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'Link'

An Evaluation

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October 1995

(This is an unpublished consultation submitted for Yorkshire Television)

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Introduction

Having been commissioned by Disability Television Limited, via Leeds University, to do a study of LINK, and of what disabled people want to see on their television screens in programmes specifically about (and one presumes for) them, I must first give a general overview of all the disability programmes around and about disability currently, or recently, on terrestrial television, if for no other reason than the fact that many of the people I interviewed for this paper referred to them.

On the BBC there is FROM THE EDGE (which is a magazine type disability issues programme from the Disabilities Programme Unit (the DPU), and OVER THE EDGE (also from the DPU, but with a harder edge than FROM THE EDGE and, in-general, a single issue programme). Although these programmes are not being screened at present they will return, and probably in the same style as before.

Both are fairly recent to the BBC, having arrived in the past four years; these programmes replaced ONE IN FOUR, remembered with a high degree of affection by many of my interviewees. Recently the BBC gave a prime-time slot to THE INVISIBLE WALL, an investigative programme that looked closely at the real experience of discrimination that people have faced with the use of a micro-camera to record 'bad experiences'.

For the Deaf community the BBC have the specifically Deaf Issues programme of SEE HEAR: a programme which is magazine and studio based with many specials that are single issue programmes (often from abroad). A popular programme within the Deaf community, but probably because it was the only one for a significant period of time.

Channel Four have in the past few years introduced SIGN ON, a similarly magazine style programme but with a monthly news edition that gives an overview of current affairs which are both signed and sub-titled (on-screen).

Both the BBC and Channel Four's Deaf programmes are on-screen sub-titled and in British Sign Language.

Channel Four's main disability programme is PEOPLE FIRST, a series of single issue programmes which are predominately made by disabled people. The subjects of a specific series often seem completely unrelated and as such PEOPLE FIRST is seen as an umbrella type label for a group of disparate programmes of a specific length. The main factor which goes to making this one of the most watched disability programmes on television at present is its very beneficial transmission time: currently it is on at 19.30 Hours on a Saturday night.

Although PEOPLE FIRST is also seen to be Channel Four's time filler, when most of the television audience are watching ITV or the BBC, it still draws a considerable audience in comparison to the other disability programmes on television (which appear on mid-week afternoons, Sunday mornings and midweek late-nights: OVER THE EDGE was on at 23.15 Hours on a Tuesday or Thursday - depending upon series).

A summer addition to the disability programmes list was a series of short programmes called I'M STILL A TOURIST. Under ten minutes long, it had disabled people going to tourist places in the UK, and Europe, giving their perspective on the places visited: accessibility, cost, toilet facilities and the like. Again, this had a mid-week morning slot and often shifted in transmission times from mid- to late-morning.

One of the main criticisms of this programme was that it was very amateurishly made and seemed obsessed with the toilet habits of disabled people. As with many of the programmes the use of a multiplicity of people with different impairments was always praised as a good step forward, but it also made many people feel that specific programmes had less relevance to disabled people without that specific impairment in that specific programme.

One of the main reasons for not regularly watching, for example, PEOPLE FIRST was that its relevance to many disabled people seemed tenuous as they often seemed impairment specific and as such "not relevant to me". Though, usually, the people who didn't watch a specific edition of a programme still felt the series was good because they always felt that their impairment would, 'come up', if not in this series then the next. And, to its credit, the editions that were issue based tried to incorporate as many impairments as possible to make the over-all point for that edition's agenda.

For many, that is the strength of PEOPLE FIRST: its ability to appeal to a wide audience of disabled people even when on the surface the impairment dealt with might not appear to be of interest to "me". As with all the disability programmes on the television at present, the viewer's own degree of disability awareness and political awareness of both disability and society seemed to dictate which programmes they liked or disliked.

DISABILITY AGENDA, a disability programme on in the middle of the night "to be video-taped", was rarely mentioned because almost no one had seen it. Although this was a magazine style programme that was different to most other disability television, its transmission time worked against it. Even if one had a video (which considering the financial status of many disabled people is a suspect proposition to start with) many either forgot or couldn't be bothered to tape it. They couldn't be bothered to tape it not because they didn't like it but because if they had taped it they would then have to find time to watch it!

