

Media Trust's Reframing Disability Summit: Key Insights and Takeaways

Based on the views of the 18 disability charities and 60 media and creative industry experts present



Evolving landscape

Given how much the landscape has shifted over time and as forms of disability like invisible and intermittent disability become more widely acknowledged, we need to take a fresh look at disability, traditional definitions of diversity, the universal disability symbol of a person in a wheelchair, and so on. This needs to be a constantly evolving conversation.

Changing disability's Cinderella status

The fact that society has prioritised tackling gender, racial and LGBT discrimination over disability is both good and bad. It's bad because we have a lot of catching up to do but good because we can learn from models and approaches that have worked for other communities so hopefully we can move that much further faster. What is important though is that disability finally loses its Cinderella status and organisations make it an integral part of their business planning and diversity policies.

New angles for reframing disability

The way the media currently frames disability – as helpless victims, brave tragic protagonists or as superhuman paralympians – isn't helpful to creating the social norms that will allow disabled people to be who they are. We need more relatable, middle ground, diverse disabled characters. At the same time, some disability charities are continuing to use messaging designed to tug on the public's heartstrings but this is contributing to the perpetuation of narrow stereotypes.

If we want to reframe disability away from the current stereotypes, there are a lot of possible new angles – whether it's around the untapped talent they embody or the untapped consumer market they represent. We need to re-define disability and position 20% as the new normal, and to help disabled people feel proud and supported about self-identifying as disabled.

We also shouldn't be afraid to use humour to get people thinking differently to try and break down some of the barriers that exist between disabled people and the general public.



Leadership & organisational culture

Change needs to be both top down and bottom up. Leaders need to lead by example and everyone at every level should feel empowered to suggest and make changes to bring about a more inclusive and accessible working environment and culture.

Change also needs to start from within so media organisations need to ensure recruitment processes are aligned and review the barriers to employment that disabled people face from conscious and unconscious bias on the part of commissioners and HR departments to accessibility and safeguarding issues. Employers also need to acknowledge the glass ceiling and pay gap for disabled journalists and other industry professionals. Disabled people should also play a bigger part in decision-making.

Data, tracking and targets

Getting an accurate picture is essential so we need media companies to sign up to measure and publish their disability statistics and to set and enforce time-based targets for representation on screen, off screen and in their workplaces. Once we have the data and a system of reporting and tracking, this can support accreditation or awards for companies who are really putting disability on the agenda. Government-backed or industry-set quotas may be tokenistic but are perhaps a necessary first step to a sea-change and normalisation.

What brands can do

To change advertising, brands and clients need to be on the journey. Brands need to ask themselves if they really know their disabled customers or the potential that the disabled market represents. Brands can play a huge part in holding agencies and media organisations to account by requiring them to share their diversity/disability data if they want the brand's business. Brands must work more collaboratively with disability organisations and disabled people to generate and test ideas, campaigns and messaging.



More accessible platforms

Media platforms need to be more accessible, recognising that a large part of the problem is that there are no industry standards for accessibility and because there are so many stakeholders, this slows down change while conversely, technology is so fast moving. New platforms should embed accessible features from the start because retro-fitting later is more challenging.

How the third sector can help

Media organisations need to be meaningfully engaging with disability charities and non-profit organisations to ensure they are taking into account insights and views of people with lived experiences. Charities can also help with outreach for employability programmes that will help increase diversity and in turn, representation. However media organisations need to recognise the value non-profits bring and not expect them to help for free.

The role of Government

The Government can help by ring-fencing money in existing Government or lottery funded schemes to improve diversity in the creative industries, especially to get more disabled people on our screens.

Existing Initiatives

We know there are some great existing initiatives to improve disabled representation including Project Diamond, the BBC's Class Act project and Channel 4's guide for broadcasters on employing disabled people. Besides this, #WorkWithMe by Virgin Media and Scope is getting companies to pledge to improve workplace practices and support a million disabled people to find and stay in work and media companies like the BBC, Channel 4, Edelman, Omnicom and WPP are part of the Valuable 500 initiative to unlock the social and economic value of disabled people. A key question is how we can build on and collaborate with these different ongoing efforts and how these schemes can be better supported, scaled up and rolled out across the full range of mainstream media.



In summary, we believe now is the time to reframe disability in the media and in the UK. We need bold and innovative measures if we want to mobilise the public to be open to new and innovative thinking that destigmatises disability. This requires a major shift in how British people think about and understand disability and how they act in response to it. That's why we need the media, with its power to inform and influence public opinion, to get on board.

Email: su-meit@mediatrust.org
Website: mediatrust.org