

good reason to banish cigarette advertising from television. Similarly, audience members can learn what is normative within society. If prime-time comedies began incorporating the use of Rohypnol into their plots, audience members would not be expected to begin date-raping one another with reckless abandon. But some increase in such occurrences certainly would be observed because audience members were either given the idea or given the idea it was more acceptable/less unacceptable than they previously thought.

While this might seem like a relatively bizarre example, there are instances of such occurring in television programming on a regular basis. Some celebrities—such as Jenny McCarthy and Jim Carrey—have appeared on talk shows suggesting that autism is caused by childhood vaccinations. Such an appearance on a program such as *Oprah* means millions of people are exposed to this point of view. Unfortunately, audience members will not know that this belief was based on medical studies that have since been retracted by the medical journals that published them. Of course, learning vicariously works equally well for topics that are not generally held in disregard.

Finally, the media also provide audiences with access to health information. This information is critical to any theory focusing on attitudes and attitude change, such as the theory of reasoned action and the theory of planned behavior. Other uses of media messages include inoculating audience members against the future persuasive efforts of others. Existing health attitudes can be protected against counterattitudinal influences or attacks through the use of inoculation. Inoculation works by providing audience members with information about the health issue, motivation to develop arguments that they can use when presented counterarguments, and practice defending their own attitudes. It has been used successfully in the health context with a variety of health issues including smoking, drinking, and substance abuse of all sorts. In addition, the theory has been used to prevent skin cancer, encourage safe sex, advance organ donation, and promote healthy behaviors on a host of other issues.

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**See Also:** Agenda Setting; Framing; Inoculation Effects; Media Content: Magazines; Media Content: Newspapers; Media Content: Other Print; Media Content: Televised Entertainment; Media Content: Televised News; Media Depictions: Medical Workers; O-S-O-R Model; Overtreatment and Overreliance on Diagnostic Testing; Pornography, Health Consequences of.

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## Media Depictions: Disability

Mass media function as sites through which social issues are considered and negotiated. Scholars across fields have focused on media portrayals of people with disabilities (PWD). Because many individuals have little or no interaction or communication with PWD, they gain their knowledge of PWD from mass media. Scholars have examined disability representations in newspapers, print and online media, photographs, children's books, films, television shows, news, cartoons, the arts, sporting events, and advertising. Media play an important role in helping shape the understanding people have of the world around

them, particularly people of whom they have no previous knowledge. A number of theories have been posted to help explain media's capacity to shape or craft views and attitudes. Some of these are minimal effects, magic bullet or hypodermic needle, and agenda setting theories. Both minimal effects and bullet and hypodermic models have been discredited. However, scholars tend to agree that media representation plays a role in how people construct reality. Communication scholars argue that media texts are rhetorical entities that are persuasive texts.

PWD have been consistently underrepresented on television; they are repeatedly portrayed as inferior to able-bodied individuals. If PWD are in the mass media, they are often only shown because they have a disability. Most images of PWD are negative and the individuals are portrayed as

being angry, dependent, or criminal. On the other hand, when the portrayal is meant to be positive, PWD are shown as being courageous or having special gifts. All of these representations are seen as "othering" and/or disempowering for PWD.

### Medical Model and Social Model

There are two ways in which disability is constructed: the medical model and the social model. The medical model tends to present disability in terms of personal tragedy and a social burden; medical or social welfare problems must be solved through medical intervention, charitable work, or social care. In contrast, the understanding of disability in the media has recently shifted to the social model as a result of the intervention of the disability rights movement. The social model of disability aims to help people see the



Members of the media cover the award ceremonies at the 2012 Paralympic games in London, September 8, 2012. When people with disabilities (PWD) are represented on television, they are usually stereotyped, including the image of someone who overcame insurmountable odds to conquer the disability. Although media coverage of athletes with disabilities has improved, they are still often represented as "supercrips." Most of the coverage of PWD in sports tends to rely on visible disabilities rather than invisible disabilities.

“person first,” not the disability, which helps remove some of the fear and anxiety that people have about disability. The social model emphasizes the dignity, independence, and privacy of the individual. Some disability advocates have called on media organizations to embrace the social model ahead of the medical model because the social model places the individual before his or her disability. In an attempt to help journalists, producers, and the broader community achieve this goal, a focus on the language used to describe disabilities and impairments should promote “person first” language.

