

Difference and Documentary  
Images of Autism in Contemporary British Factual  
Television

Amy Attrill

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## Abstract

Autism has become a familiar theme in television and cinema over recent years. Nevertheless, autism's depiction in television documentary formats is little discussed in scholarly literature and is often taken for granted due to assumptions about objectivity, truth and narratological authority associated with the documentary form. This thesis examines the evolving portrayal of autism in British television documentaries between 2002 and 2020. During this period, broadcasters, it is argued, have increasingly replaced homogenous, deficit-laden depictions with more heterogeneous portrayals that present neurodiverse perspectives. The dissertation finds that autism representation in British documentaries is shaped by the interplay among various autism conceptualisations, historical stereotypes, narrative conventions and recent developments in digital media technology. Science-inflected documentary genres have tended to present autism according to the medical model of disability, which relies on problematic stereotyping. Entertainment-focused documentaries, meanwhile, idealise and normalise autism through hybridised and sometimes sensationalising formats, curative narratives and the construction of autistic celebrity personas. And lastly, first-person oriented documentaries have elaborated more neurodiverse portrayals of the condition in relation to more progressive disability models, but could further diversify autism representation by including voices from a broader range of perspectives from across the autistic spectrum, such as those of autistic people with a learning disability or those with communication difficulties.

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## Declaration

Whilst registered as a candidate for the above degree, I have not been registered for any other research award. The results and conclusions embodied in this thesis are the work of the named candidate and have not been submitted for any other academic award.

Signed: Amy Attrill

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## List of Abbreviations

ASD - Autism Spectrum Disorder

BARB - Broadcasters Audience Research Board

CARS - Childhood Autism Rating Scale (Second Edition)

DSM-V - Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5<sup>th</sup> Edition)

DSM-IV - Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4<sup>th</sup> Edition)

ITV - Independent Television

BBC - British Broadcasting Company

Vlog - Video Blog or Video Log

VOD - Video-on-Demand

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Finally, to my nan, although you are gone, thank you.

## Introduction

This thesis analyses the portrayal of autism in British television, using contemporary documentaries to cast a spotlight on autism representation in factual media. It explores historical, contemporary and potential future representations of autism. It argues that autism stereotyping occurs due to a dependency on stigmatising historical stereotypes, outdated or inaccurate scientific theories and 'deficit' perspectives, and the narratological constraints of particular documentary formats. However, due to an increasingly individualised documentary discourse and societal changes, autism representations are improving. This dissertation analyses and identifies stereotypes surrounding autism and the factors which affect its representation. It takes account of social and political contexts, disability models and their impact on autism representation across a wide range of documentary styles and the improvements that incorporating lessons from emerging genres could potentially have.

The American Psychiatric Association (2015, p.26) defines autism as impairment in social communication and interactions, restrictive and repetitive patterns of behaviour. Such characteristics are present from early childhood and limit everyday functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2015, p. 26). In addition to these characteristics, autistic people may have difficulty processing sensory stimuli (American Psychiatric Association, 2015). Autism was initially named and defined by Leo Kanner (1943) and Hans Asperger (1944). Kanner (1943), a child psychiatrist, identified 11 children with "extreme autistic aloneness" (Kanner, 1943, p.242) who exhibited obsessive actions, stereotypy and echolalia (Kanner, 1943, p.248). In 1944, Asperger described teenage boys with average or high intelligence with 'autistic psychopathy', which led to the inclusion of Asperger's syndrome as a separate category (Asperger, 1991). Both autism and Asperger's syndrome were classified under childhood



schizophrenia until the third edition of the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (APA, 1980), when they were included as separate entities.

Autism is not considered to be a physical or mental disability. Instead, it is an invisible condition; it lacks the visual and physical symptoms that society uses to label someone as disabled (Thompson-Hodgetts et al., 2020, p.2). It is a complex and heterogeneous condition and part of a spectrum with no two individuals occupying the same position. Bogdashina (2005, p. 21) explains that “autism is a spectrum disorder, it means that people are affected to a different degree. Some individuals will be severely affected, while for others, their difficulties may appear to be quite subtle”. The latest edition of the DSM-V incorporates significant changes to the classification system which incorporates levels of severity in relation to impairments to social communication and restrictive, repetitive patterns of behaviour (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p.50). Most importantly, in this edition, the Asperger’s diagnosis has been removed, and the DSM now uses the terms autism spectrum disorder or social (pragmatic) communication disorder if individuals have deficits in communication (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p.51). Although some members of Asperger’s-focused online communities have greeted these changes with acceptance and positivity (Giles, 2014, p.185), others have met it with fear, rejection, suspicion, reassurance, and defiance by others (Giles, 2014, pp.186 – 191). Many of the documentaries in this dissertation date from the early 2000s and still use the older terminology. The phrases ‘Asperger’s syndrome’, ‘high functioning’ and ‘low functioning’ autism are employed in this discussion when participants or producers use these terms. Furthermore, as many documentary participants describe themselves as having Asperger’s syndrome, it is fitting to use these terms in the present work.

The prevalence of autism has increased dramatically with more and more people seeking a diagnosis. In 2008, UK studies estimated that just over 1% of the population had an autism spectrum condition, with Asperger's syndrome making up 0.7% of those diagnosed (Frith, 2008, p. 42). Among children, the annual prevalence rates are approximately 3.8/1000 boys and 0.8/1000 girls (Taylor et al., 2013 p.1). Recent UK studies have further documented "an overall 787% increase in recorded incidence of autism diagnosis over 20 years" (Russell et al., 2021, p. 3). The increase in prevalence rates has been linked to changes in diagnostic concepts and identification methods alongside improved public awareness, policies and services (Saracino et al., 2010, p.327). In 2009, the UK government introduced the Autism Act (Government, 2009), drafted by the National Autistic Society, the first disability-specific law of its kind and more recently the National Strategy for autistic children, young people and adults (Department for Education & Department of Health & Social Care, 2021). Additionally, as noted by Dillenburger et al. (2013, p.1558), events such as World Autism Awareness months, Autism Speaks' Light It Up Blue campaign, fundraising, and the increase of autism charities have helped increase the public knowledge surrounding autism. The American Psychiatric Association (2013, p.55) states that "it remains unclear whether higher rates reflect an expansion of the diagnostic criteria of DSM-IV to include threshold cases, increased awareness, differences in study methodology, or a true increase in the frequency of autism spectrum disorder".

### Questioning normal: reconceptualizing disability and autism

Autism representation has tended to conform to either a medical or social disability model. The medical and social disability models originate in physical disability studies, but the field

has now expanded to encompass learning and mental disabilities. The two models are helpful in understanding different forms of disability representation.

The medical model emphasises individuals' disabilities, portraying them as reliant on health professionals and others (Clogstone, 1994, p.46). It views autism "as a maladaptive condition that needs to be cured" (Mitchell et al., 2021, p.12) according to a 'deficit approach' that pathologizes the differences it aims to explain and describe (Dinishak, 2016, para 18). The deficit approach emphasises language and social difficulties, often overlooking issues surrounding identity construction (Bagatell, 2007, p.414). Historically, medical and educational discourse surrounding autism has tended to focus on inclusion and normalisation (Ripamonti, 2016, p.57). Such discourse is concerned with physical problems and limitations and with approaches comprehensible to institutional and medical practices (Grue, 2014, p.51). Here, individuals' bodies become "a site to be policed and normalised by means of pharmaceutical drugs, surgery, behavioural training, or other medical treatments" (Waltz, 2013, p.71).

The medical approach contrasts with the social paradigm, which postulates that all bodies are socially constructed, with social attitudes and institutions having a more significant impact than biological facts when representing the body's reality (Siebers, 2001, p.737). Solutions should be directed at society and not at the individual (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). Social constructionist theories of the body suggest that society's dominant ideas, attitudes and customs influence the perception of bodies (Siebers, 2001, p.738). This social model of disability is entrenched in disability rights movements, calling for a political repurposing of concepts of disability, as it describes the socially created disadvantage and marginalisation of those perceived to be impaired (Lawson & Beckett, 2020, p.348). It attests that disability is

not lodged inside the body but is instead created by the social and material conditions that 'dis-able', preventing the full involvement of a range of bodies and minds in social activities (Ginsburg & Rapp, 2013, p.54). The social model of disability may allow for disability narratives to move beyond harmful and dehumanising narratives that focus on tragedy (Chapman, 2020a, p.62). It is associated with a series of dichotomies, including the differentiation of impairment from disability, in which the former is private and individual, and the latter is public and structural (Shakespeare, 2013, p.216). Although these representational models often dominate the portrayals of autism offered within the documentaries discussed throughout this dissertation, they are often not the sole influence as new methods of understanding disability are increasingly being sought. Kafer (2013, p.7), for example, has called for a renewed interrogation of medical approaches to disability rather than their rejection, as social models can marginalise disabled people who seek medical interventions.

Other recent interventions in critical disability studies encourage the incorporation of intersectional categories and increasingly focus on concepts of identity. Crip theory foregrounds disabled identity by intersecting disability studies with considerations of subjective embodiment and queer theory, questioning ableist and heteronormative assumptions. McRuer and Bérubé (2006, p.9) link queer theory to disability studies by stating that "able-bodied identity and heterosexual identity are linked in their mutual impossibility and in their mutual incomprehensibility – they are incomprehensible in that each is an identity that is simultaneously the ground on which all identities supposedly rest and an impressive achievement that is always deferred and thus never really guaranteed". Like queer theory, crip theory encourages the conceptualisation of disability beyond simplistic binary understandings of disabled/abled and normal/other and challenges what society perceives as

normal. The impairment/non-impairment binary, for example, reduces complex embodiments into a one-size-fits-all body and overlooks the inherent subjective positioning of disability (Davidson, 2016, p.8). Such crude distinctions undervalue the diverse array of disabled experiences and embodiments; simply put, you are either have an able body or you do not (McRuer & Bérubé, 2006, p.7). Viewing disability studies through a crip theory lens helps enable the creation of “critically disabled spaces overlapping with the critically queer spaces that activists and scholars have shaped during recent decades, in which we can identify and challenge the ongoing consolidation of heterosexual, able-bodied hegemony” (McRuer and Bérubé, 2006, p.9), potentially allowing for societal and political change.

Temporal analyses within disability studies state that “whether by illness, age, or accident, all of us will live with disability at some point in our lives” (Kafer, 2013, p.25). In this context, the reclamation of the word crip, whilst risking appropriation, can be a way of acknowledging people’s differences and their shifting abilities, while providing opportunities to grapple with the political aspects of their condition (Kafer, 2013, p.13). Kafer draws upon the work of Scott, who in turn builds upon Haraway’s cyborg theory, to discuss how disabled people productively identify a “collective affinity” that plays “on identifications that have been attributed to individuals by their societies, and that have served to exclude them or subordinate them” (Kafer, 2013, p.11 who cites Scott, 1989) – a form of reverse discourse (Foucault, 2020 [1984]) in which individuals reclaim language and terminology that has historical been used to oppress and/or control (a theme that arises in relation to autism in Chapter 7 of the present dissertation).

Kafer contributes to these discussions of crip/queer theory and feminism by drawing upon her own experiences as a disabled individual to explore societal norms of able-

bodiedness and the way they tend to imagine or foreclose certain kinds of 'crip futures'. Ableist perspectives view disability as an unending tragedy and a fate worse than death in which positive futures only exist in the absence of disability (Kafer, 2013, pp.2-3). Within this framework, disabled individuals, and in particular disabled children, become symbolic of an undesirable or blighted future life (Kafer, 2013, pp.2-3). Such themes are present within the early chapters in this dissertation (in particular Chapter 3) that view autism through the lens of the medical model and promote 'cures' to remove autistic characteristics and identities and their portrayal within narratives of normalisation. These practices and interventions can be understood in terms of what Kafer (2013, p.27) refers to as the *curative imaginary*, whereby understandings of disability require and assume interventions and cannot understand or comprehend approaches to autism beyond these interferences.

This dissertation also considers changes in television's representation of autism in the light of the dominant political narrative of the last twenty years, namely neoliberalism. Chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation, in particular, discuss the specifically neoliberal forms of autistic normalisation found in contemporary reality television. Emerging from the economic crises of the 1970s and influenced by developments in feminism, gay liberation, and disability rights, neoliberal culture does not always or simply stigmatise difference but can also celebrate it (McRuer & Bérubé, 2006, p.2). While paradoxically characterised by growing economic inequality and exploitation, the neoliberal turn has arguably led to less rigidity in how oppression is extended and reproduced (McRuer & Bérubé, 2006, p.3). Mitchell and Snyder (2015, p.5) argue that neoliberal society has opened up certain limited opportunities for the inclusion of previously excluded groups. They position disability theory among "other cross-cultural experiences of bodies identified as deviant yet now newly tolerated within

neoliberalism” (Mitchell and Snyder, 2015, p.28). However, according to them, such inclusions are only meaningful is of the term inclusion *“if disability becomes more fully recognized as providing alternative values for living that do not simply reify reigning concepts of normalcy”*. Throughout their work, they critically examine the logic of ‘inclusionism’ and the normalisation of disabled people to fit in with often inflexible social institutions in which *“disability is tolerated as long as it does not demand an excessive degree of change from relatively inflexible institutions, environments, and norms of belonging”* (Mitchell & Snyder, 2015, p.14).

Openings for inclusions and representation for formerly excluded groups and populations, that is, comes with a cost (Mitchell & Snyder, 2015, p.11). Mitchell & Snyder characterise neoliberalism as involving the “seizure of the very materiality of life at the level of the individual” (Mitchell & Snyder, 2015, p.8), so that, as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation, the impetus to change is placed on the autistic body rather than on society. For Mitchell and Snyder (2015, p.29), attempts at normalisation through the increasing recognition among normative bodies and calls for ‘we are all disabled’ that may hasten a dangerous decline into meaningless homogenisation. Potential ramifications such as these can be seen in many chapters of this dissertation which examine the representational cost of neoliberal normalisation narratives, including entertainment focused documentary formats.

Much of Mitchel & Snyder’s work focuses on conceptualising disabled identities and embodied forms of knowledge. By drawing upon queer and crip theories, they argue the value of alternative and subjective forms of knowledge and embodied experiences highlights the need for ethical methodologies through which disabled people can articulate the value of their lives and the wider world, which may otherwise go unrecognised (Mitchell & Snyder,

2015, p.6). This approach, referred here as nonnormative positivism, provides opportunities and spaces for discussions of living with alternative forms of embodiment that enable and further discussions that “revise, reinvent, and transform narrow normative practices, beliefs, and qualifications of who counts” (Mitchell & Snyder, 2015, p.6). It is the tentative suggestion of Chapter 7 that the relatively democratised and participatory cultures enabled by social media platforms have opened up such spaces for some autistic people.

Autism is viewed within the burgeoning neurodiversity movement in terms of neurological difference rather than outdated terms that convey and position it in relation to deficit. Advocates of neurodiversity challenge the medicalised pathology of autism (Chapman, 2020b, p.800) and the culture in which autism diagnoses are governed and controlled by notions of ‘normal’ human functioning (Bovell, 2020, p.39). Although this dissertation’s fifth chapter discusses the portrayal and impact of neurodiversity perspectives in contemporary British documentary formats, it is worth here exploring the movement’s broader contextual relationships to new disability theories. Recent scholarly collections such as *Neurodiversity Studies: A New Critical Paradigm* seeks to address the methods by which othering occurs within cognitive normativity, drawing on insights from the fields of disability studies, psychology, medical humanities, and critical autism studies (Bertilsson Rosqvist et al., 2020, p.2). The anthology assumes neurodivergence as a potentially valuable mode of existence but acknowledges that such divergence comes with all of the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ traits present in all humans (Bertilsson Rosqvist et al. 2020, p.7). It includes discussion of neurodiverse wellbeing and questions the “boundaries between predominant neurotypes and their ‘others’”; furthermore, it formulates “alternative perspectives on cognitive normativity and cognitive othering from a neurodivergent perspective including, but not



limited to, autistic perspectives” (Bertilsson Rosqvist et al., 2020, p.2) often relate their work to social and medical models of disability.

Societal understandings of autism might be improved by the inclusion of autistic perspectives that reflect neurodiverse lived experiences (Chown, 2020, p.28) and autistic scholars are making an increasing impact on autism scholarship. Yergeau (2018), one such autistic academic, views autism in terms of neurodivergence and neuro-queer identity rather than impairment. In *Authoring Autism*, Yergeau offers a reflexive and personal storied account of autism, incorporating discussions of queerness, autistic rhetoric, involuntarity, and the perceived passivity of autistic people. Yergeau analogises conversations regarding autistic rhetoric with societal responses to homosexuality and deviance (Yergeau, 2018, p.26), arguing that autistic people are too often pathologized with little account taken of autistic self-expression. Yet contemporary autism discourse narratives are “rhetorical projects: they apprehend neuroqueerness as interlocking series of socially complex impairments, impairments that impact the domains of relatedness, intent, feeling, sexuality, gender identity, and sensation – indeed, all of that which might be used to call oneself properly a person” (Yergeau, 2018, p.3). Such a holistic focus on autistic personhood is a theme of this dissertation, which explores the transition from televisual narratives of deficit and dehumanising stereotypes to more personalised accounts of difference.

Autism, as Yergeau (2018, p.8) explains, “is frequently conceived as essentialized involuntarity”. Through rhetorical narratives of lack and involuntary movements (whether bodily control, audience awareness or purpose) autistic people are dehumanised and placed under the banner of passive personhood (Yergeau, 2018, p.8). Again, such depictions are common in the documentaries examined in this dissertation’s earlier chapters. Yergeau

proposes autism as a neuroqueer identity, one in which autistic people seek to “queer the motifs, structures, modes, and commonplaces of what nonautistics have come to narrate and thereby know about autism” (Yergeau, 2018, p.6). She later compares autism rhetoric and identity to similar practices in the deaf community, drawing on Bauman & Murray’s edited collection *Deaf Gain*, which employs a similar critique of deafness conceptualisations that “behold deafness as loss, lack, or absence” (Yergeau, 2018, p.180). She further argues that “if we are seeking to build a world in which neuroqueer people are respected and seen as wholly human, then our frame of reference cannot revolve around what deaf/autistic people are missing, nor can it rely on sliding- scale conceptions of disability and normalcy” (Yergeau, 2018, p.180).

Many autistic people have language ‘difficulties’, but express themselves through different forms of communication and bodily movement. Yergeau (2018, p.181) refers to these as embodied communicative forms that manifest themselves as echoes, tics, stims, rocking bodies or twirling. These embodiments “represent linguistic and cultural motions that pose possibility for autistics” that may counter assumptions about a supposed lack of autistic culture due to the absence of autistic shared language (Yergeau, 2018, p.181). As this dissertation highlights throughout, autistic individuals with communication difficulties are often excluded, omitted or mediated through a parental or medical perspective; they are talked *about* but rarely *to* and their bodily movements are typically pathologized.

The increasing prominence of autistic voices is apparent elsewhere in autism scholarship. In 2010, the online journal *Disability Studies Quarterly* published a special issue entitled *Autism and the Concept of Neurodiversity*. In the issue’s introductory article, Savarese & Savarese (2010, para 5) state that “just as people with physical disabilities have insisted on

the right to self-representation and determination, so, too, have people with autism — and not just those who are termed ‘high-functioning’”. From the outset, the special issue emphasises neurodiversity as a political movement and the importance of embodied self-representation and determination. Such principles are demonstrated throughout the issue in articles written by academics, educators, parents of autistic children and many autistic contributors.

A common theme throughout this special issue is the importance of autistic voice, language and rhetoric. Prince (2010) gives a personal account of her experiences as an autistic individual, discussing the connections between language differences among autistic people, and their often-seeming silence, and perceptions of un/intelligence. Baggs, who is discussed further in Chapter 7 in relation to their self-authored and produced YouTube video *In My Language* (silentmiaow, 2007), discusses how their interactions and perceptions of the world are defined by others in terms of absence and lack. Donnellan & Hill (2010, para 49), meanwhile, state that autistic people are often considered to be non-persons, referred to as having behavioural problems or as being sub-normal. The absence of language, it is again argued here, is regarded dismissively and often results in miscommunication. On the other hand, examining autistic people’s experiences, and valuing differences, may pave the way to “acceptance, accommodation and appropriate support” (Donnellan et al, 2010, para 51).

Autism, like other disabilities, is often conceptualised inflexible binary distinctions. Collective identities are complicated by the inherent heterogeneity of disability and medically constructed passivity (Little, 2010, para 13). Yergeau details the imprecise nature of categorisations within discourse communities in which categorisations encompassing “disabled” and “able-bodied” do not overlap, likewise with “autistic” and “neurotypical”. Such distinctions extend somewhat between definitions of high and low function autism and

neurotypicality with some slight overlap between the groups. Yergeau (2010, para 9), who use a series of circle diagrams to illustrate her arguments, states that she like other autistic individuals cannot be placed within “all-defining circle or even within overlapping circles”. To somewhat similar effect, Murray (2010) takes issue with the notion of autistic ‘functioning’. Describing individuals as either low or high functioning “erases any real sense of differentiation, offering as it does only two possible positions of identification” (Murray, 2010, para 1) and sets up “inflexible ontological categories” that fix the ‘value’ of autistic people (Murray, 2010, para 3). This, as Murray explains, is dangerous, as it misrepresents the nature and intelligence of autistic individuals and creates the “presumption of a link between the condition and the “deficit” in a manner which misreads what autistic intelligence actually is” (Murray, 2010, para 3). In an impassioned contribution, Zaks (2010, para 32), an autistic parent of two disabled daughters, sets out what is at stake in the valuation of human difference, stating that “the call for a just and tolerant society is not a liberal plea for more welfare but rather the desperate cry of a civilization that will cease to function without the diversity that fuels human endeavour and compassion”.

The neurodiversity movement, then, embraces autism as a series of “embodied differences” (Rocque, 2010, para 34). Neurodiversity perspectives aim to take account of the diverse personhoods of autistic people and are further inflected by other types of diversity, for example ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation (Robertson, 2010, para 4). Within this model, autistic people are viewed as people “who possess a blend of cognitive strengths and weaknesses” (Robertson, 2010, para 4). Such conceptualisations support the need for more subjective and individualised understandings of autism. Indeed, a more detailed account of neurodiversity approaches to autism is provided at the beginning of Chapter 5, which goes on

to illustrate the practical application of such theories in first-person perspective documentaries.

Ultimately, autism is increasingly seen both within and outside of academia as heterogenous and irreducible and autistic people themselves have increasingly discussed the need to think about their condition beyond simplistic binary categorisations and representational models. However, members of the public are likely to be unaware of these disability models, movements or approaches unless they have a personal stake or family member with the condition. If they do not, media representations become a substitute source of information about autism.

### The evolution of documentaries in British television

British television broadcasters have targeted strategies to improve diversity and inclusion in their programming that have responded to the increased power and acceptance of social models of disability. These strategies include increasing and improving representation, both on and off-screen, for those with disabilities. The BBC, for example, has pledged to increase disability representation through their diversity and inclusion commissioning guidelines (BBC, 2016) and their diversity commissioning code of practice (BBC, 2018). Other broadcasters, such as ITV and Channel 4, have launched similar guidelines. Although such initiatives have increased disability representation, disabled people within the industry are still underrepresented. The Creative Diversity Network (established to improve diversity within British television) recently reported that 17% of those of working age identify as disabled. Findings from their third Diamond report show that only 7.8% with disabilities work in front of the camera, and 5.2% work behind (Creative Diversity Network, 2020, p. 6). These figures

highlight a disparity and suggest a need for improved disability representation and greater involvement of autistic people in production roles.

Disability narratives featuring autism have become popular with audiences. Since 2000, the British Film Institute has listed 55 series and individual programmes featuring autism (BFI, 2019). While the BFI list may not be exhaustive, it suggests the popularity of autism in contemporary television. Certainly, autism themed programmes are now part of mainstream culture and are not aimed solely at those with a personal connection to the condition. But autism's portrayal in popular media may have consequences for societal understanding and attitudes towards those who display autistic behaviours. The National Autistic Society (2017, para 4) states that "until recently, too few portrayals of autistic people have presented them as rounded individuals or reflected the diversity of the autism spectrum". Therefore, understanding the nature and influence of these programmes is becoming increasingly important. The public's knowledge of autism may draw from first-hand experience (if a friend or relative has the condition), but often audiences will base it on media representations. New knowledge about autism is often derived from informal contexts such as magazines, museums or documentaries (Glaser et al., 2012, p. 37) and as Philo (1990, p. 133) writes, "the information which we receive and indeed the pictures which we are shown are crucial dimensions to the formation of our understanding". Therefore, media representations are highly significant in determining our perception and impressions of many topics, including conditions such as autism. However, as recognised by Huws & Jones (2011, p.98-99), little research establishes how Western media portrays developmental disabilities. Draaisma (2014, p.769) states that "the general understanding of autism is shaped from many different sides, such as education, literature, film and news media. With it came a

proliferation of stereotypes, even to the point where one may ask just how much variation is compatible with the very idea of a stereotype". The abundance of stereotypes in popular culture affects the public's understanding of autistic people's lives, their families and how they see themselves. This work documents and examines the evolution of autism stereotypes in British documentary and the interactions and relationships between formats, stereotypes, broadcast environments and the advancement of autism understandings and conceptualisations.

The documentary form is constantly evolving with the development of new formats and genres. Documentary carries an expectation of accuracy, as audiences are unlikely to be aware of the constructed nature of the format, its similarities with fictional media forms, the influence of broadcasters and commercial pressures on documentary production. These factors shape and differentiate the depiction of autism. For example, although all of the documentaries analysed in this work were produced and aired by British broadcasters, there are significant differences in portrayals across channels. There are currently two main types of broadcaster in the UK. Commercial broadcasters garner funding from advertisements and programme sponsorships, and non-commercial broadcasters acquire funds through the licence fee. All, however, must adhere to public service remits, which require each broadcaster to produce and broadcast several programmes that fulfil educational criteria or contribute to a public good (BBC, 2004). In their report *Building Public Value*, the BBC is required to provide programming which contains "democratic value ... cultural and creative value ... educational value ... social and community value ... global value" (BBC, 2004, p. 8). Mark Moore defines public value in the BBC's *Building Public Value* by increasing "an organisation's value to society (*outward* outcomes) and achieve better results by challenging existing policy mandates through innovation" (Coyle & Woolard, 2010, p. 6). By measuring a

channel's value in this way, broadcasters become accountable to the public rather than advertisers and, in theory, produce a higher quality of programming that reflects each channel's remit obligations. In the BBC's case, public value is measured by a "framework in which such judgements can be made as soundly as possible – rooted in the purposes of the organisation and based on evidence – and explained to the wider public that is paying for services" (Coyle & Woolard, 2010, p.7).

The documentaries chosen for analysis in this study were all produced or broadcast by the most popular free-to-view broadcasters in the UK between 2002 and 2020. BARB's 2018 annual audience share report ranked BBC, ITV, Channel 4, and Channel 5 within the top five broadcasters. In 2017, BBC channels received 31.57% of the audience share, ITV, 21.71%, Channel 4, 10.23% and Channel 5, 6.53% (BARB, 2018, Table 5). However, broadcasters have suffered a slight drop in audience share since 2003. Purely commercial broadcasters, such as BSkyB, have enjoyed an 8.26% of the audience share (BARB, 2018, Table 5). Several factors have influenced this increase, including commercial providers such as BSkyB becoming more competitive and incorporating high profile imported programmes into their schedules. Although BSkyB is in the top five for audience share, BBC broadcast channels boasted a four times greater audience share than BSkyB.

ITV has had a long, turbulent history with numerous franchises and mergers; currently, three companies manage its 12 franchises. Due to its status as a commercial channel, ITV's public service remit is not as stringent as the BBC's. Ofcom lists 13 separate licences for each franchise and one for ITV's national breakfast time service. ITV's public service remit only requires it to produce diverse and high-quality programming (Ofcom, 2004b) and stipulates no specific requirements for documentary output. ITV has a long-standing history of



producing and broadcasting high-quality documentary programming. However, critics have described a decline in ITV's documentary output and quality since the mid-nineties. This deterioration has been seen by many as a reaction to the 1990s Broadcasting Act, and the resulting deregulation has seen ITV relax its approach to making documentaries. ITV switched its approach to broadcasting from a public service institution funded primarily from advertising to a solely commercial enterprise (Kilborn, 2003, p.36). These changes, alongside the 1990 Broadcasting Act, "paved the way for the slow but inexorable decline of serious documentary on ITV" (Kilborn, 2003, p.36). As early as 2001, Franklin (2001, p.117) stated that ITV's decline in documentaries had led to later scheduling and "a 'creative' redefinition of the term documentary to include the 'lighter', more popular genre of docu-soaps".

Since the 1990 Broadcasting Act, ITV's documentaries have been geared towards docu-soaps, reality television and docutainment. The docu-soap format has attracted significant audience figures, which justified continuing with this documentary model. Franklin (2001, p.119) further describes this trend as ITV overreacting to missing the 1997 influx of docu-soaps broadcasting on other channels. This change was accentuated with populist factual programmes *Holidays from Hell* (Kay & Scott, 1999-2003) and *Neighbours from Hell* (Cleary, 1998-2004) series. ITV's website places these programmes under the umbrella heading 'factual'. While Franklin and Kilborn interpret this shift as a decline in the quality of entertainment content, this new and constantly changing television landscape provides challenges and opportunities that producers of autism focused productions must endeavour to navigate.

Britain's second commercial broadcaster, Channel 4, was launched in November 1982. One of the terms within its remit is to demonstrate innovation, experimentation, and creativity in its programming (Ofcom, 2004a). To meet this clause and to distinguish itself

from BBC and ITV, it has targeted ethnic minorities; as Hobson (2008, p.207) argues, these groups “had not previously been major viewers in television”. Concerning documentary output, Channel 4 must make “a significant contribution to meeting the need for the licensed public service channels to include programmes of an educational nature and other programmes of educative value” (Ofcom, 2004a). These clauses have led to the channel producing accessible education and entertainment programmes for a diverse audience. Sørensen (2014, p.36), references both Doyle (2013, p.168) and Steemers (2004, p.161-3), stating that “both the BBC and Channel 4 use documentary as one of the main genres with which to promote their brands, differentiate themselves from their competitors and demonstrate their commitment to serious, public service programming”.

Due to its nature as both a commercial entity and a public service broadcaster. Channel 4 has provoked criticism surrounding its conflicting goals. The channel combines “a legislative requirement to *experiment*, to *innovate*, and to *complement* the service offered by the existing commercial television channel” (Harvey, 2000, p.92), but Blanchard (2013) has argued that Channel 4 has “two faces”. He suggests that “Channel 4 has to be seen and understood as an institution which emerged as an organisational hybrid or ‘blend’ of these two trajectories and traditions — ‘public service’ and ‘private services’” (Blanchard, 2013, p.371). Channel 4’s ability to sell advertising space also has ramifications on the content it provides, as external and internal pressures to maximise audiences may see it prioritising the types of programming that attract audiences advertisers want to reach, instead of the ones that embody its public service values (Harvey, 2000, p.116). This approach can be seen reflected in the differing forms of documentary content. The films discussed throughout this dissertation fall on both sides of this divide, with *Dispatches: MMR: What They Didn’t Tell You* (Deer & Carter, 2004), *Are You Autistic?* (Swift, 2018), *Young, Autistic and Stagestruck*

(McKerrow, 2010) and *The Autistic Gardener* (Carre & Emerson, 2015-2017) providing a stark contrast between scientific principles and hybridised entertainment formats that indicate the changing nature of both the documentary form and public service broadcasting in the present day.

The nature of public service broadcasting is changing due to the convergence of television and digital technologies. Since the advent of Web 2.0 – when internet technologies began to allow user generated content and social media networking sites (Welsh, 2010) – audiences have changed their documentary and broader media consumption habits. Viewers increasingly view their television and documentaries online through various devices, using video on demand (VOD) platforms via free and subscription-based online services. Broadcast organisations behave “in much the same manner as the TV channels do on television”, so that they “act as curators for documentary content on their sites and provide brand security for viewers, visitors and documentary producers” (Sørensen, 2014, p.39). Sørensen explains that recent technologies have facilitated the arrival of new documentary portals, including BBC iPlayer, Channel 4’s All 4, ITV Player, Channel 5’s Demand 5, YouTube and Netflix (Sørensen, 2014, p.38). The motivation of broadcasters such as the BBC for producing these services is not primarily monetary, but instead to provide a public service (Sørensen, 2014, p.44).

These strategies enable the BBC to concentrate on viewing figures and providing its audience with a public service reflected in its mix of entertainment and online educational content. However, due to its receipt of the licence fee and increasing criticisms from the public and left- and right-wing critics, all BBC’s services must undergo a public value test administered by the BBC Trust, as well as a market impact assessment by the regulatory body Ofcom (Smith & Steemers, 2007, p.47). These tests ensure that each new service (online, television or radio) provides value for money and fulfils its public service obligations. Sørensen

(2014, p.36) argues that “the BBC’s and Channel 4’s online strategies are not only driven by a wish to maintain their positions in the documentary market, they are also required by remit to engage with new digital platforms, services and technologies”. VOD services have extended the reach of educational documentaries, allowing viewers to ‘catch up’ with programmes they may have missed or the opportunity to discover and watch a documentary they may not have watched through traditional means. These services extend the reach of a diverse array of documentary formats and genres by providing a platform for each broadcaster’s catalogue of material, which might have been previously outside mainstream audiences’ viewing habits.

There is of course much scholarship on the history of documentary television and its genres. Among the most notable is the work of Nichols (2001, p.1), who proposes that “every film is a documentary. Even the most whimsical of fictions gives evidence of the culture that produced it and reproduces the likenesses of the people who perform within it”. Nichols (2001, p.1) defines documentary representations as “what we typically call nonfiction. These films give tangible representation to aspects of the world we already inhabit and share”. Documentaries represent their production companies’ and broadcasters’ perspectives and, where applicable, their public service remits. Nichols (2001, p.3) states that “documentary filmmakers often take on the role of public representatives. They speak for the interests of others, both for the individuals whom they represent in the film and for the institution or agency that supports their filmmaking activity”. These contrasting imperatives can lead to a conflict and uncertainty as to a documentary’s core message, as in the case of public service hybrid documentaries with sensationalist titles, which may objectify their participants.

Nichols (2001, pp.99-138) outlined a series of documentary modes: expository, poetic, observational, participatory, performative and reflexive. One of the most common and

recognisable modes is that of expository mode. These films directly address the audience with titles or voiceovers that seek to advance arguments (Nichols, 1991, p.34). Documentaries in this mode typically feature an unseen narrator who guides the viewer. This form of narration is common in the documentaries selected for this study, as observational documentaries seek to locate the truth in their subject whilst the filmmaker becomes an observer. This popular mode includes 'fly-on-the-wall' style documentaries. Yet documentary forms have evolved significantly since the early days of the omniscient narrator and have gradually moved away from attempts to project an impression of objectivity (Landesman, 2008, p.33). There has been a rise in new documentary styles and approaches, which have been adapted from the modes outlined by Nichols. Furthermore, there has been an increase in documentary subgenres, including docu-soaps and the types of autism entertainment documentaries featured in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

Science documentaries are a common subgenre on television. They cover a wide range of topics, discoveries and interests. Their broad appeal and subject matter have made them a popular mainstay on British television. Despite the numerous documentary modes and genres documentaries take, scientific representation often features easily recognisable components and forms, which Gardner and Young (1981, p.177) describe as "narrative, linear, expository and didactic". These components include talking heads from the scientific field in question, scientific imagery, often inter-cuts with patient testimony. However, scientific documentaries often do not fully consider the societal implications of scientific discoveries considering these as secondary to the science presented. As Gardner and Young (1981, p.174) put it, "the result is that discovery and substance are presented as internal to science, while social impact is seen as an interacting variable". They later suggest that "the social relations

and social processes of science should be conceived of as integral to its substance” (Gardner & Young, 1981, p.175). Contemporary science documentaries, however, encourage audience participation, which may help to bring the social implications of science to the forefront. Series such as *Panorama* (Robinson, 1958-present), for example, frequently employ hashtags and social media links to encourage audience engagement and interaction.

In documentary production the position of science and its objective presentation is complex. As Nichols notes, “objectivity in documentary is related to but distinct from the principles undergirding scientific research”, since in documentary “objectivity manifests rhetorically in support of truth claims and to deny the partiality of the filmmaker, whose ‘experiment’ can never be fully re-created” (Nichols, 1991, p.30 as cited and discussed by Malitsky, 2012, p.239). Furthermore, it has been said that “the truthfulness or otherwise of ‘documentary’ is a historically variable matter. One period’s stunning truth becomes the next period’s inadequate account” (Ellis, 2021, p.141). Science programming, which is the paradigm of non-fiction television, claims to represent facts (Gardner & Young, 1981, p.179). Science documentaries use other methods to convey validity and ‘trustworthiness’ to their audience, often through visual and narrative effects (van Dijck 2006, p.6). These truth effects include explanatory and expository techniques such as interviews with experts and voiceovers. Scientific documentaries assert epistemological authority in their subject area, exercised through easily recognisable narrative modes of explanation and exposition and communicated through realist aesthetics, sometimes paired with symbolic imagery (van Dijck, 2006, p.7). To demonstrate this, van Dijck discusses the series *Walking with Dinosaurs* (Lynch, 1999), which uses computer-generated images of dinosaurs in “real” forest settings. This combination of new and traditional documentary technologies does not harm the realistic

aesthetic of the series, allowing constructed scenarios to occur without negating the factual content. Often, however, some scientific specialities are deemed unsuitable for documentary television, these include as van Dijck (2006, p.7) explains, topics where “disciplinary content was either too abstract (physics) or too theoretical (mathematics), its subject matter too remote in time (prehistory) or place (cosmology), its research object too infinitesimal (molecular biology) or inaccessible (genetic therapy) for cameras to convey ‘realistic’ images”. In the science documentary realist paradigm, explanatory and expository modes are frequently stitched onto footage to show symbolic or actual events to produce metaphorical or realistic effect (van Dijck, 2006, p.8). This technique is observable in the BBC’s *Horizon* (Lynch, 1964-present) series, which throughout its history has combined expository voiceover narration with explanatory techniques and symbolic imagery so that it “encompasses many rhetorical strategies: from metaphors to personal stories by scientists, from detailed instructions by technicians to historical excursions” (van Dijck, 2006, p.8). These techniques are the hallmark of the science-focused series *Horizon*.

Documentaries are often as subjective as their fictional counterparts and an increasing body of literature addresses the subjective nature of documentaries. Plantinga (1997, p.30) defines an objective documentary representation as one “which is from no point of view, free of subjective bias, from a god-like perspective (or to use a less lofty analogy, from the perspective of a disinterested and unnoticed fly on the wall)”. However, such an impartial view is impossible. Each production follows an agenda that it is the task of textual criticism to discover. As this dissertation argues, although objectivity is not possible, diversity of representation is desirable. This is achieved by representing a wide array of individuals on the autistic spectrum and bringing their voices to the forefront. Where appropriate, these voices

can be supplemented with scientific discourse (which, ideally, should be grounded in peer-reviewed scientific consensus).

One of the newer documentary modes is that of reality television. The 1990s saw an explosion of reality genres and formats concerned with the interactions between ordinary everyday people, media content and celebrity culture (Tremlett, 2014, p.316). The format is commonly referred to within the industry as factual entertainment, a term that alludes to the increasing hybridisation of factual programming with entertainment television (Hill, 2005, p.42). Since the 1990s, reality television has undergone an enormous amount of diversification, with new formats constantly emerging (Beck et al., 2012, p.5). The genre is brimming with a variety of techniques, styles, and formats that adapt to the needs and demands of broadcasters and audiences. These formats thrive on the largely unscripted, lived experiences of non-actors in everyday experiences or extraordinary situations (Mast, 2009, p.885). Some involve interactive elements, such as the audience voting aspects of *Big Brother* (Osborne, 2000-2018) or the numerous singing and talent shows that populate weekend evening television schedules. Others use these interactive formats to ‘spin-off’ one-off films that utilises the star power of the original’s participants (as seen in Chapter 3). In more expansive areas of factual filmmaking, there is a slippage between fictional and factual practices in filmmaking as with popular television and entertainment series such as *The Only Way is Essex* (Wrigley & Berendsen, 2010-present), which merges the outward appearance of documentary styles with the pre-planning and scripting of fictional programmes (Ellis, 2021, p.143). Instead of the easily recognisable modes of the conventional documentary, hybrids make use of adapted conventions, including using real people and actors in reconstructions



(Ward, 2006, p.34), which blurs the line between fact and fiction, as seen in the popular docu-soap subgenre.

Docu-soaps rose to cultural prominence in Britain in the mid-90s, with their influence still being felt on modern documentary hybridisations. They are characterised by their use of multiple character-led storylines, their ability to generate stars set around one physical location which focus on the day-to-day chronology (Dovey, 2000, p.133). Bruzzi (2000, p.76) states that the docu-soap subgenre of observational documentary emphasises “entertainment as opposed to serious or instructive value of documentary”, while Dovey (2000, p.21) notes that these new documentary formats are “characterised by a shifting understanding of what constitutes the acceptable domains of the private and the public”. These formats constitute a potentially democratising and empowering television form that liberates and merges public and private spheres (Dovey, 2000, p.79). However, despite their attractiveness, audiences can be distrustful of the authenticity of reality television formats, as they present real people’s life stories in an entertaining fashion (Hill, 2005, p.58). Reality formats have been met with criticism regarding the exploitation of their stars, as when ‘otherness’ is used for the purpose of titillation, perpetuating the social and cultural devaluation of particular groups in society (Mast, 2016, p.2185). Many of the documentaries discussed in this work borrow from reality formats, as themes of democratisation, exploitation and authenticity are revisited through the examination of autistic celebrity and participatory culture.

Concerns regarding the use of voice and perspective are increasingly being brought to the forefront of documentary discourse and analysis. Media representations of people are typically the product of institutional decisions (Lacey, 2009, p.160). Traditional expository

documentary forms often feature 'voice of god' narration, which conveys information (Nichols, 2017, p.124) that frames footage from the perspective of an outside authority. Classic documentary film theory defines voice as the means by which nonfiction films speak through the combination of sounds and images to present coherent perspectives or arguments (Ouellette, 2015, p.107). Documentary has attempted to adapt to these concerns regarding voice through the adaptation and rearrangement of formats. Since the 1990s, there has been a rapid growth of first-person media across many genres and platforms, which incorporate elements of video diaries and talk shows; these new formats invite new ways of thinking about how ordinary people are presented in factual media (Ouellette, 2015, p.108). As a result, discussions of reality television are increasingly moving away from questions of objectivity and accuracy to consider questions of diversity in representation, including the intersections of gender, class and race.

Indeed, reality television foregrounds the 'ordinary' within televisual representation and offers the perfect site for the exploration of self-making, self-legitimation, and the demise of class (Skeggs, 2010, p.70). The format's broad scope attracts analysis of gender and transformation (Heyes, 2007) and white hegemonic masculinity (Buchanan, 2014), topics which frequently interact with and influence autism representations, as considered at several points in this dissertation. The shift towards hybridised forms and first-person perspectives demonstrates the change from a cultural preoccupation with scientific accuracy to more subjective and individualised accounts of autism. The continuous evolution invites opportunities to examine historical and contemporary representations while suggesting future avenues for autism portrayal and voice (as well as other minority and underrepresented groups) in factual media forms.

### Research focus

This dissertation aims to take account of the shifting contemporary television environment. Public service broadcasters compete against new media forms (YouTube, Netflix, Amazon, and commercial broadcasters such as BSkyB) to retain viewers and produce comparable content. Simultaneously, broadcasters are under increasing pressure to improve the diversity of programming on both sides of the camera. These changes have led to broadcasters such as the BBC committing to improving the representation of minority groups (BBC & D&I, 2021). The recent increase in autism-related programming in contemporary British television reflects attempts at improving the diversity of marginalised and minority groups in broadcast media (other factors include autism awareness campaigns and changes in diagnostic criteria). Autism's ability to catch the public imagination is fuelled by a flood of fictional portrayals; recent examples include the principal characters in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (Fincher, 2011), *The Accountant* (O'Connor, 2016), *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre, 2007-2019) and *Parenthood* (Katims, 2010-2015). These popular culture representations of autism present opportunities to help viewers appreciate the complexities of the condition (Holton, 2013, p.57). Indeed, most of the literature surrounding autism representation has focused on fictional representations. This is the result of several factors, including audience familiarity with fictional depictions and autism's abundance within film, television and print media formats. It is imperative for any student of *factual* accounts of autism to examine such representations and learn from any failings in order potentially to improve future portrayals of the condition.

This dissertation primarily has its roots in television studies and medical humanities. However, the work is interdisciplinary and intersectional, as it also broaches the areas of

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disability advocacy and disability studies as well as considering issues relating to class, gender, celebrity and sexuality from a broader, cultural studies point of view. By combining these fields, the dissertation endeavours to take a holistic and interdisciplinary approach to understanding autism representation in British documentaries, as autism portrayals are formed and understood through the interplay of various social, media, individual and medical perspectives. Furthermore, it explores areas such as self-advocacy, disability representation and historical stereotyping. It is hoped that the research findings about the representation of autistic people may be applied to other underrepresented groups to facilitate debates surrounding diversity and representation in British broadcast media.

## Research objectives

The primary research objective of this work is to examine the representation of autism in British television documentaries and broadcasters' attempts to diversify representation between 2002 and 2020. A series of secondary objectives have also been formulated to undertake this task in order to probe the interplay between the evolution of documentary formats and societal understandings and interpretations of autism. These are:

- Examine autism representations within twenty-first century science documentaries, exploring their connections with traditional disability models and surrounding media and critical discourse

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- Identify essential stereotypes and their links to narrative and genre conventions by examining entertainment documentary formats and their relationships with the idealisation and celebrification of the autistic body
- Explore key representational issues and developments within documentary formats and the portrayal of shifting conceptualisations of autism towards neurodiverse understandings by examining content creation within contemporary broadcast and streaming platforms and the effects of these on autism representation

This dissertation's chronological structure reflects the progression of autism representation in the last two decades. Each of this dissertation's seven chapters engages with a distinct genre and historical period, seeking to uncover lessons that might benefit future productions and examine how autism representation has become increasingly diverse in contemporary factual television.

## Methodological considerations

This research is conducted primarily through the critical textual analysis of British autism focused documentaries broadcast since 2000. Textual analysis is a qualitative research methodology that examines the content, meaning, structure and discourse of texts (Lockyer, 2008, p.865). This research engages a variety of textual methods in the analysis of documentaries and YouTube short-form videos, including elements of semiotic, discourse, narrative and genre analysis to illuminate the representation of autism, combined with insights from disability studies and the historical analysis of broadcasters' attempts to improve autism representation. This interdisciplinary research employs a qualitative analysis

approach based principally within television studies, as it examines autism representation through a cultural lens. It focuses on the documentary texts themselves and the paratextual discourse surrounding them, undertakes a comprehensive review of the texts, and situates them within larger contextual and disciplinary frameworks and debates about disability rights, societal change, neoliberalism and neurodiversity.

Qualitative approaches are common within television studies and are considered an intrinsic part of media studies (Brennen, 2012, p.7). This approach provides a robust but flexible theoretical framework incorporating various methodological tools. Qualitative research methods are suited to this research as they are “interdisciplinary, interpretive, political and theoretical in nature” (Brennen, 2012, p.4). Due to the varied nature of the documentaries in this study and the variety of social, political contexts engaged by these films, such an interdisciplinary methodology seems appropriate.

