

How to make the filmmaking process more accessible for team members

“We live in a time where politics live downstream from culture, and when people can't see themselves represented in the culture, they can't reasonably believe what's possible for their lives. And maybe more importantly, when other people who are not part of their communities don't see those people in the culture, they underestimate them too, which I think is critical, especially right now. ... As an audience member, I want to see a rich, fully representative inclusive culture, just so I can see better movies, to say nothing of the politics of it. Our culture should represent our lives and if it fails to, we all lose.

– Franklin Leonard, Founder, *The Black List* ²⁶



Image Description: Day Al-Mohamed, a woman of colour in her 20s, lies stomach-down on the floor to get just the right angle for her camera shot. Beside her is her black Labrador guide dog, and behind them are the wheels of a massive steam train.

According to the 2012 Creative Skillset employment census, **only 0.3% of the total film workforce are disabled** (0.2% in production, 0.1% in exhibition and none in distribution). This is a staggering under-representation of D/deaf and disabled people in filmmaking when disabled people make up over 20% of the UK population.

It is critical that the film industry takes urgent, concrete steps to include D/deaf and disabled people in filmmaking at every level, not least because the participation of people with disabilities in the media has been suggested as a path to dismantling the prejudice of **ableism**.

“Ableism, defined as **discrimination or oppression based on one’s disability or perceived disability, pervades our culture. Fear of disability, misconceptions, and stereotypes about disabled people are so common that most people don’t even notice them. Popular movies and television shows perpetuate **ableism in ways that go unnoticed** by mainstream society and even movie critics.”²⁷**

“Accuracy in portrayals is extremely important to disabled viewers; the industry recognises that disability, as a political concern, is not yet as advanced as others issues such as ethnicity or gender equality, and that senior management must be at the helm of any initiative to effect change. **It is crucial that disabled people need to be at the heart of the creative process to move things forward.”²⁸**

“We need to be asking: who is not at the table, and why not, and actively reach out to incorporate and complicate our analyses if we ever hope to represent the diversity of the human condition, and the complexities of ableism when experienced by those who are also confronted by homophobia, racism, and the particularities of different disabilities as well.”

Dr Michelle Nario-Redmond, Professor of Psychology and Biomedical Humanities²⁹

Collaboration

"Crip Camp was built on trust: between us and the editors, and really virtually everybody on the film. It was a safe space and when you do that, and you have a collaboration like we've been privileged to have with each other – you feel like you can kind of reach for the stars and **you're going to be OK."**

Jim LeBrecht, Co-Director of *Crip Camp*



Image Description: Jim LeBrecht sits in front of a large camera, surrounded by a light, mic stand above him and two screens attached to the camera, which show a shot of Jim. He is being filmed on location in a home with yellow walls, and windows with white curtains that let daylight in.

We asked D/deaf and disabled filmmakers from FWD-Doc, Press Reset and beyond to highlight their priority advice for including and collaborating with D/deaf and disabled talent:

“Start engaging with D/deaf and disabled expertise **as early as possible**, ideally in development; trying to ‘bolt-on’ D/deaf and disabled nuance and expertise at the end of an essentially ableist film production rarely works well.”
– Producer

“Establish the **needs of all the people** on the project, not just the people with a disability. Understanding needs for childcare, working patterns, etc. benefits everyone – the best thing is to create an open discussion on how best to **facilitate everyone’s needs** (which also avoids singling out the person with the disability).” – Writer/Director

“Talk with us! Contact one of the disabled-led film talent organisations like FWD-Doc when you’re looking for collaborators, talent and projects to commission, and **engage thoughtfully and non-defensively with a range of perspectives throughout the entire filmmaking process**. Budget to do that during development, production, post and distribution (and your film will reap the economic benefits!). Really listen to our perspectives and expertise. Nothing about us without us. Be open-minded, respectful and talk with D/deaf and disabled people about what we need to be able to collaborate with you.”
– Producer & Director



Image Description: Filmmaker Kyla Harris, her hair up in a bun, headphones on, sits in her power-chair, jubilant as she directs the next shot. Beside her is a camera on a tripod, between a large fill light and a key light.

