

‘It’s Really Scared of Disability’: Disabled Comedians’ Perspectives of the British Television Comedy Industry

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Abstract

For over 25 years television broadcasters, regulators and critics have been, and continue to be, united in their desire to increase the number of disabled staff working across the television industry and to improve the representation of disabled people in television programmes. However, little research focusses on the lived experiences of disabled television writers and performers working within the television industry. Via thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with disabled comedy writers and performers, this article specifically focuses on the everyday working experiences of disabled comedy professionals in the contemporary television comedy industry. Two main interconnected themes are highlighted and explored: 1) institutional dynamics of the television comedy industry; and 2) limits of current portrayals of disability in television comedy. These themes reveal the disabling institutional norms experienced by disabled comedy professionals and their critical perceptions of the representations of disability in recent television comedy programmes, including *I’m Spazticus* and *The Last Leg*.

Keywords: disability, television comedy, thematic analysis, institutional norms, representation

Television and disability in context

Since the creation of the Broadcasters’ Disability Network (later known as the Broadcasting and Creative Industries Disability Network (BCIDN)) in 1989, which was founded to explore and address disability-related issues and topics as they pertain to the media industries, a number of television broadcasters have been united in their desire to increase the number of disabled staff across the television industry and to increase the number of disabled people represented on screen. This has resulted in a number of manifestos, initiatives and strategies targeting the recruitment and representation of disabled people in television, most of which have been introduced since the early 2000s. These include the Make a Difference! Ideas for Including Disabled People in Broadcasting and Film manifesto published by the BCIDN and the Independent Television Commission (ITC) in 2002, a Bursary Scheme for Disabled Actors launched in 2003 by Channel 4 and the Actors Centre (see Disability World 2004/05), and the BBC’s first set of targets and initiatives set out in The BBC and Disability (2004) strategy document. In September 2011 the BCIDN merged with the Cultural Diversity Network to become the Creative Diversity Network (CDN) as ‘disability is now at the heart of the diversity agenda for all the UK’s main television companies’ (Morrow in BBC 2011). Commenting on the merger, Mark Thompson, then Chair of CDN, argued that it will mean that ‘disability will remain firmly on the agenda’ (BBC 2011).

More recently, both the BBC and Channel 4 have released a new set of new procedures, again designed to increase the number of television personnel who have disabilities and to increase the representations of disabled people on our television screens. In July 2014 the BBC

announced a range measures to ‘radically change representation on air, and to make the BBC a top employer for people with disabilities’ (2014). These measures included ‘quadrupling the [BBC’s] on-screen representation of disabled people by 2017’ and ‘opening up even more opportunities for disabled people to work for the BBC’ (BBC 2014). In January 2015 Channel 4 launched its 360° Diversity Charter. This includes new commissioning guidelines to ensure that at least one lead character in scripted programmes has a disability, or is from an ethnic minority background, or is lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender and holding casting days for actors with disabilities (Hemley 2015).

There is some evidence to suggest that these manifestos, initiatives and strategies are having a (limited) positive impact on the numbers of disabled staff employed in the television industry. Although the Creative Skillset’s 2012 Employment Census of the Creative Media Industries reported that the proportion of disabled people working in the sector had remained consistent for three consecutive census years – 2006, 2009 and 2012 - at 1%, the percentage of disabled people specifically working in the television industry was *slightly* higher, at 2%. This represented the highest proportion since 2004 when 1.6% of the television industry workforce was disabled (and 1% in 2006 and 1.3% in 2009). Although these figures are moving in the right direction, given that 18% of the United Kingdom population have disabilities (Harris 2014), these figures are comparatively low. Furthermore, analysis of the representation of disabled people on television suggests that the manifestos, initiatives and strategies have had little impact over time. OFCOM’s 2005 review of The Representation and Portrayal of People with Disabilities on Analogue Terrestrial Television revealed that in 2004, 12% of sampled television programmes included representations of people with disabilities. This representation had remained stable between 11% and 13% since 1999. These findings were interpreted as providing ‘evidence of under-representation’ (2005: 2) of people with disabilities. In August 2014 Cumberbatch et al’s study of small screen diversity reported that 2.5% of on-screen participants in the most popular programmes on BBC, Channel 4, ITV and Sky had disabilities. Variability existed across channels, with disabled people making up 3.5% of participants on ITV programmes compared to 1.4% on Channel 4. Again, when compared to the percentage of the United Kingdom population with disabilities, these findings provided further evidence of under-representation of disabled people on television (Plunkett 2014).

