

Disabling Comedy and Anti-Discrimination Legislation

Colin Barnes 1991

A version of this paper entitled 'Disabling Comedy' appeared in Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People's Journal 'Coalition' December 1991 pp. 26 - 28

Over the last couple of years disabled people and their organizations have become increasingly concerned about disabling imagery in the media. One of the most important examples being the cynical exploitation of disabled people by charities in their efforts to raise money. Here I would like to highlight another form of disablism common to the media which disabled people are expected to endure, which is equally disabling and which is often overlooked or ignored: the exploitation of disabled people by professional non-disabled comedians on television.

Of course laughing at disability is not new, disabled people have been a source of amusement and ridicule for non-disabled people throughout history. Along with the other so-called timeless universals of 'popular' humour such as foreigners, women and the clergy, Elizabethan joke books are full of jokes about people with every type of impairment imaginable. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries keeping 'idiots' as objects of humour was common among those who had the money to do so, and visits to Bedlam and other 'mental' institutions were a typical form of entertainment for the able but ignorant.

While such thoughtless behaviour might be expected in earlier less enlightened times, making fun of disabled people is as prevalent now as it was then. It is especially common among professional non-disabled comedians. Indeed, several of the comedy 'greats' who influenced today's 'funny' men and women built their careers around disablist humour. In the film world, for example, Harpo Marx pretended he couldn't speak to act the fool. Radio stars of the 1950s and early 60s like Al Read and Hilda Baker mocked their respective stooges by shouting at them as if they were deaf, and, by implication, stupid.

Today, disablist humour enters our homes regularly through television. It is quite usual for TV script writers and comics to use explicitly or implicitly offensive jokes and comedy routines about impairment and disabled people to get laughs. Moreover, those who exploit this kind of material are not confined to one specific brand of comedy; they are common to them all.

The well known 'establishment' writer and comedian Ronnie Barker, for example, has mimicked individuals with impairments in two of his most successful TV sit coms: 'Clarence' - an odd job cum removal man with a visual impairment and; 'Open All Hours' - a local grocer with a speech impairment.

The popular 'radical' comedy series 'Monty Python's Flying Circus' is full of overtly disablist imagery and humour. Consider, for example, the celebrated John Cleese sketch about the Ministry of Funny Walks, or the often featured routine which two or more of the Python stars wore badly fitting clothes and knotted handkerchiefs on their heads while uttering totally meaningless statements in slurred, loud and monotonous voices. The negative implications for people who have difficulty walking, or who experience learning difficulties are obvious.

The so called 'alternative' comedians are no better either. Ben Elton once proudly defined this particular type of comedy as non-sexist and non-racist; he conveniently forgot to include non-disablist in his definition. The words 'spas' and 'spasy' - both derogatory terms short for the word 'spastic' - were repeatedly used as insults in the cult television series 'The Young Ones' starring Ade Edmonson, Rik Mayall, Nigel Planer and Christopher Ryan. One of the principal script writers for this show was none other than Mr. Elton himself.

Indeed, one alternative comedian, Harry Enfield, has even exploited disabling comedy to sell chocolate bars. In the current 'Dime Bar' ad he depicts a man with an obvious visual impairment in a supermarket, who only realises he has someone else's shopping trolley when he is frantically searching for his 'Dime' bar.

The negative implications for disabled people of this type of abuse should not be underestimated. On the one hand, it helps perpetuate the pre-conceived attitudes towards, assumptions about, and expectations of disabled people in the minds of non-disabled people - thus reinforcing the foundations on which discrimination rests. On the other hand, it has the capacity to rob disabled individuals, especially children, of their self confidence and esteem, and in so doing successfully undermines their ability to challenge that discrimination.

Since comedy with an overtly racist or sexist bias is no longer seen on television, then why is disablist humour? For my money, the answer lies in the fact that unlike discrimination against ethnic minorities and women the British Government has yet to acknowledge the full extent of discrimination against disabled people, and introduce laws to combat it. Hence, script writers, comics and television producers alike can claim ignorance of the consequences of this kind of material, and continue to exploit it. The persistence of disabling comedy, therefore, is one more reason why there is an urgent need for the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation and a suitable means of enforcing it.