Most of the analysis here focuses on broadcast television documentaries. These programmes are currently available through university subscriptions to *LearningOnScreen* or through the BBC, Channel 4 and Channel 5’s video-on-demand (VOD) online services. The documentaries have been selected insofar as they exhibit historical context, stereotypes, thematic or narrative issues relevant to the research objectives. The majority of this research focuses on British documentaries broadcast since 2000 on Freeview channels, with a focus on either an autistic child or adult. The decision to focus on Freeview documentaries was based on the Freeview broadcasters’ public service remits as well as the availability and popularity of documentaries broadcast via this platform. Access to these documentaries does not require a monetary subscription, making them available to the broadest possible viewership. The dissertation does not cover documentaries broadcast on subscription services such as Sky

and Netflix, non-UK productions or fictional programmes. Documentaries selected for this case study include both those broadcast before and after the publication of DSM-V (APA, 2013). The films analysed in this study all offer a broad range of perspectives, from those of autistic individuals, to those of parental, practitioner and medical perspectives. Production information was sought through broadcasters' websites and Google Internet searches. Information regarding suitable documentaries was input into a spreadsheet that sorted documentaries according to the following categories: science documentaries, entertainment documentaries and self-advocacy.

Analysis of YouTube videos about autism comprises a small part of this study in Chapter 7. It uses textual analysis regarding production techniques, narratives, themes and potential benefits this form may have to improve diversity and autism representation. Short-form videos or 'vlogs' (a form of first-person perspective film) on this platform were selected for their capacity for self-representation. They are generally hosted by an autistic adult who uploads this content to their own YouTube channel. These channels clearly state the phrases autism or Asperger's syndrome as part of the channel name or branding. It is argued in this chapter that television broadcasters can improve documentary representation by undertaking a more individual-focused approach akin to autistic YouTubers, improving the diversity of autism representations. Like the documentaries featured throughout this research, YouTube vlogs are treated here as audio-visual texts.

This research has attempted to consider ethical issues by respecting uploaders' privacy. It follows the anonymising approach used by other researchers using YouTube as part of their studies on autism (see, for example, Bellon-Harn et al., 2020; Azer et al., 2018; and Kollia et al., 2017). No information is presented that could identify video uploaders. Broadcast

television documentaries fall within fair usage within UK copyright law. However, there are ethical issues regarding the analysis of content uploaded to YouTube. Although YouTube content is within the public realm, issues regarding consent for their use within a research context are important to consider. Using the videos uploaded by autistic YouTubers, this context can be assumed to fall outside the original target market and intent of the creators. Therefore, an ethics review was sought and undertaken. Due to the potentially sensitive and personal characteristics of the videos published on YouTube and some of the uploaders' possible status as vulnerable adults, this chapter takes steps to protect the identity and privacy of those featured. Whereas the previous discussions regarding broadcast documentaries featured names and personal details, the analysis of the YouTube vlogs in Chapter 7 does not. The discussion uses no real names, channel names or handles that could be used to identify participants. Instead, more general terms, such as "autistic YouTuber" or "autistic creator", are deployed as necessary.

Where appropriate, the discussion examines a small number of YouTube comments on videos. It treats these within the context of audience responses to video content. YouTube videos are a method of factual user-generated content (Mikos, 2018, p.412). No direct quotations from YouTube comment sections have been referred to, as it might be possible to identify videos by comments attached to them. Instead, this study regards these videos as factual short-form content and supplies no identifying information or usernames. Social media postings are also anonymised, unless the author is a well-known public figure, organisation, or body.

As part of its critical apparatus, this dissertation incorporates secondary and tertiary sources, such as newspaper and online reviews of the documentaries examined. LexisNexis



database provided access to these resources. Secondary research sources were retrieved online through the University of Portsmouth's subscription services and its library's physical holdings. These texts provide paratextual context to deepen and contextualise the textual analysis.

### Originality and value

Autism representation is rapidly evolving. The originality of this work stems from: its unique historical periodisation, which aims to chart the evolution of autism representations through a variety of emerging twenty-first century documentary formats; its focus on an almost entirely neglected body of media texts; and its interdisciplinary approach. As the preceding section discussed, the way autism is understood is progressively shifting from a deficit and pathologizing perspective to approaches that consider autism in terms of neurodiversity and difference, a progression whose contours have not always been apparent in existing literature on this subject. This research investigates this shift across various documentary subgenres during an approximately 20-year period. The dissertation is structured chronologically as well as by theme and documentary genre. Often this dissertation highlights the more negative stereotypes and qualities of these texts. It is easy to take such representations out of context and attribute bad qualities to them without examining the larger political and cultural contexts that have influenced them. A familiar critique surrounding disabilities studies is its remote nature, which puts forth narrow textual readings focusing on the representation of disability and texts which are consumed separately from identifiable sites of production (McRuer and Bérubé, 2006, p.61). This work seeks to address this common oversight. Autism representation in documentaries, as stated in this work, should be viewed in a broader

context that positions them within a more comprehensive “representational ecology” (Schiappa, 2008, p.1). This work’s distinctive time frame and its engagement with an array of documentary formats and genres, provides unique insights into the ways in which autism representations have evolved. This work also includes discussions regarding the impact of these texts, the misrepresentations of autism and the nature of the ‘diversity’ on offer.

This work offers further original contributions and value to both television studies and autism research by exploring the potential bidirectional relationship between societal influences and changes in autism understandings and the development of media formats, technologies, and reflexive media approaches. This work’s format allows for these relationships to be questioned. Therefore, this dissertation is both timely and relevant. It questions and examines historical and contemporary representations by exploring the growing influence of self-advocacy movements in public images of autism. Furthermore, it is hoped that this research can help media producers and other stakeholders to avoid problematic historical portrayals and facilitate more adequate autism representations in the future. The intended stakeholders addressed by this work are the autism community, including self-advocacy groups, television production companies and academics researchers and scholars working in the area of documentary and autism representation. Additionally, recent technologies, such as the ones discussed and examined in relation to participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006) in Chapter 7, offer opportunities for new autistic identities to be constructed and presented without an ‘outside’ mediating presence that traditional forms of media production provide. Furthermore, as broadcasters are increasingly attempting to improve the diversity within their programming, this research is increasingly timely and relevant to media studies. This work emphasises the importance of increasing diversity within

documentary productions and including the voices of autistic people and the methods by which productions may further this aim.

The originality of this dissertation is further bolstered by the under-researched nature of its subject area, as existing research is dominated by examinations of fictional representations, especially in relation to US television, films, and imaginative literature. Additionally, where consideration of factual media does occur within the field, it frequently omits documentaries and British contributions. Although some researchers have begun examining documentary depictions, as demonstrated in the upcoming literature review, television documentaries tend to be examined in isolation from one another, and none of those discussed by other scholars were produced in the UK or broadcast on British television. Therefore, the field of autism documentary representation is still under-researched. To fill this gap in the literature, this dissertation builds upon and expands existing research, such as theory encompassing supercrips and savants, by advancing understanding through interdisciplinary research. Undertaking a similar interdisciplinary approach taken by crip theory, this work incorporates an intersectional approach by examining concepts of gender, class, elements of race through the often-stereotypical presentation of autism and neuroqueer identities.

## Chapter structure

This dissertation is structured in seven chapters, each exploring distinct aspects of autism representation within British documentaries. Chapters are ordered chronologically to facilitate the analysis of the evolution of media representations. Early chapters explore older representations from 2002 to 2010 in scientific documentaries, their use of stereotyping and

their reliance on traditional disability representational models. Chapters 3 and 4 discuss hybrid autism entertainment texts (and in some cases the entire documentary series to which they belong) between the dates 2009 to 2015. The documentaries from this period can be seen as transitional, bridging the gap between earlier science-focused films and the explosion of more recent first-person representations. The documentaries featured in Chapter 5, meanwhile, date from 2011- 2015. This chapter examines some of the formal techniques involved in the deployment of first-person perspectives on autism. Chapters 6 and 7, the final two chapters, engage with texts produced from 2018 onwards and document the changing styles in which autism is being portrayed across factual forms. Where appropriate, however, the argument has necessitated the inclusion of some documentaries that lie outside these timeframes. Each of these chapters engages with particular documentary subgenres that emerged in the time period concerned.

Following the Introduction is a literature review that outlines and identifies critical research, arguments, and theories relating to disability studies, autism media representation and television and film studies. Chapter 1: Misrepresentation, Fear and MMR examines science-focused documentaries from the early 2000s as well as the production of fear during the MMR crisis of the 90s and its impact on autism representation. It asserts that science documentaries, which focused on MMR and the perceived 'link' to autism, present a biased, deficit-focused, medicalised and heavily stereotyped portrayal of autism that has had a lasting impact on contemporary representations. Autism representation often falls between two competing binary understandings: deficit and neurodiversity. Whereas contemporary documentaries increasingly reflect neurodiverse perspectives, earlier science-oriented documentaries often rely on the medical model of disability. This chapter contextualises and

explores the medical model of disability in relation to autism representation in scientific documentaries.

The role of science-focused documentaries in reproducing autism stereotypes is developed further in Chapter 2: Savantism and Supercrims, which examines the portrayal of autistic savants in science documentaries. Subgenres of science documentary are among the most common forms of autism documentaries, with their methods and approach differing between public service and commercial broadcasters. This chapter expands upon concepts of deficit, medical and scientific constructions by examining the portrayal and construction of the common savant stereotype across several types of television broadcaster, who differently prioritise their scientific messages. It identifies problematic and negative portrayals by contrasting two subgenres of science documentary. These films feature a diverse range of autistic individuals within a scientific setting and narrative format. In these documentaries, autistic individuals occupy varying positions on the autistic spectrum and are often depicted as otherworldly or superhuman. Such films often fail to include those who do not conform to the supercrip stereotype. Science documentaries, then, highlight important problems and gaps in representation that other types of documentary have recently sought to address.

Signalling a shift away from medical models of representations, Chapter 3: Autism as Spectacle discusses the expansion into contemporary popular entertainment documentary forms. It argues that documentaries are moving away from the scientific modes of the 2000s and increasingly incorporating entertainment and populist formats. This chapter examines performance-based documentary formats and its representation and construction of autism in documentaries broadcast in 2010. It investigates some of the thematic similarities between entertainment documentaries and the nineteenth-century freak show, the commodification

of performers, and the assignment of cultural value to autistic bodies. This chapter contends that autism documentaries now constitute a significant subgenre of the hybrid entertainment documentary. It contends that at the core of these films are rites of passage – ‘curative’ narratives in which male autistic teenagers are commodified and normalised through a process of narrative idealisation. The chapter examines the portrayal of autistic persons by entertainment documentaries by establishing the term ‘ideal autistic’ to label the idealisation of young male autistics, and explores the ramifications of this move for autism diversity. It delves into the impact of neoliberalism on processes of normalisation, exploring how curative and rehabilitation narratives reinforce a culture of radical individualism.

Chapter 4: *Autistic Stardom and Notoriety* expands upon some of the themes introduced in Chapter 3. It explores some other aspects of the entertainment documentary by exploring the impact celebrification has on autistic persons. The chapter attests that autism has become part of the commodified demotic realm of television entertainment, leading to autistic individuals becoming celebrities or microcelebrities and contends that the intersections of gender, sexuality and class influence the construction of autistic celebrity identity. This chapter draws upon concepts of celebrity to call attention to social model of disability, the question of celebrity advocacy, and the involvement each celebrity has within the production process. It further argues that the paratextual discourse surrounding autistic microcelebrities can also inform audience reactions to autistic celebrities in damaging and defamatory, as well as more positive ways.

The remaining chapters focus on recent examples of autism documentary representation with a focus on first-person narrative modes and the communication of neurodiverse perspectives. The neurodiversity movement provides alternative approaches

and perspectives to traditional medical and deficit views of autism. Some contemporary documentaries are beginning to take account of these advances in their portrayals of autism, but such cases remain limited in number. Chapter 5: Neurodiversity and the First-Person Perspective Documentary asserts that documentaries allow opportunities for neurodiverse identification. This construction is effected through the use of diverse genres, visual styles, dramatisations, flashbacks, and visualisations. It contends that first-person documentaries present opportunities for a neurodiverse gaze with the power to challenge medicalising and deficit views of autism. This chapter also explores concepts of self-advocacy, participatory media, and self-representation within documentaries in which autistic persons have had a significant role in the production process – a relatively recent phenomenon.

Taking the recent changes to BBC Three as a starting point, Chapter 6: BBC Three, Neurodiversity and De-Stigmatisation, examines the ways in which short-form video formats depict and give a voice to autistic people. It argues that broadcasters can improve documentary and factual representations by integrating styles and formats from user-generated content that foster neurodiverse viewpoints and autistic identities. It examines BBC Three time as an online-only platform and the BBC's use of short-form formats to represent autism. It argues that broadcasters have improved autism representation by incorporating styles, formats, and new internet technologies with portrayals evolving from stereotypical accounts and methods of idealisation to celebration and integration of neurodiversity principles. This chapter explores the portrayal of strength-based approaches to the representation of autism that contrast with historical deficit depictions. However, as this chapter argues, improvements can still be made with respect to the inclusion and portrayal of autistic perspectives and viewpoints in such formats.

Chapter 7: Vlogs, Neurodiversity, and Reclamation uses the previous chapter as a springboard to investigate the potential representational benefits the further integration of social media video formats could have for autistic people and broadcasters. It draws upon the work of Botha et al. (2020, p.12) to examine the methods by which autistic people use vlogs as a method of stigma management, including their use as a tool for the discursive practices of concealment, disclosure, reframing and reclamation. It explores autism vlogs as a form of participatory culture and scrutinises the possible benefits and drawbacks of incorporating these emerging formats for autistic persons and broadcasters.

The concluding chapter of this dissertation draws together the arguments put forward in the preceding chapters and orients them towards this project's research objectives and broader research context. It emphasises the key findings of the research and assesses its contributions and wider implications within the field of television and disability studies. It continues by discussing this study's potential limitations and proposes some avenues for further research. It concludes these discussions with a consideration of recent changes to the British broadcasting environment and the impact and challenges of Internet broadcasting technologies.



## Literature Review

The general public acquires autism knowledge through a variety of sources, including media depictions such as print, broadcast and social media (Fontes & Pino-Juste, 2021, para 3). Draaisma (2009, p.1475) explains the importance of investigating these representations and states that “considering that much of what society at large learns on disorders on the autism spectrum is produced by representations of autism in novels, TV-series, movies or autobiographies, it will be of vital importance to scrutinize these representations and to check whether or not they are, in fact, misrepresenting autism”. The influx of autism representations has facilitated stereotypical autism perceptions among audiences. Diversity and cultural complexity regarding media representations may increase public awareness surrounding autism and reduce discrimination and stigmatisation. This literature review offers an overview of research relevant to this dissertation by exploring stereotyping theory, disability theory and autism media stereotypes. Although much of the existing research surrounding autism media representations focuses on fictional depictions, this review also considers research on depictions of autism within the news and factual media before considering scholarship relating to the presentation of autism in documentary formats.

### Stereotyping

Stereotyping is commonplace, a part of modern vernacular, everyday life and human interactions. Enteman (1996) links the term stereotype to its early use with printing presses in the late eighteenth century. Goffman (1963, p.11) states that “society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and

natural for members of each of these categories". Furthermore, Pickering (2001, p.2) establishes that forming categories is "a necessary way of organising the world in our minds, creating mental maps for working out how we view the world and negotiating our ways through it in our everyday social relations and interactions". Ashmore and Del Boca (1979, p.222) summarise numerous stereotyping theories as belief structures about the personal characteristics of a set of people. Pickering (2001, p.4) describes stereotyping as applying "Certain forms of behaviour, disposition or propensity are isolated, taken out of context and attributed to everyone associated with a particular group or category". In such cases stereotyping may be used as a form of social control, by maintaining and reproducing norms and conventions of behaviour (Pickering, 2001, p.5). The classical view of stereotypes is one in which, as Pickering (2001, p.10) explains, "social stereotypes exaggerate and homogenise traits held to be characteristic of particular categories and serve as blanket generalisations for all individuals assigned to such categories". Simply put, categories provide information, which allows us to negotiate a variety of social interactions and situations.

Despite its negative connotations, stereotyping is "considered to be one of the main avenues for the expression of social and cultural attitudes" (Stewart et al., 1979, p.1). The study of stereotyping is vital as it allows us to understand how social groups form and justify opinions and behaviour. Nario-Redmond (2010, p.472) states, "stereotypes are useful because they go beyond the immediately observable, and facilitate predictions about how others behave based on group membership". Stereotypes allow us to make judgements about the behaviour between inter-groups. Pickering (2001, p.5) states that the "assessment that is offered in a stereotype is based on the leading precepts and preoccupations of those who

reproduce them, and it is this assessment that underlies the perception and positioning of the 'difference' it regards".

Stereotyping has both positive and negative consequences. The language used in the creation and proliferation of stereotypes gives us as much insight into the individuals and groups that form them, as it does about those it is describing. Enteman (1996, p.12) explains that "the use of stereotypes, especially in pictorial form, ends up communicating much more than may have been intended; it communicates a history of ignorance and exploitation". In the context of documentary representation, the documentaries themselves embody the goals and values of those who research, produce and broadcast them. One explanation of how people form and subsequently justify stereotypes, as Enteman (1996, p.10) explains, describes it as a form of laziness: "When we are tempted with the use of stereotypes, we are attempting to evade the need to think anew about situations or people". In fictional and factual representations of autism, stereotyping may provide a narrative shorthand that aids productions and audiences. However, often, stereotypes are used to spread negative opinions and are used to form "negative or hostile judgements, the rationale for exploitative, unjust treatment, or the justification for aggressive behaviour" (Pickering, 2001, p.10). Such negative stereotypes, in other words, facilitate stigma.

Stigma refers to deeply discrediting attributes (Goffman, 1963, p.13). The term is perhaps best understood by looking at its origins. Goffman (1963, p.11) describes the first usage in ancient Greece, whose populace "originated the term *stigma* to refer to bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier". Research surrounding stigma is often focused on the individual (Link & Phelan, 2001, p.366). Link and Phelan (2001) identify a model for the construction of disability based on

stigmatisation as stereotyping causes those labelled to be 'othered', with clear categories between 'us' and 'them' appearing. Link and Phelan (2001, p.382) summarise this model and findings by stating that "stigma exists when elements of labeling, stereotyping, separating, status loss, and discrimination co-occur in a power situation that allows these processes to unfold".

Stigma is applied to the 'other', which in extreme cases, stigmatised persons or groups are seen as so different from 'us' that they are not seen as really human (Link & Phelan, 2001, p.370). The term 'othering' or 'otherness' is often applied when exploring the representation of minority groups. Fürsich (2010, p.116) explains that the "representations of Others (ethnic, racial, gender or sexual minorities, international Others) have become a focal point for critical-cultural media studies". Pickering (2001, p.73) argues that those who are othered are unequal to those who do the othering; the latter occupy a privileged position where they can define themselves in contrast. Link and Phelan (2001, p.370) further explain that when "labelled persons are believed to be distinctly different, stereotyping can be smoothly accomplished because there is little harm in attributing all manner of negative characteristics to 'them'". Negative attributes are applied to the other without fear of reprisal by the dominant 'us' group. Examining the use of othering and its links to stereotyping allows us to explore, in greater detail, the relationships between the two inter-groups of 'us' and 'them'.

The group-based categories of 'us' and 'them' form the basis of much stigma and stereotyping research. Green et al. (2005, p.212) discuss the stigma process, as identified by Link and Phelan in their model. They state that "the interactional processes of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination have relevance to the social experiences of people with disabilities and their families and that these processes can have negative

consequences in their lives". Green et al. (2005, p.212) studied the effects of stigma by examining the effect of negative stereotyping on the lives of people with disabilities. They applied Link and Phelan's stigma model to their findings. As within Link and Phelan's model, stigmatisation of disabled individuals is a complex and multidimensional process resulting from culturally specific attitudes (Green et al, 2005, p.212). Additionally, with the model a useful tool in the framing of disability experiences which draws attention to the impact of the various complex social/cultural experiences of individuals with biological differences (Green et al. 2005, p.213). Stigma forms from "deep structural conditions, such as capitalism, ideologies of individualism and personal responsibility, and the complicated legacies of racism and colonialism" (Grinker, 2020, p.S56). Furthermore, Grinker (2020, p.S64) suggests that autism, along with many other medical diagnoses, feature stigmatising boundary lines that are drawn more by culture than by nature.

Stereotyping is a form of social categorisation that serves "the need to reduce the complexity of the social environment" (Tajfel & Forgas, 2000, p.60). Stereotypes are often formed by the in-group and directed towards an out-group. Ingroups view themselves as diverse (Brown, 2010, p.50). Stereotyping is often found at the heart of prejudice studies, as the process attributes individual characteristics assumed to be shared by fellow group members (Brown, 2010, p.68). Fiske et al. (2002, p.879) identify paternalistic and envious stereotypes categories. Paternalistic stereotypes target "out-groups that are neither inclined nor capable to harm members of the in-group" (Fiske et al., 2002, p.879). Envious stereotypes depict "out-groups that are seen as competent but not warm, resulting in *envious stereotypes*" (Fiske et al., 2002, p.879). However, both types of stereotype discriminate against those whom they describe. These stereotype categories are the result of the

“combination of two separate dimensions” (Fiske et al., 2002, p.879). These methods of categorisation follow the patterns of traditional prejudice and discrimination, which allows for the “uniform derogation of a disliked and disrespected out-group and pure in-group favoritism toward the competent and warm in-group.” (Fiske et al., 2002, p.879). Prejudice is formed through antipathy based upon faulty and inflexible generalisations, directed towards a group as a whole or towards a member of that group (Allport, 1979, p.9). Stereotypes could not exist without at least two social groups, one of which views itself as different or superior to the other, giving rise to prejudicial attitudes and behaviours.

### Disability stereotypes

Autism stereotypes are rooted in broader patterns of disability misrepresentation. Studying disability characterizations and their functions is needed to broaden our minds about how we consider disability (Arndt et al., 2010, para 9). Wahl (1995) and Seale (2002) highlight public confusion surrounding developmental disabilities and mental illness, with the two often becoming interchangeable, caused by inaccurate media representations. Disability-focused stereotypes in fictional and factual media forms are both numerous and complex. Nelson (1996, pp.119-125), for example, identifies a series of stereotypes in disability representation within visual media: ‘Victim’, ‘Supercrip’, ‘Evil and Warped’, ‘Unable to adjust’, ‘The Burden’, and ‘Shouldn’t have survived’. These types are common throughout Western disability representation.

Similarly, Barnes (1992, pp.15-34) identifies a series of recurring disability-based stereotypes commonly represented in fictional and factual media as “pitiable and pathetic”, an “object of violence”, “sinister and evil”, “atmosphere or curio”, “super cripple”, “object of

ridicule”, “their own worst and only enemy”, “burden”, “as sexually abnormal”, “incapable of participating fully in community life” and “normal”. Barnes’ work on disability overlaps somewhat with that of Nelson (1996), as both have discussed the disability stereotypes “supercrip”, “burden”, “unable to adjust”, and “incapable of participating fully in community life”. This crossover highlights the prevalence of such disability imagery within Western media. Longmore (1985, p.34) explores similar concepts to those discussed by Barnes and Nelson by discussing the portrayal of disabled people as unable, or having difficulties, adjusting to their disability and society. Longmore (1985, p.34) links disabled adjustment with “a problem of psychological self-acceptance, of emotional adjustment”. Such narratives point towards disabilities social and cultural functions through stories of adjusting and overcoming which places success or failure onto the individual (Longmore, 1985, pp.34-35). Nario-Redmond (2010, p.473) explains that disability-based stigma comes primarily in two forms “the more visible ‘abominations of the body’ and the ‘blemishes of character’”. Representations imply that disabled characters are subordinate to non-disabled characters, with disabled characters forced to rely emotionally on ‘normal’, non-disabled ones.

Likewise, Arndt et. al. (2010, para 28-41), in an examination of films commonly shown to American schoolchildren, found that disabled characters often reinforced pitiful constructions in which disability is presented as an undesirable state with stereotypes perceiving disabled children as victims and supercrips. However, the practice of showing children films featuring disabled characters can be useful in teaching and enabling children to contest and re-examine stereotypes by facilitating more appropriate film readings that affirm and celebrate difference (Arndt et al. 2010, para 58). Arndt et al’s research not only accentuates the pervasiveness of disability stereotypes and the effect on public understanding but also their potential to readdress common disability stereotypes.

Disability films featuring disabled people “shift audience angles, perspectives, and relationships to peripheral embodiments by using crip/queer bodies as new modalities of social practice” (Mitchell & Snyder, 2015, p.150). Contemporary cinematic and television representations, especially documentaries, have attempted to give a more accurate and positive view of disability. Research has identified similarities and relationships between these themes and those apparent in British television documentaries. One rationale for such representations is, as Edwards (2014, p.20) explains, that “in various popular media, stereotypes have often been employed to set up something of an easy target for audience vitriol and negative reaction”. Placing disability representations into stereotypical categories allows those represented to become interchangeable and faceless placeholders. Nario-Redmond (2010, p.475) state that studies such as Fiske et al. (2002) support the hypothesis that an “overarching stereotype may be associated with disabled people as a group, especially when categorized according to some normal/abnormal binary that renders those labelled as relatively interchangeable category members”. This binary defines those with disabilities in contrast to those deemed ‘normal’.

Media representations allow us, the viewers, to distance ourselves from any shame that these representations may cause. Pickering (2001, p.27) states, “the analytical identification of stereotypical attribution in media texts and representations easily serves to distance us from the ignominy of prejudice, with the strain of such ignominy in those texts and representations providing an alibi for our own freedom from contamination”. This distancing also allows the audience to repeat and believe any stereotype without fear of public shame.



### Autism in fictional media

Fictional portrayals of autism may have negative consequences and further stereotypes and stigma (Nordahl-Hansen et al., 2018a, p.635). Society views autism as a disability (Fontes & Pino-Juste, 2021, para 2). Autism exists within competing cultural narratives and metaphors that conceptualise autism as a disease (Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008, pp.467-468) and is becoming accepted through explanations of neurodiversity, with autistic people today facing less stigma than their predecessors through job accommodations (Grinker, 2020, p.S56). However, there are many stereotypes surrounding autistic people, including them being considered as unfriendly or uncaring, a genius, incapable of love, having a broken mirror neuron system, or autism resulting from an adverse side-effect from a vaccine (Jarrett, 2014). Dominant monolithic autism media narratives risk alienating and further othering autistic people (Kehinde et al., 2021, p.281) and are frequently negative and narrow; but even where they are ostensibly 'positive', they may risk placing undue societal pressure on autistic persons.

Autism is heterogeneous; watching a film with an autistic character cannot do justice to the richness of autistic experiences (Nordahl-Hansen et al., 2018a, p.636). Homogeneous stereotypes create parameters around how autistic individuals 'should' behave, creating boundaries that leave few opportunities for individuals to be themselves and take away their individuality (Treweek et al., 2019, p.765). Popular cinema representations, in particular, seem to offer only two main autism scripts, which Draaisma (2009, p.1476) describes as "either diminished capacity or superhuman capacity, but nothing in between". The inflexibility of this binary causes conflict in the audience's understanding of autism or could lead viewers to adopt discriminatory or stigmatising attitudes. Autism stereotypes have

negative consequences for autistic persons, including social exclusion, oppression and bullying by neurotypical people (Treweek et al., 2019, pp.760-763). Draaisma (2009, p.1475) discusses the conflicting nature of autism stereotypes, particularly in fictional forms of media, arguing that there is “a harmful divergence between the general image of autism and the clinical reality of the autistic condition”. Draaisma (2009, p.1478) explores a further misunderstanding that can arise from the widespread popular view that “in a sense we are all autistic”. Although this stereotype is an attempt at being inclusive and usually asserted with the best of intentions, it can serve to underestimate the impact of the condition on autistic people’s lives.

Although autism coverage is increasing across most forms of media, it is difficult to ascertain whether today’s portrayals are more ‘accurate’ than those of the past. Holton (2013, p.50) questions the portrayal of autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) and whether these portrayals are evolving “to meet more accurate representations scholars have urged for or whether they are continuing to rely on staid constructs that appease the public at the expense of ASD individuals”. Discussions regarding the accuracy of autism representations also explore film and television characters’ adherence to commonly used diagnostic criteria. Garner et al. (2015, pp.420 - 421) use the CARS2 autism rating scale in their analysis; they highlight the dominance of ‘extreme representations’ whereby rare exceptionalities (such as savantism) are overrepresented and question such portrayals’ educational value. Additionally, autistic characteristics misrepresented include poor eye contact, shown as total avoidance, and savant skills considered integral to an autism spectrum diagnosis (Garner et al., 2015, p.420). Nordahl-Hansen et al. (2018b) further examine the accuracy of screen portrayals of autism by comparing representations to the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria. Most evaluated characters, in films such as *After Thomas* (Shore, 2006), *Molly* (Duigan, 1999) and *Mercury Rising* (Becker,

1998), scored very highly against the DSM-5 for autism (Nordahl-Hansen et al., 2018b, p.352). Such portrayals raise “the question of whether meeting all diagnostic criteria ([...] indicating that every characteristic used in diagnosis was apparent in that portrayal) can be described as ‘accurate’”. Instead, it might be better to refer to such instances as ‘archetypal’ in relation to DSM-5 diagnostic criteria (Nordahl-Hansen et al., 2018b, p.352).

Autistic portrayals in films are often formulaic and used simply as a plot device, in which autism is often “narratively enabling” (Murray, 2008, p.122). Baker (2007) identifies an eight-point formula used in a considerable number of Hollywood films, including *Cube* (Natali, 1997), *Bless the Child* (Russell, 2000), and *Mercury Rising* (Becker, 1998). Baker’s (2007, pp.231-235) formula identifies the main aspects of plots in mainstream films with autism narratives. The formula includes pairing a non-autistic character (usually an adult) with an autistic character with easily identifiable and often stereotypical autistic characteristics. The autistic character will usually possess the following features: they will be cute, endearing, innocent, or attractively quirky and endowed with savant skills or superhuman powers (Baker, 2007, p.232). The formula progresses by depicting the character as vulnerable and relying on caregivers or parents and continues by placing the autistic character in danger. This risk is often caused by information the autistic character gains through their savant skills, as in *Mercury Rising*. The film features autistic savant Simon, whose skills allow him to break a top-secret military code. The hero Art Jeffries (Bruce Willis) saves and bonds with Simon fulfilling a surrogate parental role (Baker, 2007, p.234). This parental role is common throughout these kinds of films and may imply that autistic people are childlike, innocent, and need protection – a depiction that is especially problematic when applied to autistic adults.

Film portrayals of autism present it as something in need of balancing with the material gain of special abilities or skills to become acceptable to the world (Kehinde et al.,

2021, p.281). Draaisma (2009) examines fictional Hollywood films' use of autism stereotypes. One of the most common autism stereotypes within mainstream film is the savant. A well-known and influential example of this is the film *Rain Man* (Levinson, 1988), which is considered a foundational text for subsequent autism representations (Murray, 2008, p.84). The film has been linked to increased public awareness as well as the spread of autism myths and misconceptions (Jarrett, 2014, p.746), since it fosters the perception that all autistic children have savant abilities (Ressa, 2022, p.6). Baker (2007, p.229) states that "a character with a disability serves as a lens through which an audience can view and define that disability". He argues that by narrowly representing autistic characters as vulnerable savants who are incapable of agency, the representations offer "a harmfully reductive definition of autism as a pitiful, exploitable, and inhuman condition" (Baker, 2007, p.237).

Poe & Moseley (2016) apply Baker's (2007) autistic formula of autism representation to US prime time television dramas. They (Poe & Moseley, 2016, pp.295, 297, 310) found that portrayals were often stereotypical, featured savant skills or special abilities and social dysfunctions, were reliant on those around them and robbed of agency and independence with characters existing to advance narratives or to make non-autistic characters seem more sympathetic. Films construct their own version of autism, which is easily digestible by its audience and which "has the interest to speculate upon, but not the time to know about, what the ontological questions raised by autism might be" (Murray, 2008, p.129). Autism and savantism are culturally closely intertwined, such that "when seen through the contemporary lens of popular representation, autism and savantism appear to have become almost synonymous, to the point where it could be asked whether it is possible to be a savant without also having autism, or equally whether it might be supposed that all those who are autistic

possess savant abilities” (Murray, 2008, p.65). The relevance of this observation to science documentary, as well as fictional texts, is illustrated in the second chapter of this dissertation.

Fictional representations often fuel the misconception that autistic people have a savant ability, such as an eidetic memory or an extreme mathematical ability. Murray (2007, p.246) explains that such representations place autistic individuals in relation to supposed neurotypical behaviours which often take on the form of perceived creative and exceptional savant abilities which are seen to enrich and inform the non-autistic world. Often, media and scientific discussions of savantism concentrate on the differences between savants and non-savant minds, excluding the many substantial similarities between the two (Tammet, 2010, p.XII). As discussed earlier, savant skills in autism are rare. The misconception perpetrated by films could lead audience members to devalue autistic people who do not possess savant abilities. Baker (2007, p.236) explains: “the value of autistic characters in these films is located exclusively in their savant powers, which renders all of their other autistic or non-autistic characteristics worthless or undesirable”. This assignment of value diminishes other autistic experiences, since “defining autism primarily as a savant disorder places unreasonable expectations on individuals with autism.” (Baker, 2007, p.236).

Much discussion surrounds the book and the subsequent Swedish and English language versions of the film *The Girl with a Dragon Tattoo* (Oplev, 2009; Fincher, 2011). Whilst many have debated the protagonist Lisbeth Salander’s sexuality (Surkan, 2012), mental health (Martin & Simms, 2012) and revenge (Rees, 2012), there are also several analyses of the role of autism within the series and its various adaptations. Speculation has arisen surrounding whether or not Salander is autistic or if her behaviour results from trauma and abuse she suffered as a child. Marinan (2014, p.8) contends that “Salander is an important character for discussions of difference because of the dialogic interactions, both

positive and negative, representing rhetorically discursive notions of difference". Lisbeth is a sympathetic character and a positive representation of autism. She instantiates "a new attempt by authors and filmmakers to represent difference in light of both the plot and societal shifts" (Marinan, 2014, p.8). Furthermore, Marinan (2014, p.8) explains the film's 'play' on socially established interpretations of ability, disability and difference links Lisbeth's skills with computers and their surveillance properties with Mulvey's (1975) male gaze theory and audience reception. However, as Marinan (2014, p.8) argues, instead of Lisbeth being purely the subject of this gaze, she is both the watcher and the watched and "becomes empowered through aspects of her difference even as autism is the defining characteristic of her difference". In this case, her autism acts as an equaliser to the male characters around her whilst retaining her individuality as her autistic difference manifest as through her appearance (tattoos, short 'punk' hairstyles and leather biker jacket) that counter stereotypical conventions of female beauty as they are paired with technological prowess to aid plot progression. Marinan (2014, p.8) further argues that "Salander represents a way for the author and director to provide massive amounts of agency to a female character otherwise neglected and cast aside because of her background". Ma (2014, p.54), meanwhile, states that "When deployed in art [...] Asperger's Syndrome oftentimes serves as a literary trope rather than a scientific, pathological condition". Ma (2014, pp.54-55) uses the term 'Aspergirl' in his discussion of Lisbeth; he describes Lisbeth as being "a humanoid prototype, a mythological archetype, who can feel and love just as passionately, albeit mutely". Autism here acts to separate Lisbeth from those around her and invites the audience to emphasise with her, as her autism makes it difficult for her to express herself.

Ma uses the work of Simone (2010) to ground his arguments surrounding the representation of autism in the film versions of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Ma (2014,

p.55) argues that the 'Aspergirl' embodies a new kind of superheroine due to her abilities imbued to her by her autistic status. He criticises the book's author and the film industry at large on the grounds that they "half-heartedly borrow, perhaps exploit, the disability of Asperger's Syndrome to arouse public sympathy and to justify her mystical, God-like power traditionally attributed to the Other" (Ma, 2014, p.56). Lisbeth's autism distances her from those around her through her behaviour and mannerisms. Ma (2014, p.60) further explores Lisbeth's distinctive appearance across the two films which mark her out as being an Aspergirl. Although many fictional representations use visual coding to mark disabled characters as different, Lisbeth's is especially overt.

In later work, Ma (2016, p.643) builds upon these insights, applying the term "aspic license" to the use, and abuse, of novelists and filmmakers' representation of Asperger's Syndrome to aid characterisation and plot. Referencing popular 'geek' characters who might be suspected of having Asperger's, Ma (2016, p.643) states, "Asperger's Syndrome remains very much a mystery, concurrently the narratological *raison d'être* and a cursory textual reference intimating the Other, nearly transcendent". Other studies examine the portrayal of autistic individuals and their families. Lisgou & Tsibidaki (2021, p.101) found autism focused films predominantly featured supportive single-parent families who had positive relationships with their autistic children. They further argue that such representations may contradict real-world research, suggesting that parents of autistic children are commonly overprotective (Lisgou & Tsibidaki, 2021, p.101). Studies on media depictions explore the myths surrounding autistic families and portray the siblings of autistic children as burdened, unsung heroes, ignored, lost and denied of normal childhoods (Dosch, 2019, pp.153-155). These depictions reinforce and draw upon the disability stereotypes defined by Nelson.

The majority of media portrayals of autism occur on television. Morgan (2019) notes the increase in autism representation in mainstream television, providing television reviews and synopses of recent examples in a brief article for the medical journal *The Lancet*. Such articles suggest the increasing interaction between autism knowledge within specialised professional spheres, on the one hand, and public discourse and popular culture, on the other. Holton (2013), meanwhile, analyses fictional autism portrayals by examining the US television comedy-drama *Parenthood* (Katims, 2010 - 2015), which focuses on the Braverman family and their autistic son Max. Although the series does not solely focus on the raising of Max, circumstances arising from Max's autism provide a lot of the narrative drama. Holton (2013, p.59) found that the series did not include personal narrative or self-advocacy perspectives and that essential voices were lacking from the intermingling of popular culture and disability awareness. He further argues that the portrayal of autism spectrum conditions does not accurately depict those with the condition and that "disability and the lives of the disabled are often told more through the perspective of society and its collective reaction than through the disabled" (Holton, 2013, p.47). Holton (2013, p.51) examines its production context and narrative focus as the producer of *Parenthood* has a son with the condition which "drove the development of Max's character". However, Holton (2013, p.52) also criticises the depiction, stating, as others have argued, that it "promotes an image of disability based on cultural views and perceptions rather than on lived experiences". Such representations highlight a certain overreliance on parental voices in autism portrayals; as will be seen, this is also a problematic aspect of many factual media depictions of autism.

Other research in television autism representation explores the impact and role of humour. Walters (2013) examines the use of incongruity humour in the television series *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre, 2007 – 2019) and *Community* (Harmon, 2009-2015). Both series



feature a character who displays autistic type behaviours. While discussing Abed from *Community*, Walters (2013, pp.276-279) explains Abed's positioning and function within his social group, stating that "the instability of Abed's character challenges audiences and other characters on the show to hold in tension elements of both sameness and difference involved in cognitive difference". Optimistically, Walters (2013, p.286) explains that *Community* and *The Big Bang Theory* "at their highest potential, show a world that is beginning to display the fissures between the accepted categories of 'normal' and 'abnormal' and 'neurotypical' and 'autistic'". Regarding Sheldon's character in *The Big Bang Theory*, she contends that "Sheldon's characterization may imply that the "best" or "only" way to be autistic is to be a science nerd with a PhD in physics" (Walters, 2013, p.277). She argues that this representation is harmful as "it risks normalizing cognitive difference because it may imply that there is only one way to be Aspergian" (Walters, 2013, p.278). Sheldon Cooper from the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* may provide autistic individuals with a fictional character to identify with (Rourke & McGloin, 2019, p.128). Rourke and McGloin's (2019, p.133) research found that autistic individuals with difficulties in mentalizing and social skills also conveyed greater levels of perceived homophily with Sheldon's character.

Ressa (2022, pp.21-22) states that although there have been positive improvements in autism television representation, American comedy-dramas consistently overrepresent 'high functioning', white, heterosexual autistic males. Such representations render "autistic people of color – who have different sex, genders, orientations and are from different classes and communities – the silent, invisible majority" (Ressa, 2022, p.13). This lack of diversity in autism representations progresses partial narratives and incomplete information that maintains the myths surrounding autism and causes autistic people to be disempowered (Ressa, 2022, p.22). It may also feed into the impression that autism only affects men and

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discourage others from seeking a diagnosis. However, studies on different media representations of autistic women present comparable interpretations of high functioning autistic women. Tharian et al. (2019, p.59) found a significant number of female representations in various media types, including television, film and theatre. The majority of such representations featured women (or girls) who had “high-functioning ASD or AS, with a notable lack of characters with a comorbid intellectual disability” (Tharian et al., 2019, p.59). The concentration on this part of the autistic spectrum highlights and propagates myths surrounding autism and facilitates the invisibility of those with communication difficulties or disabilities. These issues surrounding diversity, and their relevance to the idealisation of autistic people in documentaries, are taken up in Chapter 3.

### Reporting autism

Holton et al. (2014, p.195) argues that the “news media represents, and often reinforces, current societal views” about all kinds of topics. Autism representations in news media are often stereotypical and exhibit many of the themes, patterns, and stigmatising methods of portrayals discussed above. Huws and Jones (2011) studied the representations of autism in British print media between 1999 and 2008. These newspaper depictions suggested that autism primarily affected children, while stories emphasized suffering and victim stereotypes and were often homogenous in nature (Huws & Jones, 2011, p.102). These representations can also be found in television documentaries and can form the basis of common stereotypes.

The photographs accompanying such articles provide a rich opportunity for analysis. Sarrett’s (2011) study is comprised of textual analyses of photographs of autistic children in the 1960s and 2000s featured in popular American media. The photographs examined were

produced “through purposeful editing, posing and framing” and “reflect and perpetuate familiar and acceptable notions of disability and mental illnesses” (Sarrett, 2011, p.143). Sarrett provides a psychoanalytic analysis of a black and white image of a boy featured in a 1967 article by Bruno Bettelheim published in *The Chicago Tribune*, titled “The Children Who Never Were”. Sarrett homes in on the concept of fragmentation, describing the boy as “pointing at his mouth, seeming to draw attention to the location of the most recognizable point of autistic fracturing – broken communication” (Sarrett, 2011, p.146). Sarrett’s study links imagery, fragmentation, and its possible deleterious effects on the reader’s understanding of autism.

Since Chapter 1 of this dissertation focuses on the depiction of MMR in documentaries, it is also relevant here to examine coverage of the MMR controversy in the mainstream press. This coverage often presented stereotypical imagery that impacted public perceptions of autism as well as MMR vaccine uptake. Singh et al. (2007, p.157) analysed trends across print media in reporting about the MMR vaccine, in which 70% of articles with an environmental focus referred to autism and 40% referred to the Wakefield et al. (1998) study. O’Dell and Brownlow (2005, p.199) argue that the MMR debate “has contributed to the already negative views of autism and the autistic child”. McIntosh White (2012) performed a similar but smaller-scale study of newspaper readers’ understanding of autism and the MMR autism debate. She compares the uses of different framing and styles of the issue across *The Daily Mail* and *The Times* from 1998-2001, criticising both newspapers for not providing sufficiently accurate scientific information to allow readers to make an informed decision about giving their children the MMR vaccine (McIntosh White, 2012, p.89).

Boyce (2007, p.61) examined television news broadcasts during the MMR controversy, explaining that the issue became political instead of scientific, as objective science became entangled with political arguments. Speers and Lewis's (2004) study of this matter is of note due to its robust methodology. The study consisted of 521 story samples from television, radio and both broadsheet and tabloid press, all of which reported on the MMR vaccine over a seven-and-a-half-month period (Speers & Lewis, 2004, p.172). The authors combined this analysis with data collected through street interviews with members of the public. Speers & Lewis argue that news and current affairs media gave a view of the link between MMR and autism that negatively affected the public's understanding of the issue. Dixon and Clarke (2013), meanwhile, discuss the damaging effect of false balance in media coverage of public perceptions about the MMR vaccine and autism.

In his report on the representation of autism in US television news, Kang (2013) examines the different modes of framing across the medium. Kang explains his rationale for this approach by outlining a previous study performed by Wagner et al. (1999). Additionally, Kang (2013, p.247) states that "research on news framing about people with disabilities can be categorized into issues, interview sources, and whose responsibilities are emphasized". Other autism framing studies include the work of Holton et al. (2014), who examines the stigmatisation of autism in newspapers. They argue that whilst "media may simultaneously help to construct our understanding of a societal issue", it also acts "as an artefact of the way our society views that issue" (Holton, 2014, p.195). Holton et al. discuss the use of gain/loss and episodic/thematic frames as identified by Kahneman & Tversky (1979) and Tversky & Kahneman (1981). Holton et al. (2014, p.202) conclude by highlighting the critical role of such framing of mental health in the press.

### Autism and documentary

Documentaries constitute an influential resource and a prime outlet for autism portrayals. Yet the overwhelming majority of scholarly research concentrates on fictional depictions, often overlooking, dismissing, or undervaluing the potential of factual media for autism advocacy and understanding. However, a few scholars have undertaken analyses of documentary representations of autism. Schwartz et al. (2010) conducted audience studies relating to perceptions of how documentary cinema represents disabilities, undertaking audience interviews with qualitative and quantitative questions at The Sprout Film Festival at Hofstra: Focus on Disabilities Awareness. Schwartz's (2010, p.846) sample of interviewees includes graduate students and members of disability rights organisations. Schwartz (2010, p.848) argues that portrayals of disabled persons in films that desensationalised disability and featured stories of normal life dispelled stereotypes. The disability focused documentaries in Schwartz's study often feature narrative themes such as quality of life, community, and empowerment, where quality of life can be characterised as individuals and families seeking lives that are "enjoyable, meaningful, engaging and fulfilling" (Diener & Seligman, 2004, p.2).

The documentary *The Autism Enigma* (Sumpton & Gruner, 2011) is part of a popular and respected Canadian series titled *The Nature of Things*. Kitaygorodsky et al. (2013) use the documentary as a jumping-off point to discuss a new study linking bacteria in the gut to autism. This film is one of many documentaries belonging to the more traditional, expository scientific documentary style, which aims to inform and educate its audience. Kehinde et al. (2021, p.281) argue that the animated US documentary *Life, Animated* (Ross Williams, 2016) dispel autism stereotypes and preconceptions surrounding autistic individuals' abilities to feel

empathy and compassion through the depiction of Owen, an autistic man with a keen interest in Disney. Furthermore, the film, unlike many popular media and popular culture narratives, follows the daily life routines of its star, offering the audience the opportunity to observe the differing levels of ability between Owen and his autistic friends and highlighting the diversity of autistic experiences (Kehinde et al., 2021, p.282).

Hussein (2021, p.3) relates autism documentary ethics to the German idiom 'fremdschämen' and audience embarrassment in the autism documentary *Dina* (Santini & Sickles, 2017). Hussein (2021, p.12) intersects more comprehensive concepts of autism, intellectual disability, transgressional femininity, sexuality and shame and asserts that "exploration of the workings of shame and embarrassment in documentary ethics can lead us to see how shame's structuring effects can help us reformulate existing power relations and, perhaps, even make us reconsider the documentary subject as an autonomous being with agency rather than a passive subject inherently at risk of exploitation". Foster (2019) further explores the potentially harmful implications of the documentary through his examination of the film *Deej* (Rooy, 2017) and its portrayal of its titular character's use of a facilitator to assist with his writing. Foster (2019, p.583) highlights various problems with the documentary, including the implication that facilitated communication may encourage prejudice towards autistic people with communication difficulties, as they may only be accepted by society if they can demonstrate 'hidden' intelligence.