On the importance of television comedy and disability

While this quantitative data helpfully provides an overview of broad trends and patterns in terms of employment and representation, it cannot access the everyday working experiences of disabled people in the British television industry. Furthermore, although the quantitative data does not provide details on the number of disabled people working in television *comedy* specifically, this genre warrants analysis due to the prominence of representations of disability in television comedy and the ways in which audiences are concerned by television comedy’s treatment of disability.

OFCEM found that when comparing the types of portrayal of disabled and non-disabled people on screen, there is a ‘slightly higher tendency’ for disabled people/characters to be portrayed in ‘comic’ roles and a ‘lower tendency for them to be portrayed in “light” roles’ (2005: 14). Furthermore, as a number of studies have highlighted, ridiculing disabled people is a ‘major feature’ (Barnes, 1992: 14) of contemporary television (Clark, 2003; Haller and Ralph, 2003; Reid-Hresko and Reid, 2005; Mallet, 2009, 2010; Montgomerie 2010a and

b). Comic representations of disability on television are often largely based on negative and limiting stereotypes. Clark (2003) refers to these as ‘standard comic devices’, which include ‘physical comedy’, ‘the monster’, ‘the fool and the clown’ and ‘disablist language’. It is argued that repeated over time, these comic devices can have negative consequences including: ‘damage done to the general public’s perceptions of disabled people, the contribution to the erosion of a disabled people’s “identity” and how accepting disablist comedy as the “norm” has served to exclude disabled writers/comedians/performers from the [television comedy] profession’ (2003; see also Barnes 1992).

When television viewers were asked to consider a number of different groups of people, and then to indicate how acceptable they would find a tasteless joke on television about each group, 65% of respondents said they would find a tasteless joke disability either, very, or quite, offensive (Sancho 2003). This was a higher percentage than tasteless jokes made about any other type of group. For example, 41% of respondents would find tasteless joke quite, or very offensive about black people, 35% about Muslims and 35% about homosexuals. Sancho (2003) also found that comedy about disability is more palatable when the jokes are told by disabled comedians and when the targets of the jokes are clear.

These textual and audience studies suggest that although television comedy focusing on disability is a significant feature of contemporary television, its execution, reception and interpretation is complex and multifarious. This article explores the first-hand working experiences of disabled comedy professionals in the contemporary television comedy industry. It foregrounds, and examines, how disabled comedians reflect on their position within the comedy industry, their experiences and their labour. This research was conducted as part of a Sir Halley Stewart Trust funded project examining the working practices and experiences of disabled comedians.

Methodology

In order to access the lived working experiences of disabled comedians, a series of one-to-one semi-structured interviews with disabled comedians was conducted between July 2012 and June 2014. ‘Snowball sampling’ (Sturgis 2008) was implemented in order to recruit comedians to the research. Fifteen comedians, each self-identifying as a disabled comedian, were interviewed. These were: Liz Bentley, Gareth Berliner, Paul Betney, Liz Carr, Laurence Clark, Carl Cullinane, Tanyalee Davis, Imaan Hadchiti, Dan McKee, Simon Minty, Liam O’Carroll, Lost Voice Guy (Lee Ridley), Caro Sparks, Kiruna Stamell and Shaun Turner. Steve Best, a non-disabled comedian, was also interviewed due to his comedy production experience. Steve Best is co-founder and co-producer of a group of stand-up comedians called Abnormally Funny People and describes himself as the group’s ‘token non-disabled comedian’. The comedians interviewed differed in terms of the length of time they have been performing comedy (e.g. Tanyalee Davis had been performing comedy full-time for fourteen consecutive years at the time of interview and Lost Voice Guy had been performing nine months), the nature of their impairment (physical, sensory and/or mental illness) and the length of time impairment(s) had been present (ranging from birth to onset during early childhood or early adulthood). Such heterogeneity strengthens the research as it facilitates understanding of the lived-experiences of disabled comedians from a range of perspectives. Interviews examined in detail the experiences and perceptions of the British television comedy industry’s relationship with disability held by disabled comedians. The transcribed interview data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis (Aronson 1994; Braun and

