On-Screen Activism. Detecting How Serial Dramas Shape Social Discourses about Disability

Antonella Mascio*, Marica Spalletta**

In the broad scenario of EU's policies and strategies, aimed at fighting discrimination and fostering inclusive society, through an intersectional approach, serial dramas play a pivotal role both in shaping social discourses and raising people's awareness about disability. By examining historical and contemporary representations, the study highlights a shift from stigmatizing portrayals to more nuanced and empowering narratives. It also underlines how the contemporary participatory and convergent culture empowers the audience engagement through processes of active fandom, which also involve the decoding process of serial narratives. The transformative potential of these media forms, however, requires media literacy to foster deeper engagement and real-world impact.

Keywords: Inclusion; Disability; Serial dramas; Activism; Media studies; Convergence culture.

Introduction

Inclusion is a core value of the European Union, deeply embedded in its foundational treaties and policies. The EU's commitment to inclusion is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity for fostering social cohesion and stability within the diverse landscape of Europe. In line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is always reflected in the effort to promote equality, social justice, and the protection of fundamental rights across its member states. By integrating these goals into its policies, the EU emphasizes the importance of fostering an inclusive society that respects and promotes cultural differences while ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities for all citizens (Vila *et al.*, 2021).

Over the years, this strategy has evolved significantly, transitioning from a primarily identity-based framework to one that increasingly incorporates intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, Bilge, 2016). This shift acknowledges that individuals experience multiple, overlapping identities, which can

* Università di Bologna. antonella.mascio@unibo.it
** Università degli Studi LINK, Roma. m.spalletta@unilink.it

either compound their experiences of discrimination or privilege. As a result, institutions are now tasked with developing policies that are responsive to the needs of social groups marginalized due to their diversity.

But what does "diversity" mean? It is a multifaceted "umbrella" concept encompassing dimensions such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status. Its understanding has evolved over time, with contemporary definitions extending beyond traditional categories to include a broader spectrum of dimensions, such as age, religious beliefs, and disability. Diversity is often discussed within the context of societal structures and organizational practices, reflecting the complexity of human interactions and highlighting the need for inclusivity across various settings.

To this purpose, the EU has developed a legal framework, initiatives and tools with the aim to fight discrimination and foster an inclusive society. In particular, recent policies have increasingly recognized the significant role of audiovisual media in shaping societal attitudes and behaviors, due to their considerable influence on people's beliefs, values, and perceptions of reality. Consequently, the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) highlights the importance of promoting European works to influence public perceptions and cultural narratives within the EU (García Leiva, Albornoz, 2020). The EU also mandates that video-on-demand (VoD) platforms include a certain percentage of European works in their catalogues, aiming to increase the visibility of European culture and narratives, thus shaping audience attitudes toward European identity and values (Vlassis, 2023).

While audiovisual media have long been recognized as powerful tools for fighting discrimination and fostering inclusion, this acknowledgement peaks in the case of serial dramas, as very key products of digital culture (Boccia Artieri, Fiorentino, 2024) and complex TV (Mittell, 2015). Indeed, within the broader European mediascape and in the realm of popular culture, serial dramas now play a leading role in negotiating transcultural models and social behaviors (Hansen *et al.*, 2018; Barra, Scaglioni, 2020). This influence extends both within mainstream dimension and in the convergent and participatory environments of the contemporary platform society (van Dijck *et al.*, 2018).

Recently, serial dramas have increasingly tackled complex social issues, using diverse narrative strategies, character development, and settings to offer insightful perspectives on real-world social structures (Bondebjerg *et al.*, 2017). They also provide audiences with both aspirational and critical viewpoints (Hill, 2018). The rise of streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu has further broadened creative opportunities, enabling the

exploration and representation of themes and issues that were once excluded from mainstream discourse (Lobato, 2019).