I suppose the point many people made about disability television programmes is that they tend to reinforce cultural expectations of disabled people as segregated, special and in need of special treatment (rather than the fact that they are only demanding equality -not privilege -and that they are part of the everyday of social life and activity).

Any television that is about, or for, a specific group usually appears, to the outsiders of that group, as ghetto television. Gay television is seen in exactly the same light -by the gay and straight community -as disability television is.

Some of the in-group like it for validating the difference of that group, whilst others within the in-group detest it for highlighting that difference whilst they try to be as "ordinary" as everybody else. Outsiders of that group see it as making that group (in this case disabled people) more different than they saw them before, making specific minority television appear to marginalise that minority more than before.

Minority group television never educates those outside that minority, what it does do is give the minority a better image of themselves. Normalising television is the only way in which the minority ever gains ground in the fight for equality, but in playing "their game" a degree of self-validation is always lost.

Most people interviewed for this study had, in my view, the intelligence and awareness to argue for a multiplicity of representation of disabled people; a multiplicity that included the normalised method ("we are really normal ") and; the method that validated disability as intrinsically equal no matter what its status or degree of impairment.

For television programme makers: you make your choice and go with it. It will appeal to some and not others, and many will just watch it anyway and get from it that which they want (which can often be contradictory and apparently ideologically suspect).

Methodology

My methodology for this paper is a combination of the quantitative and the qualitative, combined with a cultural studies perspective rooted in the analysis of disability imagery - after all that is my speciality. For the LINK specific aspects of the paper I have interviewed a small number of people (24, a small number due to the limited resources that were made available by the commissioners) to canvass their opinions of the programme and, combined with that, I look at the programmes themselves to discuss what they reveal and how they can be interpreted by disabled people and able-bodied people also.

In discussing what people wanted from disability specific television I used my LINK interviews to cross question the interviewee to probe them further to reveal what they wanted in general from disability television, both in comparison to LINK and independent of it. Also I asked them what they wanted of disability imagery in "television in general". All the time the 5 specific questions/areas specified in the commissioning letter to Colin Barnes, at the University of Leeds, were foremost in my mind: the 5 points outlined by Sally Wells both determined the questions in the interviews and the textual analysis that I have undertaken of LINK, and disability television in general for this paper. To both show the points of the commissioning letter clearly, and to incorporate them in to the paper effectively, I will show each one specifically at the beginning of a section.

A little glitch that occurred during the preparation of this analysis of LINK is that it actually under went a transformation from a single issue "issue" programme to become a magazine format programme with a greater emphasis on a presenter -one Mark Todd, so far. As a consequence, this transformation is dealt with in much greater detail as part of the textual analysis of LINK.

Link: An Evaluation

1. "LINK" is ITV's flagship programme for disabled people. Does it serve its audience as well as it should? How could it be improved?

Taking in to account that most disabled people do not watch LINK, as was also the case with my sample group, one can only presume to answer that it does not serve its audience too well because disabled people are its audience and they do not, on the whole, watch it.

Only 25% of my study group did watch it (though most had caught it at some time and were able to be fairly critical of it as to their likes and dislikes), and if we consider that its average audience is **644,000** - which is 17% of the television audience at that time, 10.15 until 10.30 on a Sunday morning -then we can extrapolate the fact that even if all the audience were disabled (which it is not) then it is still only appealing to 10% of disabled people in the country .

These are the facts laid bare, but is life that simple? No. For a programme to appeal to all disabled people one would have to begin from the starting point that all disabled people are the same; which they obviously are not. Issues of wealth, class, gender, political sophistication and impairment ensure our diversity in society and in choice of what we each like, or want, from a television programme.

It is interesting to note that the 25% of people in my study group that watched the programme, and they all felt the programme served them effectively and coherently, were the most politically aware of the group, and the highest educational achievers (graduate or equivalent).

All those interviewed felt that the transmission time of the programme was working against it; with many (most) who didn't watch it claiming they might have watched it if it was shown later in the day. Though

such a claim is nothing if not dubious as all had caught the programme at some time or another and disliked it anyway.

That it was liked by the politically conscious and active, who had usually a vested interest in disability politics (though we all have as disabled people, I mean directly) as they worked in the field or related spheres, also explained why many of the others in the study group -75% -did not like it.