Clarke, 2006; Boyatzis 1998) and thus focuses on 'patterns of living and/or behaviour' (Aronson 1994). The thematic analysis identified two main themes in the interview data: 1) institutional dynamics of the television comedy industry; and 2) limits of current portrayals of disability in television comedy. It is to these two interesting themes that we now turn.

Institutional dynamics of the television comedy industry

One of the themes identified in the interview data related to the ways in which some disabled comedians had experienced prejudice and discrimination from television comedy professionals. These experiences were related to two main ways in which some television comedy professionals perceive disabled comedians and their work. These perceptions related to: a) the skills and talent of disabled comedians, and b) the content of television comedies written by disabled comedians.

a) Perceptions of disabled comedians' skills and talent

The BBC and Disability strategy document maintains that 'we know there are talented disabled actors out there - it is our job to find them' (2004: 8). Some disabled comedians expressed concern about assumptions underpinning some of the strategies that are used by television professionals to 'find them'. For example, Liam O'Carroll explained:

When the industry wants a disabled performer, they don't tend to go through the normal industry channels of casting. They tend to go through unofficial routes, which is frustrating because it underlines that they don't really think of us as actors like other actors are. So they'll go to a blind charity or that sort of thing. So on the one hand, it does mean they tend to find me but at the same time, you know that they're not perceiving or valuing you in the same way. (18 July 2012 interview)

Liam O'Carroll's experiences resonate with Sancho's (2003) findings when interviewing television industry professionals (including producers, commissioning editors, casting directors) about the recruitment of disabled actors in television. Sancho found that television industry professionals referred to a 'supply problem' (2003: 54) within the wider entertainment industry as an explanation for the low number of disabled people on television. Some television professionals feel that there is a 'dearth of talented disabled actors' and a much larger pool of black and minority ethnic actors' (2003: 54). The perceived 'supply problem' may be a direct consequence of the unofficial routes that some television professionals use to locate and identify some disabled performers.

In 2012 Laurence Clark, his wife Adele and their son Tom featured in *We Won't Drop the Baby*, a documentary as part of BBC's Beyond Disability season. This fly-on-the-wall documentary followed the Clark's for six months during Adele's second pregnancy. Reflecting on this television experience, Laurence recalled how it was 'compromise, compromise, compromise, and what it ended up being was very far away from what we proposed' (12 December 2012 interview). Whereas the Clarks wished to present the programme, the editors had a different view – 'they wanted us to be observed, that sort of fly-on-the-wall style' (12 December 2012 interview). When explaining why this was the producers' and editors' preference, Laurence explained:

Very cynically it's cheaper. If I'm presenting a programme, I'm the professional and I'm being paid; if I'm a participant in a programme I'm not paid, so that's one reason. I think also not being seen as a professional. It was even like, because they used bits of my stand-up in it but I didn't get a say in which bits they used and in what context. When I watch it back, that's the bit that annoys me most, it's like they would use a punchline but without the set-up, so it doesn't make sense. It was more to show that I was a comic rather than let's make the audience laugh. (12 December 2012 interview)