As "complex narrative ecosystems" (Pescatore, 2018), serial dramas move beyond the spatial limitations of the screen, becoming a platform for participatory culture. They bridge the gap between the on-screen and off-screen worlds, sparking multidirectional processes of contamination and influence (Spalletta *et al.*, 2025).

1. Theoretical framework

Media studies offer a nuanced perspective on how the media – and, by extension, serial dramas – shape social discourses and raise people's awareness, both in production and reception perspectives.

Looking at the first one, the agenda-setting theory (McCombs, Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 2004) states that the media contribute to the social construction of reality, setting the agenda of public discourse by suggesting people what to think about (first level) and how these issues should be framed (second level). Thus, the emphasis placed by the media on certain topics influences the importance that audiences assign to them, linking media coverage with people's priorities.

Cultural Studies provide valuable insights into the narrative dimension. Hall (1973; 1980) argues that media representations are not mere reproductions of reality but active processes of meanings' construction. This implies that media products do not merely reflect existing social issues; conversely, they actively shape public perception bringing attention to often marginalized social concerns. In this regard, Cultural Studies take up Gramsci's idea of "cultural hegemony" to explain how media narratives, as arenas in which opposing visions of society are contested, can either legitimize or challenge dominant social norms or stereotypes, also promoting a deeper understanding of the experiences of others.

Finally, McLuhan (1964) argues that the form of the medium shapes the perception of its content, to the point that "the medium is the message". In the case of serial drama, this concept suggests that its episodic format allows for a gradual exploration of social issues, making them more accessible and engaging for audiences.

Focusing on the second perspective, in the 1970s, Hall (1973; 1980) emphasized the audiences' active role, arguing that media producers encode messages with specific meanings, but audiences decode them based on their own cultural and social frameworks. This results in dominant, oppositional,

or negotiated readings of content, making the interpretation of social issues in media narratives a dynamic and context-dependent process.

Therefore, Cultural Studies regard audiences as active participants, sometimes even hyperactive, who attribute additional value to cultural products such as serial dramas, films, books, and video games. A notable example of this is the phenomenon of fandom, as described by Jenkins (1992): a community of fans who act as "poachers", creatively engaging with original texts – or fragments thereof – by assigning them new meanings, transforming them, and expanding their boundaries.

Fandom today operates on a "diffuse" dimension, encompassing large audiences who form strong bonds not only with specific objects of desire but also across a variety of media products and celebrities, often within the same genre. For example, fans of multiple serial dramas often display expertise in tracking and sharing the progression of their favourite shows.

The notion of "fan" has evolved over the decades. It now signifies an appreciation for diverse cultural products, forming a multifaceted experience. Fans' actions are marked by creativity, generating new meanings, narratives, and artifacts, which they share with broader audiences (Fiske, 1990). These activities are embedded within the framework of media convergence, where audiences play a vital role in shaping and amplifying cultural productions. As Jenkins (2006) outlines, media convergence reflects a cultural model where old and new media intersect, and the power dynamics between corporate producers and consumers unfold in unpredictable ways.

Jenkins has also highlighted the rise of participatory culture in the era of social networks, where audiences act through interconnected media platforms. Online fandom fosters communities where members share passions and reflect on their role as audiences[1]. Beyond creative engagement, audiences also emerge as "user groups" within social spaces on the Internet, giving rise to intricate social and textual forms. These developments carry significant cultural implications, including shifts in how disabilities are perceived and normalized.

---

[1] It is important to acknowledge that fandom studies are becoming increasingly global, mirroring the worldwide dissemination of television products. Many scholars are exploring this direction, offering insightful perspectives by examining both production and reception cultures (Hills, 2022). A notable study, presented across multiple articles, is the one coordinated by Henry Jenkins and published on the *Pop Junctions* blog under the title "Global Fandom Jamboree" (https://henryjenkins.org/blog/2021/9/27/coming-soon-global-fandom-jamboree).

