

Would you date ‘the undateables’? An analysis of the mediated public debate on the reality television show ‘The Undateables’

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Sexualities

2018, Vol. 21(5–6) 825–839

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DOI: 10.1177/1363460717699782

journals.sagepub.com/home/sex



Abstract

This article examines the different discourses in the online public debate surrounding the television dating show ‘The Undateables’. The programme, which exclusively focuses on dates of disabled people, was launched in the UK in 2012, and local adaptations of the format were broadcast in Belgium and the Netherlands. The article applies the dis/ability approach of Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2014) to examine the way in which representations of disabled singles are evaluated online. As a perspective, dis/ability destabilizes notions of normativity and enables an inquiry into not just marginalized identities, but also dominant identities. The analysis of blog posts, tweets and online press reviews of the first series of the British, Flemish and Dutch version of ‘The Undateables’ provides more insights into hegemonic and resistant notions on disability, dating and romantic relationships. This article argues that prejudices, as already identified by Morris in 1991, are still very dominant today.

Keywords

Dating, disability, mediated public debate, reality television, representation, romantic relationships

Introduction

In April 2012, Channel 4, a British public service broadcaster, launched a new dating programme, entitled ‘The Undateables’.¹ Every episode of this weekly

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reality television show revolves around three different singles in their quest for love. The dating programme can be considered unique, because it solely focuses on participants who have a disability. Together with the help of special dating agencies, exclusively devoted to match up disabled singles, the show aims to find the perfect partner for people with physical, sensory, mental or other impairments. Fly-on-the-wall shots during the first date, and in preparation of that date, are alternated with interviews with participants, their parents, friends and personal assistants. The series' ratings were immediately high and local adaptations of the format were broadcast in other countries, such as Belgium² and The Netherlands.³ Although the show was very popular, an intense online public debate arose concerning the representation of the disabled singles in 'The Undateables'. Different readings were expressed by journalists and other audiences in online press reviews, weblogs and on Twitter.

The fact that this television show centres around dating and romantic relationships, with regard to disability, can be considered progressive, because not only in western societies at large, but also in disability movements and in the academic field of disability studies, these personal issues have long been neglected, even though people with disabilities consider intimate relationships and sex amongst the most difficult concerns of their daily lives (Shakespeare, 2000; Shildrick, 2007). Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sells and Davies (1996: 6–7) state that this neglect can be explained by 'the oppressive tradition of individualising disability within the medical tragedy model'. This model, which is so dominant in contemporary western societies that it became naturalized, constructs disability as a medical pathology, and considers it the individual's personal responsibility to cope with the disability. In order to shift the responsibility from the individual to society, the social model was introduced by disability scholars and disability activists (Mogk, 2013). However, this social perspective focuses so hard on structural and social inequalities, that private issues such as romance and sexual desires remain discounted (Shakespeare, 2000; Shildrick, 2007). It was not until relatively recently that disability scholars, particularly those working within queer and feminist theory, increasingly brought the personal issues of disabled people into public attention (Shildrick, 2007).

Nonetheless, the widespread indifference to romantic and sexual desires of people with disabilities is also noticeable in popular culture, where disabled people are usually absent, or stereotypically constructed as supercripples or helpless victims, without any reference to their daily, ordinary affairs (Hartnett, 2000; Shuttleworth, 2007). 'The Undateables' thus offers an exceptional insight into the romantic aspirations of singles with disabilities, and the programme is therefore considered an interesting case study for this article. By monitoring the mediated public debate surrounding the British, Flemish and Dutch first series of this television show, we are provided with a variety of viewpoints on the portrayal of disabled people's dates and relationships. According to the dis/ability approach of Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2014), these viewpoints do not only offer valuable contributions to our cultural understandings of 'disability', but also of 'ability'.

Hence, the aim of this article is to examine what discourses on dis/ability, dating and relationships are reiterated, questioned, or deconstructed in the mediated public debate surrounding 'The Undateables'. The different viewpoints from the debate were gathered via blog posts, tweets and online press reviews. A thematic textual analysis (Larsen, 2012) was conducted that drew on the dis/ability approach of Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2014).