It often seemed to them "too political " and highbrow, not related to their real lives. For example, one respondent felt it was always stating that disability was a social issue which, for this person, may well have been true in general but also, she felt, the physicality of having an impairment was very real and often made her life " shit".

Ignoring the very real experience of impairment meant that its relevance to this respondent was negligible and often insulting, as it denied her pain and reality. Some, as they do, would argue that this is a problem that the politically active often ignore at their own peril: impairment is as real for many as is disablement.

Those who did not like LINK did not want to see it removed, they all felt it had its place, all they wished for was a different type of programme for them.

Also, if LINK was replaced by another "softer" programme then those that LINK does serve well will be displaced in to no-man's land. Their needs will not be met by making LINK, as it was, a different programme.

One must accept that as it stands LINK does, indeed, serve its audience well; its audience is a small one but very specific and vital in the articulation of disability politics and aspirations.

There is an element in which LINK is education for the politically naive disabled person, who far outnumber the politically astute or conscious. It does this in a very different manner to, say, FROM THE EDGE or OVER THE EDGE.

Whereas they often preach with either very little subtlety or complete obscurity (it has its place) LINK is always careful to explain everything in a clear and concise manner. Though it wears its heart on its sleeve it never pretends to be other than it is: "too political " for the politically orientated. I doubt that its audience would ever rise significantly even with considerable change. The audience would just change.

Though I cannot offer any evidence for this, I suspect that, to a large extent, the new style of programme that LINK is will happen and its audience will change. The magazine format, see below, that LINK has now taken upon itself to use will alienate many of its audience but bring in a new one. My only worry for it -above all we all wish any disability television to do well because there is so little of it -is that is now no longer too political whilst not being anything else; it seems lost in its own attempt at modernisation, being neither one thing nor the other.

As to how LINK could be improved, apart from the obvious transmission time difficulties (its placement between children's and religious television makes one usually have to make a specific effort to watch it, rather than just catch it whilst happening to be watching television) .Those who did watch it were quite happy with it -some would have liked it to cover more items in a single programme but only if it was longer: i.e. 30 minutes -and the rest felt it would be watchable if it became a magazine format style programme (which it has).

But, again, it is all a question of perspective: the politically inclined who watched wanted what they got, those who did not watch it wanted something different, which if they got, would make it a different programme which many of those who previously watched it would not watch. One has to choose who you

want to watch, and having chosen not complain when others don't watch. Life can, and often is, much simpler than we give it credit for.

Those who did like LINK, and watched it regularly, felt that it dealt with disabled people in their diversity in a unifying manner. In other words, although they may well have been dealing with a specific impairment (which they rarely do, in fact, upon close examination of the programmes contents) the items seemed to be about disability in general. This, I would argue, is due to the political nature of the programme: they almost always talk in the programme of "disability" as a unified group; which, from their perspective, it is; namely, a political group who are disabled by a society organised around the needs of a non-disabled majority.

This is one of the strengths of the programme, it never sways from its road (until the change in the present series). Disability is not sufficiently understood or integrated to let up on such a perspective both to the able-bodied viewers who might watch it and the disabled who do.

A couple of recent programmes on institutional discrimination in society were examples of great disability television. They made the points in a manner that made them easily understood by the lay person, whilst they debunked much that is wrong with British culture (legally and politically). No other disability television programme could have done such a programme. That LINK is ITV's token disability programme, hidden away on a Sunday morning, gives it a freedom that almost no other disability programme has (with, perhaps, the exception of PEOPLE FIRST on Channel Four).

One of the other criticisms that LINK faced was that it, disability television in general for that matter, was dominated by a disability Mafia: the same people made, presented and were on, all disability television.

This, for a considerable number of the study group, meant that it seemed distanced from them and only applicable to "those successful disabled people who don't know what it is like for me". Although I accept that "they" probably do know what it is like, the general perception was that they (the makers, presenters and participators) were far removed from "my life", as numerous members of the study group said.

2. Is the rigid, single issue, format limited? Does it offer more than a flexible magazine format does? If so, how?

Many of those who did not watch LINK felt it would be a better programme, i.e. watchable, if it was more flexible and magazine like in format. Those who liked it the least felt that it was far too static a programme, lifeless to a large extent.