2. Aims and research focus

Based on these premises, this study aims to explore how serial dramas shape social discourse and raise people's awareness about disability, which WHO (1980) defines as a multifaceted and evolving concept that includes *physical* (e.g., mobility impairments), *sensory* (e.g., blindness, deafness), *cognitive* (e.g., learning disorders), and *psychosocial impairments* (e.g., mental health issues) which hinder individuals' full participation in society.

The decision to focus on this dimension of diversity depends on two reasons. Firstly, the EU's growing interest in this issue, manifested in the development of a comprehensive policy framework aimed at promoting the inclusion of people with disabilities. This framework draws on international standards, particularly the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, according to which disability should be understood as a human rights issue, rather than merely a medical concern.

Secondly, the recent fragmentation of the television landscape, often referred to as "Peak TV" (Gray, Lotz, 2019), has helped to highlight a growing social awareness of issues related to disability in various forms. This area of research has generated diverse and distinctive perspectives. A notable example is the emergence of "media disability studies" (Ellcessor, Kirkpatrick, 2017), which seeks to analyse the complexities of how disability is represented on screen. The role of the media, particularly in fictional narratives, is significant in conceptualizing forms of discomfort expressed through characters and situations, thereby influencing the development of an inclusive culture.

3. Case studies' analysis

3.1. The evolution of disability's representation. The historical perspective

From a historical perspective, the portrayal of disability in serial drama is part of a broader process that began in the 1970s and 1980s, when scriptwriters and authors became increasingly aware of the absence of characters from diverse minority groups, reflecting the complexity of a society that was not solely made up of able-bodied, white individuals.

Most U.S. productions from this period focused on models of wealthy, middle-class families, predominantly WASPs, whose members were healthy and roles were rigidly defined: stay-at-home mom, working dad, college-bound children. Examples include *All in the Family* (1971-1979), *Eight is*

Enough (1977-1981), and *Dallas* (1978-1991). However, during the same years, many successful productions began to introduce a different perspective, telling the stories of middle-class African-American families or featuring female characters who defied the typical social norms of the time. These productions brought minority groups to the screen, helping to normalize their representation. Shows like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977), *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985), and *Charlie's Angels* (1979-1983) are notable examples.

The current focus on diversity represents an evolution in storytelling. This development builds on earlier phases that introduced ethnic minorities, successful working women, and non-cisgender individuals, and therefore people with disabilities, all of which challenged the cultural prejudices of their time. These stories, which feature greater narrative complexity, bring serial dramas closer to a more realistic portrayal of society. Influenced by the demands of social movements, the representation of minorities has been accompanied by critiques of the rights they have been denied.

These changes also reflect the profound social transformations of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Social movements have played a pivotal role in shaping new imaginaries, which many fictional works have drawn upon, through an increasing portrayal of disability and social distress. The function of these representations has evolved, moving beyond the traditional use of disability as a narrative device to create tension (e.g., disability as a "monstrous" trait). Instead, these portrayals now aim to reassure audiences, fostering understanding and empathy for diversity while allowing marginalized characters to mirror viewers' own experiences.

A deeper evolution interests also the representation of disability. In the past, serial dramas often leaned on limiting stereotypes, employing what Mitchell and Snyder (2000) describe as a "narrative prosthesis". Disability frequently functioned as a narrative tool to elicit humour, signify weakness or exceptionality, or provoke horror, rather than serving to realistically depict issues of suffering and marginalization. For example, in *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) the character Nadine Hurley is portrayed with an eye patch. However, rather than evoking sympathy, Nadine's extraordinary physical strength and surreal, out-of-context behaviour reduce her disability to an aesthetic feature rather than a substantive narrative element.

Much like how ethnic and sexual minorities gained more nuanced representation in the 1970s and 1980s, characters with disabilities are now evolving from secondary or symbolic roles to becoming protagonists in multidimensional narratives. A pioneering example is *Life Goes On* (1989-1993), the first serial drama to feature a teenager with Down syndrome as a lead

character. The series' first season focused on the everyday challenges faced by an adolescent with Down syndrome, navigating societal constraints while forging alternative life paths.