“Work with [Access Statements](#) or [‘Access Riders’](#)”, which are documents that outline what we need to do our work, so those needs can be facilitated and we have equal access to work. Make these documents for everyone in your team, not just disabled people, and budget and schedule to allow for flexibility based on everyone’s needs. It benefits everyone when we create equitable and sustainable work practices.” – Writer & Actor

“Any time you ask for advice/lived experience, then you should be paying for it. We need to move away from the legacy of disabled artists/filmmakers/advisors not being paid appropriately. Offering an honorarium is better than not offering anything at all.”
– Writer/Director

“Work with D/deaf and disabled-led artists and service providers. We’re usually the experts in what we need and how to make it happen as affordably as possible. And we’ll probably help you avoid costly and potentially embarrassing access experiments (like using unreliable and wobbly handheld devices to deliver captions to D/deaf audiences) because we’ve already tried them, and we’ve probably already made – and continue to make – those mistakes ourselves. Doing accessibility well in film is an ongoing dialogue. As long as there’s an acknowledgement that this is work and that pretty soon we won’t have to do this labour for non-disabled people anymore because they’ll all be doing it already, then we’re usually happy to advise (particularly if this is paid advisory, even with just a modest honorarium.”) – Producer & Director

“Pay D/deaf and disabled talent appropriately. The Disability Pay Gap currently stands at 19.6%. (Non-disabled workers earned 19.6% more per hour than disabled workers in 2020)” – Producer

“If you’re telling a story about D/deafness or disability and there’s no one on your team who has lived experience and also has creative influence and the power to make editorial decisions then you have a problem. Disabled narratives cannot be told without having anyone with a disability on the project, neither can it be tokenistic or toothless – alarm bells should be ringing if this is the case! And disabled junior members of a team shouldn’t be tasked with standing up for their own representation among a non-disabled senior team.” – Writer/Director



Image Description: On the set of a film, director Rodney Evans, a man of colour in his 30s, is leaning against a reflective surface and assuredly holding a camera while pensively looking down.

“Use the word ‘disability’! We use it with pride. Please don’t dance around it (with euphemisms like ‘differently abled’, ‘handicapable’). Look up the #SayTheWord campaign. Look at Disability Twitter and see who we are. We’re out here being open and clear about how to engage with us.” – Director

“Especially in documentary storytelling about loss (e.g. of senses, independence etc) or illness, and especially if the main editorial decision-maker is the person actually having the personal experience of illness or disability, ensure they’re not the only person on the team with that experience. This individual does not magically know all about the nuance of D/deaf and disabled lives, and can’t be solely responsible for that representation. It’s an unfair assumption from the rest of the team, puts unhelpful pressure on them, and frequently results in a film that can only engage with a tragedy narrative, and is harmful to and rejected by D/ deaf and disabled audiences.” – Producer/Director

“If you’re going to bring on board people with lived experience of your film subject, think about what the impact of working with you might be for them on a personal level. This applies to any marginalised community. For disabled people, confronting non-disabled people’s ableism and assumptions, even when in a positive and collaborative environment, can be very affecting. Offering mental health resources, like those provided by Film In Mind, can turn a potentially painful process into a professional and supportive experience.” – Producer & Director

“If someone with the lived experiences portrayed in the film is not in a leadership position in the filmmaking team, there is a serious power issue.” – Director

“Prioritise disabled stories by disabled people that do not perpetuate the tired and damaging stereotypes that are so commonplace.”
– Writer, Director, Actor

“Employ disabled people at the highest level of every organisation.”
– Director

“Commission and fund disabled filmmakers. Show our films.”
– Director



Image Description: Kyla Harris looks serious in front of the camera, with a bright yellow colorama taped to the ceiling behind her and a boom above her. Lou Macnamara, a white woman with bleached blonde hair in plaits in a white t-shirt and navy trousers, is adjusting the camera lens.