Though much of this criticism was aimed at the presenters, with such comments like: "the presenter seems to be dead"; "Elspeth Morrison should be shot " and "Vesey talks to you as if you're an idiot". Thus, I would argue extrapolating from such comments (which seemed to be universal) that a good, or wide variety of presenters, is preferred.

The new format, with a presenter and reporters in the field does seem a positive step forward except that the skills and knowledge of the presenter, Mark Todd, are made to look inadequate due to the limited amount of time that he has to do his stuff.

The studio interview in the style LINK, the middle item of three, is so short that he is required to solve the problems of the world in under three minutes (or whatever), which means that Todd always appears aggressive and abrupt. The fact that he always has to stop the interviewee just as it gets going backs up most people's point that it would be better in magazine format only if the programme is longer.

Packing more in to the same size package has, in the new style magazine format, made each item ridiculously short and abrupt; and the diverse nature of the reports (one presumes to make the programme appeal more to a wider audience) now makes each item look lost and out of context. Such a decision has also decontextualised the disability issue in to one of television formatting. I suspect that the audience will remain the same in quantity, but that it will be a different audience.

A good example is the current four part investigation into ACCESS TO WORK, a government scheme to enable disabled people find, maintain and progress in work. One segment of the first four programmes in the new series will examine a different aspect of the scheme. So far I have seen three. They have all appeared lost both within the programme and in the point which they are trying to make. If the four segments had been put together in a single programme they would probably make sense (were they made for that purpose we ask ourselves?) and gel together well with a coherent structure. As it stands, they seem pointless both in themselves and in LINK.

Consequently LINK, in its new format is trying to get the best of both worlds yet, getting and achieving none. Mark Todd, in my view, is an excellent interviewer, with a knowledge that few can surpass, and a talent that many would envy. But, sadly, giving him a few banalities to say at the end, and in between, with a minuscule amount of time for a serious interview, has done him no favours.

From the remarks made by the study group, the flexible, magazine format, is seen as a step forward, but only if the length of the programme permits it: LINK, as it stands, does not permit that.

Some of the more politically astute and active amongst the study group felt that perhaps the entire fifteen minutes could be given over to a hard-hitting interview. I think that if the series were year round it could achieve many of the aims that many divergent people want from it at specific times in the year.

For example, at present in LINK, one item is given over to the current political conference that is taking place; as it stands though, the one item in three approach is superficial beyond belief and predominantly looks amateurish and weak. If the series was year long it could dedicate each programme during the political conference season to an interview with a significant political figure from that party or organisation. The interview could then cover a diverse range of subjects that could still be classified as disability orientated: benefits, equal opportunities, civil rights, representation in parliament or party in question, driving legislation etc. etc.

One of the problems of a magazine format is that they can often make the trivial look important, and more significantly, the important look trivial (something the current LINK is coming close to).

What was accepted as the universal excellence of LINK was that the single issue format allowed it to cover the subject in a manner that no other disability television programme did. If one looks back at the programmes on over the last year or two that LINK have done on: the right-wing threat to disabled people; the representation of disabled people in advertising; in charity campaigns; in a Hollywood film (THE WATERDANCE); on the representation of visual impairment in films (PROOF specifically); on the passage of civil rights legislation and on the medicalisation of disability .

They have examined and questioned issues that affect our lives everyday, and in a comprehensive manner that no other television programme has. For this they must be given immeasurable credit. And each programme has been able to do that which it has done only because it has been a single issue programme. Any other format type, in the limited amount time available to them, and the issues would not have been able to be covered, or if they were they would have been diluted in the melee of subjects covered. The magazine format is not intrinsically better, it is merely different; the success of one format or another depends upon what one does in it, not "it" itself.

A flexible format, in a magazine style, was the preferred option of almost all respondents -in a programme of considered length that is -as it was felt by the study group, to offer a greater potential for exploration of a wider group of issues from a wider source.

Though it was felt that the magazine format that is utilised by FROM THE EDGE lacked a great deal because the items were not sufficiently linked either by an individual presenter (a key element of the magazine format) or a theme, and as such the items seemed (like the new LINK) lost in a rattling hulk of a programme.