The dis/ability approach applied to dating and romantic relationships

The dis/ability approach of Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2014) perceives disability as a perspective that enables us to reflect on the ways in which 'disability' as well as 'humanity' are valued within contemporary society. Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2014) state that by examining either side of the dis/ability binary, we can obtain more insights on what it means to be 'human' and to be 'normal', and what is considered 'less than human', or 'abnormal'. In this perspective however, disability does not just function as 'the other side of the binary' but as a resistant alternative to the norm. Disability allows us to 'trouble, reshape and re-fashion traditional conceptions of the human, while simultaneously asserting disabled people's humanity' (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2014: 1). In other words, disability disorients normalcy and allows us to question the relationship between dominant and marginalized identities (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2014; McRuer, 2013; Shakespeare, 2000). According to McRuer (2013) these dominant identities enforce their able-bodied norms onto marginalized, disabled identities. He refers to this system as the concept of compulsory able-bodiedness. He claims that this system, which in fact produces disability, is thoroughly intertwined with the system of compulsory heterosexuality, which produces queerness. Both systems are considered to be contingent on one another, because they both 'work to (re)produce the able body and heterosexuality' (McRuer, 2006: 31). But, in accordance with Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2014), McRuer (2006) also believes that disability has the potential to disrupt the performance of able-bodiedness, just as queerness has the potential to disrupt heterosexuality.

Despite this resistant potential, the dominant western ideology remains that 'having an able body and mind determines whether one is a quality human being' (Siebers, 2001: 3–4). Asocial attitudes and prejudices towards disabled people are still prevalent, especially when they are related to dating and romantic relationships (Shuttleworth, 2007). In 1991, Morris even published a list of prejudices held about disabled people. Some of them explicitly refer to issues of love and romance. For instance, nondisabled people often assume that 'disabled people feel ugly, inadequate and ashamed of their disability'; 'disabled people crave to be normal and whole'; 'disabled people do not have the right to an able-bodied partner'; 'if disabled people are single, it is because no one wants them, and not through personal choice'; 'if disabled people's relationships fail, it is because of the disability and for no other reason' and so on (Morris, 1991: 3–5). Tepper (2000) contends

that these societal attitudes suppress the personal desires and sexual pleasures of people with disabilities. Unfortunately, claims Morris (1991), prejudices are very difficult to alter because they come in subtle forms. On top of that, they are not just interpersonal, they are embedded in every aspect of a culture: in mental concepts, language, societal institutions, media representations and other situations (Müller et al., 2012; Shakespeare, 1994). Prejudices form the bedrock of most disabled people's interactions with the nondisabled world, and they can affect disabled people's self-esteem, especially when they become internalized (Morris, 1991). This can have consequences for the self-love and self-worth of people with disabilities, because self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem are necessary for the development of identity. Moreover, by projecting self-assurance to the outside world, individuals are far more likely to be perceived as a potential partner (Shakespeare, 2000). However, assuming that all people with disabilities struggle with issues of low self-esteem, is exactly how the system of compulsory able-bodiedness operates, because it presumes that all people aspire to be 'normal' and 'able'. According to Morris (1991), it is a very oppressive attitude to assume that disabled people are unhappy with themselves and wish to be other than they are.

