



## **Attitude Foundation**

### **Submission to the Consultation on the National Disability Strategy Position Paper**

#### **Question 3**

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Attitude Foundation Limited (**Attitude Foundation**) welcomes the opportunity to make this submission in response to the Position Paper relating to the development of National Disability Strategy review 2020.

Established in 2014, Attitude Foundation's vision is to live in an Australia in which people with disabilities are welcomed and fully included on an equal basis in every aspect of life.

In 2018, there were 4.4 million Australians with disabilities, or 17.7% of the population.<sup>1</sup> The 2011 report, 'Disability Expectations: Investing in a better life, a stronger Australia' (PWC, November 2011) noted that the biggest challenge for Australia,

*"...is to provide an environment for change which allows for a cultural shift across all parts of our society. Active participation of those with disability in society generally can only occur with a change in attitude. This is something that can't be legislated; people need to see the reason why change is important."<sup>2</sup>*

**Attitude Foundation strongly supports the proposal for the new Strategy to have a stronger emphasis on improving community attitudes across all outcome areas and we believe that a key factor in driving this change will come from a focus on increasing authentic representation of people with disability in the media.**

Attitude Foundation believes that the media is a powerful tool for changing attitudes towards people with disabilities. We work to ensure increased and authentic representation and inclusion of people with disabilities across all forms of media. We want to improve Australia's understanding of disability, including by striving to challenge the following common misconceptions:

1. the portrayal of people with disabilities as objects of inspiration, pity or tragedy;
2. the belief that an individual's diagnosis or impairment is the main barrier to their participation in society. Instead, we promote a "social model"<sup>3</sup> perspective of disability, which recognises that everyone is different, and that society needs to be organised in a way that ensures that all people can participate on an equal basis; and
3. that all impairments have obvious physical characteristics, when in fact many impairments are invisible, for example, psychosocial or mental health conditions, intellectual or sensory impairments, and hearing and vision impairments.

While we acknowledge that there is some recent improvement in the portrayal of people with disabilities in the media, there is still much to be done.

Our experienced and diverse board is led by our Chair, former Disability Commissioner Graeme Innes. Our CEO, Matthew Field, has a long history of working within the Community Media sector and has experience working with communities to assist them to develop content for broadcast with the aim of celebrating and sharing unique cultures, increasing representation of diversity on our screens and creating opportunities for emerging screen practitioners.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4430.0 – Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2018 <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/0/C258C88A7AA5A87ECA2568A9001393E8?Opendocument>.

<sup>2</sup> Disability expectations: Investing in a better life, a stronger Australia, PWC, November 2011.

<sup>3</sup> For more information about the Social Model of Disability, see People with Disability Australia, 'Social Model of Disability', <https://pwd.org.au/resources/disability-info/social-model-of-disability/>.

## Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

It is useful to reflect on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (**Convention**), ratified by Australia in 2008.

Under the Convention, Australia has specific obligations in relation to awareness raising, combatting stereotypes, representations of people with disability in the media and accessibility of information and communication technologies.

Yet there is still work to do to satisfy Australia's obligations under the Convention. The current National Disability Strategy, Australia's response to the Convention, sets out a strategy for implementation of its obligations that is almost completely silent as to the representation of people with disability in the media and accessibility of technologies.

The Attitude Foundation welcomes a stronger emphasis on improving community attitudes across all outcome areas in line with our obligations under the Convention.

### 1.1 Article 8: Awareness raising

Under Article 8 of the Convention, Australia has obligations to:

- (a) raise awareness throughout society, including at the family level, regarding persons with disabilities, and to foster respect for the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities;
- (b) combat stereotypes, prejudices and harmful practices relating to persons with disabilities, including those based on sex and age, in all areas of life; and
- (c) to raise awareness of the capabilities and contributions of persons with disabilities.

Article 8(2) measures to this end include initiating and maintaining effective public awareness campaigns and "encouraging all organs of the media to portray persons with disabilities in a manner consistent with the purpose of the present Convention".

