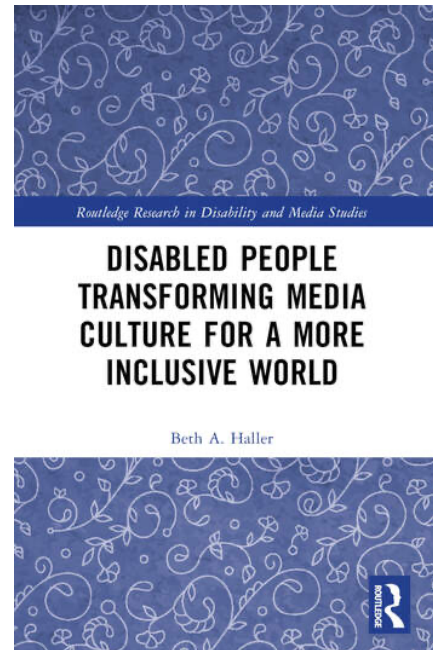


Beth A. Haller, **Disabled People Transforming Media Culture for a More Inclusive World (1st ed.)**, New York, NY: Routledge, 2024, 231 pp., \$45.59 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Russell Adzedu
University of Cincinnati

Disabled People Transforming Media Culture for a More Inclusive World is authored by Towson University Communication professor and journalist Beth A. Haller. Her expertise is shaped both by her long career documenting disability media and by her own experiences as a neurodiverse person with multiple disabilities and chronic illnesses. Haller's overarching argument is that disabled people are not merely subjects of media representation but are increasingly confronting marginalization by becoming producers, directors, journalists, performers, and digital creators. By using new and emerging platforms, disabled creators carve out spaces that reflect their realities and challenge long-standing stereotypes in the media landscape. Haller seeks to shift the conversation away from the usual question—"How are disabled people represented in the media?"—and toward a more long-overdue focus on disabled people as producers taking an active role in shaping contemporary media culture.



Haller's project is extremely ambitious. She draws from textual analysis, case studies, interviews, and close readings of media across multiple genres. This is necessary given the book's expansive and diverse scope. However, the book would have benefited from more transparency behind the choices she utilizes for her analyses. It is unclear as she alternates between mainstream commercial projects and lesser-known but critically acclaimed projects. While she acknowledges the abundance of material, stating that she "found more examples from disabled media creators than I could ever use" (p. 20), the rationale for her final selections remains unclear.

Haller begins in chapter 1 by examining how disabled creators push back against long-standing ableist storytelling conventions in both traditional and streaming media. While she analyzes well-known works like *Switched at Birth* (p. 35) and *CODA* (p. 36), the real value of this chapter lies in how she reworks established disability studies frameworks to highlight disabled authorship rather than simply representation. Her use of narrative prosthesis (Mitchell & Snyder, 2001; p. 27) shows how disabled creators interrupt the old pattern of disability functioning as a plot device and instead reshape narrative meaning by participating in writing, casting, and production. In chapter 4, when she turns to the Affirmative Model of Disability (Swain & French, 2000; p. 116) alongside Jason Mittell's (2015) ideas about complex TV (p. 131), she is not simply cataloging theories but showing how different creative environments allow more expansive disability storytelling. Together, these frameworks help situate Haller's argument alongside works like Sami Schalk's (2022) *Black Disability Politics* and Alice Wong's (2020) *Disability Visibility* that center disabled creators as

architects of their own narratives. This synthesis makes it clear that Haller is less interested in listing examples than in illustrating how disabled people are reshaping the narrative rules themselves.

Haller also looks at various forms of non-scripted media that disabled people use to speak directly to mass audiences. Reality TV and TED Talks are two of the formats she highlights. In chapter 2, she introduces the parasocial contact hypothesis, which suggests that when audiences feel they “know” disabled performers, they may experience a reduction in prejudice toward marginalized groups. Haller shows how this can be a valid way for disabled people to present more authentic versions of themselves and reach wider audiences in real time. Although her readings of these talks are compelling, this section could have been strengthened by addressing the limitations of TED as a platform, particularly its reliance on the charisma of its speakers and its tendency to favor narratives that are inspirational and easily digestible for global audiences.

