

# being seen

**PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES  
COMMUNITIES**

[www.bso-ben.ca](http://www.bso-ben.ca)  
[www.beingseen.ca](http://www.beingseen.ca)

  
**BSO**  
BLACK SCREEN OFFICE | BUREAU DE L'ÉCRAN DES NOIRS

# Table Of Contents

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>RESEARCH BACKGROUND</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>What Is Authentic Representation?</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Better Portrayal of the Communities</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Stereotypes</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Consequences</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>See More People with Disabilities Content</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Audio Description</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>DIRECTIVES</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>APPENDIX A - DEMOGRAPHIC CHARTS</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>APPENDIX B - GLOSSARY OF TERMS</b>	<b>17</b>

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Authentic representation of the People with Disabilities communities would be aided by a good understanding of the demographics of Canadians with disabilities. While there is now detailed analysis from Statistics Canada of the kinds of disabilities Canadians live with, it is still lacking ethnocultural demographic analysis. What is clear is that 22% of Canadians live with a disability. The disability communities are well aware of the size of their communities in Canada and are frustrated that so many members of their communities are being represented poorly or not at all.

Though a recurring theme was a complete lack of representation, there was frustration that what representation there was often included the following stereotypes:

- The white dude
- The superhero or victim dichotomy

This list is shorter than with many of the other communities because most of the conversations were about a complete lack of representation.

When discussing representation, participants brought up the topic of the lack of diversity within audio describers, who appear to be reluctant to describe the race of the performers. As a result, the Blind audiences have an imperfect understanding of the diversity of the shows that they are watching and the extent that they are representative of different races.

Directives were developed from the consultations to provide creators, producers, funders, broadcasters and streaming services with guidance to help them create and assess more authentic and inclusive screen content.

# INTRODUCTION

“ We have to portray the world as it really is and include everybody and give everybody a chance to participate to the full of their capacity. ”

The ‘**Being Seen**’ research project was initiated in response to the growing demand for a restructuring of the Canadian screen-based media sector to provide equitable access for Canadians of all backgrounds and identities to create content, and to allow all Canadians to see themselves reflected on our screens. In the **People with Disabilities Communities Report**, the research digs into the responses from consultations and interviews that were unique to those who identify as members of the People with Disabilities communities, namely:

- Stereotypes
- Consequences of Poor Representation
- What they Want to See More of

## RESEARCH BACKGROUND

This guide, together with the **Core Themes Report** and its other companion reports (Black, People of Colour, 2SLGBTQIA+ and Children’s Media), will help content creators, funders, broadcasters, streaming services, digital platforms and distributors to create authentic and representative film, television and interactive digital media. It is intended that the **People with Disabilities Communities Report** will be read together with the other reports, but that those with a specific interest in authentic representation of the People with Disabilities communities will be able to dive deeper into these issues.

Please note that representation terminology is constantly evolving. While there are other terms for People with Disabilities (e.g. Differently Abled, Disabled), this term was chosen after consultation with members of the Research Team who identify as People with Disabilities as well as third-party research, to best reflect feedback received on the preferred umbrella term. It centres the word ‘people’ rather than the disability. In this research, disability was defined to include both visible (i.e., Blind, Deaf) and invisible (i.e., chronic illness, neurodiversity) disabilities. It did focus on long-term or recurring rather than temporary disabilities.

The Research Team (see Appendix A of the **Core Themes Report**) conducted focus groups in English and in French that targeted People with Disabilities who are industry professionals and members of the public. The Research Team included those with disabilities, which helped with the comfort level of the participants and our outreach approaches. Those who identified as People with Disabilities also participated in focus groups that targeted Black, People of Colour and 2SLGBTQIA+. Note however, that accessibility needs such as ASL interpretation and a closed captioning interpreter were only engaged on the targeted focus groups so that did limit the participation of some people with disabilities to the focus groups with the accessibility needs they

required. At all times, participants were able to engage in discussions through the chat as well as verbally and that provided an alternative that allowed many with disabilities to provide meaningful insights. The Research Team also conducted one-on-one interviews with People with Disabilities industry professionals.

For more information on the Research Background of the project, Methodology of the consultations, overall demographics of those consulted and the Research Team, please consult the **Core Themes Report**. Detailed demographics of the People with Disabilities consulted are provided in Appendix A of this report. A Glossary of terms that may not be commonly understood is found in Appendix B.

