Disability and Digital Television Cultures

Disability and Digital Television Cultures offers an important addition to scholarly studies at the intersection of disability and media, examining disability in the context of digital television access, representation and reception.

Television, as a central medium of communication, has marginalised people with disability through both representation on screen and the lack of accessibility to this medium. With accessibility options becoming available as television is switched to digital transmissions, audience research into television representations must include a corresponding consideration of access. This book provides a comprehensive and critical study of the way people with disability access and watch digital TV. International case studies and media reports are complemented by findings of a user-focused study into accessibility and representation captured during the Australian digital television switchover. This book will provide a reliable, independent guide to fundamental shifts in media access while also offering insight from the disability community.

It will be essential reading for researchers working on disability and media, as well as television, communications and culture; upper-level undergraduate and postgraduate students in cultural studies; along with general readers with an interest in disability and digital culture.

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For Stella and Connor
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While this book has my name alone as the author, it could not have been completed without a huge team of supporters, mentors, colleagues, students, friends, and family members.

Disability occupies a marginal status in academia, just as it does in television and culture. I remember as a PhD candidate, meeting a senior academic at a conference who told me disability was just ‘trendy’ and that as a field of research it wouldn’t last – I should look for a different topic. At the time I thought, that’s outrageous, disability is not trendy, disability has never been trendy. That was over fifteen years ago, and I am pleased that critical disability studies as a field of research has lasted and I think maybe could be becoming trendy. But trendy is the wrong word – it was then, and is now.

However, there were more champions than there were detractors. Too many critical disability scholars for me to list have paved the way for me to be able to produce this work or worked alongside and I thank them for their leadership. I am especially grateful to Gerard Goggin, Beth Haller, and Rosemary Garland-Thomson who have both advised me and collaborated with me. Elizabeth Ellcessor, Meryl Alper, Toby Miller, Shawn Burns, and Mike Kent your energy and your contributions drive this discipline. You have all shaped my thinking and made a huge difference to the lives of many.

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On 26 November 2017, in celebration of National Deaf Week, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s (ABC) 6pm news bulletin was interpreted live into Australian sign language (Auslan). It was a first-of-its-kind initiative on television that was described in completely different ways by the different players involved. For the ABC, it was an important awareness raising initiative, while VicDeaf, the community group who helped organise it, saw the translation as facilitating access for thousands of Deaf Australians in their first language (ABC News, 2017). Reactions on social media from both Deaf and hearing audiences of the ABC news were positive. For the Deaf community, access like this has been limited.

Seven years prior to this news screening, it was reported that the technological advancements in digital television showed great promise, and while it was ‘not yet capable of adequate signing for television’ (Slater, Astbrink, & Lindström, 2010, p. 13), one day it would be possible to include a closed signing service on television programming. However, this promise did not eventuate and the 2017 ABC news bulletin was the first of its kind. Indeed, while the BBC, the public broadcaster in the UK, does provide some content in sign language (BBC, 2018), for Australian audiences, aside from emergency broadcasts and this one-off celebration of National Deaf Week, the only programme on Australian television purely in Auslan is an ABC Kids show, Sally and Possum. Other examples of Auslan on ABC children’s programming occur only on an ad hoc basis, for example on Playschool and The Wiggles.

Access to television is similarly poor for other Australian audiences with disability. In 2012, the ABC conducted a 12-week trial of audio description – a track of narration which describes the important visual elements of a television show, movie or performance which are included between the lines of dialogue – by offering 14 hours a week of content accessible to its blind and vision-impaired audiences. However, despite positive feedback, the trial has not continued into an ongoing service. In addition, familiar predictions of the transition to digital television offering increased opportunities for improved access for all have, at least in Australia, been somewhat empty. To date Australia remains the only

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English-speaking nation in the OECD not to offer audio description on television. In addition, audio description is not regulated in Australia and therefore continues to be stigmatised as a costly accessibility feature for a seemingly non-existent television audience.