(Not) representing disability, dating and romantic relationships

As mentioned earlier, media representations of disability often contain asocial attitudes and prejudices towards disabled people. Disability media scholars (Barnes, 1992; Cumberbatch and Negrine, 1992; Longmore 2003) have criticized such representations since the 1990s onwards. They all denounce the stereotypical constructions of disability as pitiful and inferior, and they call attention to the lack of disabled people represented as ordinary subjects who happen to have an impairment. According to Goggin (2009), the stereotypical representations of disability can be explained because media producers still hold the prejudice that people with disabilities are vulnerable and in need of special treatment. The dominant belief remains that disability is a tragedy and that disabled people are in need of help or care from the nondisabled. Hence, this 'vulnerability doctrine' or 'charity model', as Goggin puts it, still dominates media representations of disability. Within disability media studies it is argued that these types of representations can work to reinforce prejudice and disablism, that is, the blatant or subtle discrimination of people with disabilities (Kama, 2005; Müller et al., 2012; Shuttleworth, 2007; Thoreau, 2006). However, the way media representations are interpreted and evaluated by their audiences depends on the symbolic resources associated with their socioeconomic position, gender, ethnicity, dis/ability, and so forth (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990; Livingstone, 2004). It is often suggested that people without friends or relatives with impairments rely most heavily on media images for their understanding of disability (Haller, 2010; Müller et al., 2012), and that their attitudes towards disability are most often negative and prejudiced (Pruett and Chan, 2006). Therefore it is considered crucially important that media represent disability

in less stereotypical and more nuanced ways. And although mainstream representations are gradually becoming more balanced, the situation is far from perfect (Ellis, 2015; Thoreau, 2006). People with disabilities seldom appear in media texts as multidimensional, active citizens with their own experiences and life stories. They are still predominantly included because of their disability, rather than being just another part of the general social context (Hartnett, 2000).

This shortage of nuanced representations of disability is especially grave when it comes to love and romance (Shuttleworth, 2007). As referred to in the introduction, there is an unspoken taboo on the romantic and sexual desires of people with disabilities in popular culture (Shakespeare, 1996; Shildrick, 2007). Their emotional needs and romantic relationships are rarely included in mainstream media texts. On the contrary, disabled people are often constructed as asexual and unattractive objects, rather than subjects who have private desires and full sexual relationships. According to some disability scholars (Goggin, 2009; Norden, 1994; Shakespeare, 2000; Shildrick, 2007), these representations are a reflection of the dominant medical tragedy perspective on the one hand, and of the divide between the public and the private within disability politics on the other. Disability movements have always been more concerned with accessibility in public spaces and discrimination in education, employment and social institutions, than with the politics of romantic and sexual issues concerning disability.

Yet, there are some mainstream television genres that are suitable to bring the private lives of people with disabilities into the public sphere, such as soap operas (Hartnett, 2000) or documentaries. Müller et al. (2012) see reality television as a fitting genre to enhance social learning about the private lives of people with disabilities. They claim that ‘reality television has the potential to show the depth and range of people’s identities, attitudes and behaviours and enable empathy for and identification with the participants’ (Müller et al., 2012: 80). They firmly believe in the empowering potential of reality television to create more diversity on screen and more acceptance off screen. Conversely, there are other scholars (Skeggs and Wood, 2012; Turner, 2010) who consider reality television a tasteless and cynical exploitation of ordinary people and regret the audiences’ voyeuristic fascination with spectacles of other people’s shame and humiliation (Turner, 2010: 34). They disbelieve the possibilities for identification or emotional engagement with participants, if the participants are sensationalized and dramatized by reality television producers (Skeggs and Wood, 2012: 26). Nonetheless, Hill (2005) argues in favour of the social learning potentialities of reality television, even though she states that most audiences do not regard reality television as an informative genre.

Mediated public debate

With this article, we aim to add more insights about the dis/empowering potential of reality television, especially with regard to disability, dating and romantic relationships. In order to do so, we examined the mediated public debate on the first