## What is Authentic Representation?

This Word Cloud illustrates titles of shows that the participants identified as having positive representation or where they could see themselves. Unlike all other Word Clouds in the **Being Seen** research, none of the titles were referred to more than once. Many could not identify a film or television show where they felt represented and there were no video games mentioned. While some of the titles were stories about a person with disabilities (e.g., *Maudie*, *Special*, *The Station Agent*, *Margarita With A Straw*), many were shows for the general public with one character with a disability (e.g., Deaf girl signing with *King Kong*, Deaf mermaid in *The Little Mermaid*).



“ I do like the character introduced into the second season of *Special* who is outgoing, fun and gay. The character has range and is way more interesting. Of course the performer is autistic and was part of the writers room to create the character so authentically. ”

“ There’s a character in *Superstore* who is a paraplegic and I like that they never talk about what happened to him, he’s just a person in the show who happened to be in a wheelchair. ”

“ I don’t have specifically what the film *Unrest* is about but it is really the only portrayal I’ve seen of that ugly side of chronic pain that people don’t want to put in a show because I think it scares people. ”

“ *The Station Agent* with Peter Dinklage is a narrative with someone who has a disability but there’s complexity and it’s not solely an ‘overcoming’ narrative. ”

## Better Portrayal of the Communities

Since 1983, Statistics Canada has conducted seven surveys focused on People with Disabilities with the most recent being the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability, although questions about disability were also included in the general census of 2010 and 2016. The classification of disability has evolved over time to now include those with cognitive and mental health disabilities rather than just physical disabilities. Statistics Canada considers the 2017 data to be the most inclusive. Inclusivity is good but the expansion of the definition prevents an analysis of trend data<sup>1</sup>.

In 2017, 22% of Canadians had one or more disabilities. Note that this statistic is very well known within the disability communities and was cited in consultations frequently. Disabilities were broken down into the following percentages of Canadians:

Pain - 15%

Flexibility - 10%

Mobility - 10%

<sup>1</sup> [The Evolution of Disability Data in Canada](#), Statistics Canada, 2018

Mental Health - 7%  
 Seeing - 5%  
 Hearing - 5%  
 Dexterity - 5%  
 Learning - 4%  
 Memory - 4%  
 Developmental - 1%<sup>2</sup>

The prevalence of disability increased with age from 13% for those 15 to 24 years old to 47% for those 74 and older. Among those 25 to 64, People with Disabilities are less likely to be employed (59%) than those without disabilities (80%). 76% of those with mild disabilities were employed while only 31% of those with severe disabilities were employed. Those with severe disabilities were more likely (28%) to be living in poverty than those without disabilities (10%) or with mild disabilities (14%)<sup>3</sup>.

There is no ethnocultural breakdown of People with Disabilities.

## Stereotypes

As mentioned in the **Core Themes Report**, people from underrepresented identities are frustrated by simplistic and tokenistic portrayals. They want to see full, rich, complex characters but too often see tokens and stereotypes. There are a handful of recurring stereotypes that appear in all screen media that upset members of the People with Disabilities communities and the two stereotypes that people complained about the most were: 1) the white dude and 2) the superhero/victim dichotomy. In the first, it was an overrepresentation of people with disabilities as ‘white dudes’. Variations of this complaint came up regardless of the disability and went beyond the usual complaint of a lack of intersectionality in representation.

“ Autistic stories are usually white dudes with a very stereotypical textbook definition. When I look for role models, I’m looking for characters who probably aren’t labelled, but where I can at least see some of the traits. I think of shows like *Veronica Mars* where I found that Kristen Bell’s character had that odd focus that’s common in autism and ADHD and women. ”

“ When we think of autistic, we think of this skinny, nerdy, awkward white dude. We think of Sheldon from *Big Bang Theory*. I’m at the point where I just don’t watch anything that’s made by anyone who’s not autistic and saying it’s autistic. I won’t watch *Atypical*. They have brought in autistic consultants but it’s another story of a white autistic dude. ”

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the definition and classification of these disabilities, please see Canadian Survey on Disability, 2017, [Identifying Disability Types](#)

<sup>3</sup> [A Demographic, Employment and Income Profile of Canadians with Disabilities aged 15 and over, 2017](#)

“ It’s usually someone white, still very attractive by society standards, so that basically everything is perfect with them besides this one disability thing. It’s always sort of simplified instead of the messiness that I think disability is a lot of the time. ”

“ There’s a lack of representation of Black Deaf actors when I know there’s a lot of us there. But the spotlight is only going on the white actors. You have the hearing community, then the Deaf community, then the people of colour who are also Deaf and then you add on other disabilities and light skinned folks are still getting priority if they get any opportunity at all. ”

“ With shows like *CODA* and *Deaf U*, I haven’t watched them and the reason is that I know they’re not going to represent me. It’s the same thing over and over again, white Deaf folks. I want to see opportunities for Black Queer Deaf folks. I would much rather watch hearing television because at least with hearing television I can see Black stories and see my identity reflected. ”

The second stereotype was seeing the person with disability portrayed either as a superhero (e.g. *Daredevil*) or some other kind of high-performing character or they are seen as a victim or it is a story about their trauma. There was a call for representation of a range of abilities and seeing people with disabilities just living their life.