Also, and this was something that the DPU were most found guilty of, jazzy graphics and "youth" style direction made the programmes seem more superficial than they probably were. At least, as one study group member commented, "LINK gives it to you straight".

3. Given the nature of "ghetto programming" and the fact that an audience may tune in to all programmes targeted at them -on the basis that they are not represented elsewhere (apart from negative portrayals) - what do disabled people want from television programmes which are specifically targeted at them?

This theme of the study highlights a fundamental problem of minority television, especially if one is trying to address a fairly large minority, such as disabled people. It is also an area that I have already touched upon in an earlier part of this study. It is impossible to address the minority in total because it is such a diverse grouping.

A fact that is especially true of the disabled population; especially when one considers that a large proportion of the disabled community either do not see themselves in those terms at all, or are too busy trying to deny to acknowledge disability television is addressing them.

That a large proportion of a disability television programmes I audience would refuse to watch it on the ground that they are not disabled is a major stumbling block for anything that wishes to address a minority that most of its members refuse to accept as a reality in the first place.

50% of the study group fell in to this category , and significantly, the only real disability television that they enjoyed was wheelchair basketball as it seemed to reinforce their own sense that they were really normal people who were virtually the equal of their able-bodied peers.

Most of the 50% who fell in to this group were the younger members of the group: late teens to early twenties. That one of these people most enjoyed PEOPLE FIRST purely because its title emphasised their own sense of normality (despite a fairly severe congenital abnormality) seemed to say it all.

LINK, in concentrating on the political idea of "Disability", for them reinforced their own sense of difference, abnormality , and they did not appreciate that when they often considered life difficult enough as it was. The reality of what LINK tries to do, and usually succeeds in doing, was of minor importance; the individual's psyche was the key factor in what one individual to another wanted from a disability television programme.

My research suggests that disabled people do not watch all the programmes aimed at them. Only 10% of the group watched all the programmes (and then only when they remembered) .Speaking empirically, I am the only person I know of who tries to watch all disability television programmes religiously; and I only do it for research purposes (and I feel they all blur in to one another after a while) .

I consider the idea that disabled people watch all the programmes aimed at them rather a strange idea because it presumes we are all alike and will watch a programme even though it is irrelevant to us and it is rubbish (from a given perspective).

Disabled people are a lot more discriminating in their taste than they are given credit for. Also it is a misnomer to presume that what one disabled person considers to be a negative representation of their life another will feel it to be not only astute but totally realistic. Whether or not one wishes to put this down to false consciousness or not is another matter, but if one did one is bordering on patronising the group they would aim to represent.

A single image is open to a multiplicity of interpretations, all equally valid, and all equally invalid. To a large extent the image itself is innocent until one brings to it one's own psychological baggage. Though that comment is an obvious over-simplification its essence is held to be largely true.

Consequently, disabled people want a wide variety of things from television aimed at them; a variety that could never sit together coherently enough to maintain the interest of the entire disabled audience.

Many of the respondents of the interviews wanted inspiration stories ("supercrips" for want of a better term), others wanted in-depth interviews of significant disabled people, others wanted disabled people to be treated as normal people doing normal things. Another wanted an ITV breakfast television style television programme.

The men wanted more programmes about disabled men, the disabled women in the study group felt disabled women did not get much coverage and wanted disability television programmes to reflect that. Another, who was gay wanted more with disabled gay and lesbians, another wanted more Christianity in the programmes aimed at him. Another wanted more "youth" orientated television that spoke to him. The list goes on, of diverse, disparate and incompatible ideas, which reflect the scope of disability in society .

What was wanted, simply put, was a lot more disability television that was different to what was on. Not instead of, but along side the existing programmes. In a multiplicity of formats, about a multiplicity of subjects from a multiplicity of perspectives. And I suspect, the largest audience for them all will be able-bodied people who get a great degree of satisfaction out of watching "ghetto television" to boost their own weak self-esteem.

4. Some viewers, disabled and non-disabled, have expressed the opinion that a programme like "Link" is "too political". Is this the majority view ? If so, how can a programme successfully accommodate this view and simultaneously challenge negative stereotypes and society's disablement of people. And should it try?

I have largely dealt with this question in the above sections, but I can add that percentage wise I would consider that it could satisfactorily be argued that LINK is "too political" from the perspective of most disabled people.