Rangan (2017) examines autistic voices as a counter-discourse within documentaries. In one example, she examines the use of horror movie tropes that paint autism as a spectre that haunts families. Indeed, a scene in a short fund-raising film released as part of a campaign for Autism Speaks presents autism as a disease that a community of warriors can come

together to cure or overcome (Rangan, 2017, pp.103-104). Such imagery paints autistic children, and by extension their families, as victims. Rangan comments that the film's narration and sound design "heightens the horror of the words it utters in the first person" (Rangan, 2017, p.103). Horror-inspired techniques and motifs can be identified in some of depictions of autism in MMR-themed documentaries discussed in Chapter 1. Rangan also examines the use of first-person voiceovers by autistic documentary participants, arguing that it allows autistic people to speak directly and with authority about their experiences (Rangan, 2017, p.110) – an argument that resonates with my own.

## Chapter 1: Misrepresentation, Fear and MMR

To better understand contemporary autism representations, it is necessary to undertake a retrospective approach and revisit one of the most notable influences on British media's depictions of autism in recent memory: the MMR crisis. In 1998 British newspapers ran a series of articles reporting a research study conducted by Andrew Wakefield (1998). Published in the *Lancet* medical journal, it proposed a link between the MMR vaccine, bowel disease and autism. The article, combined with the residual fallout from the BSE crisis in the mid-1990s, intensified parent anxieties and lessened the public's trust in official medical and governmental advice regarding science and health matters (Stöckl & Smajdor, 2017, pp.241-242). This distrust fostered an environment in which Wakefield's study was accorded undeserved weight and authority. However, serious questions regarding the validity of Wakefield's research arose soon after publication (Taylor et al. 1999, Farrington et al. 2001 & Taylor et al., 2002), with Wakefield's study widely condemned as fraudulent (Godlee et al., 2011). The lack of evidence for a causal link between autism and the MMR vaccine resulted in 10 out of 12 of Wakefield's co-authors publishing a retraction to their 1998 paper in *The Lancet* (Murch et al., 2004, p.750). Regardless of these retractions, the impact of the Wakefield crisis is still felt today, not only in onscreen autism representations but also regarding vaccine uptake and issues surrounding public health.

Despite the widespread condemnation of Wakefield's study, the existence of a purported 'link' between MMR and autism is still a commonly held belief within the anti-vaccination community. Similarly, many parents still refuse the MMR vaccine or opt for single antigen vaccinations (McIntyre & Leask, 2008, p.729). At the same time, measles cases have



increased from “56 in 1998 to 1,400 in 2009” (McIntosh White, 2012, p.82). However, measles outbreaks can lead to some immunisation-rejecting communities to increase their uptake of MMR when combined with or influenced by targeted immunisation campaigns (Le Menach et al., 2014, p.1151). The MMR-autism debacle serves as a case study illustrating mass media’s power to influence public health perceptions and the debate surrounding vaccinations results from two fears: fear of dying from disease and fear of vaccination side effects (Alexander, 2018, p.143). This dichotomy of fear underlies several television documentaries broadcast during the MMR controversy.

Due to its prevalence in the news media, much has been written about the effect of the MMR and its discredited link to autism. Television news broadcasts reframed MMR as a political issue instead of a scientific one (Boyce, 2007, p.61) and the controversy highlights gaps in audiences’ grasp of scientific principles necessary to make informed decisions regarding vaccinations (McIntosh White, 2012, p.89). Framing is an essential process in the construction of social reality as it helps to shape the perspectives in which people see the world around them, reflecting the judgments of their creators (Hallahan, 1999, p.207). Factual media, such as the documentaries discussed within this chapter, framed autism as an unwanted side effect of vaccination which constructed autistic children as less than perfect and furthered the current negative views of autism, implying that autistic children are damaged (O’Dell & Brownlow, 2005, p.195 & p.199). Furthermore, exposure to negative information surrounding vaccines strengthened and influenced people’s biases more than exposure to positive information lessened them (Qian et al., 2020, p.15).

The news and current affairs media played a crucial role in spreading vaccine misinformation and sensationalising the surrounding debate (White, 2014, p.270). Academic examinations of the MMR controversy have predominantly focused on news reports in print

and television during the affair. Although the news media's response to the MMR crisis is well documented, little focus has been paid to documentary responses. Bradshaw et al. (2020) examine the controversial 2017 US anti-vaccination documentary series *Vaccines Revealed* (Gentempo, 1997) and its exploitation of parental anxieties and fears. However, this primarily concentrates on a single US-produced documentary series and only briefly mentions films that provide counter-arguments or alternative viewpoints.

Science documentaries, along with news media and other forms of factual programming, are an established presence in television science communication. Science documentaries such as Channel 4's *Dispatches* (Waldrum, 1987-present) and BBC's *Horizon* (Lynch, 1964-present) and *Panorama* (Robinson, 1958-present) occupy a unique middle ground between journalism and documentary. Each series features the journalistic presentation of evidence designed to educate viewers about issues of public and societal importance. Science documentaries feature many journalistic conventions, including the depiction of "conflict/controversy, human interest, and balanced coverage" (Mikulak, 2011, p.209), although the misapplication of some of these journalistic conventions, such as the misguided drive for 'balance', may cause misunderstanding, mistrust and even conflict between scientists, public health officials and parents (Mikulak, 2011, p.210). Journalistic balance can be especially tricky to achieve in the case medical or health matters (for example, the MMR controversy or the BSE crisis in 1996) and the reporting of scientific risk in such cases is sometimes criticised as being "hysterical, sensational, and confused" (Nelkin, 1995, p.60).

Although many documentaries and factual broadcasts addressed the MMR debacle during and shortly after the Wakefield affair, the following discussion focuses on three science documentary films: BBC One's *Panorama: MMR: Every Parent's Choice* (Barclay & Robinson,

2002), Channel 4's *Dispatches: MMR: What They Didn't Tell You* (Deer & Carter, 2004) and BBC One's *Horizon: Does the MMR Jab Cause Autism?* (Williams & Barret, 2005). This chapter asserts that depictions of scientific discourse often amplified the fears of concerned parents by relying on and fuelling a series of deficit-focused, stigmatising and reductive stereotypes that pitted parents and scientists in opposition to one another.

### Journalistic balance

Investigative and current affairs documentaries involve researching a topic or answering a question, often in response to a news agenda or public interest. The science documentary attempts to be objective by providing opposing arguments and a range of researcher perspectives. Reputable forms of factual media attempt to attain a level of journalistic balance and impartiality in their reporting (BBC, n.d.). However, misrepresentation and misunderstanding of scientific information can still occur. In MMR documentaries, this balance pertains to the arguments for and against the autism/vaccination link presented by narratively competing stakeholders of scientists and parents. Each film purports to offer potential answers to the MMR controversy through a series of investigative narratives. In *Panorama: MMR: Every Parent's Choice* and *Horizon: Does the MMR Jab Cause Autism?*, the journalist acts as a facilitator or mediator of the arguments presented, attempting to guide the viewer through complex and conflicting scientific discourse. Wakefield is featured heavily – more than all other experts and their research – since he is also the subject of these films. *Dispatches: MMR: What They Didn't Tell You*, on the other hand, offers a single argument counter to Wakefield's study highlighting the inaccuracies in the original research. It is an investigative style film that seeks to unveil the truth about Wakefield's study. However,

despite these attempts at objectivity, biases and stigmatisation towards autism often occur as conflicting perspectives allow for problematic autism portrayals to flourish.

The episodes discussed here outline the competing positions of scientists and parents. These groups can be further divided into scientists who recommend the vaccination and those who do not and parents who vaccinate and those who decline to. *Panorama: MMR: Every Parent's Choice* endeavours to achieve a journalistically balanced structure by attempting to balance two competing scientific messages: 'MMR causes autism', and the opposing 'MMR does not cause autism'. The production endeavours to present a level of impartiality. While discussing a BBC report (Mellor et al., 2011) about the content of the BBC's science coverage during this period, Murcott & Williams (2013, p.157) state that the corporation's commitment to journalistic balance required that reporting of MMR be presented as a debate between two contributors with equal grounding and claims to evidence and expertise. More generally, in the name of balance, British media's coverage gave the impression that the potential relationship between MMR and autism was plausible by suggesting that the epidemiological evidence was uncertain, even if the majority of scientific evidence showed otherwise (Clarke, 2008, p.79). Such false balance can distort the nature of the science reported by bolstering minority views and giving them more weight and credence than they merit (Murcott & Williams, 2013, p.157; Thomas et al., 2017, pp.153-154). In *Panorama: MMR: Every Parent's Choice*, these attempts at formal balance result in Wakefield enjoying more screen time than any of the other experts who participated in the production. Wakefield (and his supporters) holds a minority view within the scientific community; but the production arguably amplifies the validity of his arguments by granting them equal weight to counter-arguments.

In fact, journalism frequently misrepresents autism through attempts at editorial balance. Although mass media organisations seek to objectively present news, they often

omit the experiences of certain groups or create a sense of false equivalence between two sides of a debate or issue (Ferrucci et al., 2020, p.1600), a problem that has arisen in relation to media representations of climate change, for example. Furthermore, the paradigm of impartiality may cause a narrowing of perspectives and voices when it comes to controversial public issues (Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2017, p.795). Superficially both *Horizon: Does the MMR Jab Cause Autism?* and *Panorama: MMR: Every Parent's Choice* give equal opportunities for both sides of the debate, inflating views held by a minority of experts. Both shine a spotlight on Wakefield and his research, attempting to provide an answer to the controversy, often by overstating and giving credence to outlier evidence that was dismissed by the scientific community. During the MMR debate, journalistic practices and scientific knowledge contradicted one another, producing a fragmented public discourse (Mikulak, 2011, p.211) and the television documentaries largely mirrored the print media, where the false balancing of vaccination risked heightened readers' uncertainty and distorted their perspectives on the science (Dixon & Clarke, 2013, p.378). The well-established nature of both the expository documentary format and the public service credentials of the broadcaster perhaps also lent credibility to Wakefield's arguments here.

Alongside Wakefield's (Uhlmann et al., 2002) co-authored paper published in the medical journal *Molecular Pathology*, *Panorama: MMR: Every Parent's Choice* is credited with bringing the MMR vaccine to the British national news agenda (Speers & Lewis, 2004, p.171). It opens with an emotional scene serving as a warning about the dangers of not vaccinating children. The narrator introduces non-autistic teenager Adam Moorish, showing family photos and videos from birthday parties from when Adam was a "healthy nine-year-old". Intercut with this narration are parts of an interview with Adam's father, who discusses his son's regression from a healthy child to a teenager in a waking coma. Adam's condition

derives from a dormant measles virus he caught from an unvaccinated child seated next to him on a bus. His father talks to the camera while his son lies in bed behind him, his angled head gazing passively towards the ceiling while his father talks. The scene is emotive, designed to demonstrate the wider, social impact of choosing not to vaccinate a child. The film provides a contrast to Adam's depiction through its portrayal of many autistic children.

Rory Adams, a young autistic boy, is also introduced by his parents, who suspect that their son's autism was caused by the vaccine. Although silent in some footage, Rory's inclusion focuses on scenes of him crying, upset or engaging in non-verbal outbursts. Such scenes conform to a fairly uniform set of conventions within the MMR documentary. Firstly, a child, usually male, is introduced by parents, who speak on the child's behalf. The child is shown to be inconsolable – typically in the background or off-screen – but their vocalisations, sounds of distress or speech remain audible. When the child calms, the parent discusses their autism. After this, a voice-of-God narrator lists a series of 'typical' autistic characteristics. This narration is often matched with images of a crying child. Such sequences can be observed throughout all of these science-focused documentaries and their influence on contemporary documentaries is still apparent. These films' cautionary formula is developed through transparent emotional and narrative devices, one for each side of the scientist-parent binary, stimulating the viewers' fears and vaccine doubts and framing vaccination as an impossible choice, where parents risk their children's lives no matter what they choose.

Broadcast two years after *Panorama: MMR: Every Parent's Choice*, *Horizon: Does the MMR Jab Cause Autism?* attempts to update the viewer on the development of MMR research and provide an answer to the titular question. After briefly outlining the details of the MMR controversy, *Horizon: Does the MMR Jab Cause Autism?* follows a similar cautionary

formula to its predecessor, *Panorama: MMR: Every Parent's Choice*, but mobilises horror-inflected cinematography to create a more significant emotional impact. It opens with an unseen father talking to his distressed young son. This audio is matched with shots of a stairway. After panning up the wall to take in photographs of the family, the camera angle shifts to capture the entire stairwell before moving to a low angle shot up the darkened staircase, inciting fear, foreboding and distrust. It then cuts to a bedroom doorway, the presence of the wooden beams in the shot framing the scene as a stolen insight into the private world of the autistic child. Inside a distressed boy cries on a bed while his father tries to comfort him. The room is bare and poorly lit, adding to the foreboding atmosphere. Now the audience is finally introduced to James and his father. James's autism is shown to have robbed the boy of his identity – that of the smiling little boy in the photographs. This removal of his identity causes James to become a placeholder - his autism becomes his defining characteristic and positions him as a vessel for the audience's anxieties and fears. The choice of lighting and camera angles paints autism as an ominous spectre that haunts the family.

*Horizon: Does the MMR Jab Cause Autism?* details evidence and anecdotal information about MMR and its link to autism. The first half of the documentary is ambiguous and careful in its language choices. Phrases like “MMR *could* cause autism” are repeated throughout. Often referred to as hedging, such phrasing is common in scientific papers and reporting (Kolodziejski, 2014), where it is used to create distance or dilute the force of statements (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p.192) in ‘low modality’ discourse (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p.194). However, the use of hedging within a documentary context could be unfamiliar to lay audiences, causing misunderstandings. *Horizon: Does the MMR Jab Cause Autism?* adopts many of the scientific language conventions present within Wakefield's article, which was widely critiqued as potentially harmful and ambiguous (Kolodziejski, 2014, p.179). The

documentary's second half describes the consequences of not vaccinating children, after which research is presented that disputes a causal link between the MMR vaccine and autism. This move is an attempt by the production to avoid bias by offering a broad range of opposing views. In *Horizon: Does the MMR Jab Cause Autism?*, the use of hedging language on both sides of the debate reflects attempts at journalistic balance. The nature of these conflicting interpretations forms the basis of the film's journalism-inspired 'balanced' narrative structure that attempts to give equal weight to both sides of the debate.

The competing pro- and anti-vaccination perspectives run parallel throughout the documentary and are only partially resolved towards the end of the episode. The filmmakers are hesitant to commit to a position or to provide a definitive answer to the opposing arguments. The final segment of *Horizon: Does the MMR Jab Cause Autism?* refers to the results of a study of children's blood to detect the measles virus in immunised autistic and non-autistic children.

Narrator: There was no difference between the autistic and non-autistic children.

Although this research has not yet been published, *Horizon* has learnt that it has found nothing to show any link between MMR and autism.

This cautious phrasing here refers to research findings rather than providing definitive answers. Its inclusion towards the documentary's end acts as an interim conclusion before summarising statements by the film's key figures are presented. The brief mention of this research, mentioned as though it were an afterthought, makes it easy to overlook and dismiss and the documentary's alignment with journalistic conventions could be construed as a shrewd attempt to keep worried viewers invested in the drama of the Wakefield affair at the expense of scientific clarity and understanding.



Like *Horizon: Does the MMR Jab Cause Autism?*, *Panorama: MMR: Every Parent's Choice* attempts to maintain journalistic balance and to provide the audience with information surrounding Wakefield's research and its ramifications. Wakefield appears numerous times in various locations and contexts. His inclusion provides a balanced journalistic argument as the documentary gives a platform for both sides of the MMR debate. However, arguments from representatives of the scientific community are often negatively framed. Instead of the welcoming settings used for the interviews with families, the interviews with scientists and medical professionals are often conducted in cold, oppressive-looking offices. Framing involves a process of inclusion, exclusion, and emphasis (Hallahan, 1999, p.207) and the unappealing representation of scientists here arguably suggests a certain negative framing of scientific experts.

There are three common forms of bias present in media reporting: distortion bias, in which news falsely reports or distorts reality; content bias, where one side in a debate is favoured; and decision-making bias, which reflects the motivations and mindsets of the journalists (Entman, 2007, p.163). These biases are apparent in *Panorama: MMR: Every Parent's Choice*. By elevating the minority viewpoint to equal footing with other views, the production favours narratively appealing but unscientific content. Furthermore, this distortion frequently positions pro-MMR advocates (and by extension the government) in opposition to parents and families depicted with autistic children. An article published prior to the broadcast of *Panorama: MMR: Every Parent's Choice* argues that the new research depicted in the program would cast 'doubt' on the government's insistence that the vaccine was safe (Johnston, 2002, p.17). Such reviews suggest a certain content bias on the part of the production, despite the documentary's formal even-handedness.

### Medical perspective

Autism representation is split between two models of disability representation, which Clogstone (1994, p.47) identifies simply as traditional and progressive. The traditional perspective views people with disabilities in terms of biological dysfunction or as an economic burden on society. Progressive models, meanwhile, place the dysfunction not on the disabled, but on “society’s inability to adapt its physical, social, or occupational environment, as well as its attitudes, to accept those who are physically different” (Clogstone, 1994, p.47). Progressive models such as cultural pluralism consider individuals with disabilities as multifaceted and disability as merely one aspect of their personhood; these models locate disability in institutional inability or unwillingness to adapt to the needs of differently abled persons (Clogstone, 1994, p.47). As will be examined in later chapters, recent documentaries engage with progressive approaches to disability, but these earlier documentaries tend to draw on the ‘traditional’ disability model.

Science-focused autism documentaries, particularly these MMR-themed films, typically construct autism in terms of deficit and disorder. Deficit approaches face criticism as they primarily conceptualise groups in terms of their supposed limitations, dysfunctions and deficiencies (Dinishak, 2016, para 1). *Horizon: Does the MMR Jab Cause Autism?* and *Panorama: MMR: Every Parent’s Choice* represent autistic children in terms of deficit. While sometimes understandable from an educational perspective, the scientific experts and medical iconography in these productions tend to force images of autism out of the domestic sphere and into a medicalised, public frame and in the process tend to dehumanise their subjects. Despite the progression of scientific knowledge, there is no development in each film’s representation of autistic individuals, as each one relies on a series of stereotypes.

*Horizon: Does the MMR Jab Cause Autism?* considers autism to be a disease. Early in the film, the narrator, Barlow, defines autism as “not being one disease” but rather belonging to a spectrum of disorders that differ markedly in severity. Whilst this description is intended to provide a quick overview of autism to an audience unfamiliar with the condition, the language here reflects the documentary’s medical perspective. The statement further solidifies and links the episode’s overarching themes of disease, deficit and disorder of autistic children. These constructions are highlighted later through a series of images that illustrate Wakefield’s discredited theories about MMR. These include a close-up of a bottle of the MMR vaccine, black and white newspaper photographs of Wakefield, bleached out footage of a young boy about to receive a vaccination, and a needle entering a vial. The sequence continues by projecting keywords onto a child’s torso and forehead that purport to describe the possibly damaging effects of MMR vaccination. Featuring at the end of the sequence are the following two images:



*Horizon: Does MMR cause autism?*

While they can certainly not simply be taken to reflect the point of view of the documentary’s producers, these images are problematic. The placement of these words’ ‘damage’ and ‘autism’ on the boy’s skin could be seen to reinforce stigma. The boy depicted is likely an actor as he is not one of the autistic children featured elsewhere in the film and is probably not autistic, and instead acts as a proxy. This visualisation combines with the frequent repetition

of the word 'damage' in the film's voiceover narration to strengthen the connotations of difference and medicalised deficit according to which autistic children are seen as a 'side effect'. The word 'damaged' may be seeded in the viewers' minds causing them to view these children within this context, branding and framing other autistic children. The term labels autistic children by projecting a host of negative connotations onto autistic bodies. It may imply that autistic children are at risk of being impaired, not just by MMR, but by autism.

This medicalisation of autistic children is further intensified by the frequent use of fear-inducing semiotic elements. Contrasting with the cold medical imagery, stern experts, government bureaucrats and 'damaged' children is Andrew Wakefield himself, whose presentation is quite distinctive. *Horizon: Does the MMR Jab Cause Autism?* dually positions Wakefield as both scientist and parent. This duality is not afforded to any of the other experts depicted in the documentary. To begin with, Wakefield is introduced in a way that is similar to other scientists and experts depicted in the documentary; he wears dark clothing and is in a darkened room in front of textbook-filled shelves. This introduction indicates his scientific credentials. After this initial introduction, his portrayal drastically shifts, as the following scenes show him in his rural domestic setting. This distinguishes Wakefield from the other medics depicted, perhaps suggesting that the latter do not have the public's best interests at heart. His status as a father is iterated visually and verbally and arguably confers credibility upon him. The stark antithesis between rural/domestic and urban/scientific settings is exploited as an audio-visual match for the film's opposing scientific arguments.

*Panorama: MMR: Every Parent's Choice* validates Wakefield's views by playing on public concern. The depiction of Wakefield and his research reflects a larger public health controversy framework which journalism sometimes responds to by painting scientists as

lone-wolf mavericks taking on the establishment (Speers & Lewis, 2004, p.179). The production features scenes from a research conference Wakefield attended with Professor John O'Leary, who is described as an expert in finding tiny particles of viruses in human tissue. Leary is seen walking side-by-side with Wakefield through the gardens surrounding the conference venue. This friendly, naturalistic setting positions them in conflict with the sterile environments inhabited by the government-aligned experts. Professor O'Leary speaks in support of Wakefield's research and gives it further credibility. Barclay states in her voiceover that Prof O'Leary has discovered traces of vaccination-delivered measles viruses in the intestines of autistic children, although O'Leary himself is more cautious, stating that while he has found a measles virus, he needs to confirm its sequence strain.

This conference provided opportunities for the scientific community to discuss unpublished research. Although the production does not explicitly state it, it can be assumed that this research has yet to be peer-reviewed. Due to this, *Panorama: MMR: Every Parent's Choice* was not allowed to film any discussions about it. The voiceover explains that until the results are published "in a respected medical journal, neither the government nor the wider scientific community will take any notice of them", suggesting a level of institutional intransigence that places rules and procedures above children's health; however, peer review procedures are part of a standard publication process that seeks to ensure research validity. Barclay states that "scientists argue about the many possible causes of autism", but quickly turns to "the experience of hundreds of parents" and introduces the film's next participant, Vicky Hill, and her autistic twin boys. The use of the word "argue" possibly serves to undermine the scientific debate about MMR and autism, making it appear as a petty squabble that ignores the lived experience of parents. And finally, it might be noted that the producers

of this episode spent an entire year researching and filming Wakefield, a process that might have made them more prone to presenting a sympathetically weighted portrayal.

As stated above, the double coding of Wakefield as scientist and father makes him seem more trustworthy and likeable than other experts and audience identification and sympathy are further established when Barclay states that Wakefield was one of the few doctors to listen to parents, giving the impression that other doctors (and scientists) are cold and impersonal. Wakefield's emotive and self-praising language, meanwhile, builds rapport, and Wakefield paints himself in a heroic light. When discussing autistic children's bowel conditions and their links to MMR, he declares that he and his team were "obliged to investigate that. We could not, I could not walk away from that. That is what I signed up to in medicine, and however uncomfortable it might get for me, that was the deal". This, paired with earlier statements from a father of an autistic boy stating that the Department of Health "vilifies and denigrates" the groups examining a potential link between autism and MMR, positions parents as onside with Wakefield's views. He is framed as an underdog and victim of the broader scientific community and as an embattled champion of parental rights.

Footage of Wakefield speaking in front of Parliamentary Committees furthers this construction, as it makes him appear to be on trial. This is intensified in a later scene where Wakefield appears in front of a US Congressional Hearing. Although Barclay clarifies it is a representative of the British government that is under attack and not Wakefield, the scene does imply that Wakefield is fighting against governments on behalf of parents and children. The American hearing's chairperson expresses sympathy for Wakefield, stating that he is a "poor guy" who is constantly forced to defend himself and that O'Leary is a reputable scientist. He asks the British scientist, Dr Miller, why she cannot duplicate the scientist's data. To a lay audience with little scientific or research contextual grounding, these connotations

of blame may make Miller seem to be ineffectual and hostile towards Wakefield – and by extension to parental concerns. Barclay does mention that Wakefield clearly has not met a boy, and his parents, whose condition he discussed at the earlier hearing, which may imply a level of oversight and insincerity on Wakefield's behalf. However, the depiction of these hearings, combined with numerous scenes of parents attributing their sons' autism to vaccination, overall construct a more favourable interpretation of Wakefield's position. This transforms Wakefield from a purely scientific figure into a parental advocate.

Towards the episode's end, Barclay questions Wakefield's position as a "rigorous scientist". The following responses may confirm any existing audience bias or assessments as a series of summarising and contrasting views are presented. A representative of The Royal Free Hospital, Professor Taylor, states that Wakefield has "misled himself" and has not used correct scientific methodology and that no one has been able to repeat his findings and questions the research validity. Barclay states that Wakefield left the same hospital in which he once worked under "mutual agreement". She states that Wakefield "may" be right about the link between MMR and autism, but has been unable to prove his claims after four years. These comments further provide Wakefield opportunities to construct himself as someone going against the stiff rigidity of scientific institutions and that he was right to have not waited for proof before going public with his claims. This positions Wakefield and his supporters as underdog "crusaders against hard science" (White, 2014, p.271). The film ends with Wakefield walking off into the sunset towards the Washington Monument, a symbolic image that invites comparisons with the conventional endings of cinematic Westerns. This basis of this symbolism is explained by Barclay, who states that Wakefield will now work in America, but is leaving parents confused about the risks of MMR. The overall messaging here is ultimately ambiguous. Although the visual imagery strengthens Wakefield's heroic persona, Barclay's

critical remarks serve as a counterpoint to the production's somewhat grandiose visual iconography.

*Dispatches: MMR: What They Didn't Tell You* was broadcast after the peak of the MMR controversy and explores the ramifications of Wakefield's claims. Unlike *Horizon: Does the MMR Jab Cause Autism?* and *Panorama: MMR: Every Parent's Choice*, there are no illusions of balance or false equivalence here. The film's motivation is to address the plethora of misinformation surrounding MMR and Wakefield, research flaws and conflicts of interest. It continues Deer's *Sunday Times* investigation by examining the many flaws and conflicts of interest in the case, highlighting the submission of a patent for single vaccinations nine months before the original report was published in the *Lancet*. After the documentary's broadcast, Wakefield attempted to sue Channel 4 and Deer for libel; but he was ultimately forced to drop the claims and pay Channel 4's and Deer's court costs (Dyer, 2007, para 3). The film received positive reviews from the scientific community. Abi Berger, an associate editor for the *British Medical Journal* (BMJ), for example, stated that the programme was "utterly compelling both in its presentation and in its lack of emotional blackmail" (Berger, 2004, p.1293). In a departure from the documentaries discussed above, scientific arguments here are not compromised by emotive scenes of autistic or disabled children. The documentary features a heavily critical perspective on Wakefield's associates and revises the positive construction of Wakefield found in earlier documentary portrayals. Whereas previous MMR documentaries depicted single vaccination and 'pro-link' scientists as honest and professional in comparison with somewhat shady government officials, *Dispatches: MMR: What They Didn't Tell You* attempts to reverse this image.

*MMR: What They Didn't Tell You* relies on similar stereotypes as *Panorama: MMR: Every Parent's Choice*. It opens with an emotive narration by Deer that encapsulates the



confusion and anxiety generated by the news media coverage of the MMR scare: “It started with fear, spread by a doctor, fear of a vaccine routinely given to children, brought willingly by their parents for protection”. The repetition of the word ‘fear’ is significant; as Murray (2008, p.3) states, news reports have often presented autism as “a worry, an unknown fear and threat”. But Deer’s narration blames the fear creators: Wakefield, his supporters, and news and the print and broadcast media organisations that reported his findings as fact. Deer later states that the documentary will “reveal” the truth surrounding MMR and Wakefield and soothe parents’ apprehensions.

Of particular interest is the documentary’s discussion of an American company that sells ‘cures’ and treatments for autism. Deer describes these treatments as worthless with no proven benefits. These cures are expensive, and Deer implies that the manufacturers are taking advantage of parents. One of Wakefield’s co-authors for the single vaccine patents filed before the original papers’ release, Professor Fudenberg, is viewed here as an eccentric with bedraggled clothes. In a review in the *Guardian*, Banks-Smith (2004, para 7) describes him as “the bizarre Professor Fudenberg, who is older than God and twice as odd”. Fudenberg has developed his line of autism cures at home, made from his bone marrow. These treatments are dismissed as being no better than snake oil. Banks-Smith’s review contends that “in Britain public distrust of MMR was closely linked to distrust of the government. It now appears, all too ironically, that we may have been told the truth and we did not believe the messenger” (2004, para 10). The documentary places the blame for this on government mishandling of earlier health crises such as the BSE crisis, shifting the blame from the other actors involved in the controversy.

### Parental perspectives and autism stereotyping

The second dominant point of view within all of these MMR documentaries is that of the parent. The objective of these films is to inform and potentially sway audiences regarding their decisions to vaccinate their children and parental viewpoints are included in order to balance the medical opinions represented. Their views represent a humanising response to the cold medical imagery of many scientific documentaries. Parents, through necessity, specialise in their children's autism. In the absence of medical experts, documentary-makers, like their press counterparts, feature parents who offer anecdotal expertise to support Wakefield's claims (Speers & Lewis, 2004, pp.176-177). Rosemary, whose son is autistic, features in *Horizon: Does the MMR Jab Cause Autism?* as a self-taught expert on autism, with the documentary positioning her knowledge as being on a comparable level to that of the other scientific experts featured. Rosemary's knowledge allows her to participate in scientific spheres that are typically barred from the public. Her inclusion represents an attempt to close the divide between scientific perspectives and non-specialist audiences. Whereas scientific discourse is descriptive and impersonal, parental opinions attempt tangibility and audience identification through their accounts of personal experience. Such accounts are familiar within vaccination (and anti-vaccination) discourse (Kitta, 2011, p.24), as parental experiential knowledge is highly visible in media debates (O'Dell & Brownlow, 2005, p.197). Yet the fact that parents articulate their autism experiences within the family dynamic may give the impression that autistic individuals are exclusively children (Murray, 2008, p.178). Through the articulation of the parental gaze, stereotyping of autism can transpire, as autistic voices may be absent, unheard, or pushed into the background.

As already indicated, visually and verbally, MMR documentaries present autistic and disabled children as a 'consequence' for both sides of the vaccination debate. The 'normal' child is routinely positioned as an aspirational goal for parents (Waltz, 2020, p.18). Within the childrearing advice industry, the image of the 'aberrant child' can be used as an object of fear to persuade parents to follow prescribed practices of childrearing, while its aspirational opposite could also be deployed, despite normality always being just out of reach (Waltz, 2020, p.20). Similar imagery and practices are discussed by Mann (2019, p.986), who, drawing upon Jensen et al. (2017) and the crip futurism framework outlined by Kafer (2013), identifies three narrative themes present within MMR media discourse: death and survival; autism as a societal problem; and a preventative narrative that views autism as something to be eliminated. Death and survival are used to entice emotional connection with audiences, encouraging them to empathise with the parent and not the child. During the MMR controversy, autism was linked to themes of death or loss that robbed children of their futures while simultaneously giving children's families the emotional resources to 'survive' an autism diagnosis (Mann, 2019, pp.986-988). During one particularly emotional scene in *Horizon: Does the MMR Jab Cause Autism?*, the mother of an autistic boy, Lawrence, states that she finds it hard to look at baby pictures of her son, since, before his vaccination, he was happy and healthy. She compares these photographs with a more recent photograph, taken when he was nine, stating that he looks ill, thin, cold, and weak. Nelson (1996) associates the burden stereotype with images of the autistic person as frail and in need of constant care; this implies that the burden is too difficult to bear and must therefore be avoided, thus demonising disabilities in the public's eyes. Categorising disabled people as burdens diverts the focus from disabled individuals and "bestows near sainthood" on those who care for them (Black &

Pretes, 2007, p.67). *Horizon: Does the MMR Jab Cause Autism's* frequent use of the parental perspective precisely reflects this construction.

Although these MMR films offer contrasting parental perspectives and medical opinions, children's perspectives are comparatively lacking. Notwithstanding a few exceptions, we do not hear from the children themselves; instead, a parent speaks for them. 'Muted' and often framed in the background of the shot, autistic children in science documentaries reflect a common depiction of autistic persons as withdrawn and silent (Murray, 2008, pp.80-81). Although there are many scenes in which children communicate non-verbally, the productions do not depict any active engagement with these communications. For example, Lawrence, who appears early on in *Horizon: Does the MMR Jab Cause Autism?*, makes excited noises, jumping up and down while watching television as his mother speaks. This 'voiceless' stereotypical and formulaic portrayal robs the children of their unique identities, dismissing their perspectives. This lack of self-representation fails to add anything new to the audience's collective knowledge of autism or challenge their preconceptions. Although the experts featured in the documentary doubtless have the children's best interests at heart, the structure of the documentary pushes the children into the background. They are spoken 'about', not 'to'. Autistic children act as placeholders, an interchangeable stigmatised identity that serves as a warning to others about the potential consequences of vaccination.

*Horizon: Does the MMR Jab Cause Autism?* does provide a single counter-example. Matthew, a non-autistic boy who contracted measles as a child, is an active participant in the interview process, although he blends his opinions with those of his parents. Although his mother provides most of the answers during the interview, Matthew does answer when he is

able to. The film does not give this opportunity to any other child. Matthew's mother comments that the lack of MMR uptake, which immune-suppressed children rely on for their health, has been particularly low in the area where they live, causing Matthew to contract measles. This infection, his mother suggests, has ruined his life. But Matthew's inclusion in this interview prevents him from being characterised as simply another child with a disability. While he is pathologized and regarded as deficient, Matthew's contributions to the production offer a semblance of selfhood that is generally missing from science documentary depictions of autistic children.

Denying autistic people their voices is degrading and can negatively affect audience perceptions of them (Ronski & Sevcik, 2000, p.444). Moreover, autistic children's role is often to enhance emotional impact for viewers instead of communicating their feelings or opinions. Consequently, the portrayal of autism is extremely narrow. These documentaries show little interest in depicting the children's lives in any depth. *Horizon: Does the MMR Jab Cause Autism?* and *Panorama: MMR: Every Parent's Choice* uses the term "severe" autism to describe the children featured, who all experience language and communication difficulties. Nevertheless, with some consideration on the part of the producers, it might have been possible to interview some of the children. Watching these documentaries, viewers with autistic children might find it helpful to see and listen to other parents in a comparable situation. But the children's lack of self-representation distances the viewers from autistic children, preventing an emotional connection beyond a feeling of pity.

In conjunction with the voiceless stereotype, *Panorama: MMR: Every Parent's Choice* presents autistic children as victims of the MMR vaccine. Rory, a boy whose parents believe that he has been "irreparably damaged by MMR", displays overt autistic bodily movements

and non-verbal sounds of distress while his mother tries to calm him. His younger sibling, also in the frame, stands with a toy plane in hand. The symbolism here insinuates that the vaccine has robbed Rory of his childhood and sibling relationship and, by extension, his future relationships. This image of victimhood resonates with a particularly disturbing stereotype, namely, 'better off dead' (Nelson, 1996). It implies that disability prevents community membership, making meaningful life impossible, with death being viewed as preferable to being disabled (Longmore, 1985, p.34). Elliot (1994, p.77) states that such representations imply that being or becoming disabled, in a world where only physically 'perfect' individuals can succeed, is a fate worse than death. *Panorama: MMR: Every Parent's Choice* rarely presents autistic children outside their homes, apart from specialist schools or medical settings, or interacting with their wider communities. The production frequently depicts children like Rory in stigmatising and pathologized ways, but does not explicitly state that the risk of not vaccinating is preferable to the risk of developing autism. The production relies on shock values of extreme autistic behaviours to invoke sympathy, reinforces stigmatising stereotypes that reduce the humanity of autistic people, and lamenting their tragic loss of potential.

A notable difference between these three programmes is the number of autistic children represented in each of them. *Panorama: MMR: Every Parent's Choice* presents numerous autistic children, whereas *Dispatches: MMR: What They Didn't Tell You* limits its autism portrayals to a little girl called Rebecca. The introduction to Rebecca follows a similar formulaic portrayal as *Horizon: Does the MMR Jab Cause Autism?* and *Panorama: MMR: Every Parent's Choice*. The camera tightly frames her lying on her living room floor, crying loudly and kicking her legs. After some brief biographical information, Deer explains that she exhibits "a whole range of behavioural problems" and this is followed by a clip of Rebecca knocking a

video player off a stand. Deer continues by outlining Rebecca's need to follow strict routines and the difficulties she faces deviating from them. The documentary projects both victim framing and burden (Nelson, 1994) stereotypes in these scenes. Rebecca's crying and strict conformity to routines act as a symbolic barrier between Rebecca, her family, and the world. Although we later see her playing in quieter moments, she appears isolated and 'lost', a theme heightened throughout Deer's voiceover commentary and interactions between Rebecca and her parents. During a visit to a park, Deer pushes Rebecca on a swing while facing her parents, interviewing them. Although he mentions that Rebecca does have some minimal vocabulary, he only addresses her parents, looking over Rebecca's head and not engaging with her. He asks her parents for examples of her worst behaviours, his journalistic background influencing his questioning and potentially othering and sensationalising Rebecca's autism in the process.

As the documentary offers no alternative images of autism, there is nothing to counter these negative representations. Similar to the other children featured in *Horizon: Does the MMR Jab Cause Autism?*, Rebecca, her mother explains, was born "normal" before developing signs of autism after vaccination. Rebecca's inclusion fulfils a series of familiar stereotypes that reduce "the multiplicities of the autistic subject to the portrayal of a type that is repeated, sometimes with subtle variations and occasionally with additions, across stories" (Murray, 2008, p.45). Additionally, Rebecca and her family's inclusion could be an attempt at journalistic balance by Deer. Her parents believe that the MMR vaccination caused her autism and their voices offer a counter perspective to that of the other medical experts that oppose Wakefield's theories and research. The focus of *Dispatches: MMR: What They Didn't Tell You* is to disprove Wakefield's research by 'setting the story straight'; the exploration or depiction of Rebecca's perspective seems to be a secondary concern for the

programme-makers. By denying Rebecca her voice, the film follows the same harmful and damaging stereotyping as *Panorama: MMR: Every Parent's Choice*. Rebecca is merely a vessel for negative stereotyping, media and scientific agendas and her mother's feelings of guilt. Given that Rebecca is the only representative of autism in this production, the filmmakers could have provided a more balanced autism representation by including other autistic people, including autistic adults in their film. All in all, *Dispatches: MMR: What They Didn't Tell You* is up-to-date and correct in its presentation of scientific information about MMR, but offers a limited representation of the lived experience of autism and instead relies on the same formulaic and stereotypical imagery found in other documentaries.

### Conclusion

The MMR science documentaries featured in this chapter have a tendency to link autism and MMR through fear-based commentaries and imagery that often rely on problematic, damaging and stigmatising stereotypes. Vaccine discourse dominates in these films, with autistic voices consistently muted or pushed into the background. Moreover, the medical and scientific imagery in these films frequently concentrates on deficits and sometimes hints that autism may be a consequence of vaccination. These productions prioritise the voices of parents, doctors, and journalists over autistic individuals and also tend to grant equal weighting to scientific consensus and outlying scientific opinions according to the dubious principle of journalistic balance, giving undue weight to unsubstantiated scientific opinion. This is highly regrettable, since the MMR crisis was not only damaging to many children's health but was also potentially life-threatening. Furthermore, the intermingling journalistic principles and the presentation of investigative current affairs accentuates the need for autistic voices to be heard.



These documentaries follow damaging, formulaic, and stereotypical portrayals of autism, which imply that those with the condition are 'better off dead' or 'victims' (Nelson, 1996) of autism through a traditional medical disability model (Clogstone, 1994). The films reduce the children to their medical symptoms and rob them of narrative agency and voice. Presenters make little or no attempt to interview or interact with these children on screen, although it is unclear if attempts were made to do so during filming or if there is any unused footage featuring such interviews. The inclusion of such material would have made a valuable contribution to the films as they would have afforded the autistic children a voice and an opportunity to air their perspectives.

Science orientated documentaries are a potentially valuable vehicle for scientific information, especially during a crisis, when public service media might be expected to play a leading role in providing accurate and reliable information and guiding public opinion. The MMR vaccine debate centred on opposing arguments about vaccine safety. Experiences of autistic adults were absent from this discussion; instead the documentaries focus on a certain 'disciplinary' discourse made up of the opinions of psy professionals, journalists, and parents. The absence of autistic adults in these films may lead to the misconception that autism only affects children and that it can be outgrown (Bennett et al. 2019, p.214). Additionally, the perspectives of parents who have autism themselves are also absent. Zak (2010, para 22), whose contribution to the special edition of *Disability Quarterly* was cited in this work's Introduction, highlights the importance of dismantling autism stereotypes that focus on autistic communication and socialisation and the interpretation of their ability to parent their children (Zaks, 2010, para 2). The inclusion of the perspectives of autistic adults might have provided fuller insight into the experiences of autism, especially as the other autistic individuals presented were children with communication difficulties. The following chapter

## Chapter 1: Misrepresentation, Fear and MMR

examines the inclusion of autistic adults, especially in relation to savantism, within various science documentary formats.

## Chapter 2: Savantism and Supercrrips

Film and television texts often portray savantism as integral to autism diagnosis (Garner et al., 2015, p.420) and savantism is a popular topic in science documentaries. The preceding chapter introduced and examined science documentaries and their role in autism stereotyping and representation in the early 2000s. This chapter expands upon the analysis of these earlier texts by exploring two significant subgenres of science documentaries in relation to their broader broadcasting context and their effects on autism representation in films airing in 2005 and after. It examines the representation of savant skills and autism in science documentaries produced by public service and commercial broadcasters through the exploration of narrative devices, themes, and stereotyping. It argues that public service broadcasters and commercial broadcasters have tended to generate distinct subgenres of science documentary: thesis exploration series, exemplified in this chapter by BBC One's *Horizon* series, and human interest series, represented here by Channel 5's *Extraordinary People* series (Barcroft, 2003-2018). The thesis exploration documentary, as typified by the popular and well-known *Horizon*, seeks to imbue knowledge and understanding. Such documentaries seek to answer a central question, commonly posed in their introductions or titles and include, but do not necessarily foreground scientific arguments. Human interest science, embodied by *Extraordinary People*, features narratives that aim to give audiences a more rounded, humanistic, understanding of the autistic people represented, relegating science to a secondary concern. Through their construction of the savant stereotype and supercrip narrative, these types of science documentaries tailor their depictions of autism knowledge for very different types of viewers.

The term 'supercrip' is a familiar term in disability studies. The supercrip stereotype often depicts those who have 'overcome' their disability through outstanding personal endeavours (Harnett, 2000, p.22). Nelson (1994, p.6) defines supercrip narratives as tales about the "heart-warming struggle of someone likeable facing the trauma of a disability who through great courage, stamina, and determination either succeeds in triumphing or succumbs heroically". Supercrip representations are arguably underpinned by the same logic as the medical model since they are concerned with the physical aspects of a person's disability; but they portray autistic people as superhuman rather than deficient (Clogstone, 1994, p.47). The term is used to designate some autistic people as "amazing" on the grounds that they are able to function 'normally' despite being disabled. (Clogstone, 1994, p.47). Shapiro (1993, p.16) argues that supercrips all too often become "glorified disabled role models" paraded by Western media.

Supercrips are created through specific narrative mechanisms which can differ between mediums and genres (Schalk, 2016, p.72). Several types of supercrip are portrayed in disability narratives. Regular supercrips are disabled individuals whose mundane accomplishments – for example, the completion of everyday tasks – are treated as though they are great achievements, suggesting that other disabled people are not expected to achieve similarly to non-disabled people (Kama, 2004, p.450). Glorified supercrips are those who accomplish extraordinary tasks or have abilities that fascinate both fictional and factual media creators, which may imply that those who cannot do so lack resolve and self-discipline (Kama, 2004, p.450). Schalk (2016, p.81) identifies an additional third 'superpowered' supercrip type in fictional media, where 'powers' either reflect or contrast with a character's disability. Examinations of the supercrip stereotype have focused on fictional and factual media representations of physical disability, including the coverage of the Paralympic Games

(Schalk, 2016; Black & Pretes, 2007; Howe, 2011; Silva & Howe, 2012; Bruce, 2014), with autistic savant skills often framed using familiar models of disability. The popularity of the supercrip stereotype is attributable, in part, to the growing market in neoliberal society for personal narratives that favour tales of overcoming and success (Quirici, 2015, p.71).

Autistic savants frequently populate supercrip narratives in fictional and factual media. The notion of savantism has a long and problematic cultural history. In the nineteenth century, Down (1887, p.99) used the term 'idiot savant' to describe children with developmental difficulties who "exhibit special faculties which are capable of being cultivated to a very great extent". Treffert (2009, p.1352) explains that 'idiot' was an accepted classification for persons with an IQ below 25, and 'savant', or 'knowledgeable person', is derived from the French word *savoir* meaning 'to know', while Murray (2008, p.66) points out that the idiot/savant binary encapsulates a "double aspect of ability and impairment". However, the term 'idiot savant' is generally considered outdated and offensive and is now referred to more neutrally as Savant Syndrome (Treffert, 2009, p.1352). This new terminology is preferable as savant skills are not limited to autism and are present in several underlying disabilities (Treffert, 2009, p.1354; Treffert, 2010, p.18). In fact, savant ability in autism is rare: some have placed the incidence around 28.5% (Howlin et al., 2009, p.1364), but there is debate over the exact prevalence rates. Treffert, quoting Rimland's (1978) study, states that savant skills are present in 1 in 10 autistic people (Treffert, 2009, p.1352), while Hermelin (2001, p.17) proposes a figure closer to 1 or 2 in every 200, stating that a reliable frequency for its prevalence does not yet exist. Despite the relatively low prevalence rates, autistic savants are commonly found in the media, as are misunderstandings and stereotypes about them.

Autistic savant characters are often spectacularized and used as plot devices in mainstream films (Baker, 2007, pp.234-235) and regularly position autistic savants as ‘expert’ protagonists, as in *The Good Doctor* (Kim et al., 2017-present), *Bones* (Hanson & Josephson, 2005-2017) and *Big Bang Theory*, *Criminal Minds* (Gordon, 2005-2020) or as sympathetic secondary characters, as in *The A Word* (Nir et al., 2016-present), *The Cube* and *Mercury Rising*. Although television and film productions often do not explicitly label their characters as autistic, their autistic status may be implicit or a commonly held belief in fan communities. Many of these depictions follow a series of well-worn tropes around savantism, leading to an “expectation of genius” (Quirici, 2015, pp.71-72). Autistic savants are also common in autism documentaries, with savantism frequently fulfilling a host of narrative functions. This chapter explores two British television documentary series: BBC’s *Horizon* and Channel 5’s *Extraordinary People* from 2005-2010 (plus one episode from 2014). In these documentary series, autistic participants undergo similar challenges as their fictional counterparts, with representations commonly relying on supercrip stereotyping.