“ The person becomes a hero or some kind of special character as opposed to just one of the characters, more integrated, just another person in the world. ”

“ The stereotypical whole life struggle, it’s only seen as a tragedy. We’re not seeing our joy, or our love or just things that don’t have to deal with our disability as much. ”

“ Representation includes the diversity of disabled folks and diversity in terms of body/mind experience and racialized status and life experience. Not just para-athletes but also people in everyday life. ”

“ I don’t like seeing that the only Blind or disabled characters are in pain or that they are superstars, superhuman. ”

“ It’s always high-functioning individuals with a disability, like on *The Good Doctor*. But my daughter is not part of that. Even if they feature someone with Down Syndrome, it’s usually at a super high end. So, parents who have children with a more severe disability are feeling left out in general and so does your kid. And if that’s not at all reflected in the media, they become detached from it. ”

“ It’s always the high-functioning individuals and the happy ending. It just isn’t normalized so that they’re part of the fabric of the story. The stories of the high-achieving people with disabilities set a very high standard. A lot of people with disabilities are just normal, they’re not models or geniuses. They’re just average people and they need to be represented that way in the media landscape. ”

As mentioned above, there was a concern that portrayals, if any, tended to not reflect the diversity of the community but went further to call for portrayals of the diversity of the disability (i.e., the representation of the particular disability) or diversity of disabilities (i.e., one person having multiple disabilities).

“ I think the problem of diversity within disability exists across many conditions. I have MS and it looks different in everyone. With such low representation we only see one version and that’s what society thinks that is. ”

“ Everyone with disabilities experience them differently, even if it’s the same or similar disability. So, representing everyone is a challenge but to start would be fantastic. ”

“ I haven’t seen many representations of Queer folks who suffer from complex mental illness. The thing is, when you’re high functioning and are mentally ill, the very literal approach to disability and visibility doesn’t really cut it. I mean, most of us mask<sup>4</sup> to a degree or have been pushed to. So we can appear to camouflage when our inner worlds are really complex and painful. ”

<sup>4</sup> Masking’ is a process by which an individual changes or “masks” their natural personality to conform to social pressures and can be used by neurodiverse individuals to blend in better with neurotypical society.



“ I have many disabilities, multiple acquired brain injuries. I’m neurodivergent and have various chronic illnesses. If I have seen characters, it is with only one of my experiences and are mostly flat and plot-driving token characters. ”

“ I’d like to see Intersectional disabled characters, BIPOC, Indigenous, immigrant, LGBTQ2S+, refugee, old, young, not pretty, poor, chronically ill and immunocompromised characters that are not tragedy- or suffering-driven. Combating ableism as plot is good but is not the only option. It would be good to see thriving disabled folks. ”

“ There is a reason why I have so many different disabilities, because they’re all in different ranges and they all flare up at different times. It’s a very fluid kind of experience. ”

“ It’s not just one thing. Yes, I have epilepsy, but I also have anxiety, I’m also brown, I’m also female. How about that whole story? ”

“ Talking about people who are Blind or have autism or a paraplegic all as people with disabilities, whether you intend to or not, you will perpetuate the idea that we’re all the same, and are interchangeable for one another. The assumption is that one person who shares the label personifies all people who share the label and that’s wrong. ”

## Consequences

The **Being Seen** research highlights the industry and the public's demand for authentic representation but what are the consequences of poor or missing representation? Why does it matter so much? In the **Core Themes Report** there was discussion about the importance of accurately reflecting our society, but poor representation can have personal and direct consequences for members of People with Disabilities communities. Many participants drew connections between the quality of representation and employment, love, mental health and survival. The lack of any representation was seen as a significant factor in the feeling of isolation that many felt.

Consequences of poor or missing representation was a very active part of every focus group with People with Disabilities and often crowded out other discussion topics. A variety of quotes are provided here to try to communicate the importance of that discussion and the range of consequences, from everyday practical consequences, such as being able to find employment, to big-picture quality-of-life consequences that were shared.