3.2. Disability in medical dramas: between normalisation and trauma

Since then, other series have increasingly normalized the portrayal of disabilities and various forms of hardship, moving beyond stigmatizing frameworks. Medical dramas, in particular, stand out as an intriguing case. These narratives, centred on care and emergencies, occasionally feature lead doctors living with disabilities, offering complex and empowering representations.

One notable example comes from *ER* (1995-2009). Dr. Kerry Weaver's disability is part of character but does not define her. Kerry is portrayed as an ambitious, competent, and determined woman who rises to leadership roles within the hospital. Unlike the fragile portrayals of disabled characters typical of earlier decades, Kerry embodies authority and strength. However, the series does not ignore the challenges she faces, occasionally addressing the discrimination and prejudice she encounters. Dr. Weaver serves as a positive model of disability, demonstrating how physical limitations do not compromise competence, independence, or success in a demanding professional environment.

A distinct yet equally compelling portrayal is offered by *House, M.D.* (2004-2012). Gregory House is a brilliant but tormented physician whose disability plays a central role in his character development and the overarching storyline. Suffering from chronic pain in his right leg due to irreversible muscle damage, he walks with a limp and relies on a cane. To manage it, he becomes dependent on Vicodin, and his addiction underscores the complexity of living with chronic pain, highlighting both its emotional and physical toll. House's disability is intricately tied to his identity as a "troubled genius". The series portrays his struggles in a realistic manner, exploring frustration, addiction, and social isolation. At the same time, it suggests that the physical pain contributes to his unconventional thinking, enabling him to solve intricate medical puzzles. In this way, *House, M.D.* presents disability as a multifaceted concept, encompassing both challenges and strengths.

The interest of medical dramas in disability is further exemplified through storylines where doctors themselves experience forms of physical disability over the course of the narrative. Two compelling cases are Dr. Robert Romano from *ER* and Dr. Arizona Robbins from *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-). Both

characters become victims of traumas that lead to the amputation of respectively an arm and a leg. The depiction of this "acquired disability" initially follows a shared trajectory, focusing on the struggles of adapting to the new condition. However, narratives ultimately diverge in their resolutions. For Romano, disability becomes an insurmountable reason for discomfort, and his death is framed as a form of release. Conversely, Arizona starts a self-reinvention process, gradually reshaping her new condition in a positive and empowering way. This contrast highlights differing approaches to representing disability: one rooted in tragedy and the other in resilience and growth.

3.3. The growing interest toward cognitive disabilities

One topic of growing interest, particularly for its potential to shape societal perceptions of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), concerns neurodivergence. A significant example is Saga Norén, the Malmö police detective in the Scandinavian series *The Bridge* (*Bron/Broen*, 2014-2019), who exhibits traits strongly associated with Asperger's syndrome or ASD, though her condition is never explicitly labelled in the series. Similarly, Sheldon Cooper from *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019) is often interpreted as neurodivergent by fans and scholars, potentially on the autism spectrum, despite the absence of explicit confirmation.

The Netflix series *Atypical* (2017-2021) directly addresses autism, focusing on the protagonist's challenges as well as the intricate family dynamics that surround him. Meanwhile, *Glee* (2009-2015) introduces Artie Abrams, a wheelchair-using, guitar-playing student whose character highlights determination but falls short of a deep and realistic exploration of his lived experiences. In contrast, *Speechless* (2016-2019) and *Parenthood* (2010-2015) delve into the daily life of two families with sons with respectively cerebral palsy and Asperger's syndrome, seamlessly weaving disability into everyday narratives.