The author also dedicates space to newer, often open-access platforms that disabled creators use for activism, visibility, and community building. In chapter 3, she draws on Henry Giroux’s (2011) idea of public pedagogy (p. 94) to argue that podcasts and vlogs function as forms of free public education where disabled creators teach audiences directly. This framing is useful, but it does not fully grapple with some challenges disabled creators face on digital platforms. In chapter 5, Haller also turns to counter-discourse and productive resistance to explain how comics and graphic memoirs challenge older disability narratives and rethink the meaning of diagnosis itself. Overall, these examples show how digital media allow disabled people to tell their stories and find one another, but they also raise the question of whether access to platforms alone counts as transformation or whether deeper structural changes in amplification and recognition are still needed. This also reveals a tension between the promise of open-access platforms as democratizing tools and the precarity that disabled creators face when those same platforms control reach, monetization, and visibility.

The book’s innovation is at its strongest in the final chapter (7), where Haller examines how people with nonvisible disabilities craft media content. If the earlier chapters primarily showcase what disabled creators have accomplished, this chapter pushes the conversation in a new direction by directly confronting the erasure of invisible disabilities, including chronic illness and HIV. Haller acknowledges the tension within disability media and activism around whose disabilities are made visible and whose are left unspoken. She references the foundational framework, the Social Model of Disability, to emphasize that the shared experience of disability, whether apparent or not, is against the barriers placed by society and the environment. This chapter is also one of the few moments where she explicitly highlights online communities as sources of social support for people with nonvisible disabilities. Yet this discussion feels somewhat tacked on. Given the centrality of online networks in shaping identity, visibility, and coping practices for both visible and nonvisible disabled groups, it raises the question of why these communities were not engaged earlier in the book, especially with the prominence of figures such as Imani Barbarin and the vast ecosystem of chronic illness content creators Haller does not explore in depth.

Another key limitation of the book is that it fails to meaningfully cover non-Western media contexts. Haller never explicitly limits the scope of her research to the United States, yet it remains the dominant context she covers throughout the text. She cannot be faulted for this, given her own position and expertise

as an American journalist and scholar. However, she frequently cites British disability scholars such as George McKay and Chris Davies and incorporates several UK media examples throughout the text. Despite this transatlantic reach, the book does not draw from disability-led media in the Global South. The only example that briefly gestures toward a broader global disability culture is “Krip Hop Nation” (p. 116), a worldwide initiative founded by American artist Leroy F. Moore Jr. While Moore has collaborated with disabled musicians in various African countries, this international dimension remains underdeveloped in Haller’s analysis. Including creators such as Eddie Ndopu or the *Colombian Diversamente Podcast* would have broadened the book’s analytical reach and amplified its global relevance. I do not expect Haller to have all the answers, and this gap simply points to a way forward: disabled creators and scholars from the Global South can continue to champion their own perspectives and expand the conversation she begins.

Haller’s intervention arrives at a pivotal moment in disability studies. As highlighted earlier in the review, the field has produced extensive work on representation across different cultural contexts through scholars like Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and Alison Kafer. This representational critique is still necessary, but it has arguably also reached a point of saturation. What Haller offers instead is a shift toward production, which aligns with broader moves in media studies to examine the labor, infrastructures, and creative practices that shape cultural production. Her book can also be situated within communication debates, particularly work by scholars like Jeffrey Treem and Zizi Papacharissi, who show that platforms shape culture through their technical design, algorithms, and the affordances they make available. Haller demonstrates that disabled people are creating across open-access platforms by utilizing podcasts and TikTok, but she gives less attention to how these platforms structure what disabled creators can do or say. Placing Haller’s book in this conversation highlights the importance of looking not only at the content disabled people produce but also at the digital environments they must navigate and sometimes adapt to make their work possible.

At a moment when media industries are grappling with questions of diversity, accessibility, and algorithmic bias, Haller’s analysis of disabled creators arrives at exactly the right time. She provides an urgently needed account of how disability is transforming contemporary communication. The book’s ambitious scope is both its greatest strength and occasional limitation. Covering seven media formats allows Haller to map an emerging and vast landscape, but sometimes at the expense of depth. Her predominantly U.S./UK-centric focus, while understandable given her expertise, points toward the urgent need for Global South perspectives to enter this conversation. Nonetheless, this book fundamentally reorients how we study disability and media. It should be read not only by scholars but by media professionals, students, and activists invested in transforming cultural production.

References

Schalk, S. (2022). *Black disability politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Wong, A. (Ed.). (2020). *Disability visibility: First-person stories from the twenty-first century*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.