“ Mental illness is portrayed as a negative thing but it doesn't mean that if you have depression or a brain injury that your life ends. You can live a fulfilled life and accomplish a lot of things. But they don't portray this in the media so when people are diagnosed they automatically think 'oh my gosh my life is going to end'. ”

“ The consequence of showing epilepsy wrong is that people get hurt. The older the show, the worse the first aid in the movie. Then not only does the person helping the epileptic but also the epileptic gets hurt. It's terrifying to see a seizure when you've never seen one. It's usually portrayed as you flop like a dead fish and then you're fine but it's a lot more complicated than that, and a lot more painful. It's not covered in first aid training so all first responders know is what they've seen on tv. ”

“ There needs to be space made for disability stories that scare people because it forces them to face their own mortality. There needs to be space for people like us to write these stories and to tell these stories. When we have some representation it makes it a little less scary and makes you feel a little less alone. ”

“ There is a need for intersectionality, particularly with chronic illness. A lot of health issues snowball into one another, whether mental or physical. Disability is simplified over and over again when it's incredibly complex. We're seeing the same things because we're not having proper authentic voices getting the narratives out there. Most writers' rooms are older white dudes who are completely non-disabled. That is where most of society is getting their information from about our community. ”

“ Lack of representation has critical life and death impact. It strongly impacts quality of life potential. There are neurodiverse people, most often racialized but not always, who get killed by police. There are Deaf people who are getting killed and arrested inappropriately. There are autistic kids who get incarcerated or killed by even family members because of the lack of social acceptance when we don't have it reinforced by appropriate representation in the media. For people who are living various marginalized experiences, when we have the opportunity to observe characters and narrative representation that don't harm our sense of self it allows people to go forward and live with some kind of actual quality and to keep fighting for more of that. ”

“ Portrayal of autism as a male condition means that it is harder for women to be diagnosed since it is seen as a male condition. ”

“ I think so much of the importance of representation is to let people know that you have as much chance as anyone else and that it is as reasonable for you to try to achieve your dreams as it is for anyone else. ”

“ We don't see people with disabilities in friend groups with friends who don't have disabilities and that's very rarely my experience. We don't see people in a romantic light. I think the impact on me is that I think maybe the world does see me as undateable. ”

“ I've been fairly successful, compared to most Blind people I know and a lot of that had to do with expectations growing up. If your family has treated you from birth as helpless, it's really hard to break out of that. The more people are portrayed positively in mainstream media, the more likely it is that parents are going to see their kids reflected on TV or in a movie and think if that can happen, why can't it happen for my son or daughter. ”

“ I don't watch the aspirational stories because it just makes me feel like I've failed with my daughter. I have worked with my daughter tirelessly for 28 years but when I watch these shows and they have friends and they fly around to fashion shows I feel like I've failed. I don't watch them because they make me sadder. ”

“ If there are more shows then more of us would watch, and would feel part of the overall community. And that would help us in the long run in our everyday lives and the people we interact with. ”

## See More People with Disabilities Content

As described in the **Core Themes Report**, all underrepresented Canadians want to see more complexity in characters and story lines. What do the People with Disabilities focus group participants specifically want to see? A lot of the feedback related to the need to reflect intersectionality within the communities and the desire to be seen as included in society, but other topics came up as well.

“ It would be great to have a very well-accomplished person with autism who is running a business and a successful business or someone with epilepsy who is a doctor. ”

“ I never see chronically ill Asians or undiagnosed folks of colour. I'd love to see more unfinished or unclear narratives, more incidental disability. ”

“ I would like to see characters who are what I see when I'm out in my community. They're strong, they're advocates, they live very productive lives. We work, we know how to take care of our guide dogs, we can walk properly with our canes. It'll be nice to see positive portrayals of our community on television rather than always the pitiful, lost souls that we see in mainstream media. ”

“ I'd like to see more diversity within what this community means. I'd like to see them as an integral part of the community. They're walking the dog, they're in the grocery store, they're serving on juries, they're in restaurants. Then the public is no longer surprised when they see a person with a cane or without a cane who has sight loss. ”

“ Everyday characters, like the father of the bride and your Starbucks barista and your mayor at the Town Hall, those characters could have representation of disability easily, they don't have to be written into the character, you just have an actor that uses a wheelchair playing the mayor. The counter to this is 'yes, I need an actor with a disability but there are no trained actors.' Why? How do we get trained actors? ”

“ We're never seen in crowd scenes. We're 22% of the population but we're not seen at all. ”