Another noteworthy example is *Breaking Bad*, which incorporates disability into the storyline through Walter White's son. Walter Jr., who has cerebral palsy, uses crutches and has speech impairments, yet his disability is presented as an integrated aspect of his character rather than a defining feature. This nuanced portrayal contributes to the normalization of disability and reduces potential stigma.

More recently, *Sex Education* (2019-2023) has offered a similarly inclusive narrative through the character of Isaac, a quadriplegic wheelchair user.

Over the seasons, Isaac becomes a central figure, forming meaningful relationships with key characters such as Maeve and Aimee. Notably, he helps Aimee overcome sexual trauma, showcasing profound empathy and sensitivity that surpass that of his peers. *Sex Education* reflects a broader trend in teen dramas, where disability claims a significant narrative space, presenting characters as integral parts of the social fabric and moving past the stigma of earlier portrayals. An important development in these representations is the authenticity brought by actors with lived disability experiences. George Robinson, who portrays Isaac in *Sex Education*, is himself a quadriplegic, adding depth and credibility to his performance. This commitment to authentic casting reflects a growing awareness in the industry of the importance of genuine representation in shaping more inclusive narratives.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study confirms that serial dramas are powerful forms of on-screen activism able to shape social discourses and raise societal awareness of disability through more or less inclusive portrayals.

Increasingly, both linear television and digital platforms serial dramas incorporate within their narrative frameworks stories, characters, and elements tied to forms of hardship, disability, and discrimination. For various audience groups, these productions serve as sources of knowledge – some-times even primary ones – about these issues. For instance, serial dramas such as *Speechless* (2016-2019) or *The Good Doctor* (2017-2024) not only provide narratives populated by characters and situations with specific characteristics; conversely, they often function as works capable of prompting viewers to reflect – whether to a greater or lesser extent – on the subjectivities presented on screen and the accompanying scientific, cultural, and political discourse.

The presence of actors with disabilities in the casts already marks in itself a substantial difference with the recent past, giving the possibility to include in the stories not only the *acting* of specific conditions, but people who live these conditions experienced them.

This ability of serial dramas to anticipate, reinforce, or recall more or less inclusive readings of disability lends itself well to analysis within the outlined theoretical framework, confirming what Hall (1997) argues stating that the media not only reflect social reality but also actively shape it, normalizing or stigmatizing particular identity constructs.

Firstly, the study shows that disability is a highly complex and evolving concept. Serial dramas, by virtue of the medium's relevance suggested by McLuhan (1964), likely surpass other media productions in their ability to depict the multifaceted and transformative nature of the concept of disability. Secondly, addressing the broad spectrum of disability, serial dramas also set social discourses by bringing to audiences' attention topics and interpretive frames (McCombs, Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 2004) that range from reproducing established stereotypes to emphasizing diversity. It is also noteworthy the increasingly significant space serial dramas allocate to portraying the effects – both individual and social – that characterize all forms of disability. Thirdly, this constant tension between disability as obstacle or opportunity involves both the encoding and decoding processes, lending to hegemonic, oppositional, or negotiated readings (Hall, 1973; 1980) by audiences embedded within participatory and convergent cultures (Jenkins, 2006). In this context, watching a series rarely remains an isolated experience, as it increasingly situates itself within consumption practices shaped by platform logics (van Dijck *et al.*, 2018).

A final argument symbolically brings back to the pivotal role of audiovisual media in the EU's policies and strategies about inclusion. The potential of serial dramas in raising societal awareness requires, now more than ever, media literacy pathways through which audiences can be empowered to critically engage with media contents. Only in this way can the on-screen activism of serial dramas transform into a citizen-driven beyond-the-screen activism, capable of shifting the fictional dimension to "take root" in real everyday life.

References

Barra L., Scaglioni M., eds. (2020). *A European Television Fiction Renaissance*. London: Routledge.

Boccia Artieri G., Fiorentino G., eds. (2024). *Storia e teoria della serialità. Vol. III - Le forme della narrazione contemporanea tra arte, consumi e ambienti artificiali.* Milano: Meltemi.

