

**Submission to the Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and the
Media**

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Opening Statement

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Firstly, thank you to the committee for the invitation to contribute to this space today. It is somewhat serendipitous as it is nearly one year to the day since us at ILMI, a national cross-impairment disabled person's organisation, held an online event to launch our policy position on how disabled people's lives are represented, utilised and portrayed in the media.

The event was a result of a consultation process with disabled people throughout the island. As with all of our core methodologies at ILMI, we work from a position of a grassroots collective and our work is driven by disabled people and their voice. From our consultation with disabled people, the overwhelming theme is that the dominant narrative portrayed in Irish media of disability either one of how our impairments are tragic or stories of disabled people *overcoming* their impairments.

Disability is seen through the prism of medicine and charity – something to be cared for, looked after by charities and services providers, but rarely are we portrayed as whole, active, multifaceted citizens in our communities.

Disabled people are often only sought out to give our “personal stories” and not about how society disables us and prevents our full and dynamic participation.

A significant issue is that our authentic voices are not heard. We are not part of the discussions around our lives, our value in society dismissed as solely passive citizens. Rather, discourse around disabled people is by parents or carers and charities. Frequently, no regard given to how we as disabled people feel to having our lives

displayed in public and terms such as being a “burden” and in constant “crises” are common.

This is a prominent theme when service providers and charities are utilising disabled people in a call for more funding. This is a very different type of disability representation in the media, this is not looking for investment in disabled people, this is not about rights and equality (although sometimes in the media this language is used by non-DPOs – this type of portrayal is seeking further investment in the disability industry. This is where the Irish media need to be more discerning, more robust – who is giving these messages and what do they want? In the much of the Irish media, the predominate trope is that disability is a charity issue and the narrative is often of sympathy, but sympathy sells.

There are a small number of disabled people who have a platform –however this is not always positive, as repeatedly they are framed in terms of “inspirational” super humans who have “overcome” their impairment. As Disabled people we rarely see ourselves in media accurately and this will only change when we as disabled people are directly involved in the production of media: as presenters, writers, technicians, actors, audience members.

Media Companies, the Trade Unions, Government Departments and the BAI need to explore how to reflect diversity in the production, delivery and presentation of media in contemporary Ireland. That discourse needs to plan, resource and implement real inclusion in media for disabled people in the 21st Century.

This can be done by directly consulting and engaging with us as disabled people and by engaging with true Disabled Persons Organisations who try to capture the authenticity of disabled people’s lived experience. . Disability needs to be framed in discussions around inclusion, human rights and equality. Where there are discussions on issues that impact on society (education, employment, housing, transport, social inclusion, gender, etc.), we as disabled people must be involved.

There is an intersection between disability and other issues that consistently remains unexplored in Irish media due to the regular framing of disability as a medical / charity issue. If media explored disability through the social model lens, then it can witness the fullness of disabled people’s lives and how disability intersects with gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexuality and so on.

The discussion on shaping how disability is represented in the Irish media needs to be led by disabled people and DPOs: In the disability rights movement, we have two mottos, and both are particularly germane to this discussion today - Nothing about Us Without Us. And Rights not Charity.

Thanks very much for listening and we are looking forward to answering any questions.