L. & Luckmann, T. (1967). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Chambers, M. (1998, January 15). How level must the playing field be? *The New York Times*, p. C28.
- Donaldson, J. (1981). The visibility and image of handicapped people on television. *Exceptional Children*, 47, 413-416.
- Downs, A. C. (1981). Sex-role stereotyping on prime-time television. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 138, 253-258.
- Elliott, T. R., Byrd, E. K., & Byrd, P. D. (1983). An examination of disability as depicted on prime-time television. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 49, 39-42.
- Enrico, D. (1987). The handicapped make headway on Madison Avenue. *Adweek's Marketing Week*, 28, p. 36.
- Farnall, O. & Smith, K.A. (1999). Reactions to people with disabilities: Personal contact versus viewing of specific media portrayals. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 76 (4), 659-672.
- Fong, P. (1996). Economics rules: return on investment dictates ads include ethnic groups. *Marketing*, 101, 13.
- Ganahl, D. & Kallem, J. (1998). Physiographic aggregation and segmentation: Inclusion of visually detected physically impaired role models in advertisements. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Association for Education in Journalism and

Mass Communication, Disability Interest Group, Baltimore, MD.

Gerbner, G. (1998). Cultivation analysis: An overview. *Mass Communication and Society*, 3 (4), 175-194.

Goerne, C. (1992). Marketing to the disabled: New workplace law stirs interest in largely untapped market. *Marketing News*, 26, 32-33.

Hoffner, C. (1996). Children's wishful identification and parasocial interaction with favorite television characters. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 3, 389-402.

Hotchkiss, D. (1996). People with disabilities. *Bank Marketing*, 28, 24-29.

Jaben, J. (1992). Enabling the disabled. *Business Marketing*, 77, 24-26.

John, J.A. (1997). A search for indications of disability culture in magazines marketed to the disability community. Paper presented at the conference of the American Educators of Journalism and Mass Communication, Chicago.

Kent, J., Cartwright, D., & Ossorio, P. (1984). Attitudes of peer groups toward paraplegic individuals. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 50, 41-45.

Krauthammer, C. (2000, February 14). Restoration, reality and Christopher Reeve. *Time*, 155 (6), 100.

Krippendorff, K. (1980). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology*. Newbury Park: Sage.

Lunt, P. (1994). Reaching people with disabilities. *ABA Banking Journal*, 86, 52-53.

MaCaulay, A. (1996). Doing well by doing right: Two reasons why ads should include minorities. *Marketing*, 101, 10.

Morrison, J. M., & Ursprung, A. W. (1987). Children's attitudes toward people with disabilities: A review of the literature. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 53, 45-49.

Nelson, J. (1992). *The disabled, the media, and the information age*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.

Nelson, J. (1999). The media's role in building the disability community. Paper presented to the Media and Disability Interest Group at the annual convention of the American Educators of Journalism and Mass Communication, New Orleans, LA.

Pollock, J. (1997). Racial minorities become visible: How the marketing business is changing to reflect the country. *Marketing*, 102, 13.

Riffe, D., Lacy, S., Fico, F. (1998). *Analyzing media message using quantitative content analysis in research*. Mahwah, NJ: Laurence Erlbaum.

Sagatun, I. J. (1985) The effects of acknowledging a disability and initiating contact on interaction between disabled and non-disabled persons. *Social Science Journal*, 22, 33-43.

Sandomir, R. (1998, January 29). Martin receives support on Capitol Hill. *The New York Times*, p. C27.

Statistical Abstract of the United States 1996. U.S. Department of Commerce.

Super Bowl ad meter: Latest results. (2000, January 31). *USA Today* [On-line]. Available: <<http://cgi1.usatoday.com/money/admeter/fullresults.htm>>.

Dennis J. Ganahl, Ph.D is an advertising faculty member at Southern Illinois University. He received all three of his degrees in advertising and journalism from the University of Missouri. He spent twenty years in media as a publisher and account

executive prior to receiving his doctorate degree in 1994.

Mark R. Arbuckle, B.S., M.A. Mark Arbuckle holds a Bachelor of Science in Journalism (1993) and a Master of Arts in Mass Communication (1997) from Central Missouri State University. He is currently a doctoral candidate in the School of Journalism at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.