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UNFORTUNATELY, PRODUCERS STILL TURN A BLIND EYE TO CASTING

Blackface. Yellowface. More recently, Bird Box. Hollywood and studios in general have long believed audiences need to see certain actors in roles that would have been more appropriately cast with someone else.

Thankfully, we no longer see white people playing black or Asian roles. But despite all of its motivation to change in recent years, Hollywood still hasn't figured out that its casting decisions impact far more than a bottom line. Yet tragically, the very studios that purport to be benefiting minorities and people with disabilities by showcasing them are actually reinforcing stigmas and biases. They are hurting us. And their actions are merely a perpetuation of the discriminatory practices studios have embraced for years.

It seems Hollywood can't read the writing on the wall any better than I can. And I'm legally blind.

Netflix's Bird Box is the most recent example of purportedly good intentions gone bad. Netflix widely marketed its recent horror/drama starring Sandra Bullock, Trevante Rhodes, and John Malkovich, and viewers embraced the movie—even creating a “Bird Box Challenge” that dangerously suggested sighted people try activities such as boating and driving while blindfolded, so that they could better relate to and understand blind people. Notably, the movie had actors doing just about everything while blindfolded (in order to escape the consequences of seeing an ominous unseen presence that would prompt someone to commit suicide nearly immediately).

Problematically, when the “perfect” opportunity arose to cast blind or visually impaired actors—in the roles of students and administrators at the “Janet Tucker School for the Blind”—Netflix chose to cast sighted actors. Indeed, the *blind* administrator of the *blind* school, “Rick,” was cast as sighted actor Pruitt Taylor Vince.

Herein lies the problem. Why do studios cast people in roles they have no experience with personally, and then hire (sometimes) consultants to help those actors understand how a truly disabled/unsighted/black/etc. person would react? ***Are we saying that disabled or unsighted people are just not capable of playing parts, of being contributing members of society, or of even being able to perform a role that they have had to live for years?***

I am heartbroken that this studio perspective perpetuates the stigma I've only recently had to swallow: disabled and vision-impaired/blind people are thought to have little value in the business world. I've had the fortune of building a successful business in the Los Angeles area, while also calling it my home, for my entire adult life. I was “sighted,”

as we call it, until the age of 45. I consider myself lucky because I can continue professionally as a consultant in my industry, while giving generously of my time to bring a voice to the visually impaired/blind community. Despite my hardships, I feel truly blessed and honored that I can help others.

Unfortunately, I am concerned that the voices of our blind, visually impaired, disabled community – and of those with physical limitations in general (a whopping 20% of our population) – are not only being ignored in Hollywood; they are being stifled and ultimately stigmatized even more than they are currently. One could say the industry continues to “turn a blind eye” to the huge societal impact it delivers when it refuses to cast individuals with physical limitations in 95% of the roles that reflect precisely those physical limitations. In fact, in many cases, our communities are not even consulted, and the resulting characters are not only inauthentic, they can border on offensive, and in nearly all cases, the casting perpetuates the “handicap” mentality that we already face in every aspect of our daily lives.

Unfortunately, these discouraging facts are not mere rumors. According to a 2016 study performed by the Ruderman Family Foundation, ***more than 95% of TV characters portraying disabilities*** (using the definition provided by the Americans with Disabilities Act) ***are being played by able-bodied actors on television***. And this staggering percentage is not getting smaller. As merely one recent example, I point to the new television series announcement from CW called *In the Dark*, which has already been filmed with not a single blind or visually impaired person on the set. While I am generally supportive of bringing the issues of disabled Americans to a wider audience, I am alarmed when our community is left out of casting, consulting, and the process in general.

And perhaps most importantly, I am horrified by the long-lasting stigma the television and movie industries perpetuate when they release productions staffed with able-bodied actors playing people with disabilities. Make no mistake about your message: you are telling our world with your actions that it is better to marginalize people with disabilities than offer them opportunities.

Although I use bold and underlined text to make my point, I cannot emphasize this enough. As you begin to open your able-bodied eyes to the practices that have harmed so many others, please also take a moment to consider the concerns of our blind community.

Vanna Rapeti is a real estate entrepreneur in the Greater Los Angeles area. Despite becoming legally blind five years ago due to a series of unfortunate events, she has continued as a consultant in the industry and she volunteers her time at the Audio Internet Reading Service of Los Angeles. She also brings a unique perspective as someone who was “sighted” for 45 years before becoming legally blind. She was honored to receive a Lifetime Philanthropy Award from the George W. Bush administration.