By comparison, closed captions – a feature that describes the audio components of television in text at the bottom of the screen for audiences who are D/deaf or hard of hearing – first became available on Australian television in the 1980s and are regulated according to the Broadcasting Services Act (BSA) (1992). Historically, captions have been produced for certain programming but have not always been made available on every platform. However, since their inception, quotas governing their use have progressively increased – today all programmes aired on Australian free-to-air primary digital channels must include closed captions, and they are even increasingly being represented as a mainstream tool anybody can use. Nevertheless, despite these advances, accessibility is still an issue. For example, the further transition of digital television towards online programming has yet to see a corresponding availability of captions in that sphere.

Amid all this, there is a lack of understanding amongst the wider population of what these barriers actually mean to Australians with disability who require these accessibility features to fully enjoy television. Indeed, these groups are often framed within Australian popular culture and cultural identity not as at a disadvantage but rather as battlers, as people who are ultimately responsible for overcoming trials and adversary through a positive personal attitude. An Aussie battler perseveres despite the inhospitable environment and odds stacked against them.

Disability advocate Quentin Kenihan personified the Aussie battler in his early life. Throughout the 1980s, he appeared in both documentaries and a current affairs programming documenting his experiences with osteogenesis imperfecta and his family’s desire that he learn to walk. Quentin, who has long been considered a source of inspiration to the Australian public, appeared as Corpus Colossus in the blockbuster movie Mad Max: Fury Road. Quentin described the movie was a turning point away from the Aussie Battler identity imposed on him from his youth:

I’m not known as ‘that brave little boy’ anymore ... people say ‘That’s that dude from the movie’... I’m not just seen as a person in a wheelchair but as an actor, which is what I’ve always wanted.

(Mott & Dillon, 2018)

Australian actress Kate Hood takes aim at the inhospitable environment stacked against disabled actors in Australia. Hood had starred in the iconic Australian series Prisoner during the 1970s; however, after
acquiring a disability in 2002, she was not sent on an audition until 2016 (Clements, 2015). In the interim, she became an activist and established the diversity committee of the Australian actors union Equity. She describes her vision for an Australian media inclusive of disability:

In my ideal world, there would be a level playing field within our profession. We would see people with disabilities studying at drama schools, writing for television, directing for stage and film. It would be common place for the Australian public to see actors who were genuinely disabled on our stages and screens.

(Hood, 2015)

While Aussie Battlers are seen in a number of programs, it is typical to also find nondisabled actors portraying disabled characters in the way Hood describes above. In contrast to this tendency, following her work on Equity, Hood was cast on the iconic Australian soap opera Neighbours. Celebrating the casting on her Facebook page, Hood wrote ‘At last, a major Australian TV series, which is seen globally, has taken the step of casting a disabled actor to play a disabled person’ (Dow, 2016). Unfortunately authenticity in casting and disability diversity is still rare in the Australian television context.

The United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) recognises the importance of television to the human rights of disabled people. According to this convention, people with disability have a human right to be able to access television (Article 30) and encourage ‘all organs of the media to portray persons with disabilities in a manner consistent with the purpose of the... Convention’ (Article 8) (United Nations, 2006). Therefore, both representation on and access to television are an important site for analysis in disability studies. However, television, as a central medium of communication, has historically marginalised disabled people through both representation on screen and the lack of accessibility to this medium (Goggin & Newell, 2003). Therefore, in order to advance a social understanding of television’s role in disability as a complex identity involving both physical difference and social stigma, it is important to consider both representation and access in the same study. While disability analysis within media studies has historically focused on representation and the way this is shaped by policy and history, more recent theorisation recognises the mutually important area of access to digital platforms. Further, while it is true that accessibility options are becoming increasingly available – and normalised – as television transitions to digital formats, audience research into television representations must include a corresponding consideration of access. Technological creation is a social process in which disability is implicated in a set of social relations of power influenced by public policy and commercial decisions (Goggin & Newell 2003).
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As such, *Disability and Digital Television Cultures* is a book about both representation and access and how these relate to television and disability. Yet how do we define television or even disability today? At some point in time, we would have been able to say with some certainty what both were and what both meant, yet this is no longer the case. For example, in the post-World War II period, television was seen as having a social function, it brought people together into the same space to watch a programme (Spigel, 1992). Towards the end of the 20th century, however, theorists saw this social function as operating in the domain of culture rather than physical space (Lorié, 2011; Newcomb & Hirsch, 1994). Others argued that television was a privatised and individualised experience rather than a social and collective one (Rodan, 2009) and only gave the illusion of being social (Bugeja, 2005; Hoynes, 1994). Television is so much more than an aesthetic object that sits in our lounge room addressing us as though we are a homogenous mass audience – television could now also mean our phones, or computers, or light projected onto the wall or, indeed, that aesthetic object in the lounge room. Beyond technology, television also refers to content, and this content is not targeted to a mass audience anymore. Instead, audiences are targeted as niche because, once combined, they now rival the traditional mass audience. More recently, the integration of social media with traditional forms of television viewing has seen a resurgence of claims that television is a social experience (Hartley, 2010; Vance, 2010; Williams, 2009).