The typical representation of PWD in television comes from the medical model and tends to highlight the exclusion and segregation of PWD, as well as the dependency of PWD on others. Often these representations tend to be stereotypical and archetypal. PWD have been habitually underrepresented on television and, when they are depicted, it is usually within a context of negative stereotypes, which are likely to harm them. These stereotypes include the person with disabilities as pitiable or pathetic; an object of curiosity or violence; sinister or evil; freakish or a “supercrip” who overcame insurmountable odds to conquer the disability; his or her own worst enemy; a burden or not able to participate in everyday life, dependent, and nonsexual. Also, PWD have typically been able to evoke sympathy, pity, fear, or patronizing attitudes. There are limited forms of media representation in which PWD can speak for themselves, and when done it is often for tabloid, commercial, or voyeuristic purposes.

Although media coverage of athletes with disabilities has improved, these athletes are often shown as being tragic and passive figures. Often athletes tend to be represented as “supercrips” or as “exceptional.” Most of the coverage of PWD in sport tends to rely on visible disabilities rather than invisible disabilities.

Health communication scholars and scholars across disciplines attempt to challenge and even constitute attitudes toward PWD that permeate wider society. Because of the media’s focus on health problems caused by the disability, other health concerns and issues, such as quality of life or doctor–patient communication, may be ignored. Most communication scholars agree representation matters. The public portrayals of

PWD (i.e., news media and television coverage) can impact public perception and has potential material and symbolic consequences.

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**See Also:** Disability; Invisible Disabilities; Media Depictions: Medical Workers; Social Construction: Disability.

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## Media Depictions: Medical Workers

Most research on the media’s representation of medical workers has examined how doctors are depicted on entertainment television and how these depictions impact viewers’ perceptions of real-world physicians. On television, doctors have traditionally been white males who are very skilled at their jobs and very good people overall. However, these portrayals have changed in recent decades. Today’s television doctors are both male and female, racially diverse, make medical mistakes, have character flaws, and engage in unprofessional behaviors. As major characters, doctors make most of the medical decisions on television. Nurses, on the other hand, are often minor characters and pushed to the side during medical

decision making. Other medical professionals, such as hospital administrators, are also largely invisible on television.

These media representations are important, because many analyses have demonstrated a relationship between how medical professionals are portrayed in the media and how viewers perceive real-world medical professionals. For example, during the early decades of television, when doctors were portrayed in a very positive light, survey analyses indicated that heavy viewers of television were likely to report having high levels of confidence and trust in their doctors. More recent analyses, however, have demonstrated that heavy viewers of medical shows can have a more negative opinion of doctors than nonviewers.

### Representations of Doctors

Doctors have been a staple of entertainment television since the 1950s and have been consistently overrepresented. Before 1980, the proportion of doctors on television was five times greater than the proportion of doctors in the United States. Each week, viewers would normally see 12 physicians in prime time, three being major characters. Additionally, the representation of doctors was largely positive and was more favorable than the depiction of other professionals on television during this time period. Early medical dramas, such as *Dr. Kildare* and *Marcus Welby, M.D.*, depicted doctors as good, warm, sociable, fair, and very successful. In this era, it was quite rare to see a doctor on television make a mistake or fail to save a patient. Typically, episodes of these shows focused on the patient and the patient's problem, which the attentive doctors almost always successfully solved. The doctor's personal concerns or problems were not a large portion of the plot.

The depiction of doctors began to change, however, as the dramatic formula of medical shows shifted to concentrate mostly on the doctors' problems. Instead of focusing on a new patient each week, medical shows chronicled the lives and problems of the doctors themselves, and patients were relegated to minor roles. As main characters, television doctors had personality flaws and were not always portrayed as good people. Despite their personal flaws, they were still good doctors who showed unlimited dedication to their patients.

After this initial shift, medical dramas began to present a more complex portrait of physicians. Analyses in the 1970s and 1980s found that entertainment television largely painted doctors in a positive light both in terms of their personal characteristics and their ability to save their patients, whereas analyses conducted during the 1990s and 2000s noted a different depiction. During this time period, doctors were still portrayed as physically attractive and interpersonally skilled, but they also engaged in amoral behaviors. Additionally, although many television doctors were portrayed as competent and capable of performing their duties, the incredible success rates of earlier medical doctors disappeared. Television doctors were both competent experts and unskilled amateurs. Additionally, analyses of more recent medical shows, such as *Grey's Anatomy* and *House M.D.*, show that current television doctors are portrayed as less professional than ever before. Even so, these doctors are often still depicted as dedicated and heroic.