The experiences shared by Laurence Clark reflect the feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction experienced by other creative industry workers when their ideas are altered or dismissed (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011). However, more specifically, the above reflections suggest that it is precisely editors' and commissioners' limiting assumptions about disabled comedians' skills and abilities that are hindering progress being made in relation to the number of disabled people working in television comedy. Editors and commissioners hold significant positions of power within the television industry as they are 'critical gatekeepers to improving the representation of disabled people on-screen' (BCIDN 2002: 21). Therefore negative or prejudicial views held by some editors or commissioners can have significant negative impact on the opportunities and experiences of disabled comedians. Recognising this, some television professionals have argued that 'disabled people need to be at the heart of the creative process to move things forward' (Sancho 2003: 6). Until disabled people are casting, commissioning and editing the television industry, Mark Thompson's view that the television 'industry has been slow truly to honour its responsibilities towards disabled people' (in BBC 2004: 3) will be maintained. In Kiruna Stamell's view, the limited and slow progress made in relation to increasing the numbers of disabled people working within the television industry is due to a lack of 'genuine commitment' to supporting disabled comedy writers and performers. She argued there is a 'lot of tick-a-box going on' in relation to disabled people working within television comedy and a lack of 'career development for disabled people coming up the ranks' (28 February 2013 interview).

b) Perceptions of television comedies by disabled comedians

In addition to some comedians reporting that some editors and commissioners hold prejudicial views about their skills and capabilities, some disabled comedians also reported other types of barriers experienced during the commissioning process that related to the content of their television comedy scripts. Simon Minty explained what he referred to as the 'brutal truth' of the commissioning process:

We've heard it from commissioning agents and so on that "your script is really, really funny, we love your script; however, there is no way we would commission something that is so disability heavy for TV". That's direct feedback. If you write a sitcom and it has an incidental character that has a disability, we're off. They [commissioners] don't seem to think the public is ready for it. All we get told is "disability is too edgy, risky, scary, audiences aren't ready for it". And also sometimes they don't think it's good enough. (17 July 2012 interview)

Similarly, Steve Best recalled a specific occasion where a script-edited sitcom was regarded as 'disability heavy':

We've [Simon Minty and Steve Best] written a couple of sitcoms. We got really far, we took it to Hat Trick and Jimmy Mulville script-edited the first episode and we took it to Channel 4. Someone else had seen it, another production company, and they really loved it, but I think their response was, it's too disability, because every character, except for one which was the token, had a disability. I thought that was great. She [Channel 4 commissioner] said that television "is not ready for it ... if you can make it [disability] less apparent that... just have a character... a token". It's a really good script and we had such good feedback from the main people, and yet they're saying TV won't back it. I do think TV is really scared of disability, that's a big thing. (12 July 2012 interview)

Here we see the intellectual and emotional capacity of television audiences being used by commissioners as a justification for not supporting or backing disability-focused television comedy scripts. As Caldwell observes, television executives 'master the prose of "speaking for the audience" and "arguments that the "audience wants this" or "that" trumps all others' (2008: 335-336). Wishing to please television audiences too easily can result in commissioners underestimating the audiences' capacity 'for enjoying richer, more interesting, more meaningful products' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011: 203). In their analysis of creative labour in the cultural industries Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) observe that genres are useful dimensions for comprehending creative worker experiences as they provide 'some kind of institutionalisation and routinisation' as 'particular sets of values, meanings and behaviours become associated with particular genres' (2011: 14). Limits imposed by how commissioners and producers understand how audiences will respond to comedy is also evident in other media products, such as men's magazines (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011). Douglas (1978) and Palmer (1994) remind us, comedy appreciation is complex and the meaning of a joke is socially negotiated and dependent on a number of interconnected factors including specific text of the joke itself, the context in which the joke is told and the process of telling the joke. As noted above, Sancho's (2003) audience research highlighted that television audiences are most troubled by tasteless jokes made about disability, but will consider them more acceptable if the jokes are delivered by a disabled comedian and if the targets of the jokes are easily identifiable. Such interpretive complexity of the comedy genre may explain the reluctance of some commissioners to support what they might perceive as 'disability heavy' comedies.