This notion of television as a social function is discussed in detail by Toby Miller, who observes three major scholarly topics of enquiry taken to the study of television across all disciplines. First, he considers the political economy of television via an investigation of television as a technology and who owns and controls it. For example, whereas Marxist critiques focus on the control the bourgeois media has over socio-political agendas, neoliberal approaches espouse the agency of media proprietors while endorsing limited state regulation. Second, the content of television, its textuality, is a key area of focus which can be further divided into content analysis, or identifying patterns across many texts, and the study of hermeneutics, which connects meanings of particular texts to wider socio-cultural environments. Finally, Miller argues that television audiences or publics are subject to scholarly analysis regarding both damaging media effects and celebrations of audience agency (Miller, 2010).

Miller further delineates these areas of scholarly focus into three clear stages which he describes as television studies 1.0, 2.0 and 3.0 (Miller, 2010). Television studies 1.0 was concerned with the damaging effects of television and the totalising influence of television studios. This first era of television studies focused on production and the industry. Television studies 2.0, however, is characterised by a shift in focus from the
influence of the industry to the agency of the audience. These traditions led to an environment by the end of the 1980s, whereby research focused on a specific area:

It was generally agreed that the cultural and political function of the media could be assessed productively at the level of representation: precisely because the media ‘mediated’ between competing interests and sources of power, the analysis of texts revealed the negotiations of meanings required.

(Turner, 2016)

Miller posits the final era, television studies 3.0, as a way to bring together the disparate approaches to television – ethnographic, political, economical, environmental and geographical – into a comprehensive approach to the study of television. As he explains:

Taking its agenda from social movements as well as intellectual ones, Television Studies 3.0’s methods will draw on economics, politics, communications, sociology, literature, law, science, medicine, anthropology, history, environmental science, and art, with a particular focus on gender, race, class, religion, age, region, and sexuality in everyday life across national lines. And it won’t privilege pessimism, optimism, audiences, owners, states, technology, or labor – but, rather, stress their mutual imbrication.

(Miller, 2010, p. 187)

Disability must be added to this list of focus points in everyday life. A disability studies approach to television has tended to favour a pessimism firmly located within a television studies 1.0 and 2.0 approach, favouring analysis of production or representation over audience agency or access to this medium. Throughout this book, I argue it is time to move beyond social model stereotypes of disability on television to consider the full circuit of culture, or the intersections and influences of representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation. Indeed, just as with television, the definition of disability has changed. At one point in time, disability would have been recognised as a medical problem within a so-called damaged body, it existed firmly within the realm of medicine not human rights. Over time, this has slowly begun to change – disability can now be seen to have a cultural identity or be socially created. This so-called social model of disability argues that people are disabled and disempowered, not by their bodies but by inflexible social practices and power imbalances that see these bodies as inferior. Proceeding from the UNCRPD, disability includes ‘those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society.
on an equal basis with others’ (United Nations, 2006). While the United Nations maintain they do not define disability in their convention, this description is useful in recognising both the impacts of impairments and social disablement.