In addition to doctors' personalities and medical skill, the depiction of television doctors' race and gender has also changed over the years. On early medical dramas, the majority of television doctors were white and male. However, over the past two decades these portrayals have shifted to more closely match the demographic distribution of physicians in the United States. For example, a recent analysis found that entertainment television features many female physicians, and female physicians are actually overrepresented on fictional programs compared to their real-life counterparts. In terms of ethnicity, entertainment television's portrayal of physicians is also beginning to become more diverse. Compared to U.S. statistics, African American physicians are overrepresented on entertainment television, but Asian American and international medical graduates remain underrepresented.

### Representations of Nurses

Compared to doctors, there is less empirical research on the depiction of nurses in the media. On fictional programming, nurses have typically been minor female characters without well-defined roles. On average, viewers would see around six nurses on prime time programs each week before the 1980s, but only one of those nurses would be

a major character. When nurses were more central to the plot, it was often as a romantic option for the doctor.

In addition to mostly being minor characters, television nurses have not been portrayed very favorably. Compared with doctors, nurses have been portrayed as less intelligent and rational and were more emotionally unstable. Rather than depicting nursing as a distinct discipline, nurses on television have mostly been portrayed as subordinates to doctors.

Up until the late 2000s, most medically themed television shows focused primarily on doctors. Recently, however, there has been an influx of programs with nurses as central characters. Much like doctors, these shows have presented a complex portrait of nurses. Although often portrayed as both competent and dedicated medical professionals, these nurses also engaged in unprofessional behaviors, such as drug abuse. Despite these nurse-centric shows, nurses still largely do not exist on other medical programs, and doctors are often depicted performing many of the functions that nurses perform in reality.

### Representations of Other Medical Workers

There is even less research on other medical workers on television than the research on nurses. One group of medical workers that occasionally appears on television is hospital administrators. Most television hospital administrators are minor characters and are often portrayed negatively. Typically, administrators are shown as a nuisance that interferes with doctors' work.

### Representations of Provider–Patient Interactions

Compared to other medical workers, doctors have the most screen time and the most medical power on television. This is also true of entertainment television's depiction of patients and their role in medical decision making. Television does not often depict interactions between physicians and patients. When provider–patient interactions are depicted, patients are almost always depicted in a passive role. Analyses of *Chicago Hope* and *ER* found that physician-patient interactions were uncommon on these programs and physicians typically made all the medical decisions without consulting the patient. Other analyses

have shown that most discussions about health care decisions on entertainment television occur between doctors, and patients, nurses, and other health care professionals are not involved.

Not all analyses have found that provider–patient interactions on television are problematic. For example, one study found that half of all the health-related story lines on television depicted a health care interaction that was helpful and productive. Additionally, television doctors often display some patient-centered behaviors, such as providing information, asking questions, making eye contact, and listening carefully. However, other patient-centered behaviors, such as showing verbal and nonverbal empathy and providing educational materials, are uncommon.

### Effects of Media Representations

Although there is a lack of empirical research on how media representations of nurses and other medical workers influence viewers, evidence from studies of physician portrayals suggests media depictions of medical workers can have an effect. As suggested by cultivation theory, survey analyses have indicated that viewers' perceptions of doctors have largely mirrored their depiction on entertainment television. Before the 1980s, heavy viewers of television were likely to report having high confidence in their doctors. As these depictions changed, viewers of medical dramas were more likely to perceive doctors less positively than nonviewers. More recent survey analyses have demonstrated that viewers of medical shows are likely to perceive doctors as attractive but also as lacking good character. A few recent studies have shown that perceptions of doctors largely depend on how realistic viewers find the shows. People who view these shows as more realistic and credible are more likely to view physicians positively.

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**See Also:** Cultivation Theory; Doctor–Patient Communication; Media Content: Televised Entertainment; Media Content, Impact of.