### 1.2 Article 9: Access

Under Article 9 of the Convention, Australia has obligations to, amongst other things, identify and eliminate obstacles and barriers to accessibility of information, communication and other services and to take appropriate measures to, amongst other things, to:

- (a) promote access for persons with disabilities to new information and communications technologies and systems, including the Internet;
- (b) promote the design, development, production and distribution of accessible information and communications technologies and systems at an early stage, so that these technologies and systems become accessible at minimum cost.

### 1.3 Article 21: Accessibility and participation

Under Article 21 of the Convention, Australia has obligations to "take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise the right to freedom of expression and opinion, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas on an equal basis with others and through all forms of communication of their choice" including by:

- (a) Providing information intended for the general public to persons with disabilities in accessible formats and technologies appropriate to different kinds of disabilities in a timely manner and without additional cost;
- (b) Accepting and facilitating the use of sign languages, Braille, augmentative and alternative communication, and all other accessible means, modes and formats of communication of their choice by persons with disabilities in official interactions;
- (c) Urging private entities that provide services to the general public, including through the Internet, to provide information and services in accessible and usable formats for persons with disabilities;
- (d) Encouraging the mass media, including providers of information through the Internet, to make their services accessible to persons with disabilities;
- (e) Recognizing and promoting the use of sign languages.

## The role of media in shaping and influencing community attitudes

Authentic portrayal of people with disability and their experiences in the media should not be complicated. People with disability have rich and varied lives and different life experiences. They are best placed to share their stories in their own way. However, the stories of people with disability are rarely represented in the media, and when they are, people with disability are rarely the agents or authors of those representations.

The result is often inappropriate, stereotyped, negative and/or patronising. Too often, representations of people with disability in the media and social media rely on negative, outdated tropes of people with disability as cheats, charity cases and inspirations,<sup>4</sup> figures of pity or tragedy<sup>5</sup>, victims of violence, sinister or evil, as a 'super cripple' – someone who has superhuman qualities and has achieved success, 'in spite of' their disability' – an object of ridicule, their own worst enemy, a burden to their families and the community, sexually abnormal or asexual<sup>6</sup> and ill or disadvantaged.<sup>7</sup> Such frameworks and archetypes ignore the diverse realities for people with disability, perpetuate false and harmful portrayals and impact the way our communities think and act towards people with disability.

There is no question that media and social media play a central role in modern life. It is how we get our news, form and share our opinions, hold our politicians to account, obtain information about services, shop and spend money, watch drama, share information about our lives and learn about or "follow" the lives of others. Australians watch an average of 22 hours of TV a week (including streaming services), with twelve TV and movie services. Eighty-one percent of respondents to a Deloitte Media Consumer Survey have Facebook, with over half of all social media users checking their social network daily. Social media use continues to increase.<sup>8</sup> As people with disability become greater users of digital media, they are also being recognised as an untapped consumer group.<sup>9</sup>

With the prominence of media and social media, comes indisputable power to influence and shape public opinion on a range of issues including politics, religion, the environment and fashion, amongst

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<sup>4</sup> B. Hadley and D McDonald (2019), *Disability arts, culture and media studies – mapping a maturing field*, The Routledge Handbook of Disability Arts, Culture and Media, p.5

<sup>5</sup> Katie Ellis, Mike Kent, Scott Hollier, Shawn Burn and Gerard Goggin, 'Reimagining Australia via Disability and Media: Representation, Access and Digital Integration' (2018) 24(25) *Observatory: Australian and Transnational Studies Centre, Universitat de Barcelona*, p.98.

<sup>6</sup> Colin Barnes, *Disabling Imagery and the Media: An Exploration of the Principles for Media Representations of Disabled People* (The British Council of Organisation of Disabled People and Ryburn Publishing Limited 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Ellis, above n 5, p.97.