But that does not invalidate the programme, it only means that a large proportion of the potential audience do not like that aspect of it. One's view of the programme does, by and large, depend upon the political perspective one brings to the programme at the start but also of life in general as a disabled person.

Also, its political bent is instrumental in its success in maintaining a sizeable audience (all other factors considered) which it maintains and addresses effectively in the view of that audience. In times when the political agenda is up for grabs, especially in the case of disability politics and the hegemony of normality, LINK is the mainstay of popularising the agenda that will both free disabled people from their disablement and also able-bodied people from their own chains. If that seems a slight over exaggeration (especially in the face of LINK's recent change in style) it, sadly, does not say much for most other disability television.

Thus, to answer the first part of the question, it can, with justification, be argued that the majority of disabled people see LINK as "too political", but this must be taken in the context that the same majority of disabled people would argue that they are not "disabled" .

Consequently, any attempt to address that majority from a disability perspective is bound to fail, because it would fail to address the psychological reality of that majority who refuse to acknowledge the true extent of their own impairment in a disabling society, at best, or, at worst, would argue that their impairment is the cause of their disability!

Interestingly, although many of the study group watched other disability television programmes more than LINK, many felt LINK had a far greater degree of clarity and a far greater degree of consistency in their standards of production quality .

One DPU insider told me that when ever they watched LINK they always knew what the point was and were capable of understanding it easily. Conversely, they often watched FROM THE EDGE and had absolutely no idea what its point was -if indeed it had one at all. Also, the variety of subjects covered in OVER THE EDGE meant that often some of the edition's quality was suspect beyond belief (the DPU insider I spoke to felt that some editions of their shows made them fear for the future of the DPU).

On a personal level, I also feel that some of the DPU projects were often a triumph of style over quality; the recent David Hevey edition of OVER THE EDGE on body-image is a good example. LINK, to its credit has maintained a high standard of both production values and content accessibility for a considerable time.

One of the aspects of LINK that made people feel that LINK was a "too political" programme was the subjects chosen for profile and interview -with a large degree of "obvious material" being utilised. The recent edition, which has been transmitted a few times, with a leading architect seemed to be a good example. The points discussed, many of the study group felt, were not only obvious but dealt with in other editions of all disability television programmes.

That the issue was dealt with "politically" rather than in a "common sense" manner (that the ideological inferences of "common sense" as political is inter- related was a little too "political" for most of the study group) alienated over 50% of the study group in that instance alone. (That this edition had been on a few times seemed to explain why so many had seen that edition alone.)

The fact that the people interviewed, or profiled, in the programme always seemed to be " successful " made many of the study group feel that its relevance to them was limited (though this is related to many of the group's own sense of self-worth, its validation of their lives seemed to be central to their perspectives without them being fully aware of it).

Most of the study group, over 90% , wanted many more "real" people to be interviewed and asked for their opinions. Although this request usually meant " someone like me", it is a valid point which needs to be addressed. One of the problems of the disability movement in trying to claim civil rights is that those who will most benefit from it are those who are the most advanced in the disabled community anyway: i.e. white, educated men, usually with acquired impairments (which means that they did not have to suffer the sub-standard special education system which puts others at a disadvantage before they even set out on a social life) who were usually "professionals" .

The very opening of the programme does seem to back up such a perspective (the old programme this is, as the new version of LINK has new titles which have tried to modernise it, but which place in very close to the jazzy visual that so many did not like with FROM THE EDGE); heroes of the disability movement and television faded in only to be superseded by another hero (study group member's definition).

The new titles now imply that LINK is only for those "get up and go cripples"; a fact which I am sure, along with its new format, only serve to change the audience, not bring in a new one.

The differential in attitudes, aspirations and potential of those with congenital impairments, compared to those with acquired impairments (especially in adult life) seemed to most of those in the study group with congenital abnormalities, to be either ignored or not realised by disability television programme makers. (As indeed it is in the disabled community and movement at large.)

Thus, for these people, for whom impairment was often much more significant than social constructionist theories of disability, consequently their specific needs were not being met, in their eyes, by any disability television. Those in the group with congenital impairments (75%) felt more disability television should be aimed at them, at best, and aware of them, at worst.