series of the British, Flemish and Dutch version of 'The Undateables'. In order to grasp the debate we gathered blog posts, tweets and online press reviews by means of the Google search engine. As Habermas stated, the public sphere can be regarded as 'a network for communicating information and points of view'. And since media have become a major component of the public sphere (Habermas, 1996, cited in Castells, 2005: 79), we consider the mediated thoughts and opinions surrounding 'The Undateables', a reflection of the different viewpoints circulating within the public sphere. Of course it is imperative to take into account that the kind of discourses written and read online depend on the author and the type of medium. Blog posts for instance, are often general reflections on an entire episode, written by a member of the disability community, while tweets are mostly impulsive audience reactions to a specific detail in the programme. Haller (2010: 2) states that blogging plays a significant role in disability activism. She claims that blog posts are regarded as the antidote to the prevailing series of unbalanced media representations of disability, because they provide disabled people the opportunity to tell their own stories and experiences from their own perspective, without the filter of mainstream news or entertainment media (Haller, 2010: 20). Twitter, on the other hand, connects 'real time' television audiences, so they can encounter a pseudo 'group viewing experience' (Wohn and Na, 2011). In other words, for some audiences, Twitter is the new 'watercooler in the cloud', because it enables them to share and negotiate their first impressions or interpretations of a television show by using the same hashtag (Bredl et al., 2014; Harrington et al., 2013). Besides Twitter and blogging reactions to the programme, many digital reviews were also written by journalists and other media professionals in online newspapers or media blogs. Previous research by Ellis (2013) has indicated that the online press reviews of journalists and the readings expressed in the disability blogosphere are often oppositional to one another. Disability representations that were embraced as 'sensitive' by media professionals, were often attacked by disability bloggers for being 'exploitative, ableist and tokenistic'. Hence, by analysing the different discourses present within these three different online media, we were able to include the most prevalent viewpoints of the mediated public debate in this study.

In total, 47 blog posts, 1116 tweets and 36 online press reviews were studied by means of a thematic textual analysis (Creeber, 2006; Larsen, 2012; McKee, 2003). A wealth of themes were extracted from the analysis, but this article primarily elaborates on findings that refer to (1) disability and dating, and (2) disability and romantic relationships. The results were linked to relevant literature, but the present discussion derives from the analysis of the mediated public debate.

Dis/empowering discourses surrounding 'The Undateables'

Before elaborating on the main themes, an important annotation needs to be made concerning the act of watching reality television programmes. Hill (2005) claims that audiences watch reality programmes from a default critical position, especially in relation to 'the ethic of truth telling'. Ordinarily, she clarifies, audiences are very

critical towards the performances in reality formats. Audiences assume that ‘real people’ often perform, or ‘act up’ in front of the cameras, so their discussions often move back and forth between trust and suspicion concerning the authenticity of the ‘ordinary people’ on television (Hill, 2005: 78). However, contrary to the findings of Hill, the ‘not so ordinary people’ of ‘The Undateables’ are not considered to act up in front of the cameras. Their performances are praised in the mediated public debate for being ‘authentic’, ‘honest’, ‘pure’ and ‘frank’, and the truth claim of this reality programme is never critically assessed. It was taken for granted and it made the viewers value ‘The Undateables’ as an example of what constitutes ‘real reality television’.

(I) Are ‘the undateables’ un/dateable?

The title of the show unmistakably labels people with disabilities as ‘undateable’. According to Channel 4 ‘the programme title is intended to challenge preconceptions about disability’ and to ‘stimulate debate around some of the important issues the programme touches on’ (Dean, 2012). Despite the title’s ‘good intentions’, unanimous disapproval arose from the public debate that explicitly stated: ‘everyone is dateable’. However, when looking in depth at the online responses, there are a lot of implicit preconditions attached to this ‘dateability’ of ‘the undateables’, as will be discussed later. The prejudices that dominated the discourses on the disabled singles are the following: ‘disabled people should only date each other’, ‘disabled people should only date within the private sphere’ and ‘disabled people should date according to abled, heteronormative rules’.

‘The undateables’ have to date each other

When one of the candidates of the British version of ‘The Undateables’ was asked to describe her ideal partner, she replied that he would be someone without a disability. Immediate protest arose on Twitter suggesting that disabled people should only date each other.

“she wants to date someone without a disability. love you’re disabled, don’t be so shallow :p #theundateables” (@ptvkatie, 2012).

Tweets exemplified by this quotation dominated the reactions to the candidate’s partner preference, and they were rarely refuted by other tweeters. The idea of a ‘segregated dating circuit for disabled people’ was also supported by the fact that the exclusivity of the dating show and the associated dating agencies was mostly taken for granted in the online debate. Although a few people tweeted that the show would have been better merged with other dating programmes, the marginal dating circuit for disabled people was predominantly considered a natural state of affairs.