Thesis exploration documentaries cast autistic savants as part of a wider group of autistic and non-autistic participants. Human interest films are singularly focused on savantism and frequently overlook people with other forms of less narratively appealing abilities. This narrow focus discounts the broad spectrum of savant skills. Treffert (2010, p.24) describes three types of savant abilities: “splinter skills,” “talented”, and “prodigious”. Calendrical abilities are among the most common skills featured in documentaries and are featured throughout the films discussed here. Classified as a ‘splinter skill’, calendrical abilities are defined as an “obsessive preoccupation with, absorption in, and memorisation of, music and sports trivia, license plate numbers, maps, historical facts, birth dates” and these skills are found approximately in 1 in 10 autistic children (Treffert, 2010, p.24). ‘Talented’ describes

those who display musical or artistic abilities that go beyond splinter skills (Treffert, 2010, p.24). Prodigious savants, the rarest of the three savant types, describes those who possess an outstanding ability, talent or level of skill that is considered remarkable or beyond that typical of the general population (Hughes et al., 2018, p.1, Treffert, 2010, p.25). Despite this expansive research, many mysteries remain regarding savant capabilities and its links to neurodivergence more broadly (Treffert, 2014, p.566).

### Thesis exploration documentaries

The BBC series *Horizon* is an established presence in documentary science television. The series is considered authoritative in depicting scientific information (Kantor, 2021, pp.463-464). Each of the three *Horizon* documentaries discussed here, all aired between 2009-2014, differs in its focus and its representation of autism and savant skills and each episode belongs to a larger series consisting of up to 15 episodes on a vast array of topics. The films discussed here either document multiple autistic people, as in *Horizon: Living with Autism* (Frith & Sage, 2014), or use autism as a case study for a more expansive topic, as seen in *Horizon: Why Do We Talk* (Thomas, 2009) and *Horizon: What Makes a Genius* (Walker, 2010). Each documentary features autistic individuals whose skills are either calendrical, talented or prodigious.

Broadcast in 2014, *Horizon's Living with Autism* invites audiences to identify with the point of view of its friendly expert, Uta Frith – a developmental psychologist known for her 1989 book *Autism: Explaining the Enigma*. Frith both writes and narrates, fulfilling the role of expert and audience guide. Contemporary documentaries are littered with examples of savants performing and being presented as “objects of a curious interest” (Murray, 2008,

p.65) and this episode of *Horizon* constructs autistic savants as medical or scientific curiosities, participating in a longstanding tendency to view disabled bodies as figures of curiosity, fascination, study, and charity (Goodley, 2014, p.119).

Kenny, a teenage boy with Asperger's syndrome, has calendrical skills and is *Living with Autism's* only savant. He has a highly developed mathematical ability that allows him to calculate the day of the week of any given date. Frith describes his abilities as "... remarkable ... Many people with autism have talent ... and occasionally, these gifts can be quite extraordinary". Kenny's portrayal invokes these earlier concepts of curiosity and fascination as he repeatedly performs and demonstrates his skills. An early scene shows him at school as his peers crowd him on the playground, excitedly shouting out dates for him to process, and Kenny amazes them with his answers. Murray (2008, p.65) explains that savant skill excites viewers through incredible abilities and talents above average human endurance. Kenny's construction as a scientific curiosity shifts from the social to the scientific realm when he and his mother visit Professor Richard Cowan, who specialises in skills such as Kenny's. Although the meeting is informally framed as a conversation, the scene directs a medical gaze towards Kenny as the professor seeks to unravel the scientific mysteries surrounding his abilities. Indeed, the frequent use of technical and scientific language in this scene may serve to cement the scientific curio stereotype. This visit complements the inclusion of an interview with Kenny. Superficially, the shooting of this scene avoids the pitfalls found in many other documentaries, showing Kenny speaking and discussing how his mind works. However, in his meeting with Cowan, Kenny describes how his interest in dates started and explains his pattern-identification method. Although this self-representation may work to counter the more usual scientific objectification of savantism, the continual scientific gaze present throughout the scene diminishes Kenny's perspective.



The depiction of savants as a scientific curiosity is common in supercrip narratives. Kenny's journey begins at his secondary school, a mundane setting that perhaps invokes the idea of the 'regular supercrip'. But the film's narrator describes his skills as "remarkable" and "extraordinary" despite his language difficulties, transforming Kenny's narrative into that of a 'glorified supercrip'. Combined with scientific imagery and superlative language, supercrips successes are continually compared and judged to nondisabled norms (Silva & Howe, 2012, pp.185-187, as quoted by Schalk, 2016, p.77), the narrator's remarks compound Kenny's supercrip status. Kenny accomplishes the "highly extraordinary deeds" that are characteristic of the glorified supercrip (Kama, 2004, p.450). Frith explains that he identifies complex patterns and has constructed his own system by matching calendar dates in his head.

*Living with Autism* also features so-called regular supercrips. Jules has Asperger's syndrome and possesses no savant abilities. The documentary shows him participating in an acting class, which, it is explained, has helped him overcome his difficulties with social interaction and communication, by 'normalising', integrating and developing his social skills in a welcoming and supportive setting. While there is no denying that partaking in these classes is a tremendous accomplishment, Jules's achievement here could be considered 'mundane', as it is an activity that someone without autism may not classify as a significant. Mediated regular supercrips are considered particularly important as they demonstrate the feasibility of routine daily existence to the public, attesting that disability does not lie within the body but instead with social limitations (Kama, 2014, p.454).

Real-world events such as the Paralympics shine a light on how broadcast and print media's representation of 'spectacular' disability can have unforeseen consequences. Supercrip discourses increased in prominence during recent Paralympic Games, with research debates questioning the political and societal ramifications of this development (McGillivray

et al., 2021). Lucy Catchpole, a freelance journalist for *The Guardian*, discussed the impact of a Channel 4's advertising campaign for the 2016 Paralympics on herself, her husband, and others within the disabled community. She explained her fear that such representations view disabled people as "magical creatures" (Catchpole, 2016, para 12). Imagery used within the advertising campaign, as Catchpole explains, encourages society's feelings of frustration towards disabled people "by telling able-bodied people that if I just wanted it enough, or was positive enough, I could be one of those shiny talented people too" (Catchpole, 2016, para 11). Such messages may place pressure on those who are unable to match the achievements of the athletes they see on-screen and here there are some resemblances to the public responses to the supercrip stereotype, which promotes the idea that most autistic people are savants. Furthermore, as Chrisman (2011, p.176) explains, depictions of supercrips "fail to address the sociocultural construction of disability, the real barriers that stand in the way of people with disabilities". The individuals depicted in these films are on the autistic spectrum with rare savant skill; this may act to devalue or discourage autistic viewers who cannot emulate those on screen due to a variety of personal, social, economic, medical, or political barriers that the documentary makers do not explore. However, despite the similarities to the supercrip narrative, *Living with Autism* also features numerous, diverse adults and children from across the autistic spectrum. Their inclusion somewhat mitigates the negative ramifications of the supercrip script, as their achievements are varied and contextualised.

Whereas *Living with Autism* features numerous autism portrayals, BBC's *Horizon Why Do We Talk?* features only one autistic participant. The film explores the genetic causes, social impact and genetic deficits in adults that impact language and the narrator remarks that the attainment and mastery of language defines us as human beings. Among these vignettes about the scientific exploration of language the documentary presents Christopher Taylor, an

autistic man who speaks over twenty languages. A key scene features Christopher, Dr Gary Morgan, a language expert who has worked with Christopher for ten years, and Gerardo, a linguist who is about to teach him words in Nahuatl. Their presence 'crowds' Christopher, pushing him to the side of the frame. The shot composition places Christopher in the role of subject, example or specimen. Morgan and Christopher are shot similarly when they are introduced. While Christopher smiles at the camera head-on in a level mid-shot, Morgan stands looking downwards, leaning with a hand on his hip and his other hand on the wall. His posture signifies his benevolent dominance and scientific authority.

The purpose of the sequence showing Christopher with Morgan and Gerardo is to explain Christopher's savant abilities in relation to the larger overarching thesis of the documentary. But Christopher's perspective is an ancillary concern and Morgan answers questions on Christopher's behalf, often acting as a supplementary narrator by providing perceptions and contextual insights. The narrator's voice is a secondary conduit used to elaborate and support Morgan's views or further explain Christopher's abilities. Christopher's voice, meanwhile, is only heard when his behaviour or speech illustrates a scientific point made by Morgan or the narrator during prompts to translate or recite words. Although the commentary points out that Christopher "doesn't like talking to people very much", Christopher is not interviewed or asked any questions beyond a brief greeting or prompts to translate or read different languages. When he does take centre stage, during close-ups of his reading or handwriting, it serves to objectify his savant skills. His special abilities are both visually and audibly his defining characteristic. No details are provided about his life apart from his place of residence (a care home) and his savantism.

Christopher's remarkable language skills are continually framed in terms of deficit and difference. Christopher quickly learns a new language with his tutor. Morgan states that Christopher is amazing and unique as he can quickly learn new languages by identifying their patterns. Christopher gets "excited" at new languages, he "plays with languages" and he "collects languages" as others collect butterflies. Yet these childlike comparisons and the use of phrases connoting immaturity and unsophistication work to juvenilise and diminish Christopher. Such infantilisation is common in the depiction of autistic men, with the infantile autistic male a frequent stereotype (Botha, et al., 2020, p.11). Christopher's appearance in the documentary is short and his situation in the film's broader scientific framework further infantilises him. The preceding segment, for instance, centres on newborn babies' ability to recognise their mother's voice and recognise languages, an ability which, the narrator states, "doesn't last for long"; the ability to easily acquire language is posited here as being a characteristic of babies and young children. However, this is not the only stereotype attached to Christopher.

Cinematic depictions of savant abilities often place emphasis on a disabled individual's worth, with special skills acting as a compensation that 'offsets' impairment (Murray, 2008, p.132). Christopher is "superhuman", as no one else in the film displays language abilities like his. Language is inherently human, as the documentary's introduction asserts, but Christopher's 'superhuman' ability in languages nevertheless contradictorily places him outside the normal confines of the species. After all, his abilities extend beyond the usual confines and abilities of 'ordinary' people shown throughout the documentary. Christopher is therefore seen as superman because of his skills but his difference is anchored in the shared experience of spoken languages, which 'humanises' him. The scene's narration frames Christopher's language abilities within a broader context of deficit as they are viewed as

compensatory for his autism. However, despite Christopher's acquisition of many languages, he is not shown to be able to communicate effectively with those around him, making his skills appear irrelevant beyond their status as scientific curiosity. Such portrayals are common in the depiction of autistic savants and talented autistic individuals.

Broadcast in 2010, BBC's *Horizon: What Makes a Genius* features Derek, a 30-year autistic blind man and musical prodigy. His presentation within the documentary incorporates elements of both the curiosity and supercrip stereotypes and illustrates more extensive arguments and debates regarding the nature versus nurture explanations of 'genius' abilities. The documentary begins with a brief historical overview of Mozart and his childhood performances, inviting viewers to draw parallels between Mozart and Derek. Derek's portrayal illustrates the nurture 'side' of the debate as he is a 'supercrip' who cultivated his abilities rather than being predisposed to them. We are shown childhood footage of Derek playing piano, before the camera swiftly cuts to the adult Derek playing a complex piece of music. The film's host, Marcus Du Sautoy, a well-known British mathematician, explains that Derek's abilities developed in lieu of visual stimuli. Derek's skills were achieved through arduous work and dedication and his improvisational creativity, meanwhile, helpfully combats another common misconception regarding autistic savants, namely that they are unable to be creative (Treffert, 2014, p.566). Derek's depiction enriches savant portrayals in these types of documentary, which typically focus on mathematical and memory-based skills.

Despite this, Derek's doctor introduces the supercrip stereotype. Treffert (2014, p.566), who writes about Derek in his own work, remarks on the frequency with which conditions like autism are linked with visual impairments and prodigious musical abilities. Treffert (2014, p.566) describes it as "conspicuous and disproportionate" and one of the many

scientific mysteries that surround savantism. *What Makes a Genius?* makes some attempts at exploring this mystery. When discussing the methods by which Derek interprets sounds, Dr Ockelford states that children like Derek “seem to latch onto this super-patterned auditory environment that is music”. The scene’s composition reinforces this science-led perspective. Dr Ockelford details Derek’s abilities and their link to his autism while Derek occasionally voices his agreement, speaking for himself in interviews. However, the scene’s medical gaze and composition tend to negate his artistic contributions. Although superficially sympathetic, Derek’s positioning in the foreground of the shot, with Dr Ockelford and Du Sautoy in the centre background, places Derek in a subordinate position. Indeed, deficit and medical perspectives are apparent, even in this broadly sympathetic documentary.

That said, *Living with Autism* provides some advances in the representation of autism. It offers the more diversity of representation than the documentaries previously examined in this dissertation, as its sequences contain autistic men, women and children who participate in interviews, demonstrations and tests. This variety is absent from many other documentaries and may counter and address the frequent homogeneity of autism depiction in science documentary. The scientific information offered is a valuable resource and has the potential for educational value for non-specialised and lay audiences. However, the sequences in which these participants appear are often extremely short with individuals often feeling like composites, as the condensing of complex stories and perspectives into easily digestible segments, which illustrate distinct positions or scientific arguments, reduces documentary participants to stereotypical depictions. This positioning of documentary subjects may construct them as ‘others’, with autistic savants being further divided and separated from neurotypical viewers and the broader autistic community.

### Human-interest documentaries

*Extraordinary People* is a long-running human-interest documentary series broadcast on Channel 5 which aims to depict a diverse range of human experiences. The autism episodes explored here were broadcast between 2005 and 2008. Channel 5's history directly impacts the methods by which it commissions, develops, and broadcasts its documentaries. In its early years, the channel was "critically perceived as the home of cheap, low-quality programming" (McCabe & Akass, 2007, p.120). Fanthome (2003, p.32) argues that the channel occupied a position in its infancy where it was required to bridge the gap between inherited public service expectations and the market realities arising from the increasingly competitive multi-channelled environment presented over the last twenty years. The channel has overcome various rebranding efforts aimed at moving it away from the legacy of its origins and making it compete with channels that do not have to abide by public service remits (Fanthome, 2003, p.32). Fanthome (2003, p.32) attributes these improvements to the changing definition of quality television and focusing on reflexivity. Channel 5's visual styles reflect "the increased importance of advertising and promotion, branding and sponsorship in the contemporary broadcasting market" (Fanthome, 2003, p.32), an aesthetic that can be seen in its documentary output.

*Extraordinary People* seemingly represents one attempt by the channel to invest in more diverse, quality programming and to move away from its "shock doc roots" (Rogers, 2007). The documentary, which focuses on human-interest stories treated with "sensitivity and rooted in science" (Rogers, 2007) and was ordered by Channel 5's commissioning editor for factual programming John Hay, was certainly billed by the channel as offering "positive,

inspiring stories of bravery and resilience in the face of challenges that would have defeated many of us” (Farber, 2001). Yet *Extraordinary People* hardly escapes accusations of exploiting images of autism. Each episode within the documentary explores an individual’s life with an unusual medical condition such as primordial dwarfism, facial deformities, and progeria. These films often present their participants as representing a kind of ‘inspiration porn’. This term, coined by disability activist and comedian Stella Young (TEDX, 2014), refers to the objectification of disabled individuals for the benefit of the non-disabled. Young (2012, para 10) states that the intent of such images is for “non-disabled people can put their worries into perspective... it could be worse. I could be that person”. Inspiration porn necessarily ignores the social constructs of disability by placing blame on or shaming those who ‘fail’ to ‘overcome’ or be objectified (Young, 2012). Discussing Young’s work, Grue (2016, p.840) states that inspiration porn perpetuates the ideological mechanisms of objectification, devaluation, individualisation and mystification. Unfortunately, the *Extraordinary People* series frequently leverages such ideological mechanisms and imagery.

Human-interest documentaries such as the films in the *Extraordinary People* series adopt the personalised framing common in tabloid news media, wherein “individual lives are featured to personalize the story, with affective dimensions accentuated” (Luther and Zhou, 2005, pp.859–860). Human-interest frames focus on personal struggles and related responsibilities (Aalberg & Beyer, 2015, p.860). The titles of the episodes of *Extraordinary People* often seem to have been plucked from the tabloid news headlines using supercrip stereotypes to entice interest and underpin the stories they tell, all of which deploy a personalised method of storytelling that focuses on lifestyle and life challenges as well as remarkable digressions from societal ‘norms’. Human-interest science documentaries afford each production and its audience the opportunity to spend time with the individual at the



heart of the film, prioritising emotions over educational mandates or scientific investigation. Instead of medical texts, parental narratives, or specialist websites, the public understanding of autism often draws on depictions from popular culture, causing autism representations to become 'storied' (Waltz, 2013, p.157). Human-interest documentaries may bridge the divide between public understanding and scientific knowledge, as the format frequently interweaves cultural and popular media forms with scientific discourse; each film in *Extraordinary People*, for example, frequently draws upon the audience's familiarity with the blockbusting 1988 film *Rain Man*.

The enduring influence of *Rain Man*, which encourages its audience to view Dustin Hoffman's character Raymond Babbitt through his autism rather than as a person (Hannam, 2014, p.94), cannot be overstated when discussing savant representations in fictional media, since before the film's release there was no popular public conception of what autism 'looked like' (Knights, 2018, para 3). Its influence is apparent in *Extraordinary People: The Real Rain Man* (Feldes, 2006). This episode focuses on Kim Peak, who had several meetings with Dustin Hoffman during the production of *Rain Man*, meetings that greatly influenced Hoffman's portrayal of Babbitt. Released three years before Peak's death, *The Real Rain Man* is a biographical documentary about Peak's upbringing and savant abilities (however, unlike his fictional counterpart, Peak was not autistic; rather, his skills were caused by FG syndrome). The film tracks Peak's movements through medical, domestic and diagnostic environments and includes frequent displays of his savant skills and abilities.

A familiar hallmark of human-interest documentaries is the issuance of a 'challenge'. Such audience 'hooks' boost urgency and add excitement to everyday activities or production-fabricated endeavours. Challenges may be modest, as in *The Real Rain Man*,

which follows Peak and his father as they visit multiple experts on a quest to find out how Peak's brain works. Challenges may also be public events. *Extraordinary People: The Human Camera* (Osei-Tutu, 2008) features artistic savant Stephen, who is issued a substantial drawing challenge and several lesser ones. In its primary challenge, saved for the film's finale, Stephen is tasked with drawing a panoramic landscape of London from memory. Stephen is provided with a fifteen-minute helicopter ride around London to memorise its landscapes before being given several days to make a four-metre panorama drawing for public display.

Stephen's perspective and voice feature throughout *The Human Camera*, as he discusses and demonstrates his abilities and gives insight into his unique perspective. Early in the film, the narrator provides a detailed portrait of Stephen against a montage of quickly edited shots, including close-ups of Stephen's face and eyes. These shots invite the viewer to adopt Stephen's gaze as the camera mimics his eye-line view of Hampton Court Palace, which he then draws. This imitation of perspective draws attention to the constructed nature of documentary and how Stephen's point of view is interpreted by others. Although Stephen's perspective on the world is more overt than that of the participants in the other thesis exploration films, the documentary places his skills into a medicalised context shaped by the genre conventions of the science documentary.

Scientific discourse, supplied through narration and visits to experts, provides context and understanding to Stephen's abilities. Stephen's ability to sketch from memory is "effortless", "unmatched", and "astonishing", according to the voiceover. The film places this praise within a medical and deficit context through interviews with autism expert Simon Baron-Cohen. However, as such inclusions are minimal, the production does not embrace the medical model of disability to the same extent as the *Horizon* films discussed above. In

addition to medical professionals, the film introduces experts from other fields to interpret Stephen's abilities from the perspective of the 'human interest' story. These outsiders decipher and contextualise Stephen's skills for non-specialist viewers. In one sequence, for example, Stephen visits an architectural engineering and design firm based in London, where he meets with architect Narinder Sagoo to view the company's work in model form. Stephen enthusiastically identifies buildings displayed in the models, appreciating their design and architecture before drawing, seemingly spontaneously. Sagoo outlines his own architectural expertise as Stephen draws almost wordlessly by his side. He states that Stephen is "a real artist" before elucidating on the drawing's composition, accuracy, scale and remarking on the time and practice needed to learn such skills. Sagoo's perspective and explanations adds a sense of achievement and gravitas to Stephen's abilities, which otherwise may be downplayed as being naturally bestowed on him due to his autism. Despite Stephen's increased inclusion as compared to similar savants in other autism focused films, his portrayal is frequently interpreted through secondary voices. A plethora of interpretative judgements from experts and others, including a family friend and a former headteacher, do tend to objectify Stephen.

Superficially, then, the *Extraordinary People* films appear progressive as participants are not 'muted' like the children featured in the MMR-themed documentaries discussed earlier. However, progressive representations of autism ought to focus on society's response to those with disabilities (Clogstone, 1994, p.46). The series does not concern itself with disability rights or pay attention to the social construction of disability. It instead features stories of difference and dysfunction, both hallmarks of the supercrip narrative, repeatedly prioritising these themes over autistic self-representation. Although such films certainly do offer numerous perspectives on autism, including the incorporation of scientific and medical

experts and professionals, they also rely to some degree on stereotypes. Indeed, documentaries focused on single individuals allow for glorified and supercrip stereotypes to flourish, as they contain no counter representations.

Another film in the *Extraordinary People* series, *The Boy with the Incredible Brain* (Gooder, 2005), establishes Daniel, a savant with mathematical abilities, as a counter to some misconceptions and stereotypes surrounding savantism. Daniel's portrayal differs to the those offered in *Horizon* and the *Extraordinary People* series as he is not explicitly labelled as autistic. Attempts at diagnosis are made during a visit to Simon Baron-Cohen, where Daniel and his mother discuss Daniel's childhood difficulties. Baron-Cohen explains "that by most measures Daniel is autistic, but has learnt enough social skills to 'blend in' and 'adapt' to our world". Supercrips may serve as role models, becoming objects of emulation that represent examples of disabled individuals who can overcome difficulties and become 'normal' (Kama, 2004, p.453). Portrayals such as Daniel's perpetuate the stereotype of the savant and the recovered autistic, the autism versions of the common disability stereotypes of the supercrip and the heroic overcomer (Osteen, 2007, p.16). Although Baron-Cohen states that it is likely that Daniel is autistic, no formal diagnosis is made. The film does not use the term autistic to describe Daniel, instead referring only to his savantism. Daniel's supercrip status is ambiguous, as the narrator describes Daniel as having "lots of ability yet no obvious disability". This statement expresses his success as a supercrip, as he has been able to overcome and 'recover' from his childhood difficulties. He is articulate, able to clearly describe his skills and is not constructed through the typical deficit centred stereotypes that litter autistic savant documentaries.

However, autism is not the only explanation provided in the documentary for Daniel's abilities. As a child, Daniel suffered severe seizures and epilepsy, which "changed something in his brain" and shortly afterwards he began to be able to discern patterns in sets of numbers. Common misconceptions surrounding savantism are that all autistic people possess a savant skill and that all those with savant skills must be autistic (Treffert, 2014, p.565). These misconceptions are potentially problematic; as Draaisma explains, "the stereotype of the autistic savant raises expectations to an unrealistic level, causing disappointment and frustration for the many autistic persons not so gifted" (2009, p.1478). Daniel is not the only savant depicted in the documentary, as it provides a brief overview of the abilities of an American savant called Orlando, whose skills manifested after a traumatic brain injury he suffered as a child. The film's highlighting of alternative causes of savant skills may remove the burden of savant expectation on autistic people. By not providing a concrete explanation for Daniel's abilities, the film sidesteps popular public savant stereotypes.

Still, Daniel's skills are presented as superhuman as the producers issue him a small challenge. This test involves mathematical questions being posed to Daniel, with the camera frequently cutting between him and close ups of his calculator. Daniel excels at this test. His answers outpace the calculator's limited screen space, forcing the production team to use a computer with larger capacity for decimal places, which Daniel again surpasses. His superhuman abilities are further accentuated by matching Daniel's activity with striking visualisations. When Daniel says "I'm seeing things in my head like little sparks firing off, and it's not until the very last moment that those sparks tell me what on earth they mean", his words are visually illustrated with images of children's firework sparklers lighting up a dark backdrop, as large blue numbers float across the screen. This use of such imagery gives

Daniel's skills tangibility. Despite its frequent leanings towards the supercrip stereotype, then, the film also offers some resistance to stereotyping.

Conventionally, savant memory is often considered to be entirely rote or likened to computers or other mechanisms, which carries a dehumanising connotation (Straus, 2014, para 39). The shots of the calculator accompanying Daniel's demonstrations arguably have this effect. Yet *The Boy with the Incredible Brain* does soften this construction. Unlike other savants depicted both here and in the documentaries discussed previously, some of Daniel's incredible "magical" memory skills are shown as being potentially obtainable for 'ordinary' people. One sequence depicts the use of a mathematical abacus-based teaching method employed in a Tokyo school, where, starting at age four, children can become "human calculators" by age twelve. The film implies that through arduous work and strict discipline, 'ordinary' students can learn skills to process complex mental calculations comparable to Daniel's, which acts to partly demystify his abilities.

Unlike most savants depicted in the *Extraordinary People* series and *Horizon*, Daniel's skills avoid depiction through a compensation myth. Although Daniel's childhood difficulties are discussed during scenes with Baron-Cohen and feature reenactments of childhood playground scenes, the film nowhere links Daniel's abilities to autistic deficit. However, Daniel is not the only savant example in this episode. There is also Dane, who is also autistic with savant artistic skills. Although Dane's abilities flourish, he is nonetheless seen as childlike through many scenes showing his autistic outbursts. Daniel's presentation is different. He is "valuable to science" due to his language and communication abilities, countering stereotypical supercrip portrayals that link skills to compensation.

*Extraordinary People: The Rainman Twins* (Wagner, 2008) is a biographical film about two savant twins, Flo and Kay Lyman, and features a more stereotypical supercrip portrayal. The sisters, who possess savant memory-based abilities, have photographic memories that centre on their interests in music, weather, and television. Additionally, they are both calendrical calculators. Loftis (2015, p.58), while discussing the work of McDonagh (1997, p.268), argues that “both the Supercrip and savant figures suggest that people with disabilities are worthy only if they overcome or overcompensate for characteristics that may form an integral part of personal identity”. *The Rainman Twins* features no grand challenges or extended medicalised gaze surrounding their autism or savantism. Instead, it explores the sisters’ lives and family histories from the perspective of a family friend, Dave Wagner, a news anchor. Wagner directs and acts as co-producer for the documentary and is featured heavily on screen. His journalistic perspective reveals the dramatic history of the sisters’ childhoods and the medical reasoning behind the sister’s abilities. It is Wagner’s perspective, and not the sisters, which drives and frames the film. The documentary exhibits a journalistic and popularised depiction of science relying on appealing tales of hardship and overcoming.

*The Rainman Twins* provides an extensive exploration of the girls’ troubled family history and thus frames the sisters’ savantism as compensation for their difficult childhoods and the prejudice the sisters faced. The formation of the autistic other is at the very heart of supercrip narratives and is created by negatively framing autistic differences. The attribution of genius serves to dehumanise and isolate the autistic other (Quirici, 2015, p.73). Schalk (2016, p.79), discussing the work of Kama (2004), states that these stories are premised upon the ableist assumption that disabled people do not participate in everyday activities such as sports or form romantic relationships. *The Rainman Twins* shows Flo and Kay’s savant skills, which include being able to remember the precise foods and drinks they consumed on a given

date. They also enjoy 'normal' activities such as watching their favourite television game show *The \$10,000 Pyramid* (Stewart, 1973-1991), but the emphasis on the sisters' obsession with the game show's host Dick Clark, expressed through their memorabilia collections and their eidetic memory of episodes, returns the twins to the category of 'other'.

Silva & Howe (2012, p.175) argue that the result of society's perpetuation of low expectations of disabled people maintains the idea that a disabled person's very existence is a "problem". The film treats these women as anomalies, reiterating their uniqueness constantly. Dr Treffert, whose work was discussed earlier, appears within this episode. Here he calls the women "remarkable", a comment echoed by the film's narrator, who labels the women "unique" with "amazing talents". Such labels may signify the additional subjective benefits the sisters' skills have and the potential such fostering of interests may have for autistic people. Happé (2018, p.280) states that the identification and fostering of special interests can improve self-esteem, employment and facilitate opportunities for interaction and appreciation. The sisters' savant skills are demonstrated throughout the film as aiding their societal integration as their eidetic memories and impressive memories was fostered by their relationship with gameshow host Clarke. Furthermore, their skills act as a compensation for their autism that facilitates their socialisation and participation within their communities. Their connection with Clark is explored throughout the documentary, including a private meeting between them towards the film's end. Their relationship is important to the sisters; Clark telephones them every year on their birthday, and they refer to him as their "distant Daddy". Their bedroom is filled with memorabilia and is described as a "shrine" by their brother-in-law and "like a teenage girl's room from, like, 1955" by their nephew. Slow pans of Clark's photographs adorning the wall, including a personalised signed image underscores this fixation. The sequence suggests that despite their prodigious nature, their savantism is



'wasted' on them, trivialising and dismissing their interests even though it has given them untold comfort and happiness. Such disregard constructs the sisters as objects of pity (Barnes, 1992).

The pitiful disabled are objectified and come to personify their impairments (Kama, 2004, p.458). The sisters' troubling personal family history is 'storied' and objectified for the voyeuristic pleasure of the audience. The film details their complicated family history, relationships, and the prejudice they experience, suggesting that their savantism comes at a 'price'. The film highlights their complicated relationship with their mother, including her mental health difficulties and her attempt to kill the twins. A medical gaze frames and interprets their mothers' actions by including interviews by Dr David Holmes, whose work allows him to assist autistic people in living independently. Holmes discusses that previously the stress of autism was placed on the individual's families, stating that: "Many of these families were stigmatised by society, and that there was a huge embarrassment factor" as an attempt to rationalise the mother's actions. The inclusion of this event reaffirms the idea that the sisters' existence is a 'problem'. However, it provides little detail about their mother, who died when the sisters were young, except for brief allusions to her mental health problems, alcoholism and treatment. As Flo, Kay and their younger sister, Jane, recall their mother's suicide, the documentary depicts these events through reconstructed imagery of stairs, a banister, and a slow tilting zoom towards an open gas oven. The sisters then recount the police's dismissal of their mother's condition, reflecting historical and societal attitudes towards disability and mental illness. The depiction of the incident, and police response, again construes the sisters as objects of pity, which Hayes & Black (2003, p.5) define as "an emotionally conditioned social response which marginalizes those with disabilities and better serves the interests of those who show pity than it does the object of their pity".

## Conclusion

Increasingly, perhaps, the science documentary genre is a versatile format that allows for various different expressions of health-related information. This chapter has examined two science documentary sub-genres in relation to their use of supercrip and savant stereotypes, autism objectification and medical disability representation models through the thesis exploration (*Horizon*) and human-interest (*Extraordinary People*) formats. Misconceptions surrounding autistic savants are challenged or reinforced across scientific documentary subgenres that often echo problematic stereotypes. The supercrip is a potentially damaging stereotype as it often misconstrues the prevalence of savantism within autism, leading to unfair expectations being placed upon all autistic people. Despite their similar subject matter, the series differ in their approaches and both have their respective merits and weaknesses.

*Horizon's Living with Autism* offers the most diverse range of autism representations but consigns each participant to a relatively short treatment. It provides the most authoritative educational resources of the films examined due to its expository, scientific approach and use of a specialised expert as host. However, the host's presence in relation to the autistic participants signifies a disadvantage of the format as the medical and scientific gaze may dehumanise and objectify those it represents. These documentaries often view autistic savants as scientific "curiosities" and supercrips. *Horizon's* thesis exploration narrative attempts to present autism knowledge to lay audiences. Its prioritisation of scientific messages objectifies autistic people and denies them their voice. At the same time, first-person perspectives are often absent or underutilised.

*Extraordinary People's* single-focus approach and non-expert narration seemingly allows more opportunities to showcase a wider variety of autistic perspectives. Its episodes partially attempt to challenge the 'Rain Man' stereotype, as they feature individuals with creative savant abilities rather than purely eidetic memories. Human-Interest narratives place autistic people front and centre and provide some limited opportunities for voice and expression, as with Stephen's portrayal in *The Human Camera* and the camera's adoption of his gaze when he looks at buildings. Such personalising techniques can challenge audiences' preconceptions about autism, but the productions discussed here often lean towards a tabloid approach devoid of scientific or contextual information. Overall, however, from a perspective that values representational diversity over absolute 'accuracy', the series should be welcomed for widening the range of television depictions of autism.

Indeed, these science documentary subgenres raise questions about the diversity of the autistic representations on offer and the perceived value of a human-interest, tabloid-style focusing vs 'objective' scientific perspectives in television documentary. The savant case studies they present contain visually 'appealing' aspects of autism. But they are demographically limited. Apart from *The Rainman Twins*, the documentary participants are primarily male with few communications difficulties, possibly reflecting a tendency in autism documentaries to skew towards male representations. Finally, of course, these documentaries often position autistic savant skills for the audience's voyeuristic pleasure. The following chapter expands and develops this theme further with respect to entertainment-focused documentary formats.

## Chapter 3: Autism as Spectacle

There has been an explosion of entertainment-focused, factual documentary programs on British television over the last two decades. Docutainment, docudrama, and reality television have become mainstays of British television and schedules are packed with factual entertainment programmes such as *Celebrity MasterChef* (Murdoch & Roddam, 2006 – present), *24 Hours in A&E* (Kelly, 2011 – present) and *Come Dine With Me* (Sayer, 2004 - present). Entertainment documentaries push aside the relatively staid conventions of science documentary formats and progressively incorporate more populist forms and techniques that offer dynamic, tense narrative structures and a variety of visual pleasures. Hybridised entertainment documentary formats like the ones discussed in this chapter, meanwhile, provide opportunities for covering specialised topics and place “an increased emphasis on niche audiences” (Bolin, 2009, p.40).

The last two decades have witnessed a rise in autism focused films, with 2010 being a boom year for entertainment and hybridised documentary formats focusing on autism. This chapter explores the autism docutainment subgenre. Despite their relative novelty, docutainment formats often draw upon historical modes of disability representation interpreting autism in terms of spectacle, difference and idealisation. This chapter explores the commodification of autism, the creation of the ‘ideal autistic’, curative narratives, and the impact of neoliberal ideology on the hybrid entertainment documentary. It first examines the Channel 4 documentary series *Young, Autistic and Stagestruck* (McKerrow, 2010) and BBC Three’s *Autism, Disco and Me* (Rocks, 2010) in relation to their strategies of ‘normalisation’ and ‘idealisation’, before examining the commodification and commercialisation of autism in

BBC Three's *Autistic Superstars* (Austin & Bickley, 2010) which is discussed in relation to the framework of competitive individualism. All three documentaries, which were broadcast in the same year, feature a common theme: they credit music as a method of improving or curing autistic behaviours, bringing autistic people 'out of themselves' and into the wider world. Yet there is perhaps a more troubling side to these productions. Despite constant improvements in disability awareness, government legislations such as the Autism Act (Government, 2009), media portrayals, education and scientific understanding, the values of the nineteenth-century freak show are still present in contemporary culture. The following chapter therefore includes an examination of the cultural resonance of the freak show and its lingering effects on the visualisation of autism in popular television.

Properly speaking, as mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, autism is an 'invisible' condition that lacks the visual signifiers generally used to identify people as disabled (Thompson-Hodgetts et al., 2020, p.2). As such, the link between contemporary autism representation and the historical freak show is not readily apparent. The presentation of autism in the context of entertainment genres is necessarily a type of disability performance. Koppers (2003, p.3) states that performance allows for the expression of cultural uncertainties, framing the unknown through the conventions of the stage and the audience gaze. One of the earliest examples of disability performance is that of the travelling freak show. While versions of the freak show have been performed worldwide, the American freak show and its Victorian counterpart endure in society's collective consciousness. Historically, freak show managers used two modes of representation to create a public identity for their performances and garner the broadest public appeal: the exotic and the aggrandized (Bogdan, 1987, pp.540-542). The exotic mode focuses on the differences and inferiority of those exhibited and constructs them as pitiable spectacles; the aggrandised stereotype flips

this view by endowing prestigious titles such as Major, Captain, General, Prince, King, Princess or even Queen to imply the superiority of its performers (Bogdan, 1987, p.542; Bogdan 1988, p.108). American freak show audiences considered Europe and England in particular to be culturally superior and it was common for performers to change names that sounded lower class to those that suggested European or British descent (Bogdan, 1988, p.108). Such aggrandized imagery and nomenclature became a staple of disability performances and is even detectable in the freak show's modern-day pop culture descendants.

The freak show is one of the oldest models of disability performance and was often performed for the enjoyment of a paying, often braying, audience. Critics of the freak show label it as exploitative and marginalising. Indeed, disabled performers are often perfectly aware that the cultural knowledge and expectations that surround them tends to paint them as heroes, poor, tragic, helpless or struggling (Kuppers, 2003, p.3). Drawing upon the work of Garland Thomson (1996, p.10), Kérchy & Zittlau (2012, p.2) highlight just some of the socially conservative functions of enfreakment within these shows:

The show-personas presented communal anxieties and fantasies of Otherness in highly commercialised, fetishized, colonized forms, which served entertainment and educational purposes, conditioned responses of revulsion and pleasure, and consolidated the comforting, illusorily self-same identity of the ordinary average majority populace.

Despite being produced in a putatively more educated, liberal, and contemporary context, the documentaries discussed here contain remnants of the features identified by Kérchy & Zittlau. Performers in freak shows represented a diverse array of physical otherness (Pettit, 2014, p.8). In comparison, the autism docutainment makes visible the invisible, internal

differences of autistic people by placing them centre stage. This visibility frequently centres on concepts of performance, deficit, restoration, and otherness.

Disabled performers operate in a visual dichotomy. They are invisible and usually relegated to the border of cultural activity, but at the same time hypervisible and immediately defined by their physicality (Kuppers, 2003, p.49). The disabled performer enters a relationship with the audience and content producers, which can be demeaning and exploitative. The documentaries discussed here, and to some extent those discussed in the preceding chapter, operate within this performance context. Behaviour and actions can become isolated, taken out of context, with audiences attributing positive or negative qualities to the performer accordingly. In the case of the historical freak show, a ringmaster would control this process; in contemporary television, this is the job of content creators, directors and editors. However, disability performance also can be 'détourned' to become a means of empowerment, with individual agency leading to disability awareness. The freak show has relocated to television talk shows, reality television and documentaries, raising concerns regarding exploitation of differently bodied people given the medium's reputation for sensationalism (Backstrom, 2012, pp.683-684).

Bogdan (1987, p.538) states that "although freakshows were often presented as educational or scientific exhibits, they were always first and foremost a for-profit activity and within that climate of the amusement world, misrepresentation was an accepted practice". But academic and public discussions of freak shows today frequently emphasise their exploitative nature. Reality television formats draw upon the interaction between voyeurism and cultural entertainment that has historical origins within freak shows (Ellis, 2015, p.90). Both frequently engage in forms of normalisation. As Pettit (2015, p.8) explains, English freak

show stars themselves held protests during the winter season of 1898 – 1899 against the terminology used to describe them. Instead of being called ‘Freaks of Nature’, performers instead wished to be referred to by the title of ‘Prodigy’. Contemporary coverage of these protests, as Petitt explains, focused on the ‘normalising’ of performers and their everyday activities while emphasising their “extraordinary attributes”. She argues that freak show conventions and discourse have long been present in accounts of disability and otherness.

Authenticity, performance and reality television are frequently intertwined. Indeed, as Hill (2020, p.210) argues that “a moment of authenticity in a performance is a crucial element of the ‘reality’ relations between producers, participants, and audiences”, which Hill explains has links to the work of Goffman (1990). There are many different kinds of performances that people undertake in everyday life in which different versions of ourselves are presented to those around us. Goffman (1990) refers to the presentations of performances as front stage and back stage. Front stage refers to the way individuals present themselves “for the benefit of other people” (Goffman, 1990, p.28). Backstage refers to how people behave privately or when no facade is needed (Goffman, 1990, pp.50-53). The reality television trappings of autism docutainment and the transformative nature of the format is through the joining of these two stages. The complexity of autism raises questions about the ability of autistic people to project an idealised front stage persona. As Chemers (2008, p.12) writes “in times of great stress, people might drop out of character inadvertently and expose some hidden aspect of the self that would discredit their public image; this may result in the person creating an unpleasant incident or ‘making a scene,’ disrupting the regular social order”. *Young, Autistic & Stagestruck* contains many candid scenes of children in distress during rehearsals. Because of their perceived lack of artifice, autistic persons are associated with authenticity and are perceived to be ‘realer than real’. The series goal of the participants



performing in a stage production can be viewed as teaching them how to conduct themselves through this front stage (singing and dancing) for the benefit (entertainment) of the audience.

*Autism, Disco and Me* offers audiences insights into autistic performers' front and back stage performances. The one-off expository documentary follows Jimmy, an 11-year-old autistic boy, as he trains and performs in Blackpool's annual Disco Kid competition. Jimmy is not the only autistic person in his family, as his twin brother George and older brother Alex are also on the autistic spectrum. The documentary follows Jimmy's progress in the competition. The constructed stage on which Jimmy will perform has been included solely for the performer to use as part of the documentary's narrative. In this front stage setting, Jimmy performs and alters his behaviour. The theatrical stage is constructed by the production company as a mechanism of inclusion and awareness. The film documents the performances of various children, while also navigating the transformative and curative elements of its narrative.

#### Cures, normalisation and autistic performance

The term normalisation originates in the field of disability studies and is often used in reference to the deinstitutionalisation of disabled people. Two dominant principles related to normalisation derive from two distinct aspects of liberal humanism: equality and autonomy (Simpson, 2018, p.13). Nirje (1969, p.181) defines normalisation as the project of making "patterns and conditions of everyday life [...] as close as possible to the norms and patterns of the mainstream of society". In a later work, Perrin & Nirje (1985, p.69) list common misunderstandings of the term, including the idea that normalisation involves attempting to make stigmatised people's thoughts and behaviour 'normal'. Instead, they explain that

normalisation means providing opportunities and support that permit disabled people to enjoy lifestyles similar to those of other members of society.

Wolfensberger et al. (1972) broadens the concept of normalisation to refer to the destigmatisation of people devalued or labelled as deviant by society. Wolfensberger et al. (1972, p.28) propose a reformulation of the normalisation principle as “utilisation of means which are as culturally normative as possible to establish and/or maintain personal behaviours and characteristics which are as culturally normative as possible”. Wolfensberger (1992, p.32) builds upon his discussion of normalisation in his later publications on ‘Social Role Valorisation’, which describes the “enablement, establishment, enhancement, maintenance and/or defence of valued social roles”. In the context of this dissertation on British autism documentaries, two types of normalisation can be identified: normalisation of autism as a condition and normalisation of autistic people. The normalisation of autism as a condition seeks awareness and change on a societal level that aligns with social models of disability, whereas the normalisation of autistic people encourages autistic people to change in order to achieve social inclusion.

Autism as a condition is ‘normalised’ in the public’s eyes through awareness-raising, which can take various forms. Increases in Internet searches about autism and Asperger’s syndrome, for example, have coincided with initiatives that promote awareness, normalisation and visibility that make known the daily realities of autistic people (Tárraga-Mínguez et al., 2020, para 10). Normalisation challenges and changes the public’s perception of autism as a condition, positing it as natural human variation. Within this process, the societal understanding of autism shifts towards neurodiversity perspectives that view autism

as an element of human diversity. This understanding aligns closely with Nirje's approach and is explored further in Chapters 5 and 6.

The medical model of disability is based on arbitrary assumptions about 'normalcy', which does not recognise differences as having positive value but instead places great value on normalisation and rehabilitation (Waltz, 2013, p.71). Viewed from the perspective of the medical model, autistic people undergo a process of normalisation through interventions to make them fit into society by encouraging behaviours and characteristics that afford them value. As seen in the previous chapter, autistic savants are afforded value and societal integration through their abilities; but in entertainment documentaries autistic people undergo processes of 'cure' and normalisation closely aligned with Wolfersberger's notion of Social Role Valorisation.

Cures, for disabled persons, may refer to the elimination of impairments but also to normalising treatments that work towards the assimilation of the disabled mind and body (Kafer, 2013, p.28). There is no cure for autism, since it is not an illness (Murray, 2011, p.90). Nor do many autistic individuals seek a cure. As the National Autistic Society (n.d, para 3) state: "autism does not need a 'cure' and should be seen as a difference, not a disadvantage". However, media representations are often not in alignment with autistic led discourse, as many autism documentaries imply that with properly directed activity aimed at bringing them 'out of themselves', autistic people can be 'cured'. The curative autism narrative is commonplace in television and film media and frequently includes themes of normalisation that encourage the integration of autistic people into wider society. Within the context of this discussion, the term curative narrative is used to describe attempts to remove or 'improve' disabling aspects of autism rather than transforming them into a non-autistic person. In the

documentaries discussed in this chapter, these 'cures' include the easing of documentary participants' social anxieties and the reduction of social isolation.

Ostensibly, at least, the documentaries discussed in this chapter centre on Social Role Valorisation and attempts to enhance the lives of their autistic participants. Social Role Valorisation emphasizes competency and image enhancement (Wolfensberger, 1992, p.34). *Autism, Disco and Me* opens with scenes of Jimmy speaking as he flips and bounces on a garden trampoline as the song 'Mr Brightside' by The Killers plays non-diegetically. Jimmy's breathless speech anticipates the episode's themes of normalisation and the curative powers of dancing as he described himself as having once been a "regular school kid with special needs". The scene is intercut with footage of Jimmy sitting on his bed laughing and shaking his head violently as he rattles a metal tin containing coins. The sequence is intercut with a recording of Jimmy participating in disco dancing competitions and is followed by a scene in which Jimmy talks to an unseen interviewer. Relaxing on his bed, Jimmy states that dancing makes him feel "normal", as though "somebody fixed my brain inside". He then collapses sideways into bed, giving the camera a 'thumbs up' gesture. Jimmy's self-image appears to have been dramatically enhanced and his dancing affords him competency in line with Wolfensberger's Social Role Valorisation. To some extent, Jimmy's portrayal invites comparison with earlier supercrip stereotypes insofar as it incites feelings of pity for the difficulties Jimmy experienced in earlier childhood. But in *Autism, Disco and Me* these negative emotions movingly give way to far more life-affirming sentiments and a sense of optimism and progress.

In an analysis of the use of pity in the representation of film characters, Hayes & Black (2003, para 17) outline four stages: confinement, hope for rehabilitation, denial of

rehabilitation and reconciliation of confinement. Confinement occurs when a person's disability prevents a character from "realising his or her will" and can occur for many physical, social, or psychological reasons (Hayes & Black, 2003, para 18). Jimmy's autism hinders his dancing ability in a competition shown at the film's mid-point. One key obstacle for him to overcome is his ability to smile and make eye contact with the judges, something many people with autism find challenging. Hayes & Black (2003, para 22) argue that characters do not simply fight to overcome their disability, but attempt to overcome the confinement it induces. Jimmy's difficulties with eye contact influence the reception his dancing receives. Jimmy is given hope for rehabilitation after his first competition when he is placed third, an improvement on his previous performances, and he is optimistic about his future competitions. The concept of rehabilitation offers viewers, meanwhile, hope that the characters can overcome the confines of their disability in a fashion consistent with the medical models and its emphasis on cures (Hayes & Black, 2003, para 33). The impossibility of Jimmy's rehabilitation occurs during the semi-finals, where he makes it to the last fifteen. Jimmy explains that dancing makes him feel free and that his autism both aids (his dancing being a 'special' interest) and hinders his dancing ambitions. Although Jimmy does not win his competition, he has come to terms with his confinement and aspects of his autistic behaviour are deemed to have been 'improved' upon during the course of the episode.