In analysing these key themes of representation on and access to television for people with disability, and privileging the aforementioned human rights approach, this book proceeds from a media and cultural studies framework. Within this, Du Gay et al.’s concept of the circuit of culture offers some useful insights to disability and digital television cultures. The circuit of culture is a five-point framework – encompassing representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation – through which to undertake cultural analysis (Du Gay et al., 1997). This approach has been recognised as enabling ‘the recognition of power, culture and identity, as well as the fluid nature of the construction of meaning’ (Tombleson & Wolf, 2017). This circuit holds relevance to a cultural study of disability and television. Disability is constructed through culture (Shakespeare, 1994) – ‘the process by which meaning is produced, circulated, consumed, commodified and endlessly reproduced and renegotiated in society’ (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 35).

The circuit of culture is therefore applied throughout this book to both disability itself, representations of disability on television, insights obtained through interviews with people with disability, online discussions about television texts and technologies, as well as assistive technologies used to access television such as captions and audio description. The circuit of culture offers an opportunity to reflect on the intersections between the aforementioned five cultural processes, which, although distinct, intersect and influence each other in several ways to give meaning to disability and television in Australia.

Within this circuit are other smaller circuits, for example, those related to captions and audio description specifically. Captions in Australia are regulated according to the Broadcasting Services Act (1992). Historically, captions have been produced for certain programming but have not always been made available on every platform. However, they are increasingly being represented as a mainstream tool anybody can use to increase their comprehension of television. Conversely, audio description is not regulated and continues to be stigmatised as a costly accessibility feature for a seemingly non-existent television audience. Issues such as these are also recurrent themes in this book.

The book focuses most of its research within an Australian setting. The transition to digital television in most Western nations has been heavily influenced by the state. As I discuss throughout this book, this was certainly the case in Australia. With its continuing government support of both public and commercial television, the Australian television landscape offers fertile opportunity for an examination of the role of the state and legislation to advance critical disability analysis of television.
Yet while this book focuses on disabled people in Australia and their experiences of television as the technology shifts to digital platforms, it also retains an international focus, drawing from research conducted during digital television transitions internationally. For example, international case studies and media reports are complemented by findings of a user-focused study into both accessibility and representation captured during the Australian digital television switchover in, and further transition to, online platforms. The Australian context is particularly relevant to a global audience, because Australia introduced digital television after both the USA and the UK and so were aware of the problems people with disability had already experienced during those transition periods. Australian governments were therefore able to implement practices to avoid any documented problems reported by people with disability – or choose to ignore them and make the same mistakes. Australia is also a signatory to the UNCRPD.

**The United Nations Convention**

The UNCRPD is an international convention that sets out 50 articles regarding the fundamental human rights of people with disability such as access to education, the community, healthcare and media – ‘access to television programmes’ is specifically mentioned in Article 30. Several articles also make specific connections to the media including Articles 4, 8, 9 and 21. A human rights approach to disability proceeds from the assumption that people with disability have the same rights as everyone else but acknowledges that environmental, attitudinal and organisational barriers create obstacles to the enjoyment of human rights. The media is central to the creation of the social environment in which these rights are not realised (Dimopoulos, 2017) and, as such, documents like the UNCRPD and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which both establish access to television as a human right, play an important role in reducing these barriers. First, Article 19 of the UDHR establishes the right to freedom of expression, mentioning media as of particular value (author’s emphasis):

> Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

(Article 19 United Nations, 1948)

The media in general, and television in particular, have a key role in realising Articles 22 and 27 of the UDHR (Ellis & Goggin, 2015). Whereas Article 22 focuses on cultural rights, Article 27 mandates ‘Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the
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community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits’. Article 21 of the UNCRPD:

... extends the 1948 Declaration’s focus on the right to freedom of expression and participation specifically to people with disabilities.