Rather than questioning the exclusivity of the programme format, the show was lauded for ‘helping the disabled find love’ and for being a ‘warm and sincere’

portrayal that teaches nondisabled audiences that ‘these people’ also need love. Such discourses relate to the charity model of disability (Goggin, 2009) and reiterate the stereotype of ‘the nondisabled rescuing the disabled’ (Harris, 2002). This stereotype is deemed truly disempowering, because it implies that disabled people are incapable of finding a partner, unless they are helped by nondisabled others. According to Morris (1991) and McRuer (2013), being kind and generous to people with disabilities within a segregated context (such as an exclusive dating show), is comforting for nondisabled people because they can be charitable to the disabled without having to experience the fear and discomfort that their heterosexual and able-bodied norms could be threatened.

‘The undateables’ have to date in the private sphere

However, not all nondisabled audiences regard the show as ‘warm and charitable’. There are others who accuse Channel 4 of taking advantage of the disabled participants’ ‘vulnerability’ and ‘incapability to critically evaluate the programme’ in order to boost their ratings. These viewers assume it is favourable to paternalistically criticize the programme, and to speak up for people with disabilities (as exemplified in the following quotation). However, in their reasoning, they systematically deny the fact that ‘the vulnerable’ have agencies, wishes and opinions of themselves (Goggin, 2009), and the possibility that the singles can actually be participating out of informed consent.

... helping the physically and mentally challenged to find a suitable partner would surely be an act of compassion, were it done discreetly and in private. But once you bring in the TV crew, ask questions like ‘Do you think you might be boyfriend and girlfriend by the end of the day?’ and leave the cameras running as the tears begin to flow, you’ve crossed the line from compassion into prurience, and what you’re really doing is boosting your channel’s ratings by offering the show’s three million viewers access to a freak show. (Lewis-Smith, 2013)

This statement is an example of the powerful (journalists) assuming it is charitable to protect the (disabled) powerless (Goggin, 2009), which is also related to the charity model of disability. Moreover, the passage suggests that the personal issues addressed in ‘The Undateables’ belong to the private sphere, despite the increasing efforts of the disability community to politicize and publicly assess such issues. Consequently, this assumption was frequently deconstructed within the disability blogosphere. Some bloggers even complimented ‘The Undateables’ for being a form of resistance against hegemonic notions of inferiority, passivity, asexuality and exclusion from television representations in general.

The very idea that disabled people should have a sex life at all has been a taboo for as long as I can remember. That’s why I welcome a subject like this getting a viewing slot that isn’t hidden away in the schedules. (Socialist Worker, 2012)

Nevertheless, there were also a lot of disability bloggers condemning the way the show brings these issues into the open. They agreed with nondisabled viewers that the techniques used to portray the participants were voyeuristic, tokenistic and sensationalizing, but instead of slamming those representations from a patronizing perspective on disability, their criticism related to the social model of disability. They denounced the show by referring to the politics of the television industry and the sometimes exploitative formulas of the reality genre, without using homogenizing and infantilizing discourses to refer to the heterogeneous group of people with disabilities.

Anna Hamilton, another blogger from Disabled Feminists, was turned off by the way the show presents people with disabilities ‘for the (televised) amusement of non-disabled viewers.’ That ‘tends to support a really tokenistic version of multiculturalism where the ultimate test of being an “acceptable” disabled person rests on how much you can make non-disabled people relate to your life experience’. (Salon, 2012)

‘The undateables’ have to date according to abled, heteronormative rules

What is also suggested in the latter quotation is that the more disabled people are able to relate to the norms of the nondisabled, the more nondisabled people are willing to ‘accept’ them as human beings. Following McRuer (2006), this quotation implies that the show ‘disciplines’ its candidates into ‘normal’ heterosexual dating behaviour. The programme showcases able-bodied and heteronormative performances and provides a stage where compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness become interwoven (McRuer, 2013: 304). It reiterates taken-for-granted assumptions about heterosexual and able-bodied dating behaviour and the participants struggle for acceptance on those terms. These struggles appear to be highlighted in the show because they often generate trending topics on Twitter. When the participants fail to fit the narrow prescriptions of how to behave and how to look on dates, this is often mocked on Twitter. In fact, Twitter provides an ideal barometer of what constitutes ab/normal dating behaviour.