The transformative nature of competition is not limited to autistic behaviours but also extends to the physical health of autistic children. Dancing brings about improvements in other areas of Jimmy's life, such as reading and mobility. Like many autistic children, Jimmy used to walk on his tiptoes, causing him to need splints, but he no longer requires these. Repeated references to Jimmy's literacy skills and academic challenges, meanwhile, are made early in the film, but Jimmy attributes improvements in these areas to his dancing and

illustrates the level of his reading ability with his hands. *Guardian* journalist Hattenstone (2010, para 14), who interviewed Jimmy's family after the production, states that Jimmy's brain wiring "which had been so horribly twisted in his early years, started to straighten itself out", attributing the improvement in Jimmy's autism to his dancing. The documentary ends with his mother stating that "dancing is his life and lifeline", reinforcing the sense of hope and promise that bookend the documentary. The physical challenges of autism are only rarely mentioned in autism documentaries, but references to Jimmy's earlier physical difficulties and disabilities add a tangible connection to the curative and normalisation narrative that structures the film.

*Autism, Disco and Me* suggests the sacrifices Jimmy's family has made to enable their son's participation in dancing competitions. Jimmy's mother remarks upon the cost of competition attendance, costumes, and related expenses, indicating the financial burdens placed on the family. Another type of sacrifice relates to Jimmy's strained relationship with his twin George, who has hyperlexia, a condition frequently linked to autism that imbues advanced reading skills and is often reported as a savant ability occurring in autistic individuals (Ostrolenk et al., 2017, p.134). The family has made "savings and sacrifices" to support Jimmy's dancing, but George is shot sitting alone in his bedroom with headphones on, engrossed in a video game, and later he outlines his mixed feelings regarding his brother's dancing and the money spent on it. This interview portrays George as resentful towards his brother and the shift in family dynamics is indicated when the boys' mother avers that previously George had once been "the bright one". Although there are many scenes of the brothers talking and interacting fraternally, George is repeatedly situated in the background of shots, looking marginalised and isolated. Despite being identical twins, George does not have an interest in dancing, although he sometimes accompanies Jimmy to his dancing

lessons. Scenes of Jimmy dancing whilst the narrator discusses his fitness and discipline includes footage of George sitting at the side of the room eating a processed snack. Such editing alludes to the boys' personality differences and their differing physicality and willpower: Jimmy is presented as fit and healthy, while George is inactive and consumes unhealthy food. George finishes the documentary in the same position in which he started. *Independent* journalist Jarvis (2010, para 8) highlights this inactivity and its contrast to the curative nature of Jimmy's autistic interests by stating that in contrast to his well-behaved and ambitious brother, "George is trouble". Jarvis continues by stating that this is not George's fault, as "he just hasn't found his interest yet, and there's nothing to take the edge off his symptom". This invokes the popular stereotype that all autistic people have a special interest or ability. It perhaps also suggests that if George had 'applied himself' and discovered such an interest, he too could have overcome the disabling aspects of his condition and been "cured".

The documentary construes George's and Jimmy's abilities through the binaries of passivity/activity and capacity/incapacity. However, it does so only by omitting any information about George's unique strengths and challenges. Notably, there is no mention of George's hyperlexia in *Autism, Disco and Me* and the documentary's viewers would only be aware if they had read Hattenstone's (2010) article, in which George gives a brief description of his diagnosis. Additionally, Jimmy has unspecified learning difficulties, again providing a further contrast between the two boys. These omissions reduce George's agency and remove his potential for narrative growth, activity, or 'improvement'.

Also broadcast in 2010, Channel 4's *Young, Autistic and Stagestruck* is a four-part series that follows nine autistic individuals as they help to write and perform a play about the mind of a fictional autistic boy. It is a multifaceted narrative following the run-up to the

production and includes scenes of rehearsal sessions as well as interviews with the participating children and their parents and the production's director and drama therapist. The last episode features extracts from the successful performance and recaps earlier episodes, showing the distance travelled by the young stars. The ages of the participants span from 11 to 20 with various positions on the autistic spectrum, including Ben (12), Andrew (17), Mollie (11), Jonathan (12), Jozef (11) and Claire (19). The documentary's opening scenes intercut an interview with Mollie with scenes of her upset and violent outbursts at home and in rehearsals, casting the series as the story of Mollie's transformation.

The series introduces its participants through various depictions of what used to be called 'low' and 'high' functioning autism. While it presents autistic children with learning or communication difficulties intimate, emotional 'moments' through verbal discourse, such as Ben's divulging of his mental health difficulties, children with learning difficulties are shown struggling with physical health and communication difficulties. These portrayals are potentially stigmatising, as they focus on deficit and difference, effectively separating autistic children into two categories: those with communication or language difficulties and those with Asperger's syndrome. Within the former category is Jozef, who has limited language abilities and depends on those around him for his care needs. His introductory scenes include footage of his parents helping him bathe. These scenes seem exploitative and unnecessary; after all, an interview with Jozef's parents, without Jozef bathing in the background, could easily have conveyed the same information without compromising Jozef's privacy. In another scene, Jozef is shown soiling himself during rehearsals; here there are potentially stigmatising shots of Jozef's stained chair and reaction shots of other children looking shocked and disgusted. These scenes share something of the exploitative mode of freak shows, as Jozef's most intimate bodily experiences are shown for voyeuristic pleasure.



The soiling scene has a certain shock value and represents a tangible starting point for Jozef's curative journey. As Jozef has communication difficulties, he is unable to express his thoughts and feelings regarding his participation in the rehearsals. Instead, the series concentrates on Jozef's striking behaviours, and the commentary provided by his mother, who speaks as Jozef's proxy. When the rehearsal for the performance moves to the theatre in a later episode, rather than being anxious as he was in earlier episodes, Jozef appears excited. The last interview is from Jozef's mother, who says that while Jozef will never be cured, he has improved. This statement attributes the lessening of autistic difficulties to the curative power of performance and music. Indeed, the documentary's participants all appear to have 'succeeded', as they all participate in the final performance and a montage accompanying the credits of the final episode reveals each participant's progress. Through their participation in the series and the stage production, they are all shown to have 'improved' their autism through increased social integration.

Nevertheless, *Young, Autistic & Stagestruck* may provide an overly simplistic, even Panglossian, view of the curative effects of participation in music and stage performance on autistic people. There is indeed a growing body of literature surrounding the therapeutic effect of music on autistic children; for example, De Vries et al. (2015, p.234) state that music has the capacity to impact autistic individuals positively when used as a therapeutic intervention by trained professionals. Yet these films' musical and entertainment facets present an idealised image of autism as 'curable' and suggest the possibility of dramatic improvements in communication skills and social interactions.

### The ideal autistic

The autistic public identity is built upon myths of social isolation and idealisation and constructions of disability representations inherited from the historical freak show. Garland-Thomson (1996, p.10) terms this process 'enfreakment', which paradoxically foregrounds specific bodily differences and eccentricities by collapsing them into "a single amorphous category of corporeal otherness". Meanwhile, Murray (2008, p. xvii) states that autism is regarded as "compellingly attractive" and a source of "endless fascination" in the way it presents human otherness. Autism documentaries accentuate this otherness narratively, thematically and visually. In entertainment-focused documentaries, autism portrayals merge notions of enfreakment, idealisation and otherness for spectacular consumption. The term 'ideal autistic' coined here identifies and highlights this practice of reifying and othering autistic individuals in docutainment formats.

Ideal autistics have a particular set of characteristics. They are predominantly white males and are socially isolated or awkward – but not to the point of alienating the audience – and young; indeed, it is rare for anyone older than their mid-twenties to be included in popular autism texts and most representations focus on teenage boys. Moreover, common autistic stereotypes consider autism to be a 'white' condition and that autistic people are capable of violence (Botha et al. 2020, p.17). Although the ideal autistic contains aspects of these stereotypes, as depictions mainly centre on white individuals, violence is lacking in their portrayal. The ideal autistic must instead endure a struggle, possess endearing oddities and have an engaging family. Additionally, autism idealisation draws upon elements of supercrip representations, featuring stories of likeable individuals embarking on heart-warming struggles (Nelson, 1994, p.6). Jonathan was only diagnosed with autism eighteen months

before filming of *Young, Autistic and Stagestruck*. He is sympathetic and his mother's fight for his diagnosis endears and engrosses. Such intimate and personal stories serve to counter some of the 'colder' medical and deficit-focused representations that plague many science focused documentaries.

Autistic adults in documentaries face juvenilisation and depiction as innocent and non-sexual. The reality television series *The Undateables* (Carre, 2012-present) offers a chance at romance for its participants, but sanitises these opportunities. The series frequently features disabled people on blind dates, but is controversial among disability activists, as Shakespeare & Richardson (2018, p.84) report, for appearing to "ghettoize disability into a spectacle". The idealisation of autistic individuals denies them their sexuality, casting them as asexual, even disembodied, and gently mocking their relative naivety. *Young, Autistic and Stagestruck* depicts Andrew's and Claire's romantic subplot as innocent and childlike. When Andrew's parents sit him down for a conversation regarding personal boundaries and consent, it is clear that he is unfamiliar with these notions. Andrew's parents, meanwhile, chaperone the couple's date, evoking the historical use of chaperones to maintain propriety between courting couples. The pair's relationship cannot move beyond friendship and Claire eventually opines that Andrew is great to "hang out" with.

Disabled persons are subject to social disablement where societal acceptance depends on an individual's willingness to change (Rodan et al., 2013, p.5). By the same token, the ideal autistic must be prepared to 'help themselves' through participation in programming/documentary. Whereas supercrips stories feature heart-warming tales of triumphing or heroic succumbing (Nelson, 1994, p.6), the process of autistic idealisation involves triumphing over adversity and the readiness of autistic individuals to confront

everyday situations they find difficult. In the case of autism docutainment, these situations are actually highly contrived stage productions. In *Young, Autistic and Stagestruck*, Jozef and Andrew triumph through dedication and hard work and make huge improvements through their involvement with other autistic participants. Their achievements are celebrated by the uplifting soundtrack.

The documentary constructs its participants' willingness as either passive or active. Participants on the lower end of the autistic spectrum are usually shown to be willing due to their passivity – they do not fight the process as they do not have the agency or self-advocacy to resist it. *Young, Autistic and Stagestruck* includes many emotional outbursts, often during rehearsal sessions. Mollie, for example, often refuses to participate and is threatened with exclusion. However, each time this happens she is soothed or cajoled back to the rehearsals. In one particularly emotional scene, her mother begs her not to be excluded, attributing her behaviour to her fear of failure. Despite her earlier difficulties, Mollie overcomes and expresses determination to improve her skills and behaviour. Andrew, who is 'classically autistic', is more passive and 'goes with the flow'. Although he occasionally gets upset, he enjoys the opportunities to rehearse the stage production; his passivity contrasts with Mollie's often volatile protestations.

*Young, Autistic and Stagestruck* presents its participants as differentiated 'characters' in docu-soap fashion. They are easily identifiable due to their idealisation and each of the four episodes in the series features the backstory, and the home life, of a selection of the group. In one such example Ben, as the narrator outlines, has high functioning autism and is highly intelligent. He is a strong example of the ideal autistic type and he can be singled out as a central character in the series. Other participants in the series do not get equal billing; for

example, Leah is always positioned in the background of shots and little autobiographical information is provided about her. Ben's story, however, is the emotional heart of the film. Although the narrator states that Ben has difficulties coping with his and others' emotions, he does articulate his feelings. His initial, self-proclaimed negative attitude often makes him resistant to participate in the production; his evocative outbursts often reveal profoundly personal information about his mental health and fears of his future. But Ben's eventual participation in the production and his confrontation of his personal difficulties allows him to challenge a series of disability stereotypes that might otherwise depict him as "own worst and only enemy" and "incapable of participating fully in community life" (Barnes, 1992).

The curative autism narrative and the construction of the ideal autistic in *Young, Autistic and Stagestruck* could be viewed in relation to a psychological stereotype highlighted by Kupper (2003, p.51), namely that disabled people want to be 'normal'. The production asks the parents whether they would remove their child's autism if presented with the opportunity. They unanimously answered in the affirmative. By contrast, the children's responses are more positive and accepting of their autism. However, it is the parents' perspective, rather than that of their children, with which the audience is encouraged to align, as the series is heavily invested in a narrative of change and overcoming. Although there are examples of parental positivity throughout, the parents' earlier hope of transformation reflects the series' apparent objective of normalising, integrating and thereby idealising the autistic children.

The ideal autistic and the curative narrative arguably reflect and reinforce neoliberal attitudes towards health and illness. Crawford (2006, p.402) highlights that in contemporary Western societies, "personal responsibility for health is widely considered the *sine qua non* of individual autonomy and good citizenship". *Young, Autistic and Stagestruck* emphasises

personal autonomy. The narrator states that the programme offers a chance for participants to “show the world what they’re really capable of... but what they do will be up to them”, suggesting that the level and choice of participation is what will determine the personal gains the participants derive from their experience. We can perhaps detect in such statements a shift from the disciplinary perspective towards autistic people typical of science focused documentaries, in which autistic individuals are seen as passive, towards the more dynamic and individualised conception of agency implied in Han’s (2010) notion of the ‘achievement society’. But the discourse of personal responsibility ignores the question of how accessible theatrical intervention programs such as the one depicted in *Young, Autistic and Stagestruck* actually are. King (2012, p.202) discusses the limitations of individuals acting upon health discourses, pointing to constraints such as cultural capital, class, race, gender. *Young, Autistic & Stagestruck* and *Autism, Disco and Me* virtually ignore these broader socio-political contexts. Neoliberal society tends to view ill-health as a personal choice or as reflecting a lack of discipline and physical dedication (King, 2012, p.202). Those willing to participate in the stage production reflect neoliberal attitudes towards ‘recovery’ and those deemed unwilling are presented less sympathetically or simply cast aside.

#### Documentary and the commodification of autism

Autism, and its representation within media and academia, has been commodified to a great extent. Mallett & Runswick-Cole (2012, pp.43–44) assert that autism has value; the raw materials are the “time, bodies, selves, symptoms, behaviours and experiences provided by families and individuals, utilised by and added to by the time, bodies, selves of professionals, practitioners, experts and academics”. Commodification is even apparent in the academic

community, where conferences, books, research, and journal articles promote and market ideas and discussions about autism, which raises questions on who benefits from such work. Outside of academic institutions, meanwhile, the autism industry is “flourishing” and the commodification of autism trades and profits on treatment and intervention programmes such as applied behaviour analysis (Runswick-Cole, 2014, p.1125), many of which are of dubious merit. Unlike the science documentaries discussed earlier, the films explored here and later in this dissertation typically market autism as a ‘thing’. Images of autism have an exchange value both commercially, academically and within the field of autism self-advocacy.

Mallett & Runswick-Cole (2012, p.44) discuss the work of Haug (1986) stating that market exchanges depend on consumers’ self-acknowledged need and desire for an object. In the case of autism, Mallett & Runswick-Cole (2012, p.44) claim, the public demand for autism narratives is driven by a desire for clarity about and understanding of autism. The documentaries discussed in this dissertation all promise such knowledge. The documentaries in the preceding chapters announce this undertaking within their titles: *Horizon: What is Autism*; *MMR: What they didn’t tell you* and *The Real Rain Man*. Each title tantalises the audience with a pledge to reveal the ‘true nature’ of autism. By contrast, the entertainment documentaries explored in this chapter promise to show how autistic people can change, often through the development of feel-good stories.

Once captured by the camera, daily life is transformed into a commodity (Andrejevic, 2011, p.18). Autism docutainment formats draw heavily from reality television and despite attempts at fostering the values of acceptance and integration, they frequently commodify autism. BBC Three’s *Autistic Superstars* is a two-part series following two autistic singers preparing to perform at autism focused musical events. The show is a hybridisation of reality

television that substitutes autistic participants for the more usual hopeful public wishing for fame. It follows a traditional expository documentary style by introducing participants' backgrounds and performance preparation. And like many of the documentaries discussed here, *Autistic Superstars* has a more commercial structure, relying on recaps and prolepsis as well as handheld camerawork to maintain viewers' interest and create reality effects. The second episode, for example, features recapped scenes from the first, interspersed with the participants' musical performances.

Reality television shows are heavily inscribed with neoliberal values. They are tightly structured spaces that test and judge stars' performances and maximise values of consumption, labour, and social competition; they also place their stars in situations that bring out specific qualities that centre on the acquisition of personal value and self-improvement (Redden, 2018, p.409). *Autistic Superstars* appropriates many thematic and stylistic qualities of its reality television kin, such as *X-Factor* (Hurford-Jones, 2014-2018) and *The Voice UK* (van Rongen, 2012-present), in which music and performances are essential to their brand identity. A significant difference between these shows and *Autistic Superstars* is that the audience voting and judging panel have been removed, possibly for ethical reasons relating to concerns about exploitation and taste. Although the second episode of the documentary bears the closest stylistic similarities to *X-Factor*, both episodes could be said to commodify and reify autism.

Reality television developed in the 1990s as a relatively cheap form of television, alongside neoliberal policies including public sector downsizing, welfare reform and privatisation, combined with an emphasis on consumer choice and heightened expectations of individual responsibility (Ouellette, 2010, p.68). *X-Factor*, and programs of its ilk, epitomize



the hybridised reality television formats' move into dominant culture through the complex interplay between shifting political economy, television industry, and technical developments that take place in a specific sociopolitical context (Mast, 2009, p.885). In place of a cash prize or record contract, *Autistic Superstars* offers its contestants opportunities: a chance to change lives, be 'normal', leave their socially isolated world, and integrate into wider society. In the first episode's opening, Martin sings live on stage as the presenter Reggie Yates narrates and outlines the series' themes, structure, and plot. Martin has gone from singing at home to performing live in front of a studio audience, with the episode starting with the culmination of Martin's success in his live performance. His singling continues as the camera transitions to Martin at home, vocalising non-verbal sounds and presenting physically repetitive autistic behaviours. The contrast between these scenes emphasises the transformative journeys Martin and the other participants have undertaken and their 'completed' societal integration. Far from constituting an acceptance of the fundamental difference of neuroqueer identities, however, such narratives reinforce socially normative ideologies of personal success and individual transformation.

Participation in these shows is a transactional process. Autism performances are construed as being exchanged for acceptance that seemingly rejects social constructions of disability by forcing the autistic body to change. All of those participating in *Autistic Superstars* are deemed successful to varying degrees, as they participate in the cumulative stage productions or shows, and their success depends on their ability to perform in a manner that improves their original skills. Another *Autistic Superstars* participant, Carly, a 23-year-old autistic woman who speaks with an American accent when nervous, overcomes her anxiety and performs on stage. Her mother outlines singing's transformative properties as when Carly sings, she goes from "being this person who finds the world a scary place to another

character". When performing for Yates in the family living room, she changes, adopting a new persona as she sings 'All That Jazz' from the musical *Chicago*. Her eyes close, and she becomes 'lost' in the song as her arms mimic the dance moves featured in the film and stage show. Here her private performance is transposed to the public realm and commodified. The transactional process promises acceptance by audiences but only in exchange for the singers' performance and participation. *X-Factor* and *Autistic Superstars* draw upon similar performance conventions to the freak show, as both reproduce autistic performance as spectacle.

Reality television shows such as *Britain's Got Talent* (Brown & Hurford-Jones, 2007-present) engage with the competitive principles of neoliberalism as "the genre's narrative conventions reflect its morals" often by positioning constants against one-another (Grazian, 2010, p.69). But in *Autistic Superstars*, at least, Carly and Martin are the 'headline' acts but are not pitted against one another. There is no winner, and they are given equal screen time. Instead, competitive elements of the format are softened and internalised, as the participants must battle their own autism instead of other contestants. *Autistic Superstars* offers an opportunity for self-improvement and self-expression. It holds out the hope that Carly, Martin, and others will accept and understand those outside their families through participation in the stage show. Their performances will allow them to 'blend in' and overcome or suppress their autistic behaviours. *Autistic Superstars* thus merges the competitive ideologies of reality formats with streamlined transformation and television spectacle and reinforces the ideal autistic construction.

Reality television formats, which make up a very significant part of Britain's television export market, are bought and sold across the world; they become transposable and malleable, morphing to meet the needs of the purposes of each production. *Autistic*

*Superstars* repurposes a familiar entertainment format. By viewing autism as its own unique culture with a distinctive identity, the ramifications of the ideal autistic can be realised. The repetitive format provides certainty and familiarity as it perpetuates cultural myths surrounding disability and personal achievement draws upon cultural memories of the freak show.

Yet the commercialised nature of the format inevitably impacts upon its participants. Reality television entails commodifying and appropriation of the depicted people and their image (Mast, 2009, p.891). Within neoliberal disability discourse, disabled individuals have shifted from being viewed as modernity's exception (whereby difference and defects are to be isolated and eradicated) to be instead considered as neoliberal exceptionality (Mitchell & Synder, 2015, p.205). As a result, "the ontology of disability retrieves a formerly fallen object and makes it newly available for *cultural rehabilitation*" (Mitchell & Synder, 2015, p.205). In productions such as *Autistic Superstars* rehabilitation occurs through the depiction of the ideal autistic's story arc. However, like much of the representational opportunities offered by neoliberal media, this comes at a cost. Here autistic bodies become spectacles for consumption in a highly commercialised and ritualistic setting. A final aspect of commodification in this series is the transformation of passive citizens into active ones. Turner (2010, p.172) argues that the reality television makeover programme "commodifies the renovation of the person, demonstrating how their subject can respond to a more informed strategy of consumption". Such a process is seen in scenes where Carly tries on numerous costumes for her performance in a manner that recalls the conventions of 'makeover television'. The transformative nature of these autism docutainment films ostensibly serves to educate, build confidence, and help those autistic people overcome their conditions and serve to assimilate its stars into society; but it does so by replicating the conventions of

television formats that have often been regarded as highly problematic from critical and feminist perspectives. *Autistic Superstars* is not about showing the daily routines of Carly and Martin. Rather, it aims to change them from passive members of society into active ones. In this sense, the documentary ascribes cultural value to autistic bodies and is intertwined with the normalising and curative tendencies that characterise the documentaries discussed earlier in this chapter.

### Conclusion

Autism docutainment engages in both processes of autistic enfreakment and normalisation. It positions autistic people within historical conceptualisations of deficit and difference through formats that rely primarily on spectacle and performance. This chapter has examined hybrid entertainment documentaries in the context of their freak show predecessors, and disability performance through thematic and story devices used to remove the disabling aspects of autism to narratively normalise and integrate. It explores the homology between docutainment formats and neoliberal values in challenge and goal-oriented documentaries that demand and reward social participation. There is also a curative aspect of these narratives, as the documentaries seek to intervene in autistic people's lives to produce normative behaviours and aid 'social inclusion'.

Superficially, at least, these documentaries endeavour to improve and enrich their participants' lives. Autism 'cure' conflates with personal passions as many of the films' participants seem to enjoy their involvement in preparing and delivering performances. Each individual episode or series ends with a final performance that often accentuates the benefits upon the autistic person in terms of personal confidence and friendships. Yet although this chapter highlights the many seemingly positive ramifications on the autistic participants

within these transformation narratives, these representations are often exploitative and stigmatising as they draw attention to the more cinematic aspects of the condition for voyeuristic effect. The attempts to 'cure' or 'fix' autistic lives may oversimplify significant problems and trivialise them within formats that effectively constitute forms of makeover and transformational television – one dismayed blogger even writes about *Autistic Superstars* that the format is “is completely the wrong vehicle to address such issues” (*'Autistic Superstars? The world's gone bonkers'*, 2010, para 5). In this respect, curative and rehabilitation narratives potentially damage public perceptions of autism and negatively impact autistic audiences and their families. They could force unwarranted pressure and expectations onto the autistic body.

This chapter established the term 'ideal autistic' to refer to the idealisation of the white male autistic and notes that this figure is a highly stereotyped and reductive form of autism representation that exploits the autistic people's 'willingness' to improve in the context of neoliberal understandings of health and commodification. Furthermore, the prevalence of the 'ideal autistic' in these documentaries underscores the limited diversity in popular autistic representation. Representations of white teenage boys with Asperger's syndrome, or as they are often described in the documentaries, high functioning autism, dominate autism docutainment, while female autistics, those with communication difficulties or learning disabilities are underrepresented, pushed into the background or presented voyeuristically.

## Chapter 4: Autistic Stardom and Notoriety

As we have seen so far in this dissertation, autism is becoming increasingly commodified. Rather than solely belonging to private or clinical spheres of discourse, it is becoming a part of the everyday demotic domain via popular entertainment. This process includes the popular trend for 'coming out' narratives in which individuals reveal their neurodivergent status in press, television and social media. At the same time, broadcasters' attempts to increase diversity across their programming has led to a proliferation of representations of television personalities with disabilities. Although many documentaries feature people with physical disabilities, television programmes are increasingly bringing those with less visible disabilities, such as autism, to the fore. As the previous chapter showed, the 2010s was a popular time for autism entertainment documentaries, where autistic teenage boys frequently underwent processes of idealisation and commodification. This chapter analyses how entertainment documentaries broadcast between 2009 and 2015 contribute to the creation of autistic celebrity identities by focusing on two autistic television and media personalities who found fame through reality television and entertainment hybrid documentaries.

This chapter broadens the scope of the discussion by examining the television documentary portrayal of two autistic celebrities in relation to their class, gender, and sexuality. Specifically, it examines the changing depictions of the autistic singer Susan Boyle and the autistic television personality and presenter Alan Gardner. It argues that the television texts and the media paratexts that surround autistic celebrity are potentially quite stigmatising and that despite the increased visibility of autistic people through their achievement of fame and celebrity status, the depictions often rely on stereotypes.

### Susan Boyle and the celebrity documentary

After her debut appearance on *Britain's Got Talent* (Milligan, Bullen, & Thursby, 2009), Susan Boyle gained notoriety and underwent a process of celebrification. Reality television programmes such as *Britain's Got Talent* work through established fame mythologies within a self-conscious and commercialised celebrity culture (Holmes, 2010, p.74). Boyle's performance defied audience expectations, captivating viewers and the press. There are many different forms of celebrity, each with varying degrees of talent and cultural capital. Rojek (2004, pp.17- 18) outlines three forms of celebrity: ascribed, achieved, and attributed. Ascribed celebrities are those born into fame from biological descent, such as royalty. The fame of attributed celebrities is the result of cultural intermediaries. Attributed celebrities are often those vaulted into the public consciousness for little reason beyond drawing the news and current affairs media's attention, such as people who have affairs with celebrities. Achieved celebrity is the most applicable to celebrities with disabilities earned through their perceived accomplishments, such as sportspeople or artists. Popular and prominent in neoliberal environments, or what Han (2010) calls 'achievement societies', an achieved autistic celebrity can participate, exist, or excel within 'normal' society despite their autism. He or she will often have a talent, skill or calling that aids in this participation. Clearly, there is a degree of conceptual overlap between the achieved disabled celebrity and the supercrip stereotype discussed in previous chapters.

Celebrification is the transformation process whereby ordinary individuals are changed into celebrities, whereas the term celebritization usually refers to the social and cultural shift towards a celebrity oriented society (Driessens, 2012, p.643). The latter process

can be understood as a “demotic turn” that reflects the expansion of consumer choice in media consumption and the abundance of opportunities for ordinary people to participate in broadcast and television media (Turner, 2014, p.101). Boyle’s rapid rise to fame took place within this framework, as footage of her audition was shared widely by audiences through YouTube and other social media platforms. ‘Spreadable’ video clips feature disability performances prominently due to the emotive impact of transformational narratives and Boyle’s *Britain’s Got Talent* audition is an example of disability-focused viral media’s ability to rapidly disseminate through the Internet (Ellis, 2015, p.147). Boyle’s instant YouTube fame suggests that audiences increasingly encounter celebrities not by television and film directly so much as by secondary circulations (Bennett & Holmes, 2010, p.77). However, the nature of Boyle’s fame is continually changing and evolving. Boyle revealed a diagnosis of Asperger’s syndrome in 2013 as revealed in an interview with *The Observer* (Deveney, 2013). This diagnosis altered journalistic perceptions of her, turning her into an autistic celebrity. This chapter focuses mainly on her biographical documentaries that track her developing celebrity status and which were broadcast by ITV between 2009 and 2013.

Competitive reality television programs include disabled contestants to invoke emotional reactions among their viewers (Ellis, 2015, p.91). ITV has capitalised upon this to create a succession of documentary programs about Boyle. The hybrid entertainment documentary *I Dreamed a Dream: The Susan Boyle Story* (Notman-Watt, 2009) provides an insight into Boyle’s life and how she copes with being in the public eye. Classified by ITV as a ‘musical special’, it merges documentary aspects with footage from *Britain’s Got Talent*, interviews and live singing from Boyle. *Susan Boyle: An Unlikely Superstar* (Humphreys, 2011) questions whether Boyle is truly happy since becoming famous. Finally, *Susan Boyle: There’s*



*Something About Susan* (Gammon, 2013) addresses Boyle's Asperger's diagnosis and how Boyle copes with the stresses of fame in the lead up to her first solo tour.

The second autism celebrity to be examined in this chapter is Alan Gardner, star of the factual garden makeover series *The Autistic Gardener* (Carre & Emerson, 2015-2017). Boyle and Gardner have vastly different public celebrity personas that are filtered through distinctions of gender, social class, and their differing autism diagnosis. Although neither Boyle nor Gardner are savants, their fame rests upon their skills and abilities. Boyle is naturally gifted at singing, whereas Gardner attributes his gardening skills to his autism, allowing him to think laterally with excellent attention to detail (Newall, 2015, para 2). Gardner's autism has inspired "special interests" (Sewards, 2015, para 1) and he considers his Asperger's to be "a gift" (Gardner as quoted by Newall, 2015, para 2).

Boyle and Gardner found their fame by participating in 'curative' documentary storylines that have afforded them achieved celebrity status. The documentaries represent them as contributing and operating within wider society to varying degrees. Their ability to 'overcome' the challenges of autism is a standard theme in the television and news media discourse surrounding Boyle and Gardner, linking their autism with their celebrity personas. Boyle is an example of a global celebrity, whereas Gardner, more modestly, is a British television personality. Bennett (2010, p.2) describes television personalities as those who 'play themselves' by accentuating their authenticity and ordinary personas. The construction and function of television personalities' authenticity and ordinariness differs in relation to audiences' understanding of them as televisually or vocationally skilled performers (Bennett, 2010, p.155). Both Boyle and Gardner have achieved fame and popularity due to the

marketing of their skills, personalities, and personas. In this regard, Boyle is also a television personality, despite her fame on the world stage.

It is important to place Boyle's documentaries within the wider context of her press treatment, as Boyle has been the subject of a plethora of news headlines, magazine interviews, television specials, biographies, and autobiographies. Prior to Boyle's Asperger's diagnosis in 2013, much of her treatment by the public and media centred on her physical appearance, as well as issues of femininity, class and talent. Many of the typical routes of female celebrity production were inaccessible to Boyle due to her age and her lack of conformity to societal norms of beauty. In fact, much of the media coverage of Boyle, especially early in her career, were openly misogynistic, often drawing attention to her 'excess' body hair; indeed, women's body hair is associated in misogynistic discourses with an absence of femininity and women who decline to remove body hair frequently encounter stigma and sanctions (Fahs, 2011, p.454; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003, p.341). Newspapers commonly referred to Boyle as the 'Hairy Angel Susan Boyle' (Edwards, 2009, p.5; Begley, 2009, p.5; Dyke, 2009, p.3; Nathan & Rogers, 2009, p.19), a phrase that combines a backhanded compliment with corporeal ridicule. The equally dehumanising portmanteau "Subo" (Nathan & Robertson, 2009, p.9; Carson, 2010, p.7) was frequently employed in the British tabloid press, too, a form of media well known to apply pressure, complaints, criticism and nicknames and 'noticings' (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004, p.80) to women in order to police and correct the female body.

This initial abusive coverage of Susan Boyle, which often focused on her health and appearance, did not go unnoticed and in 2009 the Press Complaints Commission issued a warning to newspaper editors regarding the infringements upon Boyle's privacy (Brook, 2009,

para 1). Such complaints underline the press and public interest in the supposed conflict between Boyle's physical image and her talent. In an article circulated in *The Guardian*, journalist Joan Smith (2009, para 2) argued that the mistreatment of Boyle in the news and broadcast media as well as online tended to construct Boyle as naïve and unworldly, painting Boyle as an isolated and risible figure. She further criticises public and press interest in Boyle's single status and her portrayal as a 'spinster' (2009, para 3) and concludes by likening the tabloid treatment and public attitudes towards Boyle to those surrounding a freak show (2009, para 5).

More sympathetic than the newspaper articles that discussed her during this early stage in her career, ITV's documentary *I Dreamed a Dream: The Susan Boyle Story* is the earliest of the three Boyle documentaries discussed here. Broadcast in 2009, the same year as Boyle's debut performance on *Britain's Got Talent*, this film seeks to capitalise on growing public interest and exposes previously unseen elements of Boyle's life and draws attention to Boyle's new stylised appearance. Mainstream media dictates and regulates ideas about acceptable bodily appearance and expression (Fahs, 2017, p.192) and Boyle, like many middle-aged women, is frequently stereotyped as being asexual, frumpy, and passive in television texts (Rodan et al., 2013, p.56). Her portrayal in *Britain's Got Talent* and *I Dreamed a Dream: The Susan Boyle Story* reflects the extent of societal prejudices surrounding older female bodies.

*I Dreamed a Dream* documents the removal of the 'improper' aspects of Boyle's femininity to make her fit within 'acceptable' norms of the celebrity body and appearance. It centres on her transformation through a 'before and after' narrative format, using footage from her *Britain's Got Talent* audition. The documentary opens with a re-edited black and

white version of original audition footage, her singing goals, her performance and the talent show judges' initial expressions of disdain, disbelief, and evident delight at Boyle's 'unexpected' performance. The original footage is then critiqued for showing a superior judging gaze aimed at an apparently 'deluded' subject, implying that Boyle's middle age and appearance made her aspirations even less acceptable than other 'wannabe' young fame seekers (Holmes, 2010, p.75). Indeed, the documentary is sympathetic, to some extent reinforcing that the argument that the public's fascination with Boyle's quick rise to fame reflects the ageist and sexist logics governing female celebrity culture (Holmes & Negra, 2011, p.7). Yet despite its early critique of sexist and ageist attitudes towards Boyle, the film ends by presenting Boyle within an idealised construction of femininity. *I Dreamed a Dream: The Susan Boyle Story* celebrates Boyle's transformation, change and progression since her audition, making her singing aspirations 'acceptable' and authentically bridging the presumed disconnect between her talent and her appearance.

Much of this transformation hinges upon Boyle's appearance. *I Dreamed a Dream: The Susan Boyle Story* consistently draws attention to Boyle's expensive clothes, new hair style and professionally applied makeup. Although none of the Boyle documentaries explicitly mentions weight loss, they all suggest this theme through by showing footage of her early and later appearances on *Britain's Got Talent*. In one of these later appearance, *Britain's Got Talent* frames Boyle's transformation as a life-altering metamorphosis when Piers Morgan, the show's host, asks the audience, "how great does she look tonight?". This question insinuates that there was something wrong about her previous appearance, invoking elements of reality television's makeover formats. Makeover formats intercept issues "of class, race, and gender-inflected 'improvements' that gain legitimacy by speaking through the idiom of identity" (Weber, 2009, pp.5-6). In *I Dreamed a Dream*, Boyle herself remarks that

she has become “a sophisticated lady” since rising to fame. These comments suggest that her new appearance has changed her identity and the way she views herself as an individual. Fahs (2017, p.191) refers to Boyle’s initial appearance as representing the dreaded female body to some female audience members, representing many women’s fears regarding appearance. In a culture that ‘others’ women who digress from accepted female beauty standards, Boyle’s metamorphosis and the external factors contributing to this change are attempts to achieve normalisation and acceptance.

Boyle’s earlier media depictions also constructed her as a person unable to cope socially. The transformation of her appearance tames the visual signifiers of what was, at the time, a vaguely labelled disability. Since Boyle’s Asperger’s Syndrome diagnosis in 2013, news and broadcast media, despite occasional attempts at acceptance and understanding, have continued to emphasise and sensationalise the difficulties Boyle has faced due to her autism. This makes the process of normalisation and acceptance problematic; but the notion of authenticity plays a key role here. In her Foucauldian reading of the cosmetic surgery and the televisual makeover format, Heyes (2007, p.21) states that in narratives employ normalising language about identity, “an authentic personality of great moral beauty must be brought out of the body that fails adequately to reflect it”.

Following Boyle’s diagnosis, public interest in the singer was renewed, leading to a flurry of new newspaper articles about her. The diagnosis caused a change in the way in which her celebrity persona was communicated and received as Boyle went from a famous individual with an ambiguous learning disability (Calvert, 2014, p.102 & 104) to one with an Asperger’s diagnosis. Boyle was now seen as an autistic individual, a definitive label that defines her in the eyes of the public. Newspaper articles began to highlight Boyle’s “relief” at

being diagnosed (Archibald, 2013, para 1; Lowe, 2013, para 3), while providing a brief outline of Asperger's syndrome, quotations from Boyle offering validity to each article. The act of diagnosis provides tangibility to Boyle's eccentricity. Her diagnosis becomes part of her larger 'story'. Previous newspaper articles often concentrated on her bizarre and uncontrolled behaviour (Mills, 2013, para 12) whilst offering the occasional rationale that mentioned her learning disability or the brain damage that Boyle suffered at birth. Calvert (2014, p.104), meanwhile, examines Boyle's media and public construction as a learning-disabled individual, claiming that Boyle "offers no obvious object of discourse... in the absence of a discrete and visible object to fetishise, the learning disability is imprecisely identified and ambiguously located". However, Boyle's original 'imprecise' diagnosis was now replaced with media stories about Boyle asserting her Asperger's diagnosis.

The shift in Boyle's treatment by the media has also involved a move away from discussions of her appearance. However, her portrayal is not always positive, as the news and television media still rely on stereotypical themes and imagery. Although broadcast and print media discourse has shifted to include information regarding her Asperger's diagnosis, it still features some of the disrespectful terms used to describe Boyle in earlier portrayals, for example, "Subo" (Johnston, 2014, para 21; Merriman, 2016, para 14; Joseph, 2019, para 5). To take another example, during a lunch interview with the journalist Jenny Johnston for the *MailOnline*, Boyle's mood is described as suddenly changing. The *Mail* article is paternalistic and at times condescending as Johnston describes the attempts by himself, Boyle's manager and her PR teams to encourage Boyle to eat. Johnston dangles an onion ring in front of Boyle, as though presenting it to a child and describes her as behaving "like a toddler in a strop" when she turns her chair away (Johnston, 2014, para 6-7). Despite such infantilising details, the article goes on to highlight the effects that Boyle's Asperger's Syndrome has on her

actions. Johnston even states that Boyle's apparently churlish behaviour is not due to a "wilful temper" (Johnston, 2014, para 12) and goes on to confide her sympathy for the star. Nevertheless, the article depicts Boyle as a child, a person to be pitied, a victim of Asperger's Syndrome – all common autism stereotypes.

Other articles during Boyle's post-diagnosis period propagate these negative stereotypes, including the discussion of Boyle's treatment by the police after a public breakdown at Heathrow airport (Walker, 2016), which involved the police allegedly treating her like an "animal" (Earnshaw, 2016, para 10). Withers (2016, para 1) describes her symptoms as "crippling" and speculates that they may prevent her from singing live again. McCloskey (2013, para 9) latches on to Boyle's use of the word "relief" when describing her reaction to her Asperger's diagnosis. Such discourse realigned Boyle as a victim in opposition to previous stories labelling her as out of control. Waters (2013) uses Boyle's autism as an opportunity to discuss awareness and advocacy and the difficulties in diagnosing women and girls, which ends by inviting readers to seek further information. These articles show a cultural shift around Boyle, which fashion her as a symbol of awareness, and call for acceptance and understanding of autism.

Broadcast two years later, *Susan Boyle: There's Something About Susan* depicts its protagonist as 'trapped' by her autism, a representation that develops previous depictions of Boyle as trapped in an unruly body. Like the documentaries discussed in the previous chapter, this film is goal-orientated, following Boyle on her first solo tour. Touring is something that Boyle had been previously unable to do, owing to her feelings of anxiety. Within the first few minutes, the documentary's voiceover discusses Boyle's past autism and anxiety attacks. Headlines fill the screen declaring: "Ramboyle, Susan's four letter rant at coppers after hotel

row", "Susan Boyle breaks down in tears", and "Susan cracks under the pressure". These tabloid headlines accentuate the importance of media reactions to Boyle's celebrity and their reliance on out-of-control and victim stereotypes. Boyle proves able, however, to overcome her anxiety and completes a concert in Glasgow and the film ends by showing her starting a tour of the USA. The documentary interweaves Boyle's mental health difficulties with a larger transformational television narrative. Before Boyle's autism diagnosis, her singing and physical transformation were normalising factors; these elements are now presented as lifting and freeing her from her autism and mental health struggles, helping her overcome and gain confidence to complete her Glasgow performance. However, as Ellis (2015, p.91) suggests, "with the defining message of reality television in general being 'overcome the odds', narratives concerning people with disability hyperbolise the concept". Moreover, the documentary's celebration of Boyle's transformation and triumphant Glasgow performance may trivialise her mental health difficulties, insofar as it seeks to normalise her by showcasing her success but not presenting the impact of performance pressures on Boyle's psychological wellbeing.

Besides reinforcing stereotypical gender norms, Boyle's treatment in these documentaries and the media generally alludes to her class status. Boyle's body was subjected to class derision as it "seemed outside of the genteel norms of the metropolitan media spotlight" (Duffett, 2011, 179). In *Susan Boyle: An Unlikely Superstar*, Boyle is introduced somewhat unkindly as an "unknown, unemployed, lonely woman from Scotland". The programme portrays her as unsuccessful and unwomanly from the outset and the film's narrator voices his surprise at Susan living in her childhood council house. The term council house is a loaded term in the UK, carrying many adverse connotations, as media discourse often expresses disgust at working-class lifestyles (Lawler, 2005, p.430). The production



compounds the negative presentation of Boyle's working-class identity by drawing attention to Boyle's home condition, decorative state and cleanliness. To highlight any perceived untidiness or disorder, Boyle is asked if she is house proud. The programme follows this question with shots of a messily repaired television aerial, cardboard boxes and household clutter. Working-class people in reality television are often shamed (Reifová, 2021, p.1078) and Boyle represents what Reifová (2021, p.1083) describes as the unclassed self in which "class intersects with other identities and sublimates into them, typically age, ethnicity, gender and place of living". Although Boyle's house looks modern with fresh paint externally, unnecessary and invasive shots inside her bathroom are also shown: the toilet seat is up and there is a cluster of toiletries and accessories behind it. Although these shots have some diegetic rationale (Boyle at this point is commenting on the queues for the bathroom that she remembers from her childhood), they nevertheless seem to represent a gratuitous level of prurient scrutiny.

The programme invites the audience to relate to what Lawler (2005, p.432) describes as a fictive 'we' that excludes anyone not middle-class. Both *Susan Boyle: An Unlikely Superstar* and *Susan Boyle: There's Something About Susan* highlight that Boyle owns two properties: her childhood (former) council house in which she currently resides and a 'posh' new house which she bought after she became famous. Unhappy living in the latter, Boyle moved back into her childhood home, allowing her niece to live in her newly purchased property. By rejecting the expensive house, Boyle implicitly disavows neoliberal fantasies of social elevation and class advancement. She has rejected the upward social mobility that her fame affords. The documentary's framing of Boyle, then, features an undercurrent of classism from which even Boyle's disabled status does not quite protect her. Indeed, while the Boyle

documentaries do not critique their subject outright, they rely instead on a subtle semiotics of class opprobrium.

The last Boyle documentary to be broadcast, *There's Something About Susan* (2013), contains a very similar set of representations. Class issues are raised here by Boyle's employment of her friend Lorraine as her personal assistant. The increased social capital might be indicated by employing staff is negated by Boyle's autism, as Lorraine's assistance is presented as a necessity rather than a luxury. Lorraine is interviewed whilst making Susan's bed and discusses the childhood bullying of Boyle. A later scene shows Boyle interviewed whilst having a make-up test and her hair dyed in her kitchen, which again raises issues of femininity and class, as Boyle can afford to have this done in a professional setting, but chooses not to. Together, the inclusion of such small details of lifestyle gives the impression that Boyle is unfeminine due to her appearance and, by extension, having difficulties in the proper performance of 'womanly' and middle-class tasks. Parsons et al. (2017, pp.220-221) links deviations from traditional gender roles to negative attitudes towards women with physical disabilities. Although Boyle herself is not physically disabled, it is possible that her autism may cause her difficulties regarding housekeeping, itself a stereotypically female-gendered and working-class concern.

### Gender, sexuality and idealisation

Boyle's press and television depictions capitalise on aspects of autistic identity to create a celebritised autistic persona, which pairs 'extraordinary' talents with 'ordinary' characteristics. Chapter 3 coined the term 'ideal autistic' to identify the idealisation of autistic males. Autistic women are not idealised or commodified in the same fashion as men due to

the relatively few images of female autism across factual and fictional media. Autism is often considered male-dominated due to theories such as that of the extreme male brain that suggest sex-based differences in the diagnosing of autism concerning empathy and systemizing (Baron-Cohen, 2008, p.72; Greenberg et al., 2018, p.12155). Women often express symptoms differently and are more likely to camouflage their autism (Schuck et al., 2019, p.2600). Clinicians also perceive differences in core and associated symptoms of autism for women (Jamison et al., 2017, p.777). Additionally, Barnard-Brak et al. (2019, pp.220-221) highlight discrepancies in the numbers of male and female diagnoses, suggesting that girls and women are disproportionately underdiagnosed.

Although there are a handful of fictional autistic women portrayed in Western media (Dr Amy Farrah-Fowler in *The Big Bang Theory* and Dr Temperance “Bones” Brennan in *Bones* are coded as autistic, although a diagnosis is not confirmed in either series), they are far outnumbered by their male counterparts. The lack of female representations in fiction may alienate women on the spectrum and perpetuate marginalisation (Tharian et al., 2019, p.51). Although there are rather more depictions of autistic women in factual media forms such as documentaries, women are still underrepresented. This difference in representation alters the ways in which autistic women are typically idealised. Although female autism idealisation does occur, it is a more difficult enterprise. As in the case of men, female idealisation aims to make the female autistic body ‘safe’ and integrate women into society through normalisation. However, in the case of women, this process is far more often thwarted by negative assumptions about class, gender stereotypes and sexuality.

A recurring theme throughout Boyle’s appearances across television, documentary and news media is her appearance and its perceived incompatibility with her sexuality.

