

Between Beggar and Batman

The image of people with disabilities in the media

by Peter Radtke

First of all I want to thank the organizers of this congress for having given me the opportunity to speak to this distinguished audience. My name is Peter Radtke and I am General Manager and Chief Editor of a small TV-station and film-producing company in Germany dealing exclusively with disability topics. From this professional background and the experience of 19 years of work in this field I want to talk about the image of people with disabilities in the media, at least in our country. I have given this personal introduction because very often I hear disabled people complaining about the media that they convey a wrong image of people with disabilities. As I will show later on it is perhaps not a wrong image but a one-sided one. We have to see both parties, the media and those that are disabled, with their expectations and exigencies in order to understand the complex situation that we have to deal with.

There are two different questions in this respect: "What is the image of people with disabilities reflected in the media" and "In what way does this image influence social consciousness"? This seems to be the old philosophical problem: "What did exist first – hen or egg". Whatever you say, you will be wrong. There are strong arguments for each one of the alternatives. But in our case it is not as difficult. Media are a product of

society. That does not mean that they reflect exclusively and under all circumstances existing attitudes. They may also open new horizons or try to educate their audience. But nevertheless they will stay rather close to ideas cherished by their consumers. Therefore an analysis must first of all list the stereotypes and prejudices on people with disabilities only to raise afterwards the question how media pick up those ideas and use them for their own purposes. Finally we have to look, what effect this mixture of elements of reality and fiction has upon society.

For centuries already disability and people with disabilities have been looked upon as an accident of nature. Homer in his "Ilias" describes how the Olympic Gods make a mock of Hephaistos, because he is limping, and throw him out of heaven. For all we know in Sparta disabled children were exposed to death. In the Old Testament people with a physical deformation were excluded from priesthood. Even the German reformer Martin Luther writes in his diary about a disabled child: "If I were sovereign, I would throw the cripple into the river to be drowned". The climax of such social hostility to people with disabilities was reached during the Third Reich when the Nazi regime murdered about 100 000 physically or mentally disabled persons. Though times have changed, the new discussion on prenatal diagnosis and abortion show, that even in our days general opinion is not so much in favour of any disabled existence. It is on this background that we have to evaluate the role of media and the way they take responsibility in this matter.

When I use the term of "responsibility" I do this quite deliberately. Media play an eminent role in the mediation between disabled and so-called non-disabled citizens, due to the fact that direct contact between these two population groups is rather the exception than the rule. In many European countries, despite great efforts for "integration", or as it is called today "inclusion", people with disabilities still live in segregated institutions. Parents drag their children away, when they meet a disabled person in the street. Architectural barriers and legislative stupidities hamper participation in social life. Ignorance and fear dominate the contact between each other. Thus often the media remain the only means by which those that are non-disabled learn of those that after all make up ten percent of the population. The image non-disabled people have of their disabled fellow citizens basically results from information given through newspapers, radio and television.

Let's go back to our observation that people with disabilities in general are socially not too well approved. In the beginning, media reflected this situation in portraying disabled persons in a very negative way. For a long time evil character was closely related to physical deformation. When in theatre plays disabled persons made their appearance they were always characters to laugh at or to be despised. The stuttering man, who becomes the fool of the whole community, is such a wellknown stereotype. You will certainly remember the Czech opera "The Bartered Bride", by Bedrich Smetana. Murderers often are marked by some physical handicap, only to mention the film "The dead eyes of London" (1939)

after a novel of Edgar Wallace. A very interesting example is the film "Freaks" shot in 1932. On the one hand the film tried to refute the idea of disabled persons being evil characters by portraying them as individuals with higher moral standards than their non-disabled environment. On the other hand at the end of the film the disabled take revenge on their tormentors just in the way spectators were used to see them, that is, as horrible little creatures with brutal character.

Considering these unfavourable preconditions, after World War II by and by media began to build up a new vision of people with disabilities. They knew that they were not allowed to go on the way they had done before. According to their new self-conception, there were two promising starting points. Either they showed such individuals as a group of persons that needed utmost care or they put emphasis on those qualities that made them less disabled, sometimes even glorifying them as "supercrips". In the first case journalists could rely on their audience's pity. Animals, children and helpless disabled always guarantee a certain rating. In the second case it was the approach of sensation that would attract attention. One thing we have to keep in mind: it is never for the sake of people with disabilities that such films or reports come into existence. There is one iron rule: those portrayals must never decrease the ratings of a tv- or radio program or diminish the circulation of a newspaper. Only when they find the acceptance of the audience, media allow themselves the luxury of responsible reporting.

So the common practice of portraying people with disabilities during the last couple of decades was that of Beggar or Batman, as I use to call it. Beggar in the sense of a person, that can't do anything without the help of others, a passive object of charitable actions. Batman in the sense of a disabled hero, who is performing top-efficiencies that even non-disabled persons rarely achieve. I remember for instance blind climbers conquering Mount Everest or amputated bikers cycling around the globe. These images are as distorted as those that we had been discussing before. The reason for this is, that they don't leave any space for aspects besides the extraordinary performance or the need of assistance. I do not say, that such films or articles are false; they do reflect reality, but only one section of reality. Persons that depend on assistance may be quite creative in another sense; they may have hobbies or skills which compensate for their need for help. On the other hand, those heroes that seem to cope with their fate without any problem may perhaps need helping in daily life or suffer mentally or physically from their impairment. Such images are one-sided and dangerous. They are one-sided because they only highlight one aspect of the various facets of a disabled person's life. They are dangerous because they suggest to an uninformed audience that this is, what is to be understood by being disabled.