I can’t believe this bruddah ate his dates food in front of her. That’s a deal breaker. Everyone knows that surely?? #theundateables. (H For Henzetta, 2012)

I can assure you, even the whole can of deodorant is not going to help #theundateables. (Lauren Tootell, 2012)

Such tweets indicate the narrow boundaries of ‘normal’ dating behaviour, and exemplify the great social pressure placed upon people with disabilities to behave according to dominant norms. Ironically, as is also implicitly suggested in the second tweet, heterosexual and able-bodied norms can never be entirely embodied

by disabled people. But apparently, nondisabled audiences enjoy watching and commenting on disabled people's trials and errors.

By enforcing (unattainable) heterosexual and able-bodied dating behaviour upon disabled singles, nondisabled audiences become more alienated from the disabled participants, instead of becoming more acquainted to them. There were almost no expressions of identification among the analysed tweets. Most tweets were expressions of voyeurism, of watching others date. Those expressions indicate that the tweeters do not consider the participants as potential partners, rather they objectify them as good 'television amusement' (Salon, 2012).

Not trying to be patronizing, but #theundatebles is such a sweet watch! I want to play Cupid and match them all up. (Bryony Grace Heap, 2012)

(2) Are 'the undateables' un/loveable?

Tweets as illustrated in the previous section endorse the prejudice that disabled people are not suitable partners for nondisabled people. Blogger reactions indicate that many disabled people have internalized this widespread prejudice, because they do not consider themselves as someone's ideal life partner. According to Shakespeare, such attitudes are not surprising since:

love relate[s] to acceptance on a very basic level, both acceptance of oneself and acceptance by significant others, [and] disabled people, systematically devalued and excluded by modern western societies, are often not in the right place to begin the task of self-love and self-worth. (Shakespeare, 2000: 161)

However, after watching or participating in 'The Undateables' some people with disabilities clearly expressed feelings of increased self-confidence and empowerment with regard to their love life. Therefore, one can assume that alternative media representations of disability definitely serve as agents to engage, and raise the self-esteem of, people with disabilities.

The female population has never really shown any affection towards me and I've never really pushed it or pursued it... I've learnt if I'm going to meet someone, I need to get up and go out. I've registered on another dating site and I am on the lookout. She has got to be kind, considerate, thoughtful and understanding. (Morrison, 2012)

When people with disabilities specify their expectations of a partner, they all refer to what Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2014) describe as 'the ultimate human'. They have the same hopes and dreams about their partner as anyone else. However, as asserted earlier, it is still not socially accepted to have a 'human' partner if you are disabled. A prejudice that is often legitimized under the pretext of 'equality', while in fact one is referring to 'similarity' (i.e. having

similar character traits). According to Mogk (2013), western democracies traditionally associate equality with similarity, thereupon creating hierarchical categories and segregation between people with similar traits (for instance dating agencies for disabled people) while equality actually refers to the equal treatment of all people. This last notion of equality was often stressed in disability blogger discourses, deconstructing the idea that disabled people can only have valuable relationships with ‘similar’ partners.

... the programme builds on the assumption that disability is automatically a negative condition that makes it highly unusual to find love and, at the very least, will always remain a burden inflicted upon a potential partner. ... Growing up differently can bring a unique perspective to life, and that can bring great love and vitality into both partners’ lives. I’d like to think my husband is as lucky to have me as I am to have him. (Brennan, 2012)

Even when they are involved in a relationship, people with disabilities are traditionally not perceived as sexual human beings (Morris, 1991; Shakespeare, 2000). This myth was not deconstructed within the mediated discourses on ‘The Undateables’. The absence of references in the mediated public debate to sexual pleasures or sexual desires, illustrates the naturalization of the asexual status of people with disabilities. Disability and asexuality remains a prevalent association. Nonetheless, disability bloggers do criticize the fact that disabled people are not often considered to be sexually active, they never publicly discuss how their sexuality is lived, or what they sexually desire. No alternatives to the asexual status of disability were found within the analysed discourses, which leads to the conclusion that sex remains one of the greatest taboos when it comes to disability.