5. Do people outside the metropolitan catchment areas feel themselves to be represented in the programme? How important is it for disabled people in Ossett and Ongar to be represented?

Simply put, the answer is No; people outside the main metropolitan area of London do not feel that regional issues are covered, except as tokenistic item fillers. And such a perspective applies to all the disability television programmes.

That most television is London based - as is the disability movement in most of the study group's perspective - seemed to explain the situation for most of the group interviewed; a situation in television and disability terms. The coverage of issues or events outside of England (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) was seen to be quite outrageous but, sadly, indicative of the professionalisation of disability politics.

Again, as with the rest of the paper, the actual reality of the situation was not really at issue. Only the appearance of reality, as represented on disability television was considered by many of the study group (in their real lives as well as for the purpose of this study).

Statistically speaking, and LINK is especially guilty of this, there does seem to be a greater interest in American disability politics/issues than in the regions of the UK. Though this is probably due to the cost of producing expensive UK television over the cheaper US imported film, as a reality of television production in the main, most of the study group were unaware of such television nuances of accounting. Though, and this would be their point, why should they be?

It was felt by most of the group, who came from a wide variety of places across the country (including some in London) that when ever a regional report was included it was about how problematic disability was in those areas (etc.).

All the good and "positive" reports concerned London or the UK. Again, the views expressed were never stating that any of the disability television discussed (primarily LINK) did this blanketedly; it was more a sense of how they felt they were represented over time. I am sure that all the disability television on either now or in the past could point to examples of when they were positive and regionalist but, and perhaps this is the point one would wish to make, they would be individual cases within the whole and not routine. That the reports from a region would be about a specific issue or impairment would, in fact, imply that that was the only impairment/disability group in that area (whereas, obviously, they wouldn't be).

Also, and this is applicable to all television, what the disability television makers might consider a positive perspective on their region many would consider to be defamatory or insulting. For example: if a report highlighted the great work of a politically active group disrupting trains in Cardiff, many disabled people in Cardiff might think they were made to look bitter and disruptive.

Again, much of what one considers to be positive or negative comes from one's own life view and sense of self value. Attitudes and a good sense of self are universally the same. That I personally and whole heartedly support the activists is neither here nor there, many other disabled people will not share my perspective or aspirations. Who am I to put them down for having their emotions and attitudes, especially if they are the predominant ones shared by an ablist society within which we exist?

Such an analysis of perspective brings us back to item four's ideal of still challenging negative stereotypes and being positive. What ever one does many of those depicted will consider the same image/representation as negative whilst others revel in its positiveness. One cannot choose a style/format or attitude that will appeal to all: you make your choice and stick by it. Some will follow, other will not.

The problem with challenging stereotypes and being positive is that a disability television maker must choose what they consider to be positive. Is it the impairment that is to be emphasised as positive or the relative normalness that is characteristic of disabled people? It is virtually impossible to choose one without alienating the other. Again, you take your pick. Each is equally valid; the problem would be when only one perspective predominates. A multiplicity of disability television programmes from each perspective is the key to keeping most people happy most of the time.

It was important for 100% of the study group that regional representation existed, and that variations in those regions were catered for also. So, many felt that just to talk about a region and its disabled people as if they were one homogeneous group was as reductive as that which already existed. Most of the group were keen to see regional disability television programmes that informed them of events, peoples, and perspectives from their region.

All the interviewees were keen to "compare and contrast" the experience of disability in a different region with their own. Thus, the metropolitan people of the study group were keen to understand how -for example - the experience of disability was lived in a rural area (which they found impossible to bear in their imaginations).

Such a perspective made all the study group keen to be aware of the differences in the experience of disability both between and within a specific impairment group(s). Consequently young people were interested to know how old people experienced impairment, the rich with the poor, the black with the white, the gay with the straight and the political with the apolitical, with the male and the female perspective as interesting to one another as to themselves.

It was significant that many of the respondents were keen to see regional disability television (in the mainstream and on local television) because it not only opened their minds but because they all felt that it would also open opportunities within the profession of the media for local disabled people.

Even though most of those interviewed would not have been interested in it themselves.

It can be argued then, very successfully I would claim, that people in the regions, in Ossett and Ongar, and Wolverhampton, and Birmingham, and Slough, and Glasgow and Swansea do not feel that they are represented except in a tokenistic or problematic manner by any disability television programme.