Western media frequently portray people with disabilities as “asexual” (Parsons et al., 2017, p.208), considering their sexuality as a “taboo” (Chib, 2015, p.105). Society also manifests complex cultural biases against obese individuals, in particular to overweight women (Coulter, 1996, p.135), who are relegated to this category as their bodies are often figured as “a parody of female sexuality” (Murray, 2004, p.237). The Boyle documentaries certainly cast their subject as asexual and aberrant. Expressions of sexuality from Boyle are often met with disdain, as seen in her original *Britain’s Got Talent* audition when she wiggles her hips but seemingly fails to meet the normative expectations of the audience about sexual desirability (Holmes, 2010, p.75). The audience’s mocking reaction to Boyle’s appearance and singing ambition reveals how much showmakers rely on the audience’s tacit knowledge regarding middle-aged femininity (Rodan, 2013, p.56). Audience and public scorn force Boyle to conform and appear asexual and non-threatening by castigating her behaviour. Typically, male ideal autistics manifest little sexuality beyond innocent kissing and the occasional hand-holding. Relationships are permitted, but following the dictates of autism idealisation, these must be childlike and innocent. Boyle, however, contradicts these expectations during her first appearance in *Britain’s Got Talent* and when she comments on her romantic desires, the audience laughs uncomfortably. Future depictions of Boyle appear to attempt to ‘correct’ this and normalise Boyle’s public image.

Boyle’s appearance on *Britain’s Got Talent* laid the groundwork for the adverse gendered treatment Boyle received in her early career. She divulges that she is unemployed, reveals her age and her romantic history and explains that she lives alone with her cat. The inclusion of such profoundly personal information creates a striking juxtaposition with Boyle’s upcoming, stellar audition performance. Within the first thirty seconds of Boyle’s debut appearance on *Britain’s Got Talent*, the series presents her as isolated, unusual, and

unfeminine. Prior to her singing onstage, she is met with derision and “scorn at what is seen as the apparent disjuncture between Boyle’s physical appearance, social status, and professed aspirations” (Holmes, 2010, p.75).

Boyle’s perceived difference and otherness is frequently intertwined with the depiction of her femininity and sexuality. It is possible to chart the changes and development of the portrayal, and diminishing, of her sexuality across each of the Boyle films through the presentation of her interactions with her well-documented childhood crush Donny Osmond (Staunton, 2012 McGrath, 2020). In the earliest of the three documentary films: *I Dreamed a Dream: The Susan Boyle Story*, the production sets up a meeting between the pair. Osmond enters Boyle’s hotel room with a flower bouquet, and the two embrace. They sit closely on a sofa, with Osmond’s arm placed on the back of the sofa behind her, giving the encounter an intimate feel. However, Boyle looks self-conscious, staring off to the side of the camera as they talk. Long takes allow the audience to revel in Boyle’s uncomfortable reaction. When Osmond kisses Boyle’s cheek, she giggles and kisses his cheek in response. Here Boyle’s sexuality is portrayed as chaste and consistent with her ‘naïve spinster’ status.

*Susan Boyle: An Unlikely Superstar* further explores Boyle’s sexuality through allusions to her romantic relationships that paint her as a lonely and isolated woman. When questioned about her romantic status, Boyle answers that she is hopeful that she will one day find love. Although this response is optimistic, it is framed as bittersweet. Cultural understanding surrounding Boyle’s age, weight and ‘otherness’ align the audience in a shared understanding that assumes and replicates Boyle’s spinsterhood. Further allusions to Boyle’s romantic status are posed when she is asked about her Donny Osmond bedspread as she tidies up her house (shots of Osmond’s face on the bedding invoke the stereotype of a teenage girl’s bedroom).

This detail portrays her interest as a ‘crush’, which may appear tragic in an adult woman. Boyle’s response to the questioning about her romantic interests is again coy and embarrassed, almost childlike, again the production frames her romantic interest as a trivial infatuation. Again, Boyle’s romantic interests are deemed innocent and immature.

The final Boyle documentary, *There’s Something About Susan*, sanitises Boyle’s sexuality even further. The only reference to Boyle’s romantic interests here is to the aforementioned Donny Osmond bedspread, which here again the camera lingers on. Boyle fans who have watched the preceding documentary would be aware of this allusion to Boyle’s childhood crush. But here Boyle is not questioned on its significance as in the previous film; rather her sexuality is entirely overlooked entirely. The Boyle films progressively dilute Boyle’s sexuality from a physical encounter when she meets with Osmond, to a childhood crush, and finally entirely overlooked. Each of these documentaries shapes and mediates Boyle’s autistic celebrity persona in relation to distinctions of class, gender and sexuality. But such factors are far less obvious in the portrayal of male autistic celebrities.

### Autism, celebrity and garden makeovers

The hybrid documentary *The Autistic Gardener* (Carre & Emerson, 2015-2017), like many of its popular television counterparts, ‘re-presents’ autism for the purpose of mass entertainment (Mallett & Runswick-Cole, 2016, p.119). This Channel 4 series follows Gardner and his team, who are all autistic, as they work on clients’ gardens. Created by Betty Productions, the programme has run for two series with a total of seven episodes, each of which involves a ‘makeover’ of an unruly garden, a format popularised in the 1990s by the BBC’s *Ground Force* (Haslam, 1998-2005) and Channel 4’s *Changing Rooms* (Clifford, 1996-

2004). The transformation makeover format has since become adapted and specialised, allowing niche subgenres to develop, and the show has given Gardner's celebrity status as a television personality. In 2015, Gardner presented a show garden at the Chelsea Flower Show and has featured on an episode of BBC One's *Celebrity Mastermind*. His success at Chelsea has also made him popular within the gardening community. He has a substantial Twitter following and is an ambassador for the National Autistic Society. As the details suggest, whereas Boyle's public image has been to a large extent controlled by her agents and producers, Gardner has exercised greater control over the construction of his public persona. Gardner's online persona, meanwhile, hinges on his identity as an autistic gardener. His prolific use of Twitter is a gateway for interacting with fans and other "micropublics" (Marshall, 2014, p.161) within the autism community, allowing him to become a public advocate for autism awareness.

In another contrast to Boyle, Gardner's treatment within the broader media has been overwhelmingly sympathetic. Gardner has never existed in the public mind as anything other than an autistic individual, since he only became well-known outside his gardening sphere following his diagnosis and the commissioning of his television programme. Therefore, the press does not need to correct or redress a pre-existing negative portrayal. His fame is also recent compared to that of Boyle and therefore has not inspired a comparable quantity of newspaper column inches. However, he has been written about in the press and this coverage is worthy of analysis, as Gardner has been branded as the most high-profile autistic British person (Baron, 2015, para 1). Gardner's status uniquely positions him to combat negative stereotypes and perceptions encompassing autism. In a *Times* article, Hewitson (2017, para 6) expresses that Gardner "has done well" considering the childhood bullying he endured and

further mentions that his first job had been in a supermarket – comments that possibly suggest that he experienced a degree of class prejudice.

Gardner is an important figure within the autistic community and considers himself to be a role model for other autistic people (Hewitson, 2017, para 16). His presence in the series has been described as “breezily educational and immensely charming” (Searle et al., 2015), transforming him into a potentially aspirational figure. This illustrates the importance of the parasocial connection audiences can form with on-screen stars. The newspaper discourse surrounding Gardner also demonstrates the high regard and potential benefits his television presence has for the autistic community. Moreover, *The Autistic Gardener* redresses a common problem with autism representations on screen, namely that adults with autism are seldom featured within disability programming, since productions often prefer to focus on children, teenagers, or young adults. It has even been claimed that in Western media, at least, interest in autism “is almost exclusively reserved for the under-20s” (Wells, 2015). Gardner in this sense challenges the typical autism stereotypes. Even the discussion of his earlier supermarket job, problematic as it is in some respects, challenges the ‘burden’ stereotype common throughout media discourse.

Gardner’s public image is constructed through competing discourses of ordinariness and difference. His dependable image resembles that of other famous television gardeners, such as horticulturists Alan Titchmarsh and Monty Don, who were popularised by similar televised gardening formats. Indeed, television gardeners are marketed precisely by their ordinariness, authenticity and (literal) down-to-earth-ness. Gardner also conforms to familiar television gardener demographics insofar as he is a white, middle-aged, presumed heterosexual male (implied by scenes of his wife and family) and from a broadly middle-class



background. He is a highly skilled, achieved celebrity, as attested by several diegetic references to his success at the Chelsea Flower Show. Additionally, he is a knowledgeable and competent presenter. Television personalities' vocational skills give them credibility, reassuring audiences that their talents are authentic and worth attending to, either by copying or learning (Bennett, 2010, p.155).

Gardner's 'ordinariness' is complemented by his inherent autistic differences, indicated by his behaviours and his distinctive appearance as a man with bright pink hair. While superficially these aspects may seem to conflict or overwhelm one another, they complement his television persona. Television personalities 'play themselves', emphasising the continuity and authenticity of their persona (Bennett, 2010, p.2). Indeed, Gardner's autism counters and removes any suspicion that his persona is part of a contrived performance. Gardner's autism lends his skills authority and serves to counter stereotypes and preconceptions surrounding autistic skills, abilities, and cultural myths of savantism. The use of entertainment settings acts as a proxy for social and societal inclusion that simplifies greater issues by providing an environment in which a process of normalisation can occur.

Despite the general positivity surrounding Gardner's autism and Gardner's attempts at education and awareness, Gardner and the programme format and the production companies have faced criticism. Mount (2015) highlights familiar documentary tropes within the gardening sub-genre of reality television, arguing that Gardner's appearance, the titles and the series' wordplay, together with the popularity of gardening and disability programming have "all boxes ticked". This rather backhanded compliment suggests something of a backlash at autism documentaries due to a recent increase in disability-focused programming, itself a response to broadcaster attempts at improving diversity and

inclusion. The *Guardian* television reviewer Wollaston (2015, para 2) is more sympathetic, stating that despite the “fashionable” nature of autism television, such programming challenges “perceptions, detaching stigma, showing what people can do”. He dismisses claims that such shows depict “autism as entertainment”. Even so, the term “fashionable” here might be taken as implying that the series – and by extension other disability television programming – is tokenistic and perhaps seeking to capitalise on its audience’s more trivial interests rather than genuinely serving a public good.

Unlike the negativity suffered by Boyle, broadcast and print media journalism has been careful to construct a positive representation of Gardner, crafting a distinct autistic identity for him, which often emphasises his unique appearance. Remarks are made about “bright pink hair and startling pink nails” (Sewards, 2015, para 1) and “neon pink hair and fingernails” (Hewitson, 2017, para 1), elsewhere called “flamboyantly pink” (Baron, 2015, para 1). Sewards (2015, para 1) continues by stating that “you’d be forgiven for thinking Alan Gardner was part of a circus act”, which again invokes images of the freak show. However, the gist of these articles is seldom very disparaging or derogatory. Unlike the media savaging of Boyle’s appearance, the British press have generally commented sympathetically on Gardner’s love for the colour pink; unlike Boyle’s, Gardner’s unique and offbeat appearance is not pathologised.

These descriptions of Gardner’s appearance counteract the traditional medicalised terminology often used to describe those with disabilities. The press considers Gardner’s appearance to be a part of his disability positioning. The series branding, meanwhile, is based on Gardner’s uniqueness, and by extension that of his apprentices. In *The Autistic Gardener*, Gardner himself draws no undue attention to his hair or nails. However, in the press, he comes

across as unusual and ‘quirky’, terms Gardner has used to describe himself as a child (Wells, 2015).

Unlike the Boyle documentaries and Boyle’s early press coverage, *The Autistic Gardener* scarcely mentions Gardner’s appearance. Nor are there the undercurrents of gender and class contempt that characterise Boyle’s treatment. In the fourth episode of the first series, Gardner sketches out his and the trainees’ plan for the clients’ garden. These montages are frequent throughout the series and follow a standardized format. They begin with a camera shooting Gardner from behind as he works in his design studio. The camera then cuts to Gardner discussing the plan to an interlocutor off-camera. Here the camera moves often, causing Gardner’s face to become partially obscured. These shots are interspersed with close-ups of Gardner’s hands, tattoos, and bright nail polish as he draws. The effect of this dissection is two-fold. It reduces Gardner to unique and familiar components. Conversely, it also makes Gardner appear ‘ordinary’ as the dissection of his body demystifies him, granting him the legitimacy that makes his celebrity persona and skillset ‘relatable’. This dichotomy of ordinary versus extraordinary underpins both Boyle’s and Gardner’s screen portrayals.

Representations of the female body often intersect negatively with distinctions of class, as explained earlier in this chapter; but Gardner is not subjected to the same pressures as Boyle. For one thing, it is easy to assume that Gardner is, generally speaking, middle-class: both he and the audience are encouraged to identify with Lawler’s exclusionary middle-class fictive ‘we’, especially through shots of Gardner spending time with his family in a large, well-maintained garden. The series does not depict Gardner’s home and family life intrusively and instead focuses on Gardner’s career. His competing in the Chelsea Flower Show affords him

a degree of social capital that elevates him above the usual working-class connotations of his gardening profession.

Ricciardelli (2011, p.182) highlights stereotypical gender norms associated with male physical appearance. The production's attention to Gardner's hair could be seen as a feminising influence, as hair dye and the colour pink are traditionally gendered as female. Hegemonic masculinity presupposes the absence of impairment; consequently, disability in cultural representations damages masculinity (Rodan et al., 2013, p.16). But neither Gardner nor his male trainees are identified as masculine. Instead, Gardner projects a comfortable distance from standard conceptualisations and definitions of hegemonic masculinity (Ricciardelli, 2011, p.196; Connell, 1987; Kimmel et al., 2005). The goal-orientated narratives present in hybrid entertainment documentaries, both here and in the case of Boyle, militate against the depiction of romantic or sexual involvement.

Gardner does not fulfil the prerequisites of the ideal autistic. He is too old, married with children, has a successful career, has embraced his autism and does not need to be willing to 'improve' himself, as his evident personal and professional success does not require him to change or further integrate into society. Idealisation treats autistic subjects as manipulable objects to be guided by the series. Idealised depictions project a passivity onto their subjects which Gardner lacks. Instead, Gardner is portrayed as a figure of awareness and aspirational autistic success. As his appearances do not involve a rite of passage or curative narrative, his role is instead to guide his trainees to their 'cures', positioning him as a kindly, paternalistic facilitator.

*The Autistic Gardener* markets itself, and its host, on autistic differences. During the introduction to each episode of the series, Gardner describes himself as "not your typical

gardener” and differentiates himself from fellow celebrity gardener Alan Titchmarsh. These opening sequences outline the show’s format and introduce the trainees, cementing the series’ goal-orientated objectives. During the early episodes of the series, the trainees’ introductions often follow a distinct pattern, mentioning a positive feature of autism combined with an autistic difference. Charles is “talkative” yet “needs order and precision”, Phillip “struggles to read emotion” but “knows a lot about exotic plants”, and James, although not being “able to ever look you in the eye” instead has “an encyclopaedic knowledge of plants”. This phrasing attempts to offset negative qualities as part of a more extensive autistic experience while inviting the audience to connect with the documentary’s participants through a personalised framing.

Although the primary aim of *The Autistic Gardener* is normalisation and helping the trainees to gain life and work skills, it also celebrates autistic differences. It fulfils both objectives through the language that Gardner uses as a facilitator. Gardner shows a sophisticated and sensitive awareness of the difficulties surrounding the linguistic description of autism, describing himself and others on the autistic spectrum as ‘autists’ and those who are not as ‘neurotypicals’. This distinction continues when Gardner compares the two distinct groups stating that the autists are “not broken computers”, but instead have “different operating systems”. The series aims not to fix the ‘broken computer’ but teach others how to interact/engage with these different operating systems in line with social models of disability. That Gardner chooses this language, due to his position as sole narrator, affords power to him and the trainees. Gardner is granted the power to craft the language that describes him rather than being subjected to the descriptions of an omnipotent, faceless narrator. Boyle, on the other hand, lacks this type of agency. Although the Boyle documentaries include Boyle’s

interview comments, Boyle herself does not appear to have been involved in the production process and does not provide any narration of her own.

Gardner's role in his series is to facilitate the normalisation narratives of others through a process of “unlocking their horticultural potential”. This process integrates and places value upon the team’s gardening endeavours. In the second episode of *The Autistic Gardener*, Gardner facilitates his trainees’ ideas by combining them into a single plan and helps to present it to the clients. Whereas Thomas has difficulties expressing his ideas, Charles is overly enthusiastic, which leads to him confusing and overwhelming the clients. Gardner’s voice-over at this point highlights the difficulties in communication between autistic and non-autistic people. Gardner intercedes and helps the presentation get back on track.

The aim of *The Autistic Gardener* is to help autistic individuals find strategies for coping with life and job skills whilst embracing their uniqueness. Thomas is encouraged to come out of his shell, and Charles’s ideas are never outright dismissed – although the more outlandish and unfeasible ones are tamed or better communicated to the clients. A common critique of disability-focused reality television is that it can come to “a form of social welfare opportunity” (Ellis, 2017, p.39). This is to some extent a feature of the logic of neoliberalism, as such documentaries have as their goal turning their participants into better workers or consumers. Gardner accepts his own autistic identity and through his Twitter activism encourages others to accept people on the autistic spectrum. As discussed in the preceding chapter, documentaries often portray autistic people as lonely and isolated from the world. However, Gardner is neither of these things. The series mentions his family and success at the Chelsea Flower Show, which is testament to his ability to work within complex social structures and situations. It presents Gardner’s appearance and autism as a part of who he is

and implies that society should embrace him in line with social models of disability. Gardner does not need to be 'normalised'.

Many of Gardner's trainees are examples of the ideal autistic. Ideal autistics must show that they are willing to improve themselves and difference is only encouraged if an individual is willing to accept a degree of assimilation. *The Autistic Gardener* shows many of the trainees initially having difficulties working together as part of the team. At the end of each challenge, however, progress has been made regarding their social skills and they complete their projects to their clients' satisfaction. A touching example of this occurs in the opening episode of the first series in which trainee Victoria plans and designs an insect hotel for a client's garden. Although initially her plan is met with some confusion, it features in the final design. Victoria expresses her pleasure at her hotel's inclusion, as her ideas are not always listened to. Her portrayal is encapsulated within a larger normalisation narrative as her social and interpersonal skills improve through the successful completion of the project and participation in the series.

## Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the documentary and broader media treatment of two British celebrities. Boyle's documentary depictions exist within a media context influenced by shareable media, press and reality television as well as broader concepts of fame, class, disability, gender and neoliberal individualism. Media and documentary portrayals, we have seen, have depicted Boyle as thoroughly 'other'. Boyle's original diagnosis of brain damage and a learning disability compounded this stigmatisation. But Boyle's disclosure of her Asperger's diagnosis draws attention to the galvanising effects of disclosure upon public

awareness and media discourse. Since her diagnosis, more compassionate and understanding depictions have come to the fore and Boyle's sudden outbursts and unusual behaviours are now attributed to her autism. This new emphasis might be understood as a response to a public and media backlash regarding Boyle's earlier mistreatment in the media. However that may be, Boyle's image in the media generally is still blighted by longstanding, negative stereotypes about gender, class and sexuality. Her problematic treatment becomes all the more apparent when she is compared to Gardner, an autistic celebrity whose media image has never been detached from his disability. Boyle's documentaries depict her as a passive subject. Although there are themes of autism awareness in Boyle's later depictions, these are secondary. Boyle's mauling in the media and her lack of control over her own image contribute to a cautionary tale about the downsides of fame – especially for working-class women who do not conform to established social stereotypes. All of this accentuates the need for first-hand image creation and greater involvement within production contexts, as Boyle's public image continues to be constructed by others.

As a recognisable television and social media personality, Alan Gardner, by contrast, has enjoyed a degree of public and journalistic recognition as an advocate for autism awareness. Authentic advocacy is the process of collating a credible series of associations, experiences, connections and personal insights (Brockington, 2014, p.11), such as those delivered by Gardner in his documentary appearances. Moreover, as Markham (2015, p.469) notes, celebrity advocacy requires earnestness and sincerity as well as a certain ironic awareness, since "a certain level of irony or reflexiveness is central to the audience's experience of complicity with celebrities". Gardner is often reflexive about his autism which aids his authenticity. His involvement in the production of his series calls attention to other



vital issues surrounding autism advocacy. Gardner is an active participant in the documentary process as his narration is self-scripted and self-aware. The incorporation of neurodiversity approaches seen in *The Autistic Gardner* encourages viewers to regard Gardner and his apprentices as being different and diverse, as well as 'ordinary' and down-to-earth. The importance of this combination of characteristics reflects the changing societal conceptualisation of autism and the dynamic interplay between television formats and autism understandings. Finally, the changing technological landscape has also been touched on, albeit briefly, in this chapter. The circulation of Boyle's celebrity image through the sharing of her audition on YouTube indicates the increasing integration of Internet technologies with television culture, a shift that is explored further later in this dissertation.

## Chapter 5: Neurodiversity and the First-Person Perspective Documentary

Mainstream television documentaries, as we have seen, have tended to overlook autistic people's perspectives. But the television landscape is changing as traditionally marginalised voices are increasingly brought to the forefront. Approaches to disability representation are starting to transform, becoming more varied, inclusive, and actively challenging harmful and restricting stereotypes. The convergence of formerly discrete media platforms such as Twitter and YouTube has influenced the portrayal of disability on mainstream television, with disabled and autistic voices progressively being more frequently valued and represented. This trend is mirrored in modern-day documentary practice, as "films abandon the longstanding ideal of objectivity in favour of more diverse and subjective perspectives on reality" (Ros et al., 2018, p.223). This has led to a notable rise in the representation of autistic voices, advocacy narratives, biographical documentary films and ruminations on the construction of autistic identity in contemporary television documentaries.

Preceding chapters have examined entertainment and celebrity-focused documentaries and their role in the idealisation and normalisation of autistic persons within a neoliberal context. In these documentaries, as we have seen, autistic lives are often condensed into easily digestible, feel-good fragments and the films generally make use of an expository, omniscient narrator to frame autistic experiences. These documentary formats tend to separate the viewer from the films' participants. Although rites-of-passage experiences are commonly shown, the use of narration, focus on neurological difference and frequent use of othering language and visualisation prevents autistic perspectives from

emerging on their own terms. The first-person documentaries discussed in this chapter, however, often seek to address these inadequacies. This chapter explores autistic self-representations across a set of documentaries broadcast between 2011 and 2018 and their impact on autism identity construction.

First-person perspective documentaries and autism advocacy documentaries describe films that are made from an autistic person's viewpoint. In these films, people with autism are the hosts, narrators and subjects. The documentaries discussed within this chapter employ these methods of presentation to promote autism advocacy and autistic self-definition. Two of the films discussed here are biographical with some autobiographical components; the others offer subjective perspectives on autism with educational undertones. Each is defined by subjective, creative and expressionistic characteristics. It should be highlighted that the films discussed in this chapter are not produced, directed, or filmed by the autistic individual who stars. However, the filmed subjects often have a level of participation in and influence over the production.

First-person documentaries are an established and familiar documentary form. The films of Michael Moore (*Fahrenheit 9/11* [Moore, 2004]) and Morgan Spurlock (*Supersize Me* [Spurlock, 2004]) are popular cinematic examples of the genre that have entered mainstream culture. The genre is also frequently adopted by disabled individuals to present individualised accounts of their daily lives and experiences. The Netflix documentary series *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution* (LeBrecht & Newham, 2020), for example, follows a 1970s American summer camp for disabled children produced by one of its former residents, James LeBrecht. The series provides unique first-hand accounts, perspectives and identity construction that

demonstrates the format's potential by depicting marginalised groups and the increasing presence of niche films in mainstream screen culture.

The first-person perspective genre itself is broad and encompasses diverse forms, techniques, and subgenres (Ros et al., 2018, pp.225–226). Although the form has a degree of popularity among cinema-goers and is popular among autistic persons through online platforms such as YouTube, it is still in its infancy in broadcast television. Autistic people use the first-person perspective to engage in collective self-advocacy to change how the mainstream public views the autistic community (Schwarz, 2004, p.143). Autism advocacy narratives are becoming more common in documentaries and provide unique opportunities for individualised identity construction. The first-person documentary's subjective and intimate nature allows for experimentation, creativity and inventive expressions of subjective memories and first-hand experiences (Ros et al., 2018, p.223-224).

Lane (2002), discussing the work of film critics Katz & Katz (1988), notes the inherent tensions between documentary and autobiographical documentaries. The former aims at an objective recording of the historical world of 'out there', whereas autobiographies subjectively document the personal sphere of 'in here' (Lane, 2002, p.4). Additionally, as Lebow (2012, p.1) asserts, first-person documentaries are not always autobiographical, but are first and foremost constituted by a subjective mode of address, which may take the form of a "cinema of me" or have a broader societal scope. Additionally, such documentaries may take the form of confessional videos, diaries or mediations (Aufderheide, 1997, para 4). They are often mobilised by activists as instruments of social and political change or used by disenfranchised social groups to convey their perspectives to larger audiences (Aufderheide, 1997, para 19).

First-person biographical autism documentaries showcase autistic perspectives and voices. *Chris Packham: Asperger's and Me* (Russell, 2017) follows a well-known television naturalist as he explores his autism diagnosis and its effects on his everyday life. Since the publicising of his diagnosis, Packham has become an Ambassador for the National Autistic Society (NAS) and often campaigns for greater autism awareness and rights. At the heart of the film is Packham's exploration of his autistic identity, which Packham explores through highly personal accounts of his childhood, memory, and sensory interpretations. *Chris Packham: Asperger's and Me* explores these identity constructs through diverse audio-visual devices, including dramatisations, constructed flashbacks, and other innovative modes of visualisation. The documentary and Packham himself are retrospective with segments often feeling like a memoir. Such diaristic, autobiographical films frequently have a spontaneous, exploratory, or natural, raw feel (Dovey, 2000, p.41). As we will see, such qualities, visual methods and format choices provide valuable opportunities for alternate methods of autistic self-expression.

Animated autism documentaries contain many of these audio-visual elements. *Life, Animated* (a live-action documentary notorious for its animated sequences) and *A is for Autism* (Webb, 1992), which is fully animated by autistic artists and music composed by autistic musicians, are just two mainstream films in this niche subgenre. However, many other expository and autobiographical documentaries produced by charities and independent autistic animators are available on streaming platforms such as YouTube. *Newsround: My Autism and Me* (Bell, 2011) and *Newsround: Up and Away* (Stone, 2012) are examples of partially animated documentaries, combining a mixture of live action footage and animated sequences. Both documentaries are hosted and narrated by an autistic teenager, Rosie King, providing an insight into her autism and everyday life. *My Autism and Me* is a semi-

autobiographical account, whereas *Up and Away* combines its predecessor's themes with an expository overview of the difficulties autistic children and others with disabilities face when starting secondary school from an inclusive, neurodiversity focused perspective.

Autism neurodiversity movements and self-advocacy groups are gaining prominence as attitudes shift away from medicalised and deficit views and productions attempt to become more inclusive and diverse. Autism, and related conditions are now more commonly considered to be variations of the human brain. This chapter seeks to how this shift is reflected in documentary representation.

### Neurodiversity and advocacy

Historical accounts of autism explored in this dissertation's earlier chapters consider autism as deficit. These accounts typically adopt biomedical definitions presenting autism as a stigma to be pathologized, treated or removed (Dinishak, 2016). Yet the medical and scientific communities' understanding of autism has radically shifted in the past century (Kenny et al. 2016, pp.442-443). Autism knowledge is constantly in a state of flux, affecting the ways in which the condition is understood, perceived, and the language used to refer to it in broader society (Kenny et al. 2016, p.443). Autism is undergoing a process of reconceptualisation that changes the ways in which it is considered in scientific, academic and personal contexts.

There are two underlying aspects of neurodiversity. The first relates to conceptualising autism as a neurological difference and the second concerns itself with autism rights, discrimination and politics (Jaarsma & Welin, 2012, p.21). The neurodiversity movement asserts that there are neurological differences in all humans and that autism is just one of these differences (Runswick-Cole, 2014, p.1118). Neurodiversity perspectives are

homologous with the scientific notion of biodiversity (Stenning & Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, 2021, p.1532), where the value of neurodiversity for society is likened to the value of biodiversity for ecosystems (Hughes, 2020, p.50). Consequently, the neurodiversity perspective on autism presupposes a social approach that views autism as a natural human variation (Runswick-Cole, 2014, p.1118; Jaarsma & Welin, 2012, p.21; Tomlinson & Newman, 2017, p.92). Moreover, neurodiversity encapsulates a host of neurodivergent conditions including dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity and Tourette's syndrome (Hughes, 2020, p.48). Neurodiversity groups view autism as a neurological 'difference' instead of an illness, deficit, disorder or disability (Bagatell, 2007, p.420; Bagatell, 2010, p.38; Baron-Cohen, 2019) – one that capitalises upon “strengths and possibilities of being autistic” (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2015, p.220). The strength-based practice has faced some criticism, as celebrating Asperger's syndrome in relation to its social usefulness may reinforce Social Darwinist paradigms (Stenning & Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, 2021, p.1533). Nevertheless, while supporters of neurodiversity do not dispute the daily challenges autism brings for autistic people and their families, they recognise that the desirable aspects of living with autism would be removed by a cure (Rangan, 2017, p.106). Neurodiversity approaches underscore serious ethical problems with medical and deficit approaches, as “the medical paradigm's imperative to cure assumes problematic eugenicist undertones, especially in the context of a highly contested category of neurological difference like autism” (Saunders, 2018, p.5).

Neurodiversity promotes positive understandings of autism, opposing cures, seeks a collective sense of identity, and resists the appropriation of autistic voices (Bumiller, 2008, p.968). Although most understandings of autism remain strongly grounded in the biomedical paradigm, autistic individuals are attempting to change how autism is considered through narrative self-representations and coordinated activities (Bagatell, 2010, p.33). New

perspectives and significant changes in how autism is recognised, understood and described have resulted in disagreement between the medical communities, education and healthcare providers, autistic people, and their families (Ripamonti, 2016, pp.56-57). While some critics accuse neurodiversity advocates of holding a sanitised view of autism that deflects attention and resources from severely impacted persons and families (Hughes, 2020, pp.47-48), autistic differences and social complexities are increasingly being understood to be both “biologically and socially derived” (Milton, 2012, p.886) and it is these socially derived disabling aspects of disability that feature heavily in neurodiversity advocacy and rights discourses.

Disability rights movements encourage the recontextualization of disability, shifting away from viewing disabled people as pitiful or tragic, instead of considering society’s fears, myths and stereotyping that makes disabled people’s lives difficult (Shapiro, 1993, p.3). Neurodiversity groups provide a counter to narratives that consider autism to be a disorder. Instead, it is defined within a biopolitical categorisation that concerns itself with autism rights (Runswick-Cole, 2014, p.1120). Partisans of neurodiversity seek socio-political change and an improvement in the quality of life for autistic people rather than pursuing cures (Kapp et al., 2013, p.60) and understand the autism classification to signify a marginalised minority rather than a medical condition (Chapman, 2020b, p.800). Intolerance for diversity, meanwhile, is generated in sociocultural environments that fail to support differences and thereby construct disability (Bagatell, 2010, p.33).

One such area is the language used to describe autistic people, with some neurodiversity groups rejecting person-first terminology such as ‘a person with autism’, which might imply that a person is ‘trapped’ within their autism (Jaarsma & Welin, 2012, p.21). Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al. (2015, p.229) further discusses autistic belonging in relation to



two competing discourses: integrationist and separatist. The former concerns itself with integrating autistic people in a neurotypical society, whereas the latter fosters identification and belonging within autism communities. Person-first language highlights the tension between the two discourses, with person-first language aligning with integrationist, with autism-first terminology (i.e., autistic person) often being preferred by the autistic community (Bertilsson Rosqvist et al., 2015, pp.226-227). This use is tied to two different views of autism, as some view autism as an identity whilst others construct it as a disability (Bertilsson Rosqvist et al., 2015, p.226). Brownlow & O'Dell (2013, p.98) draw upon neurodiversity discourses to address autism as a form of neurobiological citizenship, which offers autistic individuals an alternative to deficit-model views of autism. Brownlow and O'Dell (2013, p.101) argue that viewing autism within a biologized discourse provides opportunities for autistic people and their advocates to confront the public's preconceptions about autism. The contemporary media representation of autism reflects these differing approaches to autism.

Broadcasters have faced increasing pressure from Ofcom to improve the diversity of their programming in recent years and broadcast media as well as public and academic autism discourse is starting to acknowledge the sea-changes in scientific thinking about autism. Documentary makers can attempt to improve diversity in a number of ways, which might involve changes to production or making different narratological and thematic choices. The first encourages autism advocacy by changing production contexts – for example, by including autistic people in front of, or behind the camera; in documentaries, this might take the form of an autistic host or presenter. The narratological and thematic changes might involve the creation of semi-autobiographical narratives and thematic choices such as diagnostic quests

or the inclusion of direct appeals for societal change. Despite the growing prominence of such elements in documentaries, however, there is still room for improvement.

The Creative Diversity Network (CDN)'s Diamond Report questions the diversity (regarding disability, ethnicity, gender, age, sexuality and transgender individuals) of the UK broadcast sector's workforce and interrogates whether audience identities are being adequately reflected (2020, p.5). The report pools over 30,000 diversity forms concerning over 600,000 productions and is backed by major British broadcasters. Interestingly, it breaks down the percentage of on-screen and off-screen autism representations by television broadcasters. At the BBC, 4.9% of off-screen contributions and 9.4 % of on-screen contributions are made by disabled people. At Channel 4, meanwhile, 7.2% of off-screen and 7.7% of on-screen contributions are from disabled staff. Both organisations outperform their competitors in the television industry (2020, p.14). The report also highlights the underrepresentation of senior roles filled by people with disabilities (2020, p.20). Unfortunately, the report does not differentiate between different forms of disability or neurodiversity, so it is not possible to ascertain what percentage of these figures consist of autistic individuals.

### Presenting neurodiverse selves

The 2018 Channel 4 documentary, *Are You Autistic?* (Swift, 2018) illustrates the growing trend for autism advocacy representations that encourage inclusivity through production involvement. The film champions autistic voices and raises issues pertinent to the autistic community. It further consciously pursues autistic inclusion through its production arrangements and narrative choices. The documentary sets out what is at stake in autism

representation by outlining the number of autism diagnoses within the UK and is validated by frequent testimonies from medical experts and demonstrations of diagnostic tests. In common with the science-focused documentaries discussed earlier in the dissertation, it even poses a thesis exploration question, asking the audience if they are autistic. However, it differs in its inclusion of two autistic female presenters: Georgia Harper, a trainee human rights lawyer, and Sam Ahern, an artist and autism campaigner. They guide the audience through what it means to them to be autistic. Indeed, this is the only science documentary where autistic voices are at the forefront. There is also a supplementary presenter: television personality Anna Richardson, whose nephew is autistic. She acts as an audience surrogate and she learns more about the condition as the film progresses. Despite her presence, it is Harper and Ahern who take the investigative lead. The pair highlight and champion issues surrounding female autism diagnosis and gendered characteristics, the so-called lost autism generation, and the difficulties in obtaining an autism diagnosis. Furthermore, *Are You Autistic?* accentuates the growing trend for personalised discourse across autism documentaries that straddle traditional genre categories.

*Are you Autistic?* is one of just a handful of autism focused documentaries that is delivered from a female perspective. In addition to the commentary by Harper and Ahern, the programme is peppered with interviews' from a small focus group of autistic women, which help to expand upon the issues raised by the programme. One such topic is 'masking', a practice that belongs to the scientific category of 'camouflaging' (Hull et al., 2017, p.2523), whereby female autistics hide symptoms in an attempt to pass as neurotypical. The film demonstrates masking in a sequence where a group of autistic women go speed dating and 'hide' their autism. At the end of the dates, the male participants are asked: "What would you say if I told you that one of the girls was autistic?" with most responding with surprise and

one initially disagreeing before being told that all of the women are autistic. After this questioning, the production reunites the two groups giving the women the opportunity to discuss their autism. Female masking is often overlooked and rarely discussed in factual (or fictional) programming and the presence of autistic women discussing this issue is a welcome exception to the under-representation of the female autistic voice in the media.

*Are You Autistic?* also highlights the issue of diagnostic delay: the setbacks individuals face in trying to obtain an autism diagnosis. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence suggests the process takes three months, whereas Harper and the National Autistic Society (NAS) contest this claim, stating that, in practice, a diagnosis often takes years to obtain. The NAS policy and campaign team Twitter (NAS Campaigns, 2018) reports on politician Kelvin Hopkins' speech at the House of Commons that praised the programme and used it as a springboard to discuss the subject of autism and pregnancy (House of Commons, 2018). Furthermore, the programme's engagement with social media (e.g. the Twitter hashtag: #areyouautistic) is also helpful, demonstrating the impact that autism advocacy is having on both autistic and neurotypical audiences. Documentaries such as these facilitate conversations, illustrating the potential inclusive documentary films have to bring about societal and political change.

The documentary also follows two potentially autistic adults: JP, a father and musician, and Jo, a mother of three children, as they undergo a series of indicative tests to determine whether they have autism. The film ends with them visiting Professor Simon Baron-Cohen, who diagnoses Jo with Asperger's Syndrome and JP with autism. Both voice their relief at finally receiving a diagnosis, with Jo stating that she now "knows who she is", linking correct diagnosis with a comforting perception of identity and self. The pair's presence

is a catalyst for discussing diagnostic delays and the missing autistic/forgotten generation, a term describing those who have been misdiagnosed or who have lacked the opportunity to receive a diagnosis as children. Baron-Cohen discusses the forgotten generation and discusses a survey conducted specially for the documentary. The survey, made accessible to the public online during the film's production process, received 750,000 respondents and was widely circulated on social media. 87,000 respondents scored above the cut off point for autism. Baron-Cohen breaks down the figure further, stating that more than half of these were women. Morgan (2019, p.144) posits that "the results from the online questionnaire could be defining, and perhaps even suggest an algorithm that could accurately predict the likelihood of an autism diagnosis". Such a practice and potential innovation suggests prospective interconnectivity between disciplines and fields, platforms and organisations that could benefit all of those with a stake in improving the public image of autism.

Although the production was led by non-autistic people, the documentary's production context is of further interest as, initially, it did not plan to include autistic presenters. Early in the film's production stages, links to the survey did the rounds on social media. Jack Welch (2017), autism activist and youth patron of the Ambitious about Autism charity, details his interactions with the film on his own website. Welch raised concerns about the film's direction by corresponding with the documentary's production company and Baron-Cohen. This correspondence led to a meeting with Channel 4 programme commissioner and a producer from Betty (the documentary's production company), where they discussed the upcoming film. This meeting led to the casting of the documentary's hosts Ahern and Harper, who are also members of the Ambitious about Autism charity. Although the production was made by non-autistic workers, the selection of autistic presenters was a positive step in expanding the diversity of documentary productions and highlights the impact

of social media on television. By voicing objections and concerns about the potential direction of the programme, Welch highlights the growing potential for advocates and activists to become involved in documentary production. Documentaries presented by autistic people, such as *Are you Autistic?*, are still a rarity, however, on mainstream television, although as we shall see in later chapters, they are popular online.

In the opening minutes of the documentary *Chris Packham: Asperger's and Me*, British naturalist and television presenter Chris Packham identifies himself as autistic, later specifying that he has Asperger's syndrome. Like many people, Packham received a diagnosis in adulthood. Fans of Packham may have been familiar with the circumstances of his diagnosis, as they were reported widely in the press (Earnshaw, 2016, Munro, 2016) in the previous year. However, casual viewers would likely be unaware; to them, Packham's documentary could be seen as a "coming out" narrative. As discussed by Davidson & Henderson (2010, p.164), coming out narratives manage identity and information, allowing autistic authors to create positive political spaces.

Two autistic identities are presented in the Chris Packham film: undiagnosed autistic child and autistic adult. Although he describes his adolescent difficulties, Packham is optimistic about his condition, explaining that he would not wish to be without it. This positivity is often contrasted with the treatment of autism in clinical contexts. Packham travels to the USA to investigate treatments for autism, including Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation and Applied Behaviour Analysis, both of which have normalisation as their goal and are critiqued by Packham in terms of his own sense of autistic self-worth. Packham's negotiation, and re-negotiation, of his autistic identity, runs throughout the documentary and

the haunting evocations of Packham's childhood make this a documentary a unique and rare endeavour among broadcast documentaries of this period.

The mediation of autism as a label is complex (Brownlow, 2010, p.20) as there is no single autistic identity. Many discourses surrounding autism focus on identity politics (Bertilsson Rosqvist et al., 2015, p.226). However, the term identity itself is contradictory: it is both broad and, at times, narrow and constraining. The construction of identities is a multifaceted and highly social process (Bagatell, 2007, p.413). Autistic identity may mean unique things to different people depending on which part of the spectrum they belong to. It also may mean something different depending on the context a person may find themselves in. Moreover, individuals may renegotiate the label of autism throughout their lives (Brownlow, 2010, p.20). First-person documentaries provide opportunities for individuated, reflective discourse and novel insights into highly subjective understandings of the autistic experience. Whereas the documentaries discussed in previous chapters confine the understanding of autism within parental or medical-professional discourses, *Chris Packham: Asperger's and Me*, *My Autism and Me* and *Up and Away* all embrace a phenomenological approach, providing fascinating and imaginative insights into autistic childhoods.

Self-identifying language is apparent throughout the CBBC Newsround Special productions *My Autism and Me* and *Up and Away* presented by British writer Rosie King. Both of these short films feature interviews and clips from autistic children, which Ebben (2020, p.202) refers to as "personal accounts" (a term originating from email Ebben's communications with the film's director) and "success stories". *Up and Away* is intended to ease the concerns of children with disabilities as they transition into secondary school and to foster acceptance and understanding from a nondisabled and neurotypical audience. *My*

*Autism and Me*, meanwhile, is an autobiographical documentary about Rosie and several other autistic children, which details what it is like to have Asperger's syndrome. It also features undercurrents of neoliberal ideology as Rosie's story of autistic overcoming via her artistic aspirations are connected to her successfully entering the labour market (Ebben, 2020, p.203). The short film includes sequences of Rosie at school and at home with her autistic brother, interspersed with vox pops with other autistic children discussing what autism means to them and the life difficulties they have overcome.

In *My Autism and Me*, King explains that her brain "works a bit differently", but that this difference "also makes [her] unique and special". King frames her autism as a natural and integral part of her identity; this may challenge audience preconceptions and foster understanding and acceptance, as her autism "makes me who I am ... I wouldn't be the same without it". Similar terminology is present in *Up and Away*, where King uses umbrella terms to group other 'different' children, explaining that there are "other kids that stand out" and that school can be "tough for kids that are different". This identifies King and the other children featured as members of a shared disabled group, providing the benefits of being included in an associative identity, with auxiliary educational value for those outside of it. Through animated sequences, the film allows neurotypical audiences to "look inside" the autistic mind (Ebben, 2020, p.207). Like the documentaries discussed in the previous chapter, this documentary treats autism as a spectacle, but does so from an insider's point of view. King invites us into "her world" to "find out what it means to be autistic". These forays into the autistic mind could be construed as a form of 'tourism', allowing the viewer to share in the autistic experience.



### Biographical documentaries and autism representation

First-person biographical accounts of autistic childhoods accentuate the construction of individualised autism identities. The presence of an autistic host within documentaries provides opportunities for internal focalisation – the audio-visual rendering of inner thoughts and fantasies. Film and television texts often employ the technique, along with re-enactments and dramatisations, as an expressionistic device to aid in the portrayal of autistic emotion and memory. A key commonality between Packham’s documentary and King’s film *My Autism and Me* is the emphasis on the sensory differences of autistic people. Unusually, both documentaries use novel techniques to demonstrate how the presenters interpret their respective worlds and recreate memories. *Chris Packham: Asperger’s and Me* uses a combination of visualisations and dramatizations, whereas *My Autism and Me* uses animations and re-enactments, devices not used in other, more expository types of documentary.

*Up and Away* uses animation to fashion individualised and intricate autistic identities for King and deploys several animation techniques to depict her inner world and feelings. Such portrayals, as Ebben (2020, p, 211) argues, emphasise the children’s inherent diversity. In one example, King recounts the apprehension she felt on her first day of school. Her mother, also feeling worried, hid behind hedgerows to watch her daughter enter the school building. They both laugh as King recalls that her mother “stalked” her. An animation then appears with childish caricatures of King and her mother, with the latter hiding behind bushes and an animated King looking irritated. This short, humorous sequence reflects common parental and child fears about starting school. Observing King’s childhood memories as

though from a child's perspective adds a layer of legitimacy and tangibility to King's recollections, as her inner emotional state would be difficult to render by other means.

Although King's is the primary perspective throughout both of the films she presents, these documentaries also offer opportunities for introspection from other children. In *My Autism and Me*, Ben, an autistic teenage boy, discusses the feelings of isolation and anger that followed his experience of being bullied at school. In one internal focalisation, Ben stands near a whiteboard and as he speaks, a simple black and white line drawn animation appears on the board. Ben describes his anger as narrowing his senses, causing him to lose his vision while retaining his hearing. Once in these fugue states, Ben lashes out at people and his environment. When he uses the metaphor of "seeing red", a beam of red light shoots out of cartoon Ben's eye. He describes his feelings during these episodes as being "twice the level of Viking berserkers". Fittingly, cartoon Ben matches these words with a Viking hammer raised in one hand and a horned helmet on his head. The camera then zooms into the whiteboard filled with a woodland scene with a large black bear. A cartoon Ben is now nestled inside the bear, a visual match for the label 'bear', which was inflicted on Ben by his bullies.

*Chris Packham: Asperger's and Me* also emphasises the importance and influence of childhood emotions and feelings of isolation. Here adolescent memories are presented using constructed flashbacks and often feature themes of separation and seclusion. Owing to the absence of home recordings of Packham's early life, actors are used to convey Packham's memories. Discussing the nature of 'flashbacks', Turim (2014, p.2) states that memory "surges forth, it strengthens or protects, or it repeats and haunts". Packham's flashbacks, rendered as internal focalisations, mirror this description and often have a dream-like tone. In one reconstruction of Packham's childhood, soft lingering yellow-hued lights, diffused sunlight,

and stray dust particles fill the air while a wistful young Packham sits alone in his bedroom. Childhood memories haunt Packham and their reconstruction provides a powerful emotional insight into difficult periods of his life. As Packham introduces the film, his mind seemingly 'wanders'. He starts detailing aspects of the 1940s ME163 rocket-powered aircraft before linking it to returning astronauts in 1969. He recalls specific dates and details as a cascade of memories. His introductory voiceover states that this is a story of his life and the viewer is shown a montage of childhood photographs and footage of actors playing Packham at different ages. Packham's inner world is also communicated through a range of visual metaphors. A scene of Packham travelling alone on a train, for example, seems to metaphorise his life 'journey'. More generally, the film outlines the importance of memory, adolescence and its ramifications on adult life. The approach taken here is akin to that of a memoir, as if through the recollection of his memories, Packham will be able to enter a process of self-healing and discovery. Indeed, his narration acts as a kind of self-driven psychoanalysis.

Packham's retrospections serve to dissect and analyse complex childhood emotions, repositioning and recontextualising these memories relating to the effects of his Asperger's syndrome. As Packham was diagnosed in later life, he did not benefit from the understanding a diagnosis would have provided both him and his family. Childhood oddities, troubling memories and tactile obsessions are now accounted for by his Asperger's diagnosis, providing him with a sense of closure and understanding. His diagnosis enables him to examine his teenage self-portrait photography and its suicidal imagery as "pretentious twaddle" caused by feelings of alienation and bullying by school peers. And he now understands his childhood attempts at controlling his environment as a coping mechanism for his then unknown Asperger's.