(Article 21 United Nations, 2006)

Australia has ratified both the UDHR and the UNCRPD and so should be making efforts to meet certain obligations of these documents which specifically address television access and representation as a means to creating an inclusive society. In addition to this legislation, Australia’s National Disability Strategy 2010–2020 was endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments in February 2011, a strategy described as ‘a coordinated plan across all levels of government to improve the lives of people with disability, their families and carers’ (Australian Government, 2011). Within this strategy, access to television is aligned with access to public spaces via a focus on captions ‘on all visual material such as DVDs, television programs and videotapes’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011, p. 30). Access to television therefore fosters inclusion for people with disability in Australian society.

Representation on Television – A Human Rights Issue

Representation matters. In 1969, communications scholar Cedric Clark published the editorial ‘Television and Social Controls: Some Observations on the Portrayals of Ethnic Minorities’ in Television Quarterly. The article introduced an enduring rubric for considering the ways minority groups are represented in the media and particularly television. For Clark, representations progress through a four-stage evolutionary process – non-recognition, ridicule, regulation and finally respect (Clark, 1969). Although there are still problematic aspects to the representation of disability on television continuing to ignore social constructions of disability and instead presenting overly medicalised, inspirational or triumph-over-adversary narratives (see Chapter 3), this book also highlights examples of television narrative that embraces respect in their representation of disability (see Chapter 4).

Analysis of the representation of disability has tended to stay at the level of meaning contained within the text particularly when it comes to television analysis. Problematic or absent media representations have long been identified as contributing to the social disablement of this group. For example, aspiring actor and model Julian Thomas describes the general lack of – not to mention stereotypical – representations of disability on television as making people with disability feel insignificant or non-existent (Thomas, 2016). Thomas illustrates his argument with a YouTube video outlining his difficulties breaking into the entertainment
industry as an actor with disability. His video details the difficulties he faces in obtaining an audition when, in the photos he sends to casting agents, his impairment is visible, yet how he is invited to several auditions when images obscuring his impairment are distributed. Thomas then goes on to describe the typical roles available for people with disability as ‘some inspirational character, some villain or a war vet’ and says there are no opportunities to portray ‘regular guy[s] living their lives’. He reflects on the social impact of this lack of representation in terms of both the wider population’s exposure to diversity and the sense of selves of people with disability who are unable to see themselves represented on television. Michael Oliver makes the same point in his early articulations of the social model of disability – disabled people are never represented as ordinary people with ordinary problems, they are always represented as either more than or less than human (Oliver, 1990). One night of prime-time television viewing would likely confirm both Thomas’ and Oliver’s argument. Vic Finkelstein also explored this concept in his thought experiment of a community created for and by wheelchair users. When some people who do not use wheelchairs attempt to relocate there they find that they are disabled by the built environment, negative attitudes and find they are completely absent on television (Finkelstein, 1987). Throughout the 1990s, the disability media research agenda turned to stereotypes (Barnes, 1992), archetypes (Darke, 1998) and strategies of isolation (Norden, 1994).

The UNCRPD recognises the impact of these stereotypes and through Article 8 encourages signatories to focus on removing attitudinal barriers to the realisation of human rights. Social disablement is initiated and sustained through people’s attitudes about the inherent dignity of the disabled. While a human rights approach to disability foregrounds the inherent worth of people irrespective of disability or impairment, attitudes circulating in society and culture promote inhospitable and inaccessible environments. Andrea Dimopoulos describes Article 8 as being concerned with the creation of attitudes or the social environment. She maintains that Article 8 should be approached in concert with Article 1 – The Purpose – of the Convention (Dimopoulos, 2017). Article 1 outlines the purpose of the Convention as:

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to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity.