Bondebjerg I., Redvall E.N., Helles R., Lai S.S., Søndergaard H., Astrupgaard C. (2017). *Transnational European Television Drama: Production, Genres and Audiences*. London: Springer.

Collins P.H., Bilge S. (2016). *Intersectionality*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Crenshaw K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6): 1241-1299. DOI: 10.2307/1229039

Ellcessor E., Kirkpatrick B., eds. (2017). *Disability Media Studies*. New York: NYU Press.

Fiske J. (1990). *Reading the popular.* London-New York: Routledge.

García Leiva M.T., Albornoz L.A. (2020). VOD service providers and regulation in the European Union: An audiovisual diversity approach. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 27(3): 267-281. DOI: 10.1080/10286632.2020.1769614

Gray J., Lotz A.D. (2019). *Television Studies.* Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.

Hall S. (1973). "Encoding and decoding in the television discourse." Paper for the Council of Europe Colloquy on "Training in the critical reading of televisual language". Testo disponibile al sito: http://epapers.bham.ac.uk/2962/1/Hall%2C_1973%2C_Encoding_and_Decoding_in_the_Television_Discourse.pdf (10/01/2025)

Hall S. (1980). Encoding / Decoding. In: Hall S., Hobson D., Lowe A., Willis P., editors, *Culture, Media, Language*. London: Hutchinson.

Hall S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. London: Sage Publications & Open University.

Hansen K.T., Peacock S., Turnbull S., editors. (2018). *European television crime drama and beyond*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hill A. (2018). *Media experiences: Engaging with drama and reality television*. London: Routledge.

Hills M. (2022). An autoethnography of Nordic Noir, or when the 'knowing audience' doesn't know. In: McCulloch R., Proctor W., editors, *The Scandinavian invasion. Nordic Noir and beyond*. Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, New York, Wien: Peter Lang.

Jenkins H. (1992). *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*. New York: Routledge.

Jenkins H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York: NYU Press.

Lobato R. (2019). *Netflix nations: The geography of digital distribution*. New York: NYU Press.

McCombs M.E., Shaw D.L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of Mass Media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2): 176-187. DOI: 10.1086/267990

McCombs M.E. (2004). *Setting the agenda: The Mass Media and public opinion*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.

McLuhan H.M. (1964). *Understanding Media: The extensions of man*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Mitchell D.T., Snyder S.L. (2000). *Narrative prosthesis: Disability and the dependencies of discourse*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Mittell J. (2015). *Complex TV: The poetics of contemporary television storytelling*. New York: NYU Press.

Pescatore G., a cura di (2018). *Ecosistemi narrativi. Dal fumetto alle serie tv*. Roma: Carocci.

Spalletta M., D'Amelio M.E., De Rosa P. (2025). On-screen leadership models and beyond-the-screen celebrification processes in the Italian teen drama *Mare fuori*. *Celebrity Studies*, online first. DOI: 10.1080/19392397.2024.2449335

van Dijck J., Poell T., de Waal M. (2018). *The platform society: Public values in a connective world*. Oxford University Press.

Vila S.F., Miotto G., Rodríguez J.R. (2021). Cultural sustainability and the SDGs: Strategies and priorities in the European Union countries. *European Journal of Sustainable Development*, 10(2): 73-90. DOI: 10.14207/ejsd.2021.v10n2p73

Vlassis A. (2023). Why to regulate Netflix: The cross-national politics of the audio-visual media governance in the light of streaming platforms. *Media, Culture & Society*, 45(7): 1511-1521. DOI: 10.1177/01634437231182565

World Health Organization (WHO). (1980). *International classification of impairments, disabilities, and handicaps: A manual of classification relating to the consequences of disease, published in accordance with resolution WHA29.35 of the Twenty-ninth World Health Assembly, May 1976*. Testo disponibile al sito: https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/41003 (10/01/2025)