*Chris Packham: Asperger's and Me* also features reconstructed memories of Packham's youth, presented in accessible and familiar documentary conventions. In one scene, a self-portrait photograph of a young Packham appears. The filmmakers then employ a match cut as the scene is recreated by an actor, duplicating the photograph's colour tones, bedroom setting and Packham's likeness. The sequence is subtle, blurring the lines between reality and memory. In a later scene, Packham revisits his childhood home to explore the emotional impact of the death of his childhood pet kestrel. As he walks down a street, the camera cuts to a black and white photograph of his family home from the 1970s, before cutting to an obscured shot of the house and finally zooming in to his name and the kestrel's, which Packham had carved into the brickwork many years previously. These enduring inscriptions signal the emotional impact that the bird had on his life. Packham describes his love for the bird while an actor plays his teenage self. As the teenage Packham gazes lovingly at the kestrel, the camera tightly frames his face with the bird positioned in front of Packham. The surrounding frame is a haze of natural tones, as though the pair are alone in the world. This flashback is what Nichols (2008, p.84) refers to as a typification as it does not reference a specific event. Instead, Packham's memories act as generalised memoirs that reframe difficult and distressing aspects of his childhood. At the centre of these scenes are thematic choices that mediate between memory and autistic identity. Photographs and reconstructions imbue Packham's inner experiences with authenticity and gravitas.

### Sensory representation and autistic identity construction

Stylistic visualisations and recreations can also be seen in the representation of autistic sensory experience. Because of his Asperger's syndrome, Packham processes his sensory

inputs differently to other people. He experiences a “hyper-reality” that alters how he perceives sounds, smells, visual stimuli, and taste. He describes the taste of rain, for example, while close-up shots alternate between him and his dog, Scratch, as the pair walk in the forest encircling their home. Around them, the trees and landscape appear blurred, making Scratch’s twitching nose dominate the frame; this blurring heightens the audience’s perceptions of sound, mirroring Packham’s own hypersensitivity to sounds. Packham then explains how he processes sound, differentiating between the man-made noise of nearby traffic and natural sounds. The surrounding landscape remains out of focus as Packham lists the different bird calls and looks forlorn as he explains that his sensory overload caused him to feel isolated growing up. Such techniques attempt to ‘get inside’ Packham’s head by replicating his sensory impressions of the world.

Packham’s unusual behaviours, such as his childhood compulsion to literally taste items in the natural world, are generally positively framed. Packham’s voice is enthusiastic and his face is caught in a reminiscent smile as he describes licking the yellow fluid off the back of a beetle as a “powerful thing”. However, these unusual sensory obsessions led Packham to become isolated from his childhood peers. He details his depression and uses photography to capture his suicidal feelings, reinforcing the documentary's overarching theme of poignant isolation and difference. Overall, however, the mood of the documentary is quietly positive, as Packham is shown to have finally found his place in the world as a television naturalist.

*My Autism and Me* uses animated sequences to represent sensory experiences. Many these involve non-mimetic substitution (Honess Roe, 2013, pp.23-25) in the visualisation of King’s autistic experiences. Mimetic substitution is used to recreate scenes where there is no

available footage, such as in the case of historical reconstructions, whereas non-mimetic substitution does not try “to make a visual link with reality or to create an illusion of a filmed image. Instead, they work towards embracing and acknowledging animation as a medium in its own right, a medium that has the potential to express meaning through its aesthetic realisation” (Honesty Roe, 2013, p.24). In one such sequence, King describes the emotional turmoil she once felt when she chose between two pairs of shoes, as she feared ‘upsetting’ the rejected pair. Two pairs of animated, anthropomorphised shoes appear, one appearing sad as King places her cartoon feet in the other. The images are brightly drawn with dark outlines on a white background, as though King has drawn them herself. Animation has the capacity to represent temporal, geographic and psychologically distal aspects of life that are outside the capability and reach of live action (Honesty Roe, 2013, p.22). These childlike emulations are not substitutions for absent footage. Instead, they give shape to King’s emotional attachments to everyday objects, as King asserts that everything, including inanimate objects, has a personality and an internal life. Animation is used here to convey the rich, idiosyncratic and wryly amusing aspects of King’s everyday lived experience as an autistic person as well as her distinctive personality and worldview.

Although she does not use the term, King describes her environmental interpretations as resembling synesthesia, a condition that is common in autism (Burghoorn et al., 2020, p.12 & p.26), being experienced by perhaps 18.9% of autistic people (Baron-Cohen et al., 2013). Synesthesia is a sensory condition where inputs such as sounds, letters, tastes or smells spark additional sensations like colours, textures, and shapes (van Leeuwen et al., 2020, p.433). For example, the colour red might taste like strawberries or have a rough texture. These animated interpretations express unique autistic experiences in a way that is relatable to non-expert audiences.

As well as non-mimetic and mimetic substitution, Honess Roe (2013, p.25) outlines a third animation function, that of 'evocation', which is used to convey "concepts, emotions, feelings and states of mind ... difficult to represent through live-action imagery". The animation style used throughout *My Autism and Me* provides insights into the mind of a teenage autistic girl with synesthesia. Images, colours, shapes, and sounds are layered together using abstract animation styles, combining the diagrams to visualise King's interpretation of the world in a childlike fashion. She describes the words slimy and prickly as feeling like their meanings. The word 'slimy' appears in dark green font with a worm-like shape inching towards it, as green slime oozes from behind the letters. The word 'prickly', meanwhile, is represented as a blotchy orange colour with sharp-looking triangles appearing at its edges. Such capturing of synaesthetic experiences is difficult to achieve using traditional documentary techniques. All of the animations in *My Autism and Me* are simple and colourful, some based on King's own drawings and others provided by an animation studio, Black North. They offer a powerful sense of interiority as they mirror and project King's feelings and generate a sense of authenticity.

### Conclusion

Contemporary autism documentaries are increasingly foregrounding not just the voices of autistic people, but their internal experiences and first-person documentaries are a potentially useful tool in helping autistic people achieve a sense of identity and empowerment. As we have seen in this chapter, more and more, autistic people host and guide the productions in which they appear and sometimes they even help to shape the agenda of documentaries. Additionally, many of the films discussed here centre the experiences of autistic girls and women, offering a response to what has been, until recently,

a predominance of male representations in autism-themed television documentaries. Reading (2018, p.120) in one of the very few articles that addresses gender in factual screen representations, notes that King challenges stereotypical autism depictions by opening “up a new image of the autistic person as female, creative and hugely imaginative unsettling the image of the autistic male maths genius or computer software engineer”. Depictions such as King’s are beginning to increase, which as discussed in the upcoming chapter, challenge dominant stereotypes and constructions. Furthermore, it is increasingly the case that the function of autism characteristics in television documentaries is not simply to serve the plot or otherwise function as narrative devices – after all, no attempts are made to ‘cure’ any of the hosts of these productions. Rather, autistic behaviours and experiences are included here as valid elements of autobiographical self-representation.

*Are You Autistic?* adopts a style that is similar to that of many expository science documentaries, but tailors the format to reflect neurodivergent perspectives and social concerns. The first-person perspectives here allow for greater accuracy and effectiveness in the communication of autistic experience: new and experimental devices such as the reconstructions and internal focalisations used in Chris Packham’s documentary and the animations used in the Rosie King productions attempt to reproduce the sensory experiences of autism that more traditional formats so often fail to register. The growing popularity of such portrayals bodes well for the future construction of unique and diverse autism documentaries.

Autism documentaries have often viewed autism as a barrier to the inclusion of autistic people into wider society. But the neurodiversity movement is seeking to redress historical pathologisation by portraying autism as a sociobiological variation; as the movement gains popularity, it is increasingly giving rise to challenging and imaginative modes



of cultural expression that prioritise exploration over the explanation. The documentaries discussed in this chapter have begun to switch towards the normalisation of autism as a condition rather than the normalisation of autistic people. The shift towards more inclusionary and celebratory screen images is explored further in the next chapter, where we will consider not just the changing nature of autism narratives on television, but the impact made by the changing nature of television itself as a medium in transition.

## Chapter 6: BBC Three, Neurodiversity and De-Stigmatisation

The broadcast media landscape is constantly adapting and in recent years the traditional conception of television has been reshaped by the arrival of web-based delivery platforms. The television set is still the most popular access point of television content; however, audiences are increasingly turning to the Internet to stream, create and disseminate media (Thinkbox, 2021). Public service broadcasting, meanwhile, is facing a range of commercial, political, and internal threats (Thoday, 2018, p.24). Although audiences still gravitate toward online television broadcasters, alternatives such as Netflix and Amazon Prime have become increasingly popular in recent years. Video sharing platform YouTube, meanwhile, provides opportunities for self-broadcasting (Brownlow et al., 2013, p.92) and there are increasing numbers of platforms for niche perspectives traditionally overlooked by mainstream broadcasters. This fast-changing environment has forced broadcasters to adapt to meet audience demands. BBC Three's recent decision to revert to linear broadcasting after having moved to online-only in 2016, provides it with unique opportunities to take the lessons it has learned from being an online-only broadcaster and integrate them within its current programming.

At the core of BBC commissioning guidelines is the organisation's aim to champion and increase opportunities for traditionally marginalised voices on and offscreen (BBC, 2018). Its young-adult orientated BBC Three channel markets itself on its innovative practices and broadcasting behaviours that highlight new talent and voices (BBC Trust, 2013, p.1). The channel's online offerings present a variety of documentary and entertainment content that often experiments with forms, genres, and production techniques; for example, the channel

is increasingly trialling short-form video formats comparable to those popularised by entertainment news sites such as BuzzFeed and Vice. Its continual experimentation enables it to compete in a dynamic media environment engaging with a demographic that is increasingly conversant with new digital media formats and platforms. BBC Three's flexible nature makes the channel suitably placed to diversify further, adapting and developing its commissioning and programming practices to improve autism representation within a competitive and challenging 'post-broadcast' environment where online video sharing is becoming increasingly prevalent.

The video distribution platform YouTube offers opportunities for individuals to create and disseminate content. YouTube vlogging has been taken up by many within the autistic community in recent years, as videos can be created in seclusion, away from social and regulatory expectations that traditional broadcasting methods necessarily entail (Brownlow et al., 2013, p.92). YouTube's putatively democratic nature allows for accessible video creation and sharing, potentially complementing BBC Three's objective of targeting diverse voices and perspectives. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the platform's popularity and BBC Three's attempts to grow their offerings have led to a convergence in recent years. This chapter responds to this ever-changing context by examining short-form media depictions of autism by television broadcasters. It uses the recent changes to BBC Three as a catalyst to explore the BBC's representation of autism through new formats within the context of the corporation's ongoing transformation.

It is argued here that the use of short-form videos formats in promoting autistic voices has led to a shift from idealised to celebratory accounts of autism in the period from 2016-2020. Although these new short-form videos frequently merely repackage traditional

documentary productions, they are nevertheless well suited to redressing historical autism stereotypes and stigmatising constructions. Short-form videos, it is shown here, facilitate autistic voices, taking forward the paradigm shift that is occurring in media autism representation, as content producers turn towards neurodiversity approaches, increasingly incorporate autism advocacy, and blur the distinction between in and outgroups.

### Turning it off and on again: Rebooting BBCThree

Public service broadcasters have for many years been under pressure to increase the popularity and reach of their programmes through the adoption of online media forms and strategies (Steemers, 1998, p.97 as cited by Ramsey, 2018, p.153). Post-broadcast television refers to the convergence and consumption of social media and digital television that promotes new methods of content creation, access and communities, with the division between audiences and broadcasters becoming increasingly blurred (Turner, 2011, pp.34-44). In 2016, BBC Three transitioned to being an online-only channel, ceasing their traditional broadcasting services. The primary objective of this move was financial, but the shift was also seen as an opportunity by the corporation to develop its online infrastructure, distinctive programming and marketing of new types of public service content (BBC, 2015, p.22). The channel's switch to an online only platform inspired much criticism from the strongest advocates of public service television, most of which concentrated on the effects of the transition on distribution economics (Doyle, 2016). During its online period, BBC Three was accessed through the BBC iPlayer and its website. Its content was also available through the BBC Three YouTube channel. Three's shift to online-only allowed it a breadth of creative freedom to explore diverse formats, styles and content. The videos discussed in this chapter

typically consist of clips from factual and comedy programmes taken from iPlayer, promotional material and specially made short-form video content designed for sharing on social media (Woods, 2017, p.143). However, early in 2021, BBC Three announced that it would restart its television broadcasting efforts (BBC Media Centre, 2021) and reverted to the hybrid delivery approaches taken by other BBC services, combining traditional linear broadcasting with online access. This approach allows media organisations to focus on making and producing content and services delivered and distributed across multiple platforms (Doyle, 2015, p.51), including content distributed via online applications and websites (Strange, 2011, p.132). Since its relaunch in early 2022, it timeshares with the CBBC channel, with BBC Three broadcasting outside CBBC's designated operating periods ("BBC Three will return", 2021, para 11). This arrangement might allow BBC Three to reach a wider viewer demographic. In any case, the channel's decision to resume linear broadcasting gives BBC Three a unique opportunity to apply the lessons learned from being an online-only platform in order to broaden the range of autism representation. Although many broadcasters are experimenting with new types of programming strategies and content, BBC Three's extensive reach and public service legacy make it particularly relevant to discuss here.

Short-form video content mimics online 'spreadable media' characteristics that aids its expansion beyond its distribution on iPlayer to cater to the social media habits of its target market (Woods, 2017). Spreadability here describes audiences' technical and cultural potential to distribute and share media content (Jenkins et al., 2013, p.3). In a recent creative briefing, BBC Three's Controller Fiona Campbell (2021b, para 1) stated that its commissioning strategy will not change despite its return to broadcast and that the channel will continue to prioritise iPlayer as the primary home for its programmes. In an earlier version of the same briefing, Campbell describes the channel's desire for "returnable formats or shorter, high

volume ‘snackable’ pieces of content” (Campbell, 2021a, para 5). Although this comment was subsequently removed from the BBC website, such a strategy embraces ongoing commercial strategies and continues Three’s practice of commissioning of short-form formats during its time as an online-only broadcaster.

The formats of BBC Three’s programmes today echo popular formats originating from online sharing platforms in respect of their short duration, fast editing, mode of address, and subject matter. While this sometimes involves the commissioning of specially made content, BBC Three’s material often includes clips that repackage and reformat video from existing long-form programmes, transforming them into shorter segments to be shared on YouTube and social media. Within this new economy of short-form media, autism representation increasingly reflects the general cultural shift towards neurodiversity and celebratory perspectives.

### Idealisation to celebration: shifting constructions of autism

Autism idealisation objectifies autistic people for the entertainment of a neurotypical audience. The ideal autistic is a recurring motif across factual television that depicts autistic persons participating in normalisation narratives. The new wave of short-form documentaries celebrates autistic differences. The new celebratory approach presents autism as variation rather than deficit. Within academia, research, education, news media and work environments approaches have begun (or actively encourage) the shift from the medical and deficit focused approaches towards ones that acknowledge autistic people’s strengths within broaden discussions of neurodiversity (Kapp et al., 2013; Leveto, 2018; Lewin & Akhtar, 2021;

Komarow & Hector, 2020, p.36; Muskat, 2017, p.81). Television and broadcast media is adopting this change of approach.

The BBC Three series *Amazing Humans* (2019) is a collection of documentary shorts. The programme trailer describes the programme as “a series about ordinary people, overcoming adversity, doing amazing things, and making the world a better place”. The flexible format allows for different stylistic techniques and styles. The series’ three autism focused episodes address themes of inclusion, celebration, and diversity and challenge historical misconstructions. These short-form films address and reposition autistic representations through a neurodiverse theoretical approach.

*The teen with autism who taught himself classical music and opera* (BBC Three, 2018, Oct 20), for example, depicts 18-year-old Michael, a talented classical pianist and singer. Although the short has similarities to some of its long-form predecessors, it redresses some of the problems of deficit-focused representations through simple cinematography. Michael is often shot sitting in a darkened room, either in a chair or at a piano, discussing his music’s effect on him and his autism. This scenario might be objectifying were it focused on Michael’s prodigious abilities; but instead, the short depicts Michael within the context of his educational and musical aspirations. Moreover, Michael’s image does not conform to the ideal autistic stereotype, since the film neither idealises, normalises, or serves to symbolically ‘remove’ his autism. Comments from Michael’s mother and teacher are included in the edit, but these others do not speak for Michael and their voices do not overwhelm his perspective. Additionally, although Michael’s autism and musical abilities are intrinsically linked, the film stresses the potential benefits to autistic people of music as a communication tool. The documentary ends with Michael addressing his disabled audience members at a recital,

advising them not to feel shy, fearful, or embarrassed because of their disabilities and instead to embrace them.

Other BBC Three short films echo the cultural affiliation model of disability (Shapiro, 1994), adopting a neurodiversity-focused, strength-based approach, similar to that adopted in many special education settings, and exploring how strengths can be used to overcome challenges and adversity, encouraging autism to be seen as a natural variation (Armstrong, 2017, p.13). The importance of music is a frequent topic in the channel's short-form autism focused films (indeed, music and other special interests have been found to improve the lives of those with Asperger's syndrome in a variety of home, educational and work settings [Winter-Messiers et al., 2007, p.77]). In some ways, this musical focus recalls the autism portrayals in the docutainment productions discussed earlier in this dissertation, which linked autistic performance with the individualising and competitive aspects of the talent show. But these music themed videos focus on increasing societal awareness of autism, rather showing autistic people being encouraged to change; they therefore indicate the increasingly porosity of the boundary between neurotypicals and autistic ingroups.

In the episode *The AutistiX: the band who use music to fight their' social hurdles'* (BBC Three, 2018, May 4), about a rock band made up of autistic teenage boys, autistic differences are used to overcome societal barriers whilst maintaining and celebrating autistic identities and reflecting social constructions of disability. In one shot, the band walks up a cobbled alley towards the camera, posing and enthusiastically gesticulating, inviting comparisons to the laddish British bands of the Britpop era. Such iconography runs throughout the film, which incorporates the band's rehearsals, gig preparation, and atmospheric shots from a pub performance. The video intersperses interviews and voiceovers from the band members,



Saul's (the drummer) father, and the reactions of the band's audiences. The boys are presented here as very much an authentic part of the music scene, and their autism is presented as a 'hurdle' – not a barrier – which their strengths help them to overcome.

The short is presented as a behind-the-scenes music film, celebrating the band in its short runtime and showing how their musical abilities enable them to conquer societal obstacles. Neurodiversity activists sometimes point out that unpredictable environmental factors may turn differences into disabilities, arguing that within autism-friendly environments, this can be minimised, allowing differences to emerge as talents (Baron-Cohen, 2019, para 5). AutistiX's music, the members explain, allows them to escape their thoughts, feelings, and anxieties and enables them to enter supportive public spaces where their musical talents are appreciated, turning deficits into differences. The celebration of these aspects of personhood is linked to the overcoming of socially constructed hurdles, but not at the cost of the band members' autistic identities. Diversity and ability are championed and autistic individuals are accepted without narrative pressures to conform or change.

Another BBC Three short video also takes a celebratory approach towards autism in a mini-documentary format. *The Bristolian who inspires happiness through sober raving* (BBC Three, 2017, July 6) features Bradley, a 21-year-old with Asperger's syndrome who participates in music raves while sober. Like the films discussed above, this high-energy video focuses on inclusion, empowerment, and positively frames differences through a fusion of professionally produced and candid, self-filmed footage. Throughout, Bradley discusses his difficulties dealing with social situations and credits his raving with helping him to gain self-confidence. The video rejects the idealised constructs of many traditional documentaries that encourage autistic people to change their behaviours. Instead, the film encourages a change

in social attitudes through the message that autistic people should be accepted as they are. Towards the end, the film includes an interview with Rose, whom Bradley has introduced to the raving scene. Rose states that she has been brought into Bradley's world rather than the other way round, describing how Bradley encouraged her to dance when she had been unwell. Bradley thus appears here as an inspiration and guide rather than an object of pity. And rather than focusing on the pair's difficulties – Rose's unnamed illness and Bradley's Asperger's syndrome – the video celebrates their mutual passion for dancing.

BBC Three's experimentation with short-form documentary formats is not limited to the *Amazing Humans* series. The channel frequently broadcasts supplementary films to portray previously unseen aspects of the stories of individuals depicted in the longer-form programming. These films may take the form of clips, such as the ones ripped from *Glow Up: Britain's Next Make-Up Star* (Brown, 2019-present), or longer music videos originating from the series *Rap Game UK* (O'Brien, 2019-present). The short film *Mal uses music to talk about autism and ADHD #RapRoadTrip* (BBC Three, 2020) is a one-off short that expands on the story of an autistic man featured in its long-form *Rap Trip: Underground Scenes Uncovered* (Corbin, 2020). The short video combines clips from its parent film with new footage, including scenes of Mal rapping and talking directly to the camera. BBC Three shared the video on their Twitter page, so that it effectively became an advertisement for the longer production.

Like the *Amazing Humans* series, *Mal uses music to talk about autism and ADHD #RapRoadTrip* contains themes of diversity and inclusion – Mal is a rare example in British television of a black autistic man – and views autism as a natural human variation from a strengths-based perspective. It thus demonstrates the short format's potential to bring forth

underrepresented voices. Its hand-held aesthetic, with some shots seeming to originate in phone footage, creates a sense of intimacy and authenticity that mirrors YouTube vlog formats, although it is unclear how much control Mal actually had over the editing of the film.

For all their positive elements, the new wave of short-form autism celebration films is not necessarily immune to the pitfalls of more traditional autism documentaries. The attempts to celebrate and portray positive aspects of autism might, for example, be accused of 'positive stereotyping'. Although often considered harmless, innocuous, or even humorous, positive stereotypes may sometimes provide a clandestine route for outdated prejudicial social beliefs (Kay et al, 2013, p.291). The positive talent-based autism portrayals in the *Amazing Humans* series may have similar ramifications to the earlier savant stereotypes of Chapter 2 and place undue pressure and expectations upon autistic people. Like older and more recognisable negative stereotypes, positive stereotypes may feel depersonalised and standardising in their own way (Siy & Cheryan, 2016, p.952). Writing about the problem of positive stereotyping in narrative feature films, Shohat and Stam (1994, p.204) write that "a cinema of contrived positive images betrays a lack of confidence in the group portrayed, which usually itself has no illusions concerning its own perfection". Here too, without vital input from autistic individuals and communities, attempts at portraying neurodiversity through positive stereotyping may backfire. Moreover, attempts to blend autistic difference with shared 'neurotypical' experiences and environments are not without risk. Integrating neurodiverse and neurotypical groups may harm autism representation by discounting the specificity of autistic experience and the participants at the centre of these films seem to make contradictory claims: "I am other" and "we are all the same". But however that might be, diversity in representation is a desirable goal in itself and from this point of view these short films constitute a net benefit insofar by extending the range of images of autism.

### New formats and combating stigma

Viral short-form formats are an adaptable medium for the portrayal of autistic experiences and perspectives. Although most of this discussion centres on BBC Three's new formats, other BBC channels and initiatives are worthy of discussion. Shared through the BBC Careers YouTube channel is the short *Project Cape Neurodiverse Immersive 360VR experience* (BBC Careers, 2016). BBC Cape (an acronym for 'creating a positive environment') is a neurodiversity initiative aimed at removing workplace barriers. The video employs VR technologies to provide insights into the experiences of autistic employees. It places the viewer in the position of an autistic person as they participate in a workplace meeting. As the session starts, a series of amplified sensory stimuli unfolds. Overhead lights blink and distort as the viewer's heartbeat and breathing dominates the audio track. The busy feature wall pixelates and flickers as high-pitched electronic tones muffle the voices of the other participants in the meeting. This cacophony of stimuli makes the business of the meeting challenging to follow. The video ends with the meeting's presenter issuing a reproach to the viewer for not participating and paying attention. The clip offers a sobering and empathic experience for audiences. Just as the documentaries discussed in the previous chapter use an array of imaginative narrative devices to recreate the inner world of the autistic person, this kind of experimental short-form film, together with the integration of virtual reality technologies, attempts to bridge the divide between neurotypical and neurodiverse groups, fostering awareness and recognition of the challenges facing autistic people in the workplace. Rather than emphasising medicalised deficit or problematically othering autistic persons, however, such films aim to change public perceptions by addressing autism stigma and prejudice by literally placing the neurotypical viewer in the seat of an autistic person.

The earlier, mostly science focused documentaries discussed in this dissertation relied heavily on negative stereotyping and deficit models that depict paternalistic autism categorisations. Short-form related factual content provides opportunities to correct and reconceptualise such patterns. These documentaries address prejudice and biases through narratives of inclusion where autistic people participate or enter spaces and situations that they may normally have difficulty accessing. This separation is a form of “hostile prejudice”, where persons with developmental disabilities are dehumanised and assumed to be harmful and are therefore kept separate from others (Parker et al., 2020, p.263). The new documentary images of autism often embrace the social model of disability, focusing on questions of access, inclusion, and acceptance. Such disability centric productions have become prevalent in contemporary long-form entertainment documentaries such as *The Undateables* (Carre, 2012-present) and *Employable Me* (Howe, 2017-2021).

Similar themes are explored in the short film *Autism: The children who find haircuts painful* (BBC Three, 2017, April 9), a news-style package that was shared on BBC Three’s Facebook page. It focuses on a barbershop made famous a few months previously by BBC News that specialises in catering for autistic clientele. It is also part of a disability awareness campaign: *#LearningDisabilityWeek*. The hairdresser depicted in the short film, James, garnered substantial news and social media attention following his news media appearance, prompting the creation of the video to tap into the public interest. The film’s short form transcends the confines of traditional linear broadcasting. The film’s availability on Facebook makes it eminently shareable, helping to raise awareness of one aspect of the daily life for children with autism. The short takes the form of a ‘how to’ video comprising a list of tips to help business owners better cater to the needs of autistic children. Although geared towards hairdressers, much of the advice is universal (for example, “treat each child with autism as an

individual”) and is transferable to other settings. James advises that he does not force children to sit for their haircuts and that hairdressers should work around them instead. This approach revisits earlier concepts of normalisation, but instead of normalising autistic people (as in Chapter 3), it normalises autism *as a condition*.

Hybridisation and the retooling or bitesizing of long-form documentaries has become widespread practice in the post broadcast environment. The 2019 series *Misfits Salon* (Egerton-Jones, 2019) exemplifies the growing trend of chopping up documentaries into spreadable ‘chunks’; this allows sequences to be reframed, retitled, made more easily searchable online, and shared through social media and video-sharing platforms. The main series’ 12-minute-long episodes are easily divided into smaller chunks to become shareable through social media platforms. Each episode features the bright colours, upbeat musical soundtracks, and the fast edited style that typifies short form formats. Autistic Daisy, star of the inaugural episode, only received her diagnosis a year before the broadcast. Daisy is presented as proudly neurodiverse, and the salon offers a safe and inclusive environment for her. Instead of being seen as disordered or subjected to ‘enfreakment’, Daisy is merely ‘different’.

Like the hybridised documentaries discussed in Chapter 3, *Misfits Salon* borrows heavily from makeover entertainment formats as Daisy undergoes a process of physical transformation which involves restyling her hair, make-up and clothes whilst undergoing pseudo-counselling sessions with the salon’s owner, Sophia. The series celebrates Daisy’s neurodiversity by embracing her autistic identity and the neoliberal discourses of self-care and empowerment, which are all further signified through her choice of t-shirt emblazoned with the phrase “I am doing this for me”. Her physical transformation – a word that brightly

flashes across the screen at the start of the first episode – is framed as helping her come to terms with her new autism diagnosis. By her transformation's end, she states that she no longer wants to be known as the 'old' Daisy or defined by her autism.

*Things not to say to an autistic person* (BBC Three, 2016) seeks to tackle audience prejudice by addressing stereotypes and biases. The episode belongs to the series *Things not to say to a ...*, a collection of 91 shorts covering topics including mental illness, disability, sexuality, and race, which aims to demystify and destigmatise. The series mimics the format and style of viral videos popularised by the likes of BuzzFeed. The format consists of two individuals sitting at a table, against a lively coloured backdrop, with a ceramic bowl between them. Inside the bowl, written on slips of paper, are questions and offensive statements commonly made about members of that community or group. There are two groups at play within this short-form autism format: the ingroup (the unseen individuals posing the questions) and the outgroup (autistic respondents).

*Things not to say to an autistic person* updates many themes depicted in earlier documentaries as it condenses complex subject matter into short factual documentary-style bursts. The use of question title cards enables seamless transitions between topics succinctly explored by the film's participants - a device not commonly used in broadcast equivalents. The absence of narrator or presenter, the uncomplicated set, framing and composition of the video's participants engrosses the audience in the minutiae detail of their responses. When asked: "What's your special ability?", participants respond with annoyance and displeasure as they discuss broadcast and news media's misrepresentations of autism and its overreliance on depictions of men rather than women. Indeed, one of the most notable features of many of the participants of these short films is their capacity for reflexivity, as they show awareness

of the stereotypical patterns of representation elsewhere in the media. Discussing ‘special abilities’, the women look pained and frustrated, their body language reflecting their exasperation at hearing this common media trope, and one of them explicitly condemns the stereotype that autistic people are all savants or geniuses. *Things not to say to an autistic person* addresses and revises these stereotypes by giving autistic people opportunities to communicate their experiences and beliefs. Furthermore, the participants’ responses contradict ingroup assumptions of the homogeneity and ‘sameness’ of autistic people by emphasising the inherent diversity and distinctiveness among autistic people.

The question-based structure of *Things not to say* allows societal misconceptions and prejudices to be addressed. Participants are presented with the statement “autistic people can’t feel empathy”, an emotive assumption that draws a heated, profanity-laden response by one respondent, while another states that she believes autistic people feel too much, rather than too little empathy. The camera then cuts back to the first respondent, who agrees that autistic people “feel things much harder”. Later a man states that he often finds it hard to place himself in another person’s shoes, but laments that this difficulty is mistaken for lack of empathy. These fast-edited, candid responses offer opportunities for spontaneous and affective exchanges between the autistic participants that other documentary formats may struggle to reproduce. Themes of normalisation and sincerity arise in response to the follow-up question: “You could be normal if you tried”. One respondent condemns such outdated understandings of disability and difference, explaining that her school teachers blamed her for being bullied, declaring that “if she tried to fit in more, she wouldn’t get bullied”. These forthright responses give a window onto each of the participant’s personalities and bugbears.



Viewers of *Things not to say to an autistic person* are invited to challenge and change their preconceptions, rather than requiring change of autistic people. Here the goal is to normalise autism as a condition rather than to normalise autistic people. The jaunty background music running throughout the episode, meanwhile, together with the often humorously exasperated reactions of the autistic participants to the stereotypical statements they are confronted with, ensures that this is achieved with a lightness of touch that is usually absent from longer form documentary. These short-form films therefore invite a more complex, fluid, and open mode of spectatorship that is often encouraged by television documentaries. In fact, the power dynamics of the traditional relationship between viewers and participants is potentially reversed in some of these productions. Unlike the ‘challenge’ component found in the docutainment genre discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, which requires autistic people to overcome, grow and change, the responsibility for change here is placed squarely on the neurotypical viewer.

While they use many of the devices of entertainment and hybridised documentaries, these short-form videos may serve audiences that traditional documentaries do not cater for. Most of the individuals featured in the films discussed belong to BBC Three’s target audience demographic of 16–34-year-olds. Nevertheless, these films are generally made from the perspective of autistic people without communication or learning difficulties and as such they do exclude a substantial part of the autistic community. Autistic people who have difficulties with self-expression are overlooked or interpreted through outsider perspectives, recalling these ways in which parents and medical professionals edge out first-person perspectives in the documentaries discussed earlier in this dissertation. More generally, the fact that only those without communication or language difficulties are provided opportunities to speak arguably reflects what could be seen as a two-tier system within autism communication.

Moreover, it is hard to ascertain the level of creative input, if any, the participants had in producing these short-formats. The representation of neurodiverse identities where autistic people have limited control or impact within the production context may cause autism portrayals to stagnate and become stereotyped, even if this stereotyping takes an ostensibly 'positive' form.

Building on its impressive legacy, BBC Three can further cement its pre-eminence in anti-stigma television by developing closer relationships with its target demographic and supporting diverse workers as well as voices (Woods, 2017, p.144). Indeed, although the short-form formats discussed in this chapter offer opportunities for increased voice, opportunities for participation should be extended on both sides of the camera. Furthermore, the channel's recent change to broadcast raises questions about the future of public service broadcasting. Channel 4, with its longstanding reputation for diversity in broadcasting, faces similar challenges to the BBC and could also benefit from adopting approaches and techniques from 'new' media platforms like YouTube. These new 'many-to-many' technologies have transformed the top-down approach of mainstream media dissemination (Spurgeon & Edmond, 2015, p.53) and encourage sharing and audience interactions. Within the context of a multiplatform environment, two-way connectivity between audience members and content producers has encouraged broadcasters and media managers to develop innovative approaches that no longer primarily focus on production and distribution, but instead place considerable importance on building and sustaining relationships with audiences (Doyle, 2015 p.52). Although its short-form content has thus far attempted to support and bring forth autistic voices, improvements can still be made as control over autism representation is still predominantly in the hands of non-autistic people.

Despite BBC Three's contribution to increasing and improving autistic representation, the greater incorporation of user-created material is a potential avenue for future exploration. YouTube's social video creation and sharing capabilities could enhance autism representations and offer additional benefits to public service broadcasters, autistic individuals, and communities by offering autistic people additional opportunities for self-expression.

## Conclusion

The nature of television is evolving as audiences are increasingly accessing content online. Broadcasters are not only repurposing, repackaging and placing broadcast content online, but producing content specifically for this purpose. These changes may offer further opportunities regarding the diversity of autism representation and documentary formats. Short-form formats are shareable and, crucially, can be relatively quickly produced by production companies. A recurrent theme throughout this dissertation has been the reinforcement of stigma and the use of disability modes in problematic and stilted representations of autism. Broadcasters' amalgamation of traditional and online media formats demonstrates the potential of short-form formats for reconceptualising autism portrayal in more interactive, light-hearted, reflexive and accepting ways.

The neurodiversity movement has become intrinsically connected to and represented within the mainstream media's autism representations and portrayals of neurodiversity suggest possible avenues for disseminating scientific and academic ideas and approaches through new digital channels. Furthermore, as the autistic community drives the

neurodiversity movement, it demonstrates the potential impact autistic people have on media portrayals, including the adoption of new platforms and formats.

This chapter has focused on the changes to BBC Three as a lens to explore the new integration of online factual short-form content. Autism advocacy and disability representation more generally has benefited enormously from this change. Although the channel has recently switched back to linear broadcasting, opportunities for diversity and autism representation remain while the channel maintains its online presence. Short-form formats draw upon populist online viral content to present autistic voices in new ways and integrates them within traditional television documentary forms. The emphasis on neurodiverse perspectives and on autism as a difference has also led to a shift from idealisation to celebration, reflecting a strengths-based approach to autism representation.

As this chapter has argued, these new formats provide opportunities to combat autism stigma using innovative technologies such as virtual reality. BBC Three and other mainstream broadcasters have already developed and reflected this changing media landscape. Project Cape's use of VR technologies, which have the potential to break down the distance between audiences and distant 'others' (Nash, 2018, p.99), suggests fresh avenues for representing autistic experience. Additionally, broadcasters could benefit further from engaging with participatory online cultures that may improve autism diversity and representation and other underrepresented groups and communities. Although the first-person perspective films discussed here are certainly to be welcomed, their ability to explore autistic experiences 'from the inside' are arguably limited by their low budgets and very conventional and contrived, usually studio-bound settings and, most especially, by being produced by non-autistic people. Indeed, the introduction of self-produced digital content, as

discussed in the following chapter, may offer even greater opportunities for neurodiverse perspectives to emerge.

## Chapter 7: Vlogs, Neurodiversity, and Reclamation

As we have seen, the traditional broadcast media and the Internet both have enormous potential to influence social constructions of disability. They can help to increase public awareness of environmental barriers, form more favourable attitudes, and facilitate the social inclusion of people with disabilities (Tárraga-Mínguez et al., 2020, para 12). But in the era of user-generated content, streaming platforms offer ordinary people the chance to make their own media and regain control over their image. Self-made factual content uploaded to platforms like YouTube provides historically unprecedented opportunities for autism self-representation. In all of the documentaries discussed in the preceding chapters, even those which feature autistic presenters and participants, control over production is generally in the hands of non-autistic people. Although the short BBC films discussed in Chapter 6 feature celebratory themes and increasingly neurodiverse viewpoints, these are nonetheless shaped by the production concerns of influential media organisations. Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that YouTube vlogs have become an increasingly common method of self-broadcast amongst individual autistic people and advocacy groups in Britain and beyond.

The denial or absence of opportunities for presenting their own voices has a host of negative consequences for autistic persons. In a co-authored study, autistic academic Damian Milton argues that sharing experiences and connecting with others is essential to an individual's well-being and social belonging (Milton & Sims, 2016, p.529). Providing autistic people with opportunities for self-expression, however, may help to facilitate stigma management, a practice that often includes concealment, disclosure, reframing and reclamation (Botha et al., 2020, p.9). Short-form formats uploaded to social media may

facilitate the communication of autistic perspectives. These formats enable content creation by individuals and communities. Broadcasters such as BBC Three frequently engage with the streaming platform and its users by sharing existing content, clips or hybridisations of existing programmes, as in the previously discussed video *Mal uses music to talk about autism and ADHD #RapRoadTrip*; but homemade vlogs have a different impetus and possess their own aesthetic styles. This chapter looks towards the future of autism documentary, exploring how representations could be enhanced to incorporate more autistic voices and neurodiverse perspectives via the personal vlog format on YouTube. It also considers the streaming platform's prospective drawbacks and the potential challenges autistic individuals and broadcasters may face as they produce content for YouTube. Finally, it suggests that some degree of convergence between self-generated and broadcast models is likely to offer the best prospects for future representations of autism.

YouTube is an intermediary online content-hosting platform that provides storage, navigation and delivery (Gillespie, 2013, pp.407-409) for user generated content and video uploads. The history of its contributions to participatory culture is already well documented (Burgess, 2015; Burgess & Green, 2018; Tripp, 2012), but suffice to say here that the platform launched in 2005 as a site for user-generated content and was initially presented in popular media as platform for the sharing of self-made videos and as an alternative to watching television (van Dijck, 2013, p.110). YouTube quickly evolved into the leading video sharing platform. It changed ownership in 2006 when Google purchased it and more recently, the platform has been embroiled in several controversies over censorship, free speech and demonetisation.

Burgess and Green (2018, p.20) identify two distinct YouTube content cultures: professional and individual. The first consists of professional productions with commercial values and aesthetics; the second describes content made by individual creators in the spirit of free expression and creativity. YouTube encourages users to create, upload and curate their content, becoming active participants in media production and consumers (Horan, 2020, pp.148-149). This participatory culture signals a departure from previous notions of media audiences as passive spectators (Jenkins, 2006, p.3) and heralds the birth of the 'prosumer'. Within a political context, the Internet redistributes influence and broadens the scope of the public sphere by increasing individuals' political activities and participation in areas typically shut off from the public (Hinderman, 2008, p.5). For the first time, the emergence of YouTube offered opportunities for individuals to participate in media production and to do so relatively cheaply. While many people still use YouTube passively – and though it is true that most users of user-generated services such as YouTube and Wikipedia do so without ever creating content of their own – audiences are increasingly becoming active media users (Welbourne & Grant, 2016, p.706). Online and virtual spaces offer a variety of communication benefits for autistic people by “virtual geographically dispersed space in which people with autism can Interact” (Bertilsson Rosqvist et al., 2013, p.373). Furthermore, they allow users to create and upload content from home, obviating the need to travel to television studios in order to appear on screen. Notwithstanding the need to respect YouTube's Community Guidelines, creators on YouTube have a relatively high degree of creative autonomy, although the content made by autistic vloggers varies considerably in quality and style.

YouTube's participatory nature trades on the diversity of the social and cultural voices that it hosts (Burgess & Green, 2018, p.96). The site embodies a revolution in media culture,



providing a platform for users to tell their own stories (Strangelove, 2010, p.9). The building of identity and community is central to YouTube's branding as it carefully presents itself to users, advertisers, and clients as an inclusive and appealing space (Gillespie, 2013, p.409 - 410). YouTube allows autistic users to self-present in dynamic and appealing styles, embracing audiences that traditional media might fail to reach (Brownlow et al., 2013, p.92). Vlogging offers more diversity regarding narrative forms and representations as it engages with the mundane experiences and idiosyncratic 'takes' of ordinary people outside of formal institutions and organisations. The democratising shift creates opportunities for the creation of content that can be tailored to the needs and concerns of autistic users. The versatility of the medium allows autistic creators to adapt and modify their content to reflect their own identities, communities and messages. Moreover, on YouTube and other streaming platforms, autistic vloggers do not operate in isolation, but participate in a network of other content creators that together make up a 'community of practice' – a term used to describe the accumulation of community-based knowledge in social groups with a shared interest (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015; Sweet et al., 2020).

New online video formats build upon historical presentational techniques. Horan (2020, pp.148-149) highlights the similarities between the style and content of YouTube vlogs and those of various legacy media. He cites Rizzo's (2008) work on early cinema's "cinema of attractions" as spectacles that address audiences directly by soliciting interest and curiosity, linking these to the 'trick shot' niche of YouTube videos, where individuals perform stunts like throwing bottles into the air. Vlogs often revolve around an attraction – whether that be a presenter, topic, or event – and an individual presenter who directly addresses audiences, conjuring curiosity and engagement from viewers. Autistic video creators may employ the

same “cinema of attraction” techniques or even some of the strategies of the historical freak show. However, the crucial point is that vlog’s host is the centre of attention and is in control of the discussion. This shift highlights the shift from passivity to activity as the dominant mode of autism representation.

### *Amanda Baggs: In My Language*

Autobiographical accounts, such as those about high-profile figures, provide opportunities to show the realities of life as an autistic person and become a means to counteract the misrepresentation of autism that are inherent in ableist discourses (Murray, 2008, p.32). Perhaps one of the best-known autism vlogs, and certainly one of the earliest, is Amanda Baggs’ eight-minute long *In My Language* (uploaded by Baggs’ online username silentmiaow), which at the time of writing has amassed over 1.5 million views. Uploaded to YouTube in 2007, the film is a key example of early an autism vlog which anticipates modern self-authored short-form formats that are now currently popular on YouTube’s platform, albeit in a far more experimental mode. Baggs, who died in 2020, was a provocative and well-known autism advocate who identified as genderless and used the pronouns sie and hir (Smith, 2020). *In My Language* is not Baggs’ only video but it is their most popular one: their dedicated channel features many videos of varying lengths ranging from vlogging formats to addressing neurotypical stereotypes and assumptions. *In My Language* itself has two parts. The first offers a sensory exploration as Baggs interacts with hir surroundings offered with no narration or explanation. The second half, Baggs’ narrates through text to speech software as sie again interacts with hir environment.

After a brief title card, the film opens with a high angle silhouetted shot of Baggs from behind as she hums and gestures, interacting with her domestic environment through a series of repetitive motions. These actions include scenes of her rubbing her face into an open book and close-ups of a hand rubbing noisily across a computer keyboard. Throughout the only sound is Baggs' humming and the noises that objects make as Baggs interacts with them. These interactions are intercut with close-ups of Baggs' body, and the lack of voiceover invites audiences to "inhabit *her* [sic] narrative of significant interactions with objects, spaces, and her own body" (Davidson, 2016, p.9). The imagery is challenging as it invites audiences to reconsider the "'normative ideal' of speech-centred communication and highlights the frictions of visibility" (Reading, 2018, p.123). While it is tempting to attribute a connotative reading of this montage from a neurotypical gaze, Baggs states in the narration accompanying the second part of the video that "my language is not about designing words or even visual symbols for people to interpret, it is about being in a constant conversation with every aspect of my environment". In her discussion of the video, autistic author/academic Yergeau highlights Baggs' rebuttal of the "allistic desire to interpret, to root out symbolism and social meaning in autistexts" (Yergeau, 2018, p.193).

The frame occasionally shakes as Baggs holds the camera to document her movements, accentuating the video's subjective and individualistic perspective. Its style further incorporates techniques from traditional documentary modes as, in particular, its first part presents a poetic mode of address through the juxtaposition of sound and imagery offered with no justificatory narration in the poetic documentary mode (Nichols, 2001). This avant-garde mode of presentation communicates Baggs' sensory explorations and encounters through a distinctly personal, subjective and expressionistic style. The approach taken here is arguably somewhat similar that taken in the Rosie King and Chris Packham

documentaries discussed in Chapter 5; however, the imagery in the latter programmes was largely under the control of other, neurotypical creators. Here Baggs is in control, providing an individual account of autistic personhood using a proxy voice and camera to mimic hir gaze.

Baggs' described hir sensory communication in this video as hir "native language". As detailed in the video's description, the second part of the video acts as a "translation" of the imagery presented in the first. Similar imagery and interactions are presented as in the first portion, but this second part is narrated by Baggs. In this narration, Baggs iterates the importance of language, or rather its lack, and its connection to personhood, value and identity. The film extrapolates from the personal to address how mainstream cultural narratives misrepresent autism, it further documents a move from simple a presentation of Baggs' daily habits to wider discussions of autistic selfhood and the methods by which the autistic sense of self is interpreted by others (Murray, 2008, p.34). The film asserts the importance and diversity of autistic experiences and differences. Baggs' opening textual and sensory exploration of hir surroundings demonstrates the intensity and complexity of hir everyday experiences that may often be overlooked, devalued or mistranslated. As Baggs (2010, para 26) questions, "the problem with people quantifying that richness is that they completely forget it is infinite compared to the broadest of humanity's finite capacities".

In an article for *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Baggs (2010, para 15) remarks on hir 'patterned' perception of the world, considering "these patterns and connections to be more my language than the words that appear on the screen when I let my fingers use the keyboard". The film's alternation between silence and narration, meanwhile, provokes the audience into reconsidering the normative ideas about communication and disability that arise in pedagogical accounts of autistic language use. Furthermore, the video demonstrates

“a form of critical embodiment that questions normative ideas about the body and its relationship to language” (Davidson, 2016, p.10). Davidson (2016, p.11) further theorises that “If the ideal of an ‘embodied language’ is the unmediated expression of feelings through speech, Baggs’ form of embodiment exists as a ventriloquized interface that mirrors her internally distanced relationship to neurotypical life”. This notion of embodied language challenges the stigmatisation of autistic communicational differences, in which the absence of language often results in dismissal, devaluation and dehumanisation.

Baggs’ influence on autistic online participatory culture has at times seemed problematic, with some members of online communities questioning Baggs’ autism diagnosis and the authenticity of her autistic persona (Carmody Hagood, 2014, pp.41-43). Such reactions from online communities stress the potential drawbacks of the unregulated, two-way discourse that participatory culture can afford. However, despite these controversies, Baggs’ role in raising autism awareness and her influence on other autistic creators can be still felt in contemporary autism vlogs. *In my Language*, first person format, positioning of voice and control is echoed in more recent autism vlogs. These newer examples, which are the focus of the following discussion, generally eschew the auteurist, poetic mode of Baggs’ film, but owe much to the subjective mode of autism communication pioneered by Baggs.

### YouTube and the reclamation of stigmatised identities

YouTube can be used as a means of stigma management. Combining stigma management approaches with short-form broadcast formats distributed through YouTube offers autistic people opportunities for voice and self-advocacy, inclusion, and empowerment, leading to the reclamation and reconceptualisation of stigmatised identities. One researcher, Botha et

al. (2020, p.12), questioned autistic people as to how they understand their autism and their experiences of managing stigma, identifying themes of concealment, disclosure, reframing and reclamation. Autistic people often point out that the decision to reveal an autism diagnosis is difficult because “they could tell people, and be judged on the label, or not tell people, and be judged on their behaviour, but either way there were consequences” (Botha et al., 2020, p.13). Vlogs are a versatile format that can aid these stigma management approaches.