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## Media Depictions: Mental Illnesses

Representation studies, involving content and form analysis of media messages, often claim that the negative framing of mental illnesses in different media genres is stigmatizing and contributes to perpetuating the public’s negative attitudes toward those afflicted. However, a new trend demonstrated in the digital media, normalizing disorder as everybody’s problem, removes stigma, making disorder acceptable.

Mental disorders are common worldwide, with 25 to 35 percent of people in most countries meeting diagnosis criteria at some point in their life. At least 350 million people live with depression, the leading cause of disability worldwide, according to the World Health Organization’s 2012 report.

Both factual and fictional media are the general public’s primary sources of information about mental illnesses. Representation studies consistently show that both entertainment and news media provide dramatic and distorted images of mental illness, and depictions of persons with

mental illness are generally negative and stigmatizing, emphasizing dangerousness, criminality, violence, unpredictability, and social incompetence.

### Distortion of Images in Fictional Media

Mental illness and treatment are popular subjects for filmmakers and audiences worldwide because their depiction provides dramatic and emotionally compelling stories. These portrayals are often negative, relying on stereotypes and fears about mental illness.

Linking mental illness with homicidal behavior is a myth that appears frequently in horror films (such as *Psycho*) and films about serial killers. Other stereotypical media images suggest that people with mental illness are irresponsible, incompetent, unpredictable, dangerous, unstable, victims, or disenfranchised, with no family connections, no occupation, and no social identity.

Fictional images of mentally ill persons in entertainment media portray these individuals as significantly more violent than other characters or than real people with mental illness. Television programs also tend to attribute responsibility for outrages and tragedies to deinstitutionalization and community-based services.

A more balanced view has emerged since the 1990s in films such as *A Beautiful Mind* (schizophrenia) and the television series *Monk* (obsessive compulsive disorder). However, although the general trend seems to be moving in a positive direction, away from serial killers and toward sympathetic and successful characters, the old stereotypes are still present in movies as well as in the public mind. These include the myths of the psychiatric institution as a dangerous place, and madness as a phenomenon associated with genius.

Stereotypes of these disorders exist even in children’s films and television programs. These stereotypes are especially evident in animated films produced by The Walt Disney Studios, in which mentally ill characters are portrayed as objects of amusement, derision, and fear.

### Distortion of Images in Nonfiction Media

Studies show that news representations of mental illness, especially in the print media, are largely inaccurate and negative. In the Internet era, strong competition for audiences forces journalists to persistently pursue those responsible for

societal problems. Stories about violence involving unusual circumstances are key elements of newsworthiness, making persons with mental illness attractive news subjects that grab public attention.

Content analysis studies suggest that news reports often include dramatic descriptions of violent attacks and murders committed intentionally by persons with mental illness. The news covers court proceedings in criminal cases centering on violent subgroups or those pleading not guilty by reason of unsound mind or insanity. Criminals may be presented as suspected of suffering from psychosis, paranoia, depression, or schizophrenia.

Selective coverage by journalists of attacks by persons with schizophrenia labels the entire mentally ill population as dangerous and unpredictable. The print media ignore the fact that only a minority of those afflicted with mental illness commit serious crimes, and that their rate of violence is low, not above 14 percent.

Studies also demonstrate that the term *schizophrenia* is used far more frequently as a metaphor than in reference to the disorder itself. The most frequent metaphoric use is for incoherence, contradiction, split, and unpredictability, especially in politics. These studies suggest that the metaphoric use may be an equal or greater contributor to the stigma and prejudice experienced by people with this mental disorder. Susan Sontag observed that illnesses whose etiologies are considered mysterious are more likely to be used metaphorically as a reflection of stigmatizing beliefs. Among mental illnesses, schizophrenia is probably the most incomprehensible and involves one of the highest levels of stigma.

Bias is also introduced into mental illness coverage by the limited perspectives presented. People with these illnesses and their personal stories of recovery are rarely included as sources for news items. Mental health professionals have scorned and avoided media contact, thus their perspectives have been underrepresented. Omitting these two perspectives from journalistic accounts can contribute to negative cultural stereotypes by limiting the views presented and solutions proposed.

### Gender Bias

Research has noted the gendering of depression in the mass media, whereby women's lives are increasingly and disproportionately represented

as depressed. Stories about the antidepressants called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) served to widen the boundaries of normative life events such as menstruation, birth, and menopause that are presented in women's magazines as necessitating treatment with antidepressants—a phenomenon known as medicalization.