“Creating a talent **pipeline** for paid work is essential – offering endless ‘mentoring’ doesn’t effectively convert talent into paid jobs and sustainable careers.” – Director

“Do the **work of understanding ableism** – there are numerous resources already out there, including [Disability Arts Online](#), and a passionate D/deaf and disabled community on social media (e.g. #DisabilityTwitter and #WeShallNotBeRemoved, a UK disability arts alliance) which has already done the work of creating resources and sharing their expertise and concerns. Read books such as *Disability Visibility* by Alice Wong, *Pleasure Activism* by Adrienne Maree Brown, *Crippled* by Frances Ryan, and *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha.” – Actor, Director & Curator

“When you’re hiring and you can’t find an experienced disabled person for a role, **pair established non-disabled talent with disabled talent** for mutual (paid) learning and to develop disabled experience. That way, next time you want to hire a disabled person in a particular role, there will be someone with the experience to do it. The Netflix feature documentary *Disclosure* pioneered a [paid fellowship programme to develop transgender talent](#) - this can inform and inspire the entire film industry. We can all learn to proactively budget and schedule to do this.” – Producer, Writer, Director

“Support films that are about or made by people with disabilities, even if the central theme of the film has nothing to do with disability.”
– Writer, Director, Actor



Image Description: Jim LeBrecht, in tie-dye shirt and tinted glasses, sits in his wheelchair on the abandoned muddy grounds of what was once Camp Jened. A large yellow digger looms behind him. He reminisces with Denise Sherer Jacobson who looks back at Jim intently.

“Be courageous enough to engage with D/deaf and disabled people who are vociferously demanding better representation – parts of the community are loud after decades of misrepresentation and harm. Make space for engaging with those perspectives in your work processes. And **recognise that the ‘community’ is not homogenous.**” – Writer

“Businesses and film entities need to realise that D/deaf and disabled communities are underserved, niche audiences that are pretty **organised, reachable,** and easily **convertible.** Businesses and film entities’ practices of ignoring the existence of D/deaf and disabled people results in the loss of massive audiences and revenue. You can hire D/deaf and disabled people who can help you seize these opportunities.” – Producer

“Disability is multi-faceted and not always visible. People with different disabilities are also learning about people with other disabilities; we can also be guilty of not always understanding each other’s realities and needs. If you are someone who wants to tell the story of someone with a disability and you yourself do not share that disability, involve those who do have that disability in the storytelling, including having creative input and compensation.” – Writer, Director, Actor

“Just because someone identifies with a diagnosis or particular deaf or disability experience does not mean they all agree; involve a range of perspectives so you’re not involving people just as a token. There are political, social, and many other differences of opinion and action.” – Filmmaker

“You are not always the best person to make a film about someone else, no matter how much you love the person or the topic. Be prepared to hand over your access to resources if you are unable to meet the needs of the people in the film and the audience. The documentary field needs to engage with its historic ethos of entitlement and paternalism.” – Writer, Director, Actor

“Ensure that, if you are looking at issues of racial equity in who tells stories you support, that you apply the same attention to films about disability and people with disabilities. Explicitly include disability and people with disabilities in your mission statements, alongside your commitments to other marginalised identities.” – Producer & Director

“**Be an ally and an advocate.** Meet new D/deaf and disabled people, connect and amplify talent. Create connections and challenge people if you feel something is missing or lacking.” – Producer

“Include POC, LGBTQ+, and filmmakers with disabilities in programming **beyond diversity;** ensure you’re providing a platform to discuss talent, not just identity. We are all filmmakers with a wide variety of expertise and have value and skills beyond our identities.” – Producer

“You are creating the model for your team/members/participants. **Prioritise and promote accessibility.** Fund it. Talk about it. Not only does this encourage more people to be open about their disabilities and accommodation needs but it also encourages others to craft accessible content and engage in creating a welcoming and inclusive environment.” – Writer, Director, Actor

“Non-disabled allies are essential in joining us in campaigning for our rights within the film industry. Often, all we want to do is to be able to focus on our craft like our non-disabled industry professionals, but so much of the bureaucracy and ableism within the industry stops us from not only creating but joining the industry altogether.” – Actor, Writer, Activist

“Share this document with everyone across your film team – from production managers to editors, to execs to runners. It’s everyone’s job to understand and engage with a multiplicity of identities and experiences in filmmaking, and recognise that disabilities can be invisible.” – Producer



Image Description: Jim LeBrecht sits in his wheelchair centre-stage. He holds a microphone in his right hand and his left hand is raised in a fist above his head, triumphant. Standing next to him, applauding, is Nicole Newnham. The screen behind them is a rich purple with large black abstract patterns.