One vlog subgenre, the diary vlog, seems particularly promising in this respect. Traditional, written diaries imbue social meaning to daily routines and reflect their authors’ social and emotional world (Ibrahim, 2021, p.333). Although diaries are customarily private affairs, their confessional style presents the speaker with occasions for self-reflection, present neuroqueer perspectives and seek to establish intimate relationships with audiences through a parasocial mode of address. In one such example, typical of the practices of many autism vloggers, an autistic vlogger moves enthusiastically as they speak. The vlogger constantly shifts their weight as they divulge private and personal information regarding their autism diagnosis and childhood experiences. At times, this motion causes the top of their head to be cut from the frame, accentuating their movements and expressing the spontaneous candour of their opinions. The vlog appears unscripted and deeply personal, with the implied viewer of the vlog taking on the role of confidant. These types of ‘autism diary’ vlog typically explore the psychological effects of concealment and the dilemmas involved in choosing whether to disclose a diagnosis. They often describe the fear and apprehension autistic people face when telling family or friends about their autism. Vlog formats often range from educational lists to

personal monologues, acting as a form of online autobiography and as a self-help forum, offering advice for those unsure whether to reveal their diagnosis.

The comment sections attached to vlogs also provide opportunities for camaraderie, as these are sites where viewers can interact with the posted content and share details of their own struggles. In this sense, YouTube and similar streaming services can provide a platform for community engagement and encourage peer interactions among autistic users. The public comments on neurodiversity vlogs tend to be supportive: some commenters thank the uploader for increasing awareness, whilst others express affinity with the uploader and the content of the video. Other commenters disclose details of their own autism diagnoses, discussing the obstacles they faced in getting diagnosed. In this way, a multi-directional relationship among creators/presenters and viewers is created. Vloggers will often respond to the comments made on their videos with equally supportive and conversational messages.

Self-presentation within autism vlogs often confronts audience preconceptions about autism impairments (Brownlow et al., 2013, p.92). The perception of stigma can deter individuals from disclosing their autism diagnosis or, in the case of a parent, from revealing their child's diagnosis to others (Thompson-Hodgetts, et al., 2020, p.2). Assimilation, for example, is a method of concealment whereby autistic individuals try to make themselves less different in an attempt to fit in (Botha et al., 2020, p.13). Such practices are reflected in many vlogs, where autistic masking is a frequent topic of discussion. Masking is generally seen as having a considerable emotional cost, affecting an autistic person's sense of self or a sense of having to hide their true nature to 'fit in' (Lilley et al., 2021, p.9). The role of these vlogs in disclosure is to present the damaging impact that concealing autism can have on self-esteem. Vloggers often present lists detailing common masking behaviours or feature personal

accounts and experiences of masking. Moreover, these videos often use the word “we” when describing masking behaviours, in a way that implies a relationship and attachment with autistic viewers and presents a collective autistic identity to neurotypical audiences. Other videos offer advice on “unmasking” and its possible ramifications, including its mental health consequences such as depression and anxiety. Overall, therefore, these videos present and document processes of stigma protection for both autistic and non-autistic audiences.

The very existence of autism themed vlogs generally negates concepts of concealment, as viewers will be aware that vlog presenters are autistic. Vloggers give examples of occasions when they have concealed their autism to ‘fit in’ and the act of uploading autism vlogs serves as a method of disclosure in itself as it reveals an autistic person’s diagnosis and identity to audiences – even if the videos do not feature a ‘coming out’ narrative. However, the intended audience may be outside of the vlogger’s own social milieu. Uploading of vlogs may facilitate the formation of autistic identities and provide viewers with a sense that they are joining a welcoming community. Autistic adolescents describe grappling with how they are viewed after an Asperger’s diagnosis, often referring to the social stigma attached to ASD (Jones et al., 2015, p.1498). Disclosure can therefore be crucial to how autistic individuals traverse relationships, daily routines, and activities (Thompson-Hodgetts et al., 2020, p.2). Positive reactions to disclosure can increase the understanding of autistic people among neurotypical populations (Corden et al. 2021, p.6). One autistic YouTuber, for example, explains that they often mention their diagnosis in casual conversations with others and that their interlocutors often do not know how to react. Such disclosure allows non-autistic viewers to better understand the difficulties faced by autistic people in ‘coming out’.



Autism disclosure may also have educational benefits that help autistic and non-autistic people to conceptualise the condition more adequately. Vlogs offering information about autism contribute to community knowledge that reframes traditional constructions and shatters stereotypes. Due to their necessarily niche appeal, YouTube autism vlogs provide small autistic communities with safe opportunities for disclosure. Yet the YouTube vlogs discussed here are unrestricted and publicly available, meaning that anybody can view them and come to a better understanding of the psychological impact of autism stereotypes and public misunderstanding of autistic people.

Unlike most of the documentaries discussed earlier in this dissertation, autism vlogs place autistic people in the role of experts – and compared to non-autistic people, autistic people are indeed experts, if only on the nature of their own lived experiences (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017, p.10). YouTube offers these experts prospects for self-expression and the building of community knowledge. Vlogs exist within the context of a culture of networked sociality (Ibrahim, 2021, p.332 & p.335), where online video platforms democratise science communication, providing people opportunities to engage with discourses about health and illness as both producers and consumers (Rosenthal, 2020, p.1). In one video, an autistic vlogger details their autism ‘credentials’; not only are they autistic, but they also work within the autism support field with other autistic adults and the broader autism community. These credentials lend them authenticity and authority to disperse information among audiences. In the comments section attached to this video, viewers respond to the vlogger’s information and expand upon them, adding examples from their own experience. Community knowledge structures emerge when control of knowledge production is placed in the hands of autistic people themselves. Autism vloggers merge personal and private facets of autistic experiences

with the educational and scientific discourses traditionally denied to them, in a process of collective learning and confidence-building, both for themselves and their community. Their videos often have dual function, apparently being aimed at both neurotypical and neurodiverse audiences, as many have educational themes of relevance or benefit to both. Educational, list-based videos are a common viral form of autism first-person knowledge production. This format was popularised by entertainment channels, with videos usually consisting of several items related to diagnostic criteria or autistic traits. It is a format that echoes the conventions of more traditional, tabloid publications (for example, print magazine articles structured around numbered lists of ways to improve health, fitness or relationships) and is thus easily digestible and shared, making it a favoured vehicle for online activists and advocates.

Rather than autism knowledge being produced only in scientific and educational spheres, vlogs allow for the expression of self-expertise anchored in first-person experiences. The proliferation of autism knowledge and experience raises questions, however, about the value of the scientific information being shared online and not all commentators on the Internet and social media have expressed unbridled enthusiasm towards the medium's potential for democracy. For example, online videos are sometimes dismissed as a mass cultural practice (Strangelove, 2010, p.23) and not afforded the same cultural standing as more 'worthy' media forms. Keen (2007, p.15), meanwhile, argues that the Internet undermines truthful and accurate civic discourse and belittles expertise, experience, and talent. He (2007, p.16) further argues that free (or almost free) user-generated content online replaces sources of 'expert' information and its traditional cultural gatekeepers. It is certainly true that the 'anything goes' nature of the vlogosphere could potentially open the door to the

spreading of misinformation. The relatively unregulated mode of public communication represented by vlogs may cause inaccuracies to creep into the information presented, as there are no reliable outside parties to fact-check information, something that mainstream television documentary makers must take enormously seriously or face regulatory censure. On the other hand, YouTube Community Guidelines allow users to report videos that they feel are misleading or that have the potential to cause damage.

The key point here is that vlogs' democratic nature mostly serves to foster inclusion and understanding. YouTube and social media platforms generally offer opportunities for representation and discourse that traditional medical and scientific settings have historically excluded autistic people from. Autism self-expertise, although certainly subjective and depicted through highly individualised experiences, provides perspectives and information absent from conventional autism knowledge production. Vlogs frequently present expressions of autistic lived experiences as worthy contributions to lay knowledge and frequently explore autistic behaviours to help viewers understand autism diagnosis. Autism vlogs may become problematic when they try to pass off personal experience as a generalisable fact, as some list-based vlogs risk doing. The platform brings together the modern trappings of online control, commercialisation and mediated stereotyped personas that may constrain the freedom with which autistic persons can create and present their perspectives. While personal experience allows for greater self-reflection and audience identification, overemphasis may be also placed on some autism characteristics, such as sensory responses to certain stimuli. Nevertheless, online self-representation matters to autistic people and is hugely appreciated by non-autistic viewers. It should be seen not as a

replacement for credentialed expertise, but as a supplement to it – one that can help to democratise expertise and bring it into the mediated public sphere.

YouTube's infrastructure, social sharing and content creation aid the reclamation of autistic identities and address autism stigma. Vlog formats increasingly draw upon the practices used by professional YouTubers. These practices may be stylistic, as in the use of title cards at the beginning and end of vlogs, musical choices or animations. Professional YouTube creators and influencers increasingly operate within dynamic, cross-platform environments (Burgess & Green, 2018, p.82). Although these figures predominantly operate outside traditional linear broadcasting methods on platforms such as Twitter and TikTok, autism advocates are increasingly moving back and forth between television and online platforms. Rosie King, the star of the documentaries *My Autism and Me* and *Up and Away*, features in a variety of content uploaded to the platform. YouTube search results reveal the 'spreadable' nature of her work, since King features in clips of television appearances, online interviews, documentary uploads and a TED talk that King delivered about her autism (TED, 2014). This convergence of old and new media forms broadens, diversifies and democratises autism representation. Although comparable to reality television stars in terms of mediated personas and surveillance, online celebrities' fame resides on self-publicity and self-motivation to construct an exciting and interesting mediated self (Bennett, 2011, p.346). Vlogs are a versatile progression of first-person television narratives, offering creators autonomy and control over their image, which not only brings forth neurodiverse perspectives but gives autistic people a sense of purpose.

Autistic vloggers may further reclaim a positive identity for themselves by adopting microcelebrity practices. Microcelebrity refers to the self-branding efforts and describes

individuals' celebrification on social media platforms (Senft, 2008). Microcelebrities deploy and maintain an online identity as though it were a branded good (Senft, 2013, p.346). A microcelebrity's social media presence requires constant control and cultivation. The vlog's visual nature encourages a continuously constructed representation of self as a visual artefact (Ibrahim, 2021, p.334) – for example, mundane online habits such as deleting unflattering Facebook photos, are listed as micro-celebrity practices (Senft, 2013, p.346). YouTube is home to many online autistic communities that regularly engage in microcelebrity rituals. The creation of microcelebrity identities and practices amongst autistic creators is widespread. On a trivial level, microcelebrity activity involve actions such as celebrating subscriber counts or developing branding that reflects some idiosyncratic aspect of a vlogger's persona. Many autism channels have a substantial number of followers, with some vloggers earning the 'Silver Play Buttons' awarded by YouTube to channels with over 100,000 subscribers.

The colloquial term 'aspie' is a term of reclamation and community identity. Aspie communities exist both online and offline. Bagatell (2007, pp.419-420) describes the aspie community as populated by those with Asperger's syndrome (and what used to be known as high functioning autism), whose members regularly engage in self-advocacy discourse. The term regularly used in YouTube vlogs (and in the videos tags, images and the parameters they generate), and its use enables a more positive and self-defined autistic community (Bagatell, 2007, p.422). This use of identification terminology is a form of naming language (Senft, 2013, pp.347-348). Superficially, the term serves to package and identify video content, making it easily searchable and accessible. However, by using the term aspie, positive self-identifying and branding occurs in a process analogous with Foucault's (2020 [1984]) notion of 'reverse

discourse'. Its use in the vlogging context reclaims stigmatised autistic identity by expressing a shared online culture, experience and belonging.

As part of the online aspie community branding, creators must navigate and project an identity aligned with the expectations and practices of a niche YouTube subculture. The aspie subculture typically reflects accepted neurodiverse conceptualisations of autism, as members tend to focus on their autistic differences. Vloggers use a number of strategies to project this perspective. Their videos may encourage autistic viewers to see themselves as neurodiverse. They also generally encourage positivity, self-reflection, and the reframing of previously medicalised autism characteristics as human differences. These vlogs often take the form of direct addresses. Additionally, autistic vloggers encourage the adoption of neurodiverse perspectives among non-autistic people through awareness-raising, encouraging neurotypical viewers to reconceptualise their understanding of the autistic behaviours of their romantic partners, friends, family members or colleagues.

YouTube searches for the term aspie turn up a variety of content detailing areas of a distinct cultural and community identity. These vary from dating advice, symptomatology, mental health issues, difficulties in communication, diagnosis, and employment aimed at autistic and non-autistic people. Viewing them as their own self-made subculture on YouTube enables the identification of "the language, narratives, rituals, and other symbols that persons with disabilities enact in the production and interpretation of disability culture and cocultures" (Coopman, 2003, p.369). YouTube autism subcultures borrow from social media techniques to reflect on and critique academic theories about autism, neurodiversity and biodiversity. They contain advice that other autistic adults and children can use. Autistic

YouTubers seek to reclaim and reframe 'spoiled' identities through a discourse of understanding, personal reflection and calls for societal change.

Neurodiverse conceptions of autism influence how autistic creators present their autism on YouTube. The integration of neurodiverse perspectives, advocacy and the emphasis on helping others with the autism community are defining characteristics of the autism vlog subculture. The use of autism advocacy narratives within vlogs is multifaceted. It is a common vlog topic or goal to combat stigma via the delivery of highly subjective and personalised advice, relating, for example, to sensory sensitivities or anxiety. In one video, a man details his diagnosis in conversation with an expert and divulges the emotional impact his autism diagnosis had on him. He discusses a range of autobiographical topics, including his relationships with others, providing biographical insight into his early life experiences.

Such videos highlight the frequent disconnect between neurodiverse and neurotypical understandings, referred to as the double empathy problem. Milton (2012, p.884) defines this as "a disjuncture in reciprocity between two differently disposed social actors which becomes more marked the wider the disjuncture in dispositional perceptions of the lifeworld". Where autistic people might lack insights and understanding regarding neurotypical cultures, it is equally the case that non-autistic people lack understanding of autistic people (Milton, 2012, p.886). Autobiographical vlogs provide platforms that may redress aspects of the double empathy problem, as neurotypical audiences are urged to comprehend perspectives beyond their own and gain awareness and understanding of autistic online communities and their members.

Autism YouTube communities demonstrate a degree of self-moderation, which may be either passively or actively pursued, affecting its membership and inclusion. Senft (2013,

p.350) differentiates between audiences and communities as each requires different social codes that may create barriers to entry into the community. Interaction between creators and audiences allows for relationships to form; however, this requires a level of social understanding among the participants. The codes and terminologies used by ingroup vloggers may deter outsiders unfamiliar with the conventions or social practices and prevent group cohesion and inclusion. Social anxieties, fear of stigma or apprehension in communicating their perspective may prevent new autistic creators, meanwhile, from participating in online communities. Additionally, those with learning or communication difficulties may find accessing the platform, commenting, and uploading video content difficult. Nevertheless, the potential social benefits of vlog formats, and the interactive nature of the platform, may facilitate the overcoming of these barriers in the long term.

The dominance of neurodiverse perspectives in vlog formats highlights another representational trend: the overrepresentation of Asperger's syndrome and 'high functioning' autistic people on YouTube. Although changes in the DSM-V removed the latter terms from medical use, the terms high and low functioning are still used by many autistic people in online platforms. The vlogosphere habitually underrepresents autistic people with complex communication and learning needs. Like the science-oriented documentaries discussed in Chapter 1, vlogs often depict parental perspectives that define and surveil autistic children via a parental gaze. Although personal autism vlogs may benefit the parents of autistic children in some ways, offering advice and a sense of community, they may risk being exploitative. Children's perspectives are often secondary and they may not have consented to being in the video. The omission of children and people with communication difficulties



means that the specific interests of these groups are all too often subsumed into parental and educational/medical perspectives.

A consequence of the community-driven format is the division it creates between members (autistic people), intended audiences (autistic people's families and allies) and non-intended audiences. The recent removal of the diagnostic label Asperger's syndrome was welcomed by some commentators, who believed the term created a problematic division between 'spectrumites' and neurotypical people (Giles, 2014, p.158). But list-based videos, in particular, risk reinforcing such divisions. By aiming to educate non-autistic people on diagnostic criteria and autistic experiences using language such as 'us', 'our', and 'my', some vloggers communicate a sense of distance between the content creator community and the viewer. This positioning highlights the differences between ingroups and outgroups and between the categories of neurotypical and neurodiverse. In this way, autistic YouTubers can sometimes undergo a process of self-othering that differentiates them from non-autistic viewers. By viewing themselves as both neurodivergent and as a unique subculture, they can employ a discourse of change via a kind of strategic essentialism. Autistic vlogs, then, can contribute to a certain division between neurotypical and neurodiverse people, reiterating conventional documentary representations of autism that demarcate autistic and non-autistic people within in-groups and out-groups, leading to prejudice and discrimination.

### Technology and representation

Representational problems are also posed by YouTube search and content algorithms. Users may use YouTube's search facility and browse their own personally selected subscriptions. In

this sense, YouTube allows users an element of democratic control, as users impact video viewership through 'like' ratings and channel subscriptions. But this is only one aspect of how users access YouTube content. Users are also recommended videos by YouTube's content algorithms and are strongly influenced by the site's referral systems, search, and page ranking mechanisms (van Dijck, 2013, p.113), which steer audiences towards suggested content. The use of algorithms to direct users' attention and drive 'traffic' in particular directions is standard across many search engines, social media and e-commerce, of course, and is becoming objects of public, research and journalistic attention in their own right (Dourish, 2016, p.1). However, user knowledge and awareness of how search algorithms work is not widespread (Cotter & Reisdorf, 2020, p.746), meaning that some YouTube users may have an unjustified illusion of control over the content they consume. Furthermore, autistic content creators may find themselves having to mimic the actions and content of mainstream social media celebrities and commercialised, standardised formats in order to cater to YouTube's algorithmic preferences. This may in turn hinder creativity and individuality. More than ever, in fact, YouTube content is heavily curated and the platform certainly does not offer unlimited freedom of expression to content creators.

YouTube's algorithms promote customised content according to user preferences (Bessi et al., 2016, para 2). YouTube, and its plethora of autism vlogs, superficially offers users endless opportunities for "exposure diversity", describing audiences' exposure to different political and social views and programming formats (Napoli, 1999, p.24 – p.25; Napoli, 2011, p.248). The platform offers audiences content from various sources, including content uploaded by individuals, businesses, charities, and organisations. But the use of precise search terms may cause YouTube's content algorithms to become increasingly targeted, producing

ever-narrower sets of results. The platform's social characteristics and community formation aspects further amplify this problem. Channel creators also recommend other autism vloggers on their channel recommendation pages through social media platforms. As the page's creators choose these recommendations, there is often overlap in perspectives, formats, approaches, and expression of the shared narratives which form a large part of the community's collective discourse but may potentially prioritise certain voices and thus limit the range of perspectives on offer.

Social media platforms, designed for entertainment purposes, have changed the way information is spread, reinforcing shared narratives and creating echo chambers (Cinelli et al., 2021, p.5), as online social media users are disposed to 'content bias', favouring material that conforms to their particular interests and prejudices and disregarding opposing viewpoints (Cinelli et al., 2021, p.5). When combined with users' tendencies to interact and engage with other like-minded people, social media algorithms may create environments that expose users to belief-reinforcing content that excludes more diverse and opinion-challenging material (Kitchens et al. 2020, p.1619). Such limitations are especially problematic within autism communities that may be sharing incorrect, controversial or under-researched topics, such as treatments or cures. The subjective nature of autism vlogs means that the medical and scientific information presented can be highly individualised and should be viewed with caution. Additionally, misinformation can be spread about including polarising issues such as vaccination. Chapter 1 explored how mainstream television documentaries were not always helpful in dispelling misinformation about the MMR vaccine; but the potential for such misinformation to flourish in today's online spaces is vastly greater, despite the steps recently taken by the large technology corporations to stamp out misinformation, 'fake news' and

conspiracy theories. YouTube's potential to improve autism representation, therefore, is certainly not unlimited.

Like commercial broadcasters, YouTube – and many YouTubers – make money through advertisements that are placed before and during the videos placed on its platform. Depending on the number of views their uploads attract, uploaders may earn money from advertisements placed on their videos. However, not all videos are eligible for this treatment, as strict content criteria apply regarding content suitability. Additionally, channels must also reach a specific number of subscribers and views before applying to be monetised. This level of popularity means that only established, 'successful' autistic YouTubers can make money from their videos. At the time of writing, a channel's videos must have been watched for 4,000 hours in the last twelve months, have 1000 subscribers and be in "good standing with YouTube" before being able to apply to become monetised (YouTube Creators, 2019). This is, to say the least, a tall order. Just as in commercial broadcasting, then, advertising on YouTube serves to prioritise certain viewpoints and perspectives that align with advertisers needs. In the case of 'beauty vloggers', for example, YouTube's algorithm "rewards hegemonic and normative performances of femininity, in line with the desires and needs of brands and advertisers" (Bishop, 2018, p.81). Additionally, content must align with YouTube's "advertiser-friendly content guidelines" (YouTube Help, n.d., a). These lengthy guidelines cover a range of issues, including the use of firearms, drugs and harmful or dangerous acts. Adult themes and the use of inappropriate language, such as swearing, are also listed (YouTube Help, n.d. b). As many autistic YouTubers discuss personal issues, including sexuality, these restrictions could be inhibiting, and the promise of advertising revenue may serve to standardise or banalise output. Autistic YouTubers who align with advertisers' needs

and demographics may receive advertising revenue and may use these funds to further their YouTube careers. Those deemed ineligible for advertising, meanwhile, may find it difficult to continue producing content.

The worry here is that creators come to mimic certain behaviours and practices to adhere to advertising algorithmic criteria, stifling and suppressing individuality and creativity. Algorithms and advertising may force users to soften the opinions they upload, practice self-censorship and conform to the practices of more successful channels. Channels that do not conform may find themselves disappearing amongst thousands of search results. To an extent, standardisation seems already to be happening, as many channels use similar language in their videos and feature similar editing and filming strategies. For example, pinned videos on autistic creators' main channels often feature thumbnails with eye-catching text and discuss diagnostic criteria. However, it is difficult to criticise vloggers who choose this approach, as their target is to reach the largest possible neurodiverse audience and spread their voice. Autistic YouTubers may subscribe to a template that causes autism representation to stagnate, as only 'powerful' voices reach audiences.

The monetisation of autism YouTube content leads to discussions regarding the ethics of the commercialisation of autism. The relationships and priorities between the platform and advertisers hide amongst extensive terms and conditions. Additionally, uploaders have little control over the advertisements placed on their videos, making such placements ethically suspect. Channels can also form affiliations and sponsorship with businesses and organisations. In these cases, as per YouTube's terms and conditions, channels must reference within their video that sponsorship has occurred and this is often indicated verbally or through overlaid text. Although such sponsorships may place an element of control back

into creators' hands and provide welcome resources to content creators, content must nevertheless reflect and conform to the sponsors' priorities. This may leave autistic YouTube with difficulties that parallel those faced by commercial television, where challenging content has often been thwarted by advertising and sponsorship pressure.

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There are no longer clear divisions between online broadcasting platforms and traditional broadcasters, as strategies and approaches are constantly borrowed, hybridised, and integrated across the mediums. New technologies and collaborative, participatory practices have led to a rise in formats and accessibility previously unavailable on mainstream television. Short-form formats are a versatile medium enabling first-person autistic perspectives. Such forms accentuate the shifting away from traditional documentary techniques and approaches towards socially produced and popular-democratic formats. However, vlog formats are becoming increasingly anodyne when compared to earlier examples on the platform. Whereas Baggs' film is experimental and almost avant-garde in its approach and imagery, newer vlog formats have uniform production techniques and stylistic approaches that mirror broader vlogging practices present on YouTube. Such populist approaches, especially when compared to the earlier Baggs' example, are somewhat sterilised, and may suggest a diminishing of autistic viewpoints that accentuates the interlocking dyad of advantages and disadvantages that YouTube has for autistic content creators and audiences.

Autistic individuals and their communities can experience representational benefits from short-form media through first-hand image creation and control over self-representation. Although every medium has its drawbacks, the versatility of YouTube offers representational benefits for autistic people. New conceptualisations view autism as

difference rather than a deficit. Self-representations of autistic experience may allow for the combating of stigma, the tackling of stereotypes, community empowerment and the reclamation of stigmatised autistic identity. They also facilitate a highly medium-reflexive mode of autism advocacy that casts a critical eye on the misrepresentation of autism in other forms of media.

However, the integration of online formats into the representational economy will not on its own 'fix' the problems inherent within broadcast documentaries, and there are many drawbacks ingrained in the technological infrastructure of platforms such as YouTube. Moreover, most of the videos explored in this chapter feature autistic people without communication difficulties, mirroring many of the previous chapter's narrow depictions of autism. The ideas delivered in these vlogs are often highly personal and present a very individualised type of understanding, meaning that they frequently lack the social and political context of other documentary formats.

The further integration of neurodiversity perspectives provides opportunities for the de-stigmatisation of autistic identities. The earlier accounts of autism representation discussed in this dissertation are relatively homogenous. Although it is unlikely that first-person perspective vlogs hosted by sites like YouTube could ever entirely replace traditional documentary formats, they can form part of a larger collective of viewpoints and perspectives that together increase the diversity of autism representation across the media landscape in participatory and democratic ways. The proliferation of self-authored neurodiverse perspectives in these formats may improve the social inclusion of autistic people and enhance autistic people's self-image, helping to reclaim cultural narratives surrounding autism for autistic people themselves.

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This dissertation has examined the evolution of autism representation between 2002 and 2020. Using this chronological approach, it has been possible to chart a progression in documentary representation of autism from images of fear and deficit in many science focused documentaries, through to processes of idealisation, normalisation and celebrification in more popular television docutainments, and finally towards a more progressive, self-defined and celebratory accounts of autism in the era of Web 2.0. Broadcasters are increasingly working in short-form formats, which may offer opportunities for autistic expression and perspective. The chronological approach taken here underscores the changes and developments in societal understandings of autism and suggests a dynamic interplay between the development of autism conceptualisations and the increasingly participatory, reflexive and democratic nature of documentary formats. By examining documentary representations over two decades, this work has highlighted several contextual changes in respect of autism representation and the increasing prominence of neurodiverse perspectives, and the technological advancements underpinning new documentary formats in the post-broadcast environment.

Autism representations are dynamic and ever-changing. Earlier documentary portrayals of autism tend to be rooted in culturally derived media stereotypes that often reproduce fictional stereotypes and rely on problematic imagery and assumptions about autism as deficit. Contemporary depictions are shifting away from such conceptions of autism towards a more diverse array of portrayals and neurodiverse perspectives. The increase in diversity helps overcome stereotyping. As Draaisma (2014, p.769) questions, “how much



diversity can stereotypes assimilate before it becomes meaningless to think of them as stereotypes at all?”. Autism documentary representations, and broader forms of factual media representation, may indicate the potential for a post-stereotype environment as portrayals are gradually becoming more inclusive and documentary producers are increasingly putting creative control in the hands of autistic people themselves.

As time has gone on, autism representation has also become progressively more democratic, with autistic people increasingly becoming involved in producing their own images and identities. This work has documented the shifting role and power in autism representation in documentary and similar factual media forms. Broderick & Ne’eman (2008, p.471) assert that “representation is established by who can claim control over the narratives used to define a person, place, experience or term, and the parent narrative about autism has had far more time to disseminate than the self-advocate one”. Older, especially science-focused documentaries about autism frequently placed autistic people in the background, concentrating instead on the voices of parents and scientific experts. But the broadcast media landscape is constantly adapting, evolving, and transforming, as reflected by the use of the bold techniques of animation and reconstructions used to convey autistic sensory experience in the first-person documentaries discussed in Chapter 5. Audiences are also increasingly interacting and engaging with media texts online. These new forms of participatory culture offer a host of representational benefits for autistic people and other marginalised groups and communities. Self-produced factual content, in particular, is a vital method of self-representation and expression that could benefit autism representations by addressing the deeply rooted problems of past portrayals. Autism portrayals are increasingly presented from autistic perspectives and experiences. Television documentaries examined in this work’s later chapters experiment with new formats and online broadcasting techniques. Further

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integration of these techniques, participatory and spreadable media forms that utilise autistic voices and offer opportunities for improved and corrective forms of representation that combat stigma and address common and historical stereotypes.

## Research objectives

This dissertation examined the diversifying representation of autism in British television documentaries. This task was divided into three smaller objectives that mapped the relationship between autism representation, documentary formats and the progression of scientific and public understandings of autism.

Initial chapters examined the representation of autism in historical and contemporary science documentaries. These chapters contain the earliest documentaries in this study, with the first of them broadcast in 2002. The objective of these chapters was to examine historical autism representations through one of the most common formats: the science documentary. Chapters 1 and 2 examined three distinct science subgenres: current affairs science documentary, thesis exploration documentary and the human-interest documentary. These chapters found that science documentaries present medical and deficit views of autism and depict autistic people under the surveillance of medical and parental authority within a broadly disciplinary framework. Through this model and supporting perspectives, films propagated harmful, problematic, and stigmatising images of autism, reinforcing common cinematic stereotypes and drawing upon the notion of the supercrip savant.

Chapters 3 and 4 identified autism stereotypes and representational trends in autism documentaries broadcast between 2009–2015. Documentary formats are constantly evolving in response to technological, societal, and industrial contexts. Reality television formats have

embraced these changes, as they are easy to adapt and hybridise. Chapter 3 highlighted representational and genre conventions surrounding the idealisation of young autistic males and coins the phrase 'ideal autistic' to label these occurrences. The examination of autism idealisation identifies the stylistic conventions used to depict young autistic males. It further underscores the centrality of normalisation, curative narratives, and the neoliberal values of individual personal achievement and individualism in these productions. Chapter 4 explored further the theme of idealisation by examining two adult autistic television celebrities and the ways in which their prominence suggests a growing public interest in autistic identities, notwithstanding the sometimes unpleasant sexist and classist discriminations that have affected their public images.

The final three chapters explored contemporary representational strategies and the increasing presence of autistic voices. These chapters analysed the interactions between formats, autism portrayal and the tilt towards neurodiversity perspectives. Chapter 5 marks the beginning of this shift through the use of autistic documentary presenters and the various imaginative devices these documentaries use to depict first-person, sensory experiences of autism. Chapter 6 explored innovative and experimental short formats, discovering a more diverse range of representations (with regard to, for example, sex, age, and race) that may have potentially positive outcomes for autistic people. Chapter 7 expanded upon the themes of the previous chapter by investigating possible avenues for stigma reclamation when autistic people are placed in charge of their own image. Autism vlogs reflect neurodiversity perspectives and offer a host of representational benefits for autistic people. Adoption of these formats by broadcasters could help integrate autistic voices within production contexts. However, even these examples of self-definition tend to overlook autistic people with communication difficulties or non-verbal forms of autism in both broadcast television and

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online social short-form formats. Further barriers to the adequate representation of autism in new online formats such as YouTube may result from technological gatekeeping, which continued innovation regarding the format could help rectify.

## Contributions to new knowledge

The image of autism in the documentary is an under-researched field. The scholarly discourse surrounding autism portrayals has mainly focused on fictional Hollywood films and television. Discussions of British autism portrayals are also conspicuously absent from scholarship. This research addresses these gaps in the field by examining British television documentaries and considering them from the perspective of the interdisciplinary fields of television and disability studies. This research addresses oversights in critical discourse surrounding documentary representations of autism and considers autism representation chronologically over an approximately 20-year period. This timeframe allowed for documenting the transition from documentary portrayals of medical perspectives to neurodiverse ones and the effects this has had on autism representations. The influence of neurodiversity approaches in these documentaries acts to counter and address stereotypes and stigma prevalent in earlier films that adopted medical disability models approaches by presenting opportunities for autistic voices and experiences to emerge.

The examination of commonly used autism stereotypes found patterns within scientific and entertainment autism documentaries. Savants are common, and the 'special interests' of autistic people are overstated. Such portrayals indulge cultural myths that surround autism and do not further autism representation as they do not challenge stereotypes and preconceptions. In the documentaries discussed in the first three chapters,

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autistic males are frequently idealised and overrepresented. This research coined the term 'ideal autistic' to refer to the most common type of autistic individual represented in factual television. It further highlights the dominance of the white autistic heterosexual Asperger's male figure that features prevalently in fictional autism representations. Research throughout this dissertation shows that this trend continues in documentary portrayals, as depictions idealise and commodify teenage and young autistic males, often to the relative exclusion of autistic people of colour. Such narrow depiction and focusing on autistic males highlight the underrepresentation of autistic women, especially in earlier documentary texts (and although Susan Boyle is a well-known autistic woman, she has been regularly presented in sexist and misogynistic terms in documentary paratexts). These examinations of gender emphasise historical oversights in the representation of autistic women, a trend that recent broadcast documentaries and self-made videos are attempting to rectify with varying degrees of success. This work also emphasises the overabundance of portrayals of Asperger's syndrome, as autistic people with language difficulties and learning disorders are either absent or portrayed from the point of view of parents.

Autism is heterogeneous. There is no "correct" autism representation, as what is true for one might be widely incorrect for another. Not every stereotype is inherently bad. There are good and bad aspects in every representation (in particular to their educational merits, perspectives, formats and representation of specific groups or individuals). But that is not to say autism representation should stop trying to 'improve'. Rather, this dissertation moves beyond binary concepts of 'good or bad' or 'right and wrong' representations by proposing diversity as the key to improving and extending the range of autism representations. Rather than being outright dismissed, problematic representations of autism are best viewed as being partial or incomplete as demonstrated in the documentaries discussed earlier in the

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dissertation that over rely of autistic portrayals from narrow demographics (leading to the formation of the ideal autistic). Viewing autism representation in this context allows for discussions to expand and evolve beyond stereotypes and invite discourse that focus on improving heterogeneity and acknowledging the range, depth and irreducible individuality of autistic experience. Such approaches may invite further inclusion and adoption of technological innovations and techniques which may be of aid to those with communication difficulties who are often excluded from both mainstream broadcast documentary and online factual formats.

This research further contributes to the field as suggests possible avenues for facilitating production control by autistic people and giving them authority over their own image. It asserts that by diversifying portrayals, particularly through new and emerging first-person formats, autistic representations can improve autism portrayals. Although it remained outside the remit and breadth of this dissertation, the insights offered by the present work may be beneficial in creating and developing media toolkits that may further improve the media representation of autistic people. Although toolkits, resources and guides exist regarding disability, these are often broad and are not specific to a particular disability. In 2021, Channel 4 published a series of introductory guides, produced in collaboration with several disability centred television organisations, to aid the inclusion, progression and hiring of disabled production talent within the television industry (Channel 4, 2021). The series of recommendations is broad, as they are intended to offer producers an overview and general advice regarding hiring and inclusivity, but they do provide some limited information regarding resources for neurodivergent and autistic people.

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This research can be used as a resource for the development of a similar autism media toolkit. The findings of this research can be potentially used to provide historical documentary accounts and analyses of problematic stereotypes and depictions. Furthermore, its findings highlight key oversights and underrepresentation of specific groups within the autistic community. It could be used to build upon existing guides such as the Channel 4 one, to further emphasise the democratic inclusion of more autistic voices in all stages of the production process. The findings of this work may provide a jumping-off point for the exchange of knowledge between academia, medical institutions, media and broadcast industries and the autistic community.

## Limitations, recommendations and the future of British documentary

Academics have made calls to further include autistic individuals within research contexts through meaningful participatory research methods, since historically autistic persons have been excluded from the production of disability knowledge (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Milton, 2014). Such involvement is crucial “if social research in the field of autism is to claim ethical and epistemological integrity” (Milton, 2014, p.796). Unfortunately, it was not possible to incorporate these perspectives into this dissertation due to space constraints. However, the textual analyses undertaken in this dissertation could be further expanded upon in the future by incorporating audience studies and interviews or focus groups with autistic people to explore further how autistic viewers negotiate documentary treatments of autism. Such studies would place the present work in context and provide valuable insight into how autistic people perceive documentary autism stereotypes. As noted in Chapter 5, although documentaries increasingly prioritise autistic perspectives, it is unclear how much influence

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autistic people have within production contexts. A further avenue of research could therefore be to examine broadcasters' attempts to increase the involvement of autistic people in the production process. Although this was explored during the research process, this avenue of research was not followed through as adequate sources of data could not be found at the time. Although outside the range of this research, a specialised toolkit regarding autism representation aimed at media workers or producers might benefit both autistic people and television broadcasters.

Although the research process undertaken for this dissertation identified many documentary films, it was impractical to include discussions of all of those discovered and the decision was made to focus on those broadcast via Freeview. Although this work has sometimes considered fictional representations, it may benefit from the further inclusion of other fictional examples. Additionally, it was not possible to include the insights of very recently published literature, such as Aspler et al. (2022) and Pomerance & Palmer (2022), as both of these works were published after this dissertation was submitted for viva. Aspler et al. (2022) focus on issues of race, gender and class and employ an intersectional approach towards autism representation. Pomerance & Palmer's (2022) collection examines many themes potentially pertinent to this dissertation including the depiction of autism in recent film and television series, neurodiversity and changing societal understandings. Both works potentially could provide valuable insights, but owing to the timing of their publishing it was not possible to incorporate these works beyond this brief overview.

In the past 20 years, there has been a considerable increase in the popularity of online streaming platforms that provide an alternative to traditional broadcasting methods. Of additional interest is the increasing body of documentaries and programmes distributed and



produced by online broadcasters like Netflix and Amazon. Netflix is a popular platform for fictional and factual content. Its emphasis on documentary content is considered a major factor in its growth, which has led to considerable changes in the nature of the documentary film industry (Sharma, 2016, p.143). It features a vast array of autism focused content that might provide valuable insights into autism representation. The documentary series *Love on the Spectrum* (O'Clery, 2019-present) and *Asperger's Are Us* (Lehmann, 2016), for example, are just two of the many autism focused films currently available on the platform.

Such content marks a shift in audience viewing habits and perhaps suggests a certain mainstreaming of neurodivergent programming. Although textual analysis of it was outside this research's purview, consideration of online VOD platforms and their international reach and production contexts may present exciting and valuable avenues for future research. Netflix's (and other similar platforms') presence as a commercial online broadcaster, without the limitations or regulations of traditional linear broadcasters (Harvey, 2020, p.108), presents unique representational opportunities. These platforms are still relatively new, making it interesting to consider the impact their content will have on the output of traditional broadcasters in Britain (Harvey, 2020, p.123).

The documentary genre is adaptable and presents uniquely important space for autism representation. Its array of formats is constantly evolving. The focus of this dissertation begins long after the end of British television's 'golden age' in the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, BBC and ITV competed for audiences based on a public service premise, a practice that lasted well into the 1990s. The films in the earlier chapters in this dissertation still showed remnants of these practices, as they placed educational and informational aspects at the forefront of the documentaries. But the future of science

documentary television is under constant question. The 2000s saw a rise in hybridised and commercialised formats, the popularity of satellite television and the multi-channel broadcast environment and the aforementioned rise of online streaming platforms saw increasing shifts towards reality formats. These developments are partly in response to growing audience trends but also due to changes in the funding structures of British broadcasting.

At the same time, BBC's status as a publicly funded broadcaster is under attack. The British government has recently announced the freezing of the license fee with potential plans for its abolition in 2027. This will likely force BBC to make deep cuts to its programming budget, raising doubts regarding the broadcaster's financial future and the independence of public service broadcasting itself (Waterson, 2022 Jan 16, para 1-3). The British government's recent efforts to abolish the license fee, and move to create a new funding mechanism, has been described as cultural vandalism and the destruction of a global brand (Medhurst, 2022, para 1). Debates around this proposed change have centred on the fee being an essential funding tool for public good or as a regressive and outdated tax given the broadcaster's place in more expansive multi-screen and online streaming environments (Chivers & Allan, 2022, para 1-6). However, with an estimated cut of £300m to BBC's funding, their factual, news and current affairs programming will suffer (Medhurst, 2022, para 11). As this dissertation has shown in relation to both the BBC and Channel 4, whatever problems there are with their representation of autism, public service broadcasters have made a sustained and massive contribution to the public understanding of disability in general and autism in particular. It can therefore be reasonably assumed that the retention of the BBC license fee and its intertwining with the BBC's public service values will enable further innovation in the future. But the ever-looming threat to public service broadcasting, the ever-changing media

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environment and the increasing fragmentation of documentary television and its audiences suggest an uncertain future for documentary television.

Finally, this work has highlighted the growing trend towards self-broadcast and portrayal of autistic identities across online social video platforms. Further exploration of this growing trend is required to explore television documentary's benefits and drawbacks for autistic people and disabled communities. The increasingly commercialised context of broadcasting, the rise of online broadcasting and vlogging, and the inclusion of neurodiverse perspectives all raise new challenges for broadcasters and potential value for autistic people.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Ethics Checklist

#### FORM UPR16

##### Research Ethics Review Checklist

Please include this completed form as an appendix to your thesis (see the Research Degrees Operational Handbook for more information)



<b>Postgraduate Research Student (PGRS) Information</b>		<b>Student ID:</b>	633848
<b>PGRS Name:</b>	Amy Attrill		
<b>Department:</b>	Creative Cultural Institute	<b>First Supervisor:</b>	Stephen Harper
<b>Start Date:</b> (or progression date for Prof Doc students)	01/02/2014		
<b>Study Mode and Route:</b>	Part-time <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Full-time <input type="checkbox"/>	MPhil <input type="checkbox"/> PhD <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	MD <input type="checkbox"/> Professional Doctorate <input type="checkbox"/>

<b>Title of Thesis:</b>	Difference and Documentary: Images of Autism in Contemporary British Factual Television
<b>Thesis Word Count:</b> (excluding ancillary data)	65115

If you are unsure about any of the following, please contact the local representative on your Faculty Ethics Committee for advice. Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the University's Ethics Policy and any relevant University, academic or professional guidelines in the conduct of your study

Although the Ethics Committee may have given your study a favourable opinion, the final responsibility for the ethical conduct of this work lies with the researcher(s).

##### UKRIO Finished Research Checklist:

(If you would like to know more about the checklist, please see your Faculty or Departmental Ethics Committee rep or see the online version of the full checklist at: <http://www.ukrio.org/what-we-do/code-of-practice-for-research/>)

a) Have all of your research and findings been reported accurately, honestly and within a reasonable time frame?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
b) Have all contributions to knowledge been acknowledged?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
c) Have you complied with all agreements relating to intellectual property, publication and authorship?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
d) Has your research data been retained in a secure and accessible form and will it remain so for the required duration?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
e) Does your research comply with all legal, ethical, and contractual requirements?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>

##### Candidate Statement:

I have considered the ethical dimensions of the above named research project, and have successfully obtained the necessary ethical approval(s)

<b>Ethical review number(s) from Faculty Ethics Committee (or from NRES/SCREC):</b>	CCI-FEthC 2021-007
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If you have *not* submitted your work for ethical review, and/or you have answered 'No' to one or more of questions a) to e), please explain below why this is so:

<b>Signed (PGRS):</b>		<b>Date:</b>	31/01/2022
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## Appendix 2: Positive Ethics response



27<sup>th</sup> April 2021

### Faculty of Creative and Cultural Industries Ethics Committee

#### **FAVOURABLE ETHICS OPINION**

**Study Title:** Autism, Diversity and Documentary: An examination of the effect of broadcasters attempts at diversity on the representation of autism in contemporary British documentary

**Reference Number:** CCI-FEthC 2021-007

**Accepted for Review :** 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021

**Stage:** 1

**Covid-19 related advice for research involving human participants**

PGR fieldwork and associated UK-based research trips can now resume following the completion and approval of a Covid-19 Risk Assessment and Restart Checklist, and additionally, an email approval from the relevant supervisor. For details please consult these University of Portsmouth pages: [Restarting your Research](#)

Dear Amy Attrill

I am pleased to inform you that your research has been granted a favourable ethics opinion on the basis described in the submitted documents listed at Annex A, and subject to standard general conditions (See Annex B).

Please note that this favourable opinion does not grant permission or approval to undertake the research/work. Management permission or approval must be obtained from any host organisation, including the University of Portsmouth or supervisor, prior to the start of the study.

The reviewers did have some advisory comments, but this Favourable Opinion is not conditional upon their resolution, nor do you need to reply:

The careful analysis of possible ethical issues which others might have ignored "anything already on YouTube will gain much more attention than anything coming from an academic source" as one reviewer put it, was much appreciated.

from another reviewer: "the research seems to be phrased to 'prove an idea', rather than explore the topic area in an unbiased manner. This is probably just a terminology issue in this form, but I think it would be helpful to perhaps think about the inclusion / exclusion criteria in more detail before selecting the materials to be analysed. Alongside this, the form says 'no pilot is needed'. It might be worth reconsidering this and doing an initial analysis to check that the right approach, coding scheme and

## Appendices

materials have been selected. I think these 'questions' are ones that I am sure are already being effectively resolved by the student and supervisor but worth raising here for completeness." Wishing you every success in your research.

Faculty Ethics Committee



Dr Alessandro Zambelli ARB – Chair, CCI Faculty Ethics Committee [Annexes](#)

- Documents reviewed

- After ethics review

### **ANNEX A**      **Documents reviewed**

The documents reviewed for this application

Document	Version	Date
Application Form	1	1.04.21

### **ANNEX B - After ethics review**

This Annex sets out important guidance for those with a favourable opinion from a University of Portsmouth Ethics Committee. Please read the guidance carefully. A failure to follow the guidance could lead to the committee reviewing and possibly revoking its opinion on the research.

It is assumed that the work will commence within 1 year of the date of the favourable ethics opinion or the start date stated in the application, whichever is the latest.

The work must not commence until the researcher has obtained any necessary management/governance permissions or approvals including carrying out appropriate and required risk assessments – this is particularly pertinent in cases of research hosted by external organisations. The appropriate head of department should also be aware of a member of staff's plans.

If it is proposed to extend the duration of the study beyond that stated in the application, the Ethics Committee must be informed.

Any proposed substantial amendments must be submitted to the Ethics Committee for review. A substantial amendment is any amendment to the terms of the application for ethics review, or to the protocol or other supporting documentation approved by the Committee that is likely to affect to a significant degree:

the safety or physical or mental integrity of participants

the scientific value of the study

the conduct or management of the study.

5.1 A substantial amendment should not be implemented until a favourable ethics opinion has been given by the Committee.

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At the end of the work a final report should be submitted to the ethics committee. A template for this can be found on the University Ethics webpage.

Researchers are reminded of the University's commitments as stated in the Concordat to Support Research Integrity viz:

maintaining the highest standards of rigour and integrity in all aspects of research

ensuring that research is conducted according to appropriate ethical, legal and professional frameworks, obligations and standards

supporting a research environment that is underpinned by a culture of integrity and based on good governance, best practice and support for the development of researchers

using transparent, robust and fair processes to deal with allegations of research misconduct should they arise

working together to strengthen the integrity of research and to reviewing progress regularly and openly.

In ensuring that it meets these commitments the University has adopted the UKRIO Code of Practice for Research. Any breach of this code may be considered as misconduct and may be investigated following the University Procedure for the Investigation of Allegations of Misconduct in Research. Researchers are advised to use the UKRIO checklist as a simple guide to integrity.