

## Would you date '*The Undateables*'?

### A textual analysis of journalistic, blogger and Twitter discourses on the television show '*The Undateables*'

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In April 2012 Channel 4 released yet another new reality television format, entitled '*The Undateables*'. The show belongs to the subgenre of dating programs, but is exceptional because it focuses on people with disabilities. In each episode three different singles are followed on their first date with a person who is also disabled. The format became a success in The United Kingdom and was adapted in Flanders and The Netherlands. Nonetheless the high ratings, the television series encountered some contrary winds, because of the way it staged people with disabilities. Some blog posts and Tweets have criticized the features of the format, because they intentionally dismiss people with disabilities from the mainstream dating circuit (e.g. by using dating websites exclusively for disabled singles). But also other elements, such as a patronizing voice-over, have initiated oppositional readings of '*The Undateables*', especially by people who belong to the represented group. However, many people have had no regular contact with disabled persons, and their mediated discourses on the show seem to be laudatory. In the mainstream press as well as on Twitter, appraisals were carried out because of the progressive constructions of disabled people as human beings with sexual desires and in need of romantic love.

Such mediated comments provide useful understandings on the public's interpretations concerning portrayals of disability. Thereby the aim of this paper is to acquire more insights into mediated audience discourses on the way people with physical and/or mental disabilities are staged by the producers of '*The Undateables*', and consequently to attain a better notion on how people with disabilities are constructed within Western European countries. An inductive thematic textual analysis (Creeber, 2006; Larsen, 2012; McKee, 2003) will be conducted to examine the journalistic, blogger and Twitter discourses circulating in The United Kingdom, The Netherlands and Flanders, respectively on the original and the two adapted shows of '*The Undateables*'. Drawing on representation theory of Stuart Hall (1997) and the work on stereotyping and othering by Michael Pickering (2004), special attention will be paid to discourses on sexuality, physical appearances, normative (dating) behavior, etcetera.

This kind of interdisciplinary research between the fields of disability studies and cultural media studies is rather scarce and especially research on audience reception of disability representations remains rather unattended. Nevertheless Margaret Quinlan and Benjamin Bates (2008) did express interest in public discourses surrounding television performances of physically impaired people. They

specifically concluded their work by emphasizing the need for more research on audience discourses, in order to get a better grasp on the recurring themes within hegemonic and resistant readings on disability media constructions. Because this project is drawing on a comparable theoretical framework and methodological approach, it will be a direct contribution to the work of Quinlan and Bates (2008), but also to disability media studies in general, as it adds insights to the current constructions of disabled people, especially concerning the way they are dating.

## References

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