

Disability Representation in Children's Programs: A Critical Analysis of Nickelodeon's Avatar

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Abstract : Media plays a significant role in terms of shaping and influencing people's perception of various themes, including disability. Although recent examples indicate progressive attitudes in society, programs across genres continue to portray disability in a negative and stereotypical way. Such a one-sided or stereotypical portrayal of disabled people can further reinforce their marginalized position by turning them into the other. The common trope of the blind or visually impaired woman, for example, marks the character as particularly vulnerable. These stereotypes are easily absorbed and left unquestioned, especially by younger audiences. As a result, the presentation of disability as problematic or painful can instill a subconscious fear of disability in viewers at a very young age. Now the question arises, how can disability be portrayed to children in a more positive way? This paper focuses on the portrayal of physical disability in children's programming. Using disabled characters from Nickelodeon's Avatar: The Last Airbender and Avatar: The Legend of Korra, the paper will show that the chosen animated characters have the potential to challenge and subvert disability-based bias and to contribute to the normalization of disability on screen. Analyzing blind protagonist Toph Beifong, recurring support character and wheelchair user Teo, and villain Ming Hua who has prosthetic limbs, this paper aims at highlighting that these disabled characters are far more than mere stereotyped tokens. Instead, they are crucial to the outcome of the story. They are strong and confident while still being allowed to express their insecurities in certain situations. The paper also focuses on how these characters can make disability issues relatable to disabled and non-disabled young audiences alike and how they can thereby contribute to the reduction of prejudice. Finally, they will serve as an example of what inclusive, nuanced, and even empowering disability representation in animated television series can look like.

Keywords : Children, disability, representation, television

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