(Article 1 United Nations, 2006)
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The significance of Article 8 therefore relates to social justice, social inclusion and the limits of broadcast media. It goes beyond the specific measures outlined in the Convention and points to the way attitudes can be changed to ensure the concerns of the convention are realised.
While there is currently no general comment related to Article 8, the drafting process related to awareness raising details an enduring concern with media representation. For example, during discussions in 2004, both Australia and Venezuela raised concerns about addressing media representation clearly and specifically in the Convention (Dimopoulos, 2017, p. 47). Strictly speaking, awareness raising is not a right; however, Article 8 obliges signatories to combat stereotypes as a way to facilitate human rights. Within the Australian television landscape, this is not typically approached via the mainstream media, and instead governments engage disabled peoples’ organisations to promote awareness raising campaigns.

Access to Television – A Human Rights Issue

Whereas most research into disability and television has focused on the potentially disabling prejudice that is perpetuated through onscreen representations that conflate disability with superheroes, villains or tragic individuals, the changing technology of digital television requires an engagement with how people with disability access television. While insights surrounding representation remain important, we cannot ignore the disabling impacts of the technology of television itself.

People with disability know a lot about access and lack of access to public space, technology, and society in general. Access is central to the experience of disability. For example, if a wheelchair user attempts to enter a building accessible only by stairs, they are disabled by the absence of ramps, not their inability to walk. Likewise, television, as a visual and audible medium, disables people who cannot see and hear. The UNCRPD recognises that the built environment is always under the full control of society, and so inaccessibility relates to social and cultural factors including customs and attitudes. However, awareness-raising activities to address stigma and facilitate change could therefore potentially improve accessibility. Indeed, like the wheelchair and ramp, television can be accessed in different ways if such adaptations are understood and made available.

As outlined above, it is this notion of accessibility which forms one of the key themes to this book. In Disability and New Media, with my co-author Mike Kent I argued that technology typically follows a three-step process to becoming more accessible to people with disability. First, technology begins as being relatively accessible, then, as it becomes more widely adopted by the general population, it begins to be designed in ways that exclude people with disability, before finally being retrofitted to allow access by this group (Ellis & Kent, 2011). However, television has followed a different path. It began as completely inaccessible to people with disability and then, as technology developed, it has become more accessible the more widespread its use has become. As we enter a
period where television audiences personalise their experience through programming targeted to niche audiences and individualised mobile media accessibility enters the domain of choice, this digitisation has seen a personalisation of television. Watching television in 2018 is very different to how we viewed television in the 1920s, when it first became available in its most rudimentary form – indeed, ‘accessing’ rather than watching is perhaps a better description of how we approach television today.

This new digital television arena also promises greater flexibility, in particular in the way it can be provided, and therefore accessed, in different formats. For example, people who are D/deaf or hard of hearing greatly benefit from the affordances of digital television through captions. Similarly, people who are blind or vision impaired benefit from audio descriptions of key visual information. Such translation and description benefit a sizeable portion of the community, including not only those with hearing or vision impairments but also people who predominately communicate in sign language or other alternative forms of communication, those with dexterity impairments (Pedlow, 2008) as well as people who form part of a more mainstream audience. However, although this environment represents great material, we cannot ignore the liberatory myth that surrounds both technology and disability (Goggin & Newell, 2003). While technology such as digital television is often presented as inherently liberating, disabling mechanisms continue to be reproduced into new technologies because disability is not considered to be a cultural identity in the same way as race, class and gender. Important work is therefore needed in the area of awareness raising.

The Australian Television Landscape

In The World Television Industry: An Economic Analysis, Peter Dunnett describes the television industry as a case of unintended consequences characterised by a failure to anticipate new markets, and a miscalculation of anticipated markets which did not materialise. The industry has also failed to see the effects on their industry of new entrants using different methods (Dunnett, 1990). This is certainly the case in Australia, dating all the way back to the introduction of television after the World War II. The Postmaster-General’s Department, who were at the time responsible for broadcasting actively resisted the introduction of television predicting the medium would never become a ‘mass medium of communication’ (Curthoys, 1991). While a joint parliamentary committee was established in 1941 to discuss the implementation of television in Australia, it was not introduced until 1956. Today Australian broadcast television comprises of two public broadcasters (ABC, SBS) and three commercial stations (7, 9, 10).