Discussion and conclusion

By analysing discourses from three different online media – blog posts, tweets, online press reviews – more insights were obtained into the different viewpoints in the mediated public debate concerning ‘The Undateables’. The results from the analysis indicate that it is not the evaluations (positive or negative) of the show that prove to juxtapose disabled and nondisabled audiences (Ellis, 2013). Rather, it is the ideologies behind the audiences’ reactions that can be dis/empowering for disabled people.

Most of the positive and the negative evaluations of ‘The Undateables’, given by nondisabled viewers, clearly draw on the medical or charity model of disability. These evaluations are based on the prejudice that disabled people are dependent on, and in need of help from nondisabled people, and they continue to reinforce dominant stereotypes in relation to disability, dating and romantic relationships. Concerning disabled people dating, the hegemonic discourses remain that people with disabilities should only date each other; within their own private sphere; and according to the prescriptions of the abled, heteronormative majority. Moreover people with disabilities are still not perceived as valuable romantic life partners

with their own sexual desires. Thus, the prejudices listed by Morris (1991: 3–5), remain omnipresent after more than 25 years.

As was indicated by Haller (2010) and Thoreau (2006), blogs grant disabled people the opportunity to react to disempowering media representations and produce representations of their own. By reacting to ‘The Undateables’ from their personal perspective, and by telling their own life stories, people with disabilities deconstruct and refute some of the stereotypes embedded within the nondisabled discourses surrounding the programme. Anecdotes of dates, relationships, marriages and so forth were posted to illustrate that it is not disability that complicates love and relationships, but disabling social constructions and prejudices. However, anecdotes of sexual experiences remained absent from the blogosphere. All in all, most of the bloggers had mixed reactions to the representations of ‘The Undateables’ but they were encouraged by the fact that the issues addressed by the programme were taken out of the private sphere.

This article agrees with Müller et al. (2012) and Hill (2005) that reality television enables possibilities for social learning, especially when it concerns themes that are unknown to most audiences. Some of the nondisabled viewers stated they had learnt a lot about the private lives of people with disabilities thanks to ‘The Undateables’, and disabled singles indicated that the programme empowered them to look for a partner. Perhaps the viewers were even more receptive to social learning in relation to this particular reality show because they did not question the authenticity of the participants. Nevertheless, most viewers could not identify with the portrayed participants. It seems that the producers kept the viewers at a distance by exaggerating the participants’ struggles to fit the limited prescriptions of normative dating behaviour, instead of focusing on their equalities with the audiences. This de-humanizing practice evoked a lot of mockery on Twitter, but also indicates that the programme is produced from a nondisabled ideology. The embedded systems of compulsory heterosexuality intertwined with compulsory able-bodiedness forced the participants into normative dating behaviour, instead of granting them opportunities to break up the narrow boundaries of what is conceived as ‘normal’ and ‘human’. Nondisabled audience reactions proved that the segregated, inferior and ‘less than human’ position of disability (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2014) is still often taken for granted.

All things considered, the programme stimulated empowering as well as disempowering discourses. However, an alternative reality format, less bound to hegemonic heterosexual and able-bodied formulas, that allows subjects to tell their own stories, may challenge and deconstruct social prejudices even more.

Notes

1. After the first series of ‘The Undateables’ was aired in the UK in 2012, a new series of the programme was produced each year until 2016.
2. In Belgium, a Flemish adaptation of ‘The Undateables’, entitled ‘Ik wil ook een lief’, was broadcast in 2013 by the commercial television channel VIER. Only one series, containing six episodes, was produced.

3. In the Netherlands, a Dutch adaptation, also entitled 'The Undateables', was broadcast in 2013 by the public service television channel BNN. Each year after that, a new series of the Dutch version of the programme was produced until 2016.

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