Some resentment exists that the USA is better covered than they are. Interestingly, Radio 4 was the medium that seemed to be praised for regional coverage with DOES HE TAKE SUGAR and

IN TOUCH. This could be because radio has such a small audience that it must be different (which only reinforces the view that television is London orientated) and it is cheaper to make and easier to produce.

Conclusion

LINK appeals to a section of the disabled community that is, by extension, attuned to its "political" nature. Consequently it not only serves them, but does so effectively and in a manner which they appreciate (notwithstanding the current transformation it has undergone, which I feel is a mistaken route for it to have taken).

For the majority of disabled people then it is "too political" but only because it is not a programme they like. To take those people onboard the programme will have to change, which if it does -it has -my research would indicate that it would lose the audience it has.

A change to a less political perspective will undoubtedly increase its audience because the majority of the minority that we are members of are that way inclined (such is the political system of society at large).

But, if it does change the audience that it did serve well will no longer be served at all.

LINK is seen as being London orientated, as all the disability television is, with a format that serves it well but not a majority of disabled people. A magazine format programme is desired by most people interviewed but not as a replacement for LINK but alongside it; and one that is different to magazine type programmes such as FROM THE EDGE.

As I wrote at the very beginning, a great affection was held for ONE IN FOUR, and also Channel Four's SAME DIFFERENCE; both magazine format programmes with presenters that had both a serious and light hearted aspect. Though I personally suspect that the affection is rooted in the memory of the programme rather than its contents.

It is a mistaken assumption to presume that disabled people watch all the programmes about disability that are on the television. If they did there would be more programmes made because they would have had incredibly high ratings: 6.5 million at least.

Also one must consider that a high proportion of a disability television programme's audience will be ordinary people with a vested interest in the programme (carers or impairment industry professionals -social workers, nurses, care workers etc. - for instance); who will get the increased self-validation of it for either supporting the idea that disabled people need help or that they are really like them: ' normals' .

What disabled people want from programmes aimed at them is the same as anybody else: variety, relevance to themselves, and entertainment. I would argue that the best way to achieve such a multiplicity is in a variety of programmes with a variety of perspectives. Each one has its own validity.

Closing Remarks

Each point raised in the commissioning letter has been dealt with individually and, as such, I will not repeat myself here. I will now conclude with a few comments that I have gathered together from research that do not in themselves constitute significant points.

For a start, the question of entertainment was raised fairly often without any degree of specificity .It is felt, more often than not, that there is a lack of humour in the programmes in general. Though there is occasionally "comedy" in FROM THE EDGE it was deemed to be either politically orientated and predominantly un-funny .

Disabled people are much more discriminating and aware, politically and televisually, than they are usually given credit for. Many disabled people who on the surface seem to devalue themselves are fully aware of the situation but do what they consider to be required to achieve that which they do, that is apart from it being a defence mechanism in an attacking society .

Disabled people want to enjoy the television they watch as much as they want to be informed, educated and see themselves. This would partly explain why so many of us enjoy that which is often derogatory of us. And a significant proportion of disabled people, tragically, do not want to see themselves on the television at all because they do indeed have so a low opinion of themselves that they feel either totally worthless or in denial of their "difference" or "different treatment". For these people disablement refers to their bodies and not their social situation or discrimination.

Finally, from a personal point of view, I would say that when it comes to disability television it is often trapped in its own sense of ghetto television which inhibits it from exploring the alternative, the obvious or the personal as valid in its own right.

But, and this is what it comes down to in the end: you take your pick and produce that which you want to produce. Apolitical disability television, I feel, will always get a bigger audience than the politically orientated disability television but that this is only because it is what appeals to the non-disabled audience. There is a fine line between showing the normalness of disability and the kind of representation that most of us dislike on HEARTS OF GOLD and TELETHON's of any kind.

"Nice" disability television is often a normalised view of disability and, as such, is a step back in the fight for justice, equality and civil rights of any kind. All I would say to a disability television producer is, try not to mistake a high audience for a good audience. The programme you make may be being enjoyed by the wrong people, or the right people for the wrong reason or, even worse, the wrong people for the wrong reason.