

# Media Coverage and Audience Reception of Disfigurement on Television

Dr Claire Wardle and  
Dr Tammy Boyce and  
Joana Barron

This research examines the role of television in representing disfigurement and considers how representations might be improved. The project was funded by the Healing Foundation and the Wales Office of Research & Development.



THE HEALING FOUNDATION

*Rebuilding the bodies, minds and lives of people with disfigurements*



## Introduction

The team at Cardiff University examined:

1. The nature of representations of disfigurement across the span of terrestrial television output (primetime and daytime).
2. The response of audiences to these representations, both those who have personal experience of disfigurement, and those without.
3. How television representations of disfigurement are produced (e.g. decisions by commissioners, script writers and producers).

## Research methods

- A. **Content Analysis of 8,650 hours of television:** one year's *primetime* television output (October 2006 to 2007) complemented by analysis of one month's *daytime* television (October 2006).
- B. **17 focus groups** exploring audience views about, and reception of, representations of disfigurement on television. The focus groups (and a small number of interviews) involved 85 people both with, and without, personal experience of disfigurement.
- C. **Interviews with 16 media producers:** script writers, commissioning editors, disability champions, and documentary producers involved with programmes which have represented disfigurement.

## Key findings

1. Television representations **differed considerably by genre**. Soap, drama, documentary, reality TV and news all frame disfigurement slightly differently and offer different opportunities and challenges.
2. Disfigurement is often presented as an **individual 'problem'** that can be solved with biomedical, technological or practical solutions.
3. People with a disfigurement are often positioned as the **object of a voyeuristic gaze and rarely given a voice**.
4. There are **repeated patterns** deployed in the representation of disfigurement e.g. association with evil, reclusiveness, bitterness.
5. **Historical archetypes and stereotypes** are still being drawn upon in fictional representations of disfigurement.
6. Certain 'high-profile' programmes **focus on unusual, rare or extraordinary** disfigurements (justified by producers because of high viewing figures and an increasingly competitive commercial environment).
7. **Ordinary or everyday disfigurement issues** (particularly prejudice and stigma) are neglected and less 'visible'.

## The Healing Foundation

The Healing Foundation is a national fundraising charity championing the cause of people living with disfigurement and visible loss of function, by funding research into pioneering surgical and psychological healing techniques. Through research, we also raise awareness about the cause and provide information about the sources of support.



## Section One:

### Overall conclusions from content analysis of 8,650 hours of television

	Time frame	Individual Instances	Ratio	With Repeats
Overall	Oct 2006 – Oct 2007	332	6.5 per week	497
Primetime	12 months	293	5.75 per week	446
Daytime	1 month	39	9.75 per week	51

1. Disfigurement is rarely shown on British television: in 7,650 hours of primetime television, there were 293 individual representations of disfigurement. When representations do appear, they fall into distinct categories, which are strongly linked with genre:
  - a. **Extremely rare**, congenital conditions affecting children from overseas appear on documentaries and in the news;
  - b. **Common disfiguring conditions**, often affecting the skin, appear on reality television programmes, such as *Embarrassing Illnesses*, *Street Doctor* and *City Hospital*;
  - c. **Representations based on stereotypes and myths** surrounding disfigurement are used in fictional programming as plot devices (people with burns living as a recluse, gangsters with scars etc).
2. Disfigurement is far more likely to appear in non-fiction (85% of the representations) rather than fictional programming
  - a. 33% of representations appeared in news programming; 31% in reality TV; and 15% in documentaries; 6% other;
  - b. 9% appeared in drama, 3% in film, 2% in soap, 1% in comedy.
3. The most common types of disfigurement represented on television are scarring (21%), burns (18%) and limb loss (16%).
4. Representations of disfigurement are more likely to be explained by a traumatic incident during primetime (50%) television, whereas 55% of the representations in daytime programming are explained through disease.
5. Representations of men with a disfigurement are more likely to occur during primetime (61%) compared with daytime, when women are more likely to be featured (63%).
6. There are similarities and differences between disfigurement and the representation of **other minority groups and social issues** (eg. race, sexuality, mental health) on television.
  - a. **Similarities** - television can raise awareness and understanding;
  - b. **Differences** - compared to other minority groups and social issues:
    - i. the relative invisibility of people with disfigurement means TV can be the only time audiences see disfigurement;
    - ii. disfigurement has a back story and there is inevitable curiosity about how the disfigurement occurred;
    - iii. disfigurement is often difficult or even impossible to hide;
    - iv. because disfigurement can occur at any point in someone's life, 'negative' portrayals of disfigurement can have a particularly damaging psychological impact if someone has not received adequate psycho-social support to help them adjust.

## Section Two:

### Overall conclusions from audience response

1. The audience demonstrated **more similarities than differences** between groups.
  - a. Participants with personal experience of disfigurement were slightly more outraged by negative portrayals, but many participants with no experiences were similarly outraged.
  - b. **'Natural curiosity' to look at difference** was something which appeared to be shared by all.
2. People's reactions to representations of disfigurement **depend entirely on their own experiences**. People with a particular type of disfigurement identified with representations of their own type of disfigurement but not with others.

Recurrent themes from the audience research include:

- Participants believed that television did have an impact on attitudes towards disfigurement.
- Documentaries which feature very rare disfiguring conditions clearly encourage people to talk about disfigurement with others, although not in a uniform way.
- There were high levels of discomfort about knowing how to talk about disfigurement (particular discomfort with the term **'normal'**).
- Belief that disfigurement is the **'last taboo'** (comparisons with representations of other minority groups).
- Audience members frequently contextualised the representations within the **current obsession with appearance** on television.
- There was a shared belief that there should be **more incidental, everyday representations** of disfigurement.

## Section Three:

### Overall conclusions from interviews with media producers

1. Some media producers believe **television** has an educational remit, and is a **potentially positive force for good**.
2. **Others** believe its role is purely an entertainment one, and has **little influence** on the audience beyond that.
3. The **current competitive climate** within television production is having a significant impact on output.

A sample of views from television 'producers' include:

#### Fictional

- Fear that audiences would switch off as there is a belief that the audience does not want to see representations of disfigurement.
- Fear that representations would look tokenistic.
- Logistical concerns (make-up, casting) about the difficulty of including storylines which feature disfigurement.

#### Factual

- Upset about the term 'shock doc' – they see the programmes as science and health documentaries.
- An awareness that documentaries featuring very rare disfiguring conditions gain high viewing figures.
- Within the documentary genre, there is a race to find the rarest conditions ("the bar keeps rising").
- A shared belief that it's not about disfigurement, it's about telling the best story.

#### The Healing Foundation

at The Royal College of Surgeons,  
35 - 43 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London WC2A 3PE  
Telephone: 020 7869 6920

Email: [info@thehealingfoundation.org](mailto:info@thehealingfoundation.org) [www.thehealingfoundation.org](http://www.thehealingfoundation.org)

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