“ Latino, Asian, African, South East Asian, I’d like to see their stories too. I’m sure that my Deaf experience is different from another culture’s Deaf experience or another person’s Deaf experience. ”

“ I’d like to see parents with disabilities. You see a lot of single parents who are struggling but you don’t see a lot of parents who are struggling with disabilities. ”

“ I have a problem with ‘overcoming disability’ as inspiration porn for ableds to feel good about, as though it is a happily ever after story. Or the idea of disability and living a joyful life as being outside the norm. Everything is a tragedy, and personally, even though I struggle with mental illness, I’ve experienced many beautiful moments in my life, good relationships, and joy. It seems like such a taboo subject, to feel joy when you struggle with mental illness or disability. And to me, joy and living joyfully is an act of resistance and disability resistance. ”

## Audio Description

A particular area of concern was the lack of diversity in audio description<sup>5</sup>, which impacted the quality of the ‘viewing’ experience. This is an issue related to representation as it impacts the Blind audience’s perception of the representation being presented to them.

“ Anything that I watch on TV or film, the default is always white. Often describers will say ‘the woman in the red dress’. I don’t get that she’s a Black woman or an Asian woman, so my default is always white. They’ll do better on shows with a lot of Black actors but even then, on *The Underground Railroad*, they identify that the main character is a Black woman and then walking up her driveway is a woman. Why aren’t you telling me she’s a white woman? Sometimes people are afraid to ‘label’ but otherwise as a Blind person I live in a world with no diversity. ”

<sup>5</sup> Audio description, also known as video description or described video, is a form of narration used to provide information surrounding key visual elements in a media work for the benefit of Blind and visually impaired audiences. The term audio description is used here as it was the term used by focus group participants.

“ Audio description is mostly older white women. You can hear it in the description. There’s some content that requires authentic writing of description from that community and authentic narration of description from that community in order to really do justice to the piece of art that is being recorded. ”



## DIRECTIVES

Based on the thoughts shared by participants, the following Directives were developed to provide guidance in creating and commissioning more authentic and representative screen-based content that engages with the People with Disabilities communities.

1. The People with Disabilities communities are diverse and made up of many identities and orientations, as demonstrated by the variety of titles in the Word Cloud earlier. The communities are also intersectional and consist of many Black, People of Colour and 2SLGBTQIA+ people. Each disability is also diverse in how it is experienced by each individual. Review character descriptions to ensure that the diversity of these communities and disabilities is being reflected.
2. Disabilities are not always visible. Do not default to visible disabilities as a substitute for representation.
3. Consult with experts within the specific disability community being represented to ensure accurate representation. Remember that if hiring a consultant or engaging a creative from that community, their experience is likely to be limited to their own personal experience with the disability.
4. Remember that 22% of Canadians live with disability. Consider the speaking roles and background roles to ensure that there is representation.
5. While there is still a need for some trauma-centred stories, are there other yet-to-be-told stories reflecting the lived experiences of People with Disabilities that could be created or greenlit?
6. Before centering or casting a white man in the role of a person with a disability, consider whether it is necessary to the story.
7. Are the characters stereotypes? Can those stereotypes be subverted or do they need to be thrown out?

# CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

“ Canada presents itself as this amazingly inclusive and progressive society so why not try to be more of a leader in that space? I was pretty excited to participate in this [‘Being Seen’] because disabled people seem like the last to be on the big screen. ”

Stereotypes about People and Communities with Disabilities abound in the screen media that we produce in Canada but an even greater problem is the lack of representation of People with Disabilities. It is everyone’s responsibility—from creators and producers to broadcasters, funders, streamers and distributors—to break the cycle and ensure that harmful stereotypes are erased from depictions on Canadian screens and that People with Disabilities are seen to be included as part of Canadian society. Only with authentic stories and characters can members of the People with Disabilities communities feel included in Canadian society and feel that their potential is unlimited. Authentic stories and characters will also reach underserved audiences and encourage more from those communities to participate in the creative industries, therefore leading to more high-quality content for underrepresented and mainstream audiences.

At the time of consultation, there were no formal organizations representing People with Disabilities working in the screen industry and there was frustration that as a result they felt excluded from conversations with funders, broadcasters and policy makers, particularly when it came to the issues of representation. However, on May 6, 2022, Accessible Media Inc. (AMI) announced that in partnership with CMF and Telefilm Canada it will be launching the [Disability Screen Office](#) to eliminate accessibility barriers and support and amplify disabled creatives. There was a consistent appreciation of the opportunity for community building that the research consultations provided. The Disability Screen Office can further this development, which will help creatives feel a part of the screen industry.