But is this situation so different from the portrayal of non-disabled persons? Aren't they also very often one-sided? They are, but there is a striking difference. As I pointed out beforehand, there is very little contact between disabled and non-disabled people. Therefore there is no

way of correcting a wrong or one-sided image on the part of the ill-informed audience. Moreover a person with an impairment is seldom seen as an individual by the public. For most people he or she is representing the whole community of disabled people. So if Mr. A needs help, all disabled people need help, or if Mrs. B. is able to participate in the Paralympics all disabled people are able to do so. A non-disabled person never is judged as representative of a group; a disabled person is. So the portrayal of one disabled man or woman has an impact on the image society has of disabled people as a whole.

Now, some of my friends will argue that this doesn't matter, as long as we draw positive pictures of people with disabilities in the media. I am in doubt whether this is the right way to do good public relation. Disability is a product not easy to sell. But if we try to sell it under a sugarcoated label soon people will smell a rat and won't believe us. Everyone knows that living the life of a disabled person means being confronted with many problems. So if we paint a life in pink, reality contradicts us. On the other hand life isn't as gloomy as it is often depicted in the media. What we need are objective, impartial, unvarnished portrayals that reflect our daily life with all its shadows and brightnesses. Otherwise we would repeat the failures of the past, only with opposite signs. Personally I am very skeptical concerning so-called political correctness. In former times, disability and bad character were one unit. But today, when in a detective film a disabled person is the suspected murderer, you may be sure that he will not be the criminal.

Begar or Batman, is there nothing between? Fortunately in the last couple of years, progress has been made in the portrayal of people with disabilities, and this under different point of views. Let's go back to our example of "Freaks", that ambivalent film of 1932. For a short moment it seems, as if the disabled hero would marry the beautiful, non-disabled star model. But this impression is wrong, of course. The disabled have to stay in their world and the non-disabled lady will return to her sphere. A similar situation is given in "The Hunchback of Notre-Dame" film by William Dieterle in 1939. In contrast to these examples we may take "Children of a lesser God" of 1986. At the end of the film, the hearing teacher will marry his deaf student, and there is nothing shocking or irritating in this situation. The film reflects in some way the changed social attitude towards disabled people

Another remarkable aspect is the fact, that more and more authentic disabled actors appear on the screen. Though films like "My left foot" (1989) or "Gaby" (1987) are excellent examples of a more realistic approach to the topic, they are still shot by starring non-disabled actors. In contrast to these productions "Kenny" (1987), "The 8th Day" (1996) or "Children of a lesser God" (1986), already mentioned above, add to their message the authenticity of their actors. On German television we now have soap operas with genuine disabled actors, which I think is a very positive trend. The inclusion of disabled performers in entertainment is one of the most effective means to influence public. Public doesn't want to be educated. "Docere et delectare – To teach and to entertain", that

was already the principle of ancient schoolbooks on poetic arts during the epoch of Baroque and Enlightenment. When people learn by simply seeing, they will be more influenced than by any well-meant documentary.

From my experience I have to say: What we lack most are films on daily life of disabled people. Often I hear the objection that daily life isn't interesting. People want to read or to watch new, sensational things. My reply is: Daily life of disabled citizens is new and sensational for the majority of our population. They don't know anything on how I manage my life, they look rather surprised when I enter a car, they cannot imagine my fulfilling a full-time job. We have to reduce the gap that exists between our lives and that of our non-disabled fellow-citizens. But how can we achieve this goal?

The proof of the validity of my thesis that daily life of disabled persons does fascinate the public is given by the tv-program of my own organization. ABM, association for disability and media, is an umbrella organization of about 16 self-help groups. It was founded in 1983 on the initiative of the Bavarian government. Its task was to produce tv-programs concerning topics on disability for private and public tv-stations. In the beginning we were seen only by a couple of persons, as private tv was still in children's shoes. Colleagues of well-established tv stations sneered at us, as they could not believe that disabled people were able to manage a competitive program. Perhaps they were right, but disabled people are professionals in the field of disability. If they work together with profes-

sionals in the field of television they may reach a quality that others would long for. Indeed soon critics had to change their minds. Our transmissions got ratings quite unusual for this kind of program. People stopped mocking us. They even began to copy things we had introduced into German television. For instance our small tv-station was the first one to have disabled presenters before the camera. In 1984 / 1985 this was rather revolutionary. At that time the general opinion was that disabled telecasters will never be accepted by the audience. The course of events showed that this wasn't true. Viewers are much more open-minded than the responsible persons in the broadcasting stations believe. We produced documentaries on daily life of people with disabilities that got awards and prizes, though this kind of program is said to be boring. Today we have regular tv-broadcastings on two private and one public national channels. These programs that are transmitted by satellite are to be seen all over Europe. I don't know how much our programs influence society. But I do know, that there is no better way to lobby for our cause. We must go into offensive. We must change from invisible citizens to visible citizens. And when our fellow citizens don't come into our living rooms we must go into theirs.

But there are some prerequisites to be observed. To begin with, we have to professionalize in the field of media. We must get to know their rules and exigencies. We must learn how to handle them and to use them for our own end. Some broadcasting stations haven't given people with disabilities the chance to become real, good journalists. We have to multi-

ply these examples of good practice. Secondly: We have to build up a European network of journalists disabled or non-disabled working in the field of disability items. This network will be able to exchange experiences and perhaps even find ways of direct cooperation between radio and television stations or newspapers in order to finance and conceive common projects. And last but not least from such network could derive a European Press Agency similar to the national Spanish agency "Servimedia" but on an international scale with correspondents in the most important regions of the world. I am well aware of the fact that this is a long way to go, but with the help of supporters and perhaps the starting point on June 13th, 2003 in Athens, it is a realistic vision of a more adequate coverage of people with disabilities.