Limits of current portrayals of disability in television comedy

The second theme to be identified in the interview data related to disabled comedians' perception of recent portrayals of disability in television comedy. In 2012 a BBC News Entertainment and Arts journalist asked 'Is this the year of disability on TV?', arguing that 'from prime time documentaries about "undateable" people and autism, through to sitcoms from world-renowned comedians, disability is currently more visible on TV than ever before' (Rose 2012). Some interviewees raised concern about the under-representation of disabled comedians on mainstream comedy programmes. For example, Shaun Turner argued:

Why aren't people like Laurence Clark and Francesca Martinez on *Mock the Week* [2005-] or *Live at the Apollo* [2004-] or *Michael McIntyre's Comedy Roadshow* [2009-2011] or *8 Out of 10 Cats* [2005-]. There's just nothing, yet there are black comedians, yet there are women, yet there are Asians. Now don't get me wrong, I'm

not saying those people aren't on there for being funny, I'm just saying that disability in television comedy is under-represented and misrepresented at times. (26 June 2014 interview)

Similarly, Gareth Berliner asked:

Why haven't I seen Steve Day, who's totally good enough on *Live at the Apollo*? He's a safe disability. If Steve goes on *Live at the Apollo* he looks pretty well, he has a hearing aid on, other than that the audience doesn't have to deal with anything uncomfortable. We haven't seen him on the *Apollo*, and why haven't we? Because Off the Kerb pretty much control who goes on *Live at the Apollo*, Off the Kerb and I think Hannah Chambers, I'm not sure. If you're with one of those, you're on, if not forget it unless you're lucky. (3 September 2013 interview)

These two quotes raise a number of important points about the current representations of disability in television comedy programmes. Firstly, Shaun Turner's reflection draws attention to the way in which representations of disability, in terms of numbers, continue to lag behind other marginalised groups, including women and black and ethnic minorities. Television audiences recognise the lack of visibility of disabled people on screen and are acutely aware of the socio-political benefits of increased visibility on screen. For example, a recent Scope report highlighted that audiences were 'very keen' to see more portrayals of disabled people in television, arguing that greater visibility of disabled people could help reduce discrimination and stigma towards disability (Aiden and McCarthy 2014: 16). However, Sancho (2003) revealed that some television industry professional are reluctant to address representational issues of disability, with some admitting that:

they are more engaged with other issues such as gender equality, ethnicity and sexuality, which as "political issues" have been around longer. Inclusion of disabled people is seen [by some] as something that is "nice to have" rather than essential. There is a sense that the issue is "too big" for effective engagement [...] There are so many different types of impairment, each with their own set of challenges and issues, that they feel broadcasters cannot hope to please everyone. (2003: 55-56).

Secondly, Gareth Berliner highlights the way in which the specificities of the institutional structure of the British comedy industry can limit the opportunities of television work for those disabled comedians who do not have specific industry connections. Much of the comedy broadcast by channels such as the BBC and Channel 4 is not made by the broadcasters, but purchased from independent production companies, such as Baby Cow Productions, Avalon Television and Open Mike Productions (see Tunstall 2015). Many of these companies have links to both the production of television comedy programmes and comedy talent agency businesses. For example, Open Mike Productions is the programming arm of Off the Kerb Productions, a comedian talent agency. Gareth's reflection on the comedians who are more likely to appear on *Live at the Apollo* highlight the close connection between the production and agency arms of companies involved in comedy.

Two specific comedy programmes were repeatedly discussed by interviewees: *I'm Spazticus* (2012-13) and *The Last Leg* (2012-present). *I'm Spazticus* is a hidden camera comedy programme where disabled performers, including Tanyalee Davis, prank unsuspecting

members of the general public. Although a pilot of the programme was shown in 2005, the first series was not broadcast on Channel 4 until August 2012, prefacing the Paralympic Games in London. The programme received a mixed-reception. Whilst *Radio Times* journalist, Susanna Lazarus, described the programme as ‘fantastic television’ and having ‘that delightful quality of balancing glorious entertainment with toe-curling awkwardness’ (2013), Scott Harris (2012) in *The Telegraph* described it as ‘just awful’, criticised it for lacking comedic qualities and questioned the rationale of the programme. When reflecting on her responses to the prank show, Kiruna Stamell explained:

I couldn’t stand it, it didn’t represent my experience. If you want it to be written by non-disabled people because you don’t think disabled people have the talent, then I’d suggest just write a non-disabled character and then cast a disabled performer, just plonk him in there, do it that way. Write a funny character and they just happen to have, any disability, it doesn’t matter, because the comedy isn’t specifically about it, yet it will be there because it’s informed by the actor playing it. You know an actor with a disability will not play not having that disability, the disability will be there, and it can inform and enrich the work. (28 February 2013 interview)

Gareth Berliner was as equally as critical of the programme, making similar evaluations as Kiruna Stamell in terms of the writing and performing of the programme, but extending the criticism to the limited format, tone and execution of the comedy:

I don’t think it’s progressive at all personally. I think, if anything, a lot of it reinforces stuff. I don’t feel like it’s massively challenging and so far, having watched a couple of episodes, it’s not that funny. I’m not saying it’s completely devoid of humour, but how many times can a blind guy go into the wrong shop? And also isn’t that the kind of joke that able bodied people tell about blind people. Isn’t that the kind of ignorant assumption of what blind people do? They walk into the wrong shops because they’re stupid, or they need their dog to be spoken to, and aren’t we reinforcing when other people are out, oh do I need to talk to the dog? (3 September 2012 interview)

Kiruna Stamells’ comments that *I’m Spazticus* ‘didn’t represent my experience’ and that a disabled actor playing a part ‘will not play not having that disability, the disability will be there’ are significant given television’s wider social-political role. As Rieser (2003) argues, ‘broadcasters have a responsibility to fairly represent the society that they’re actually broadcasting to’ and Channel 4, as a public service broadcasters, has a particular responsibility to broadcast diverse programmes which ‘appeal to the tastes and interests of a culturally diverse society’ (Channel 4 2015). Furthermore, Channel 4’s public service broadcasting remit also includes broadcasting high quality programming that ‘demonstrates innovation, experimentation and creativity in the form and content of programmes’ and ‘exhibits a distinctive character’ (Channel 4 2015). Gareth Berliner’s comments that *I’m Spazticus*, is not ‘progressive at all’, it ‘reinforces stuff’ and it is not ‘massively challenging’ suggests a considerable disparity between the channel’s remit and the perception of its programming by some of its target audience. It also suggests that rather than broadcasting innovative, experimental and/or creative comedy that focusses on disability, some of the recent comic programmes simply repeat some of the standard disabling comic devices that have been used in British television comedy since the early 1960s, as identified by Clark (2003). These include: ‘ridicule’ where humour is derived from the functional limitations of impairments; ‘physical comedy’ where ‘physical characteristics of impairments’ are used for

comic purposes); and ‘the fool and the clown’ which involves comedy being derived from a character lacking in intelligence, or from learning difficulties (Clark 2003). Criticisms were not limited to *I’m Spazticus*, but were also extended to *The Last Leg*.

The Last Leg (known as *The Last Leg with Adam Hills* in the first series) was initially broadcast live each night during the Paralympic Games in London 2012. Presented by comedian Adam Hills, and co-hosted by television presenter Alex Brooker and comedian Josh Widdicombe it combined comedy, special guest interviews and Paralympic highlights to provide an irreverent review of the day’s events at the Games. Interestingly, and lending additional support to Gareth Berliner’s comment above about the performing opportunities afforded by close connections between comedy talent agencies and independent comedy production companies, Adam Hills and Josh Widdicombe are represented by Off the Kerb Productions and *The Last Leg* is produced by Open Mike Productions (the programming arm of Off the Kerb Productions). Since the Paralympics Games, the series have been broadcast weekly, and whilst maintaining its focus on Paralympic-related stories, they also examine the week’s news. Referencing the prosthetic leg each worn by himself and Alex Brooker, Adam Hills describes the programme as involving ‘three guys with four legs talking about the week’ (Millar 2013). *The Last Leg* was generally well-received, garnering more than a million viewers per episode during the Paralympic series (Robertson 2012; Deans 2012), which it has maintained during the latest series (BARB 2015). Tabloid and quality journalists praised the programme in equal measure. *Mirror* journalist, Mark Jefferies, described it as ‘a real success’ and ‘exactly the sort of show and kind of angle’ (2012) that makes Channel 4 programming distinctive. In *The Guardian* Frances Ryan described the programme as ‘often tasteless, sometimes awkward, always funny’ (2012) and Emine Saner praised it for generating public discussion about whether disability and comedy on television works (2012). Some of the disabled comedians interviewed raised concerns about *The Last Leg*. These concerns related to the casting in the programme, particularly in relation to the specific disability of the main host and the non-disabled co-host. For example, Gareth Berliner observed that:

