

## Your response

What is your response to this call for inputs?

Confidential? –N

Changing Faces welcomes the current in-depth review of how the nations, regions and diverse communities of the UK are represented and portrayed in BBC TV programmes and are pleased to submit a response to this call for evidence:

According to recent research *Disfigurement in the UK 2017*, disfigurement / visible difference is often absent or underrepresented in the media. Where it is present, it often serves to sensationalise or tragedise reinforcing the stereotypes associated with looking different of potential lower intelligence and aspiration, negative attitudes, link with villainy and the need for cosmetic surgery. This creates additional psychological and social distress and negative implicit bias to individuals and their families who are often already vulnerable and experience an unequal playing field in almost every aspect of life including the media and social media, leading people who look different to have lower aspirations and expectations, and to resign themselves to the inevitability of bullying, abuse and injustice. And yet there are 1.3 million people who live with a mark, scar of condition that affect their appearance such as a burn, birthmark, cleft lip and palate, eczema or acne.

The only sight of people with disfigurements in the mainstream media is often in programmes with offensive titles such as 'The Undateables' (Channel 4) and 'Freak Show' (BBC Three). Indeed, the BBC's five year Diversity Strategy, published in late 2016, contained no mention of disfigurement whatsoever.

It's unsurprising, then, that respondents to our survey said they felt that the media does not represent disfigurement well. More than two-fifths (42.2%) of respondents couldn't remember when they last saw someone with a disfigurement – whether real or fictional – in a newspaper or on television.

When asked to rate the frequency of seeing people with disfigurements on the television, more than a third (33.5%) said it was 'not at all representative', whilst a total of 83.2% said representation was low or very low. Just 0.5% of respondents said television was 'very representative' and 1.8% said it was good or very good.

When asked how realistic the depiction of people with disfigurements was on television, a quarter (25.2%) said it was not at all realistic and 62.4% of respondents said it was unrealistic or very unrealistic. Only 2% said they thought depictions were very realistic.

Perhaps reflecting Changing Faces' modest successes at seeking redress from newspapers via industry regulators, respondents showed moderate faith in those regulators to take action if Changing Faces were to complain again. When asked about the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), 84% said they would expect them to take the complaint 'moderately' or 'very' seriously. Almost 9 in 10 (87.8%) said they would expect Ofcom to take a similar complaint as seriously.

*"Disfigurement just doesn't exist in the media. We're invisible, and that says to me that the people running media companies don't care about us. Yes, you see more people in wheelchairs in programmes, but where are people who look different? Where are the birthmarks? Where are the burn scars? It's pathetic."*

#### Examples

Changing Faces criticised ITV's 'Benidorm' programme for a 'grossly offensive' comment about a character with a facial disfigurement.

In the [final episode of series nine](#), broadcast on Wednesday 3rd May 2017, actor and singer Danny Tetley was described as having 'a face like a dropped pie'.

The then Chief Executive of Changing Faces, Dr James Partridge OBE, wrote to

the chair of ITV, Sir Peter Bazalgette, expressing the charity's shock and disappointment. Changing Faces demanded an apology for the programme and said that it is prepared to refer the complaint to Ofcom. The episode was also [criticised by CLAPA](#), the Cleft Lip and Palate Association.

On Tuesday 19 January 2016, BBC Three broadcast an hour-long documentary entitled 'Adam Pearson: Freak Show'. It was produced for the BBC by Betty TV and showed Adam Pearson, a man with neurofibromatosis, going on a personal journey to explore the American freak show industry.

Changing Faces raised serious concerns that this film may have caused serious damage to the campaign for 'face equality', potentially legitimising bullying and name-calling, and thus setting the campaign for equality for people with visible difference back by several years.

Examples of Villains who have a visible difference:

Dr Poison – Wonder Woman (facial disfigurement covered with a mask)

Darth Vader – Star Wars (Scars on cheek and scalp, deep skin creases, hypopigmentation, wears a mask to cover)

Wicked Witch – Wizard of Oz (facial warts, green skin)

Changing Faces is calling for better representation of our community. One of our young people articulated it as follows:

*"People with a visual difference have started to be represented in the media/tv (weather lady and children's presenter with only one hand) but more needs to be done. You never see someone with a facial difference in a tv show unless they are playing the part of someone who has had an accident.*

*People with facial differences don't just play the part of a person for who they are, it's because what they look like fits the part. I never see people with facial differences hosting*

*programmes and the only time you see someone in a movie they are playing the part of a villain. People with a scar or mark are always portrayed as the bad guy and never the good guy. No wonder people grow up with the negative views they do, so people who look different are less accepted in everyday life.*

*People with a visible difference should be accepted in the same way as everyone else. They are no different! It's people in the community, and their opinions, that make people with a visible difference feel like they are different. If people with a visible difference were in the media/tv for other reasons, not just because of how they, and this became the norm then that would be great. Stop making villains the ones with scars on their faces. Let's make some films using people with a visible difference as the good guys."*

We would like:

- Ofcom to ensure that people who look different feature in their factual, documentary and news outputs but ensure that it is done in a sensitive, accurate way, avoiding sensationalist or offensive titles.
- Visible difference must be normalised by the BBC by including characters who have an unusual appearance in soaps, dramas and other programming, with care taken to ensure the disfigurement does not suggest villainy, untrustworthiness or any other negative characteristic.
- Programme makers should strive to use actors who have disfigurements themselves where possible, rather than using prosthetics or make-up.
- Disfigurement should be included specifically within the BBC Licence and its Broadcasting Code to adopt guidelines on the portrayal of disfigurement in print and broadcast media, and ensure that complaints about the portrayal of disfigurement are taken seriously, handled quickly and effectively, and statistics on such complaints and their outcomes are

published annually.

We would be delighted to provide more evidence should you need.