Direct-to-consumer advertising of antidepressants also frames depression as a female condition, perpetuating the stereotype of females as biologically depressive.

However, content analysis of women's magazines points to portrayals that lessen the severity of women's mental problems and ignore their healing solutions. The focus is on stress and fear of open spaces (agoraphobia) as female mental disabilities, while ignoring more severe mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Men are overrepresented as having mental illness in discussions about psychoses, personality disorders, and childhood problems. Women are overrepresented with problems of sexual dysfunction and neuroses.

Although mental illness has contributed to the vast majority of suicides in Taiwan, male suicides are more frequently portrayed as being due to unemployment and legal problems, while female suicides are more likely to be depicted as being due to mental illness or relationship problems. This reflects men's more prominent reluctance to admit and accept treatment, which is also similar in Western countries.

### Distortion of Causes and Treatments

Biases in portrayals of the causes and treatment of mental illnesses also have been documented. In contrast to studies that demonstrated the gendering of depression, other studies claim that not just women but everyone is vulnerable to depression. They demonstrate that from a problem explained in a variety of ways in news stories in the 1980s, which offered varieties of self-help and psychotherapy, depression's presentation changed into a primarily biomedical phenomenon. Since the 1990s, drugs have been described as the prevailing solution to depression, despite little evidence for many different biological theories about its origin.

Similarly, direct-to-consumer advertising of antidepressants frames depression narrowly within a biomedical model of causation and privileges benefits over risks. The press proclaimed

Prozac as a miracle drug for treating depression, although the SSRI class of drugs, to which it belongs, has not proven to be much more effective than the preceding generation of drugs. Such coverage is argued to cultivate unjustified expectations and hopes among those afflicted.

In coverage of the discovery of genes associated with schizophrenia and manic depression, there was a marked tendency toward genetic determinism and over-optimism regarding the causes and cures of mental illnesses. Such descriptions are argued to foster a public perception of genetic research as morally problematic because of its association with eugenics.

Movies also distort by dramatizing the effects of psychiatric treatments as oppressive and inhuman. Images of forced confinement, electroshock, and psychosurgery horrify audiences and cast serious and lasting doubts upon the nature of psychiatric treatments and the motivation of psychiatric professionals.

### The Mentally Ill in Digital Media

New media imageries of people with mental illness have shifted, as demonstrated by studies of mental health Web sites. These sites provide comprehensive information on psychological disorders and psychiatric medications from both a consumer and expert point of view, blurring the lines between information dissemination, consumerism, and sociodigital participation. Online support groups allow individuals to construct the self as a legitimate member of a disorder community, present as an expert-patient, and demonstrate shared beliefs about healing and the importance of story, allowing individuals to characterize the self in terms of illness and health simultaneously.

Moreover, recent Web site visual imagery conveys a shift from a biomedical discourse focused on illness to a social-therapeutic discourse centered on health and wellness. This is reflected in generic stock photos of everyday people on mental health Web sites instead of symbolic images of suffering. Research suggests that this demonstrates a new way of representing disorder, blurring the boundaries between disorder and wellness, thus removing stigma.

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**See Also:** Antisocial Behaviors: Bullying and Cyberbullying; Content Analysis; Depression; Digital Media; Media Depictions: Disability; Media Depictions: Medical Workers; Medicalization; Mental Health; Social Identity; Stigmatization; Television.

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## Media Literacy

Because they live in a media-saturated world, children must learn to use media effectively to inform their health choices. Eliminating screen use is an unrealistic strategy for eliminating damaging media effects, despite widespread concerns about media effects on young people's health decisions. The vast majority of children has access to the Internet, often on smartphones and unsupervised. Recent reports of youth media use indicate that young people on average use media almost 11 hours per day. They use media to pass the time, to socialize, to learn, to relax, to plan, and to assert their identities. Media are important to them and are also inescapable, with marketing ubiquitous on billboards, in stadiums, and even in schools.

Moreover, media are tools that can be beneficial. Young people can obtain useful information, can advocate for causes important to them, and can connect with people who can help them through a crisis or prevent a crisis. Media messages also can provide a catalyst for the discussion of important topics that might not otherwise be discussed. In other words, young people with the