<sup>8</sup> Respondents to Deloitte's Media Consumer Survey 2019

<sup>9</sup> Ellis, above n 5, p.97.

many others. That power to influence and shape opinion is reflected in the significant media and social presence of Government and business both in Australia and around the world. One needs only to consider media and social media over the last few months for examples including the Trump presidency, covid-19 crisis, Hong Kong protests and the Black Lives Matter movement. Indeed, the power of media and social media is such that it has generated a whole new industry of “influencers” whose brand and wealth are directly related to their ability to influence the opinions (and spending patterns) of millions of people around the world.

The media and social media’s dominance in our lives gives them an undeniable power to both reflect and influence societal attitudes and perceptions of people with disability, and to facilitate and shape discussion around public policy and other issues affecting people with disability.<sup>10</sup>

One of the most effective ways to improve attitudes towards people with disability is through non-stereotyped and non-derogatory portrayals of people with disability in the media and social media.<sup>11</sup> Given this, the media has the potential to change how disability is imagined and how it might be reimagined<sup>12</sup> and in establishing new societal norms.

Over the last few years, we have seen more diverse and authentic representations of people with disability in our media and social media.. However, overall, the rates of representation of people with disability in media and social media remain extremely low as do the rates of employment or engagement of people with disability in the development and production of content. Another relevant factor in considering issues relating to the representation of people with disability is the ability of people with disability to access media and social media. Without accessibility there can be no participation – which compounds the forms of exclusion experienced by people with disability.

There are many strategies that can be implemented to improve the representation, access (to the technology itself), accessibility (how that technology is used) and participation of people with disability in Australian media and social media. Such media will be significant drivers in improving rights awareness and attitudes towards people with disability in Australia.

## **ATTITUDE FOUNDATION INITIATIVES**

Attitude Foundation set itself the ambitious goal of driving material change in attitudes and lives through the creation of media, resources and research.

### **Perspective Shift Documentary Series**

A principal initiative of the Foundation has been the creation of ‘Perspective Shift’, a three-part documentary TV series which explores the triumphs and trials of three of Australia’s top practitioners in the arts industries, who also happen to be people with disabilities. The series delivers insight into the experiences of people with disabilities and shapes a new understanding of disability in Australia, framed in terms of possibilities and positivity and showing people with disabilities as agents of their own destiny and not victims or heroes.

The Perspective Shift TV series can be viewed through SBS On Demand or on Attitude Foundation’s website at: <https://www.attitude.org.au/perspective-shift>

### **ReFramed – Disability in Media Podcast**

Due for completion in October this 6 part podcast series will explore issues of disability in screen media with a particular emphasis on highlighting positive stories of authentic portrayal of people with disability, inclusive production practices and streaming platform accessibility.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Thompson D, Fisher K R, Purcal C, Deeming C and Sawrikar P (2011), Community attitudes to people with disability: scoping project, Social Policy Research Centre, Disability Studies and Research Centre, University of New South Wales, p.21

<sup>12</sup> Ellis, above n 5, p.96.

## **Educational Resources Development**

The Foundation is developing a suite of educational resources aimed at secondary school students based on the themes of the Perspective Shift series that will challenge students unconscious biases and perceptions towards people with disability.

## **Research**

The Foundation has partnered with Curtin University on a research project to evaluate the effectiveness of the Perspective Shift series in terms of its effectiveness in contributing to attitude change at a community and society level. The Foundation believes that an evidence based approach will enable us to continually improve our effectiveness and to provide a case study resource for the broader media to improve representation and portrayal of people with disability more widely.

## **Content guidelines**

Attitude Foundation created Guidelines for Content Writers<sup>13</sup> to guide the creation of media that is made by or for Attitude Foundation, with Attitude Foundation's help or that has something to do with Attitude Foundation.

The Guidelines aim to ensure that Attitude media content is inclusive and accessible, involves talking with the disability sector and directly with people with disability, is inclusive of people with disability of all identities, can be understood in different formats and helps the community to know more about the real lives of people with disability.

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<sup>13</sup> The Guidelines are available at Attitude Foundation, *Resources* <<https://www.attitude.org.au/resources>>.