It just strikes me as a little bit dodgy that we’re really open about disability, so we’re going to have a disabled host who you can’t tell is disabled. That feels really bad to say on one level, but I think it should have been someone who was quite clearly disabled, because it’s about the Paralympics. No-one normally knows about Adam’s foot. He’s talked about it on a couple of programmes, but if you haven’t seen those programmes, he looks just like an able bodied comedian, how would you know any different? (3 September 2012 interview)

Kiruna Stamell raised interesting questions surrounding the lack of disabled comedians on the programme: ‘Why isn’t Josh’s role a recurring one? Why isn’t it Liz Carr one week, Gareth Berliner another week, why isn’t that spot a rotational spot for disabled comics?’ (28 February 2013 interview). Similarly, Gareth Berliner, asked ‘why hasn’t Channel 4 got Liz Carr, Steve Day, Chris McCausland, anyone, representing real disability and being funny?’ (3 September 2012 interview). Reflecting on the limited representations on *The Last Leg*, Gareth Berliner and Kiruna Stamell had similar explanations, both referring to the restrictive views held by television professionals in terms of what are acceptable disabilities to show on television. Gareth Berliner argued that some of the physical disabilities that some disabled comedians have are ‘a little bit scary, not safe’ (3 September 2012 interview), and Kiruna Stamell maintained that broadcasters are ‘scared’ of some disabilities (28 February 2013

interview). Similarly, Laurence Clark commented that:

They could have used some other disabled comics as well, British comics. I thought they were quite timid around disability stuff that they covered and they had lots of non-disabled comics on but that just sort of rubbed it in really. (12 December 2012 interview)

Conclusions

This article has examined the lived experiences of disabled comedy writers and performers working in, or wishing to work in, the British television industry. Thematic analysis of interview data provides a nuanced understanding of why, despite 25 years of television broadcasters, regulators and critics creating manifestos, strategies and initiatives targeting the recruitment and representation of disabled people in television, limited progress has been made. Thematic analysis provides evidence of problematic institutional norms and values around disabled comedy professionals and comic representations of disabled people. The first theme, institutional dynamics of the television comedy industry, highlighted two specific ways in which institutional norms of some television casting, commissioning and editing professionals limit the opportunities of disabled comedy writers and performers. These limits relate to the ways in which some television professionals undervalue the talents and abilities of disabled comedy professionals and have specific views on the type of portrayals of disability in television comedy that are suitable for television. The second theme, limits of current portrayals of disability in television comedy, reveals disabled comedy professionals' views on the limited visibility of disabled people on television programmes and the problematic performances, format, tone and execution of comedy involving disability. The second theme also highlights how the structure and working practices of both the comedy industry and the television industry can exacerbate the barriers to inclusion experienced by disabled comedians. Since being interviewed during the Sir Halley Stewart Trust funded project, a couple of disabled comedians have secured television acting roles. Since 2013 Liz Carr has been a regular character, Clarissa Mullery, in the crime thriller *Silent Witness* (1996-present), and between October 2014 and January 2015 Gareth Berliner appeared as Macca in the long running serial drama, *Coronation Street* (1960-present). Although these are significant developments, it is disappointing that neither of the programme are comedies, but given the above themes, perhaps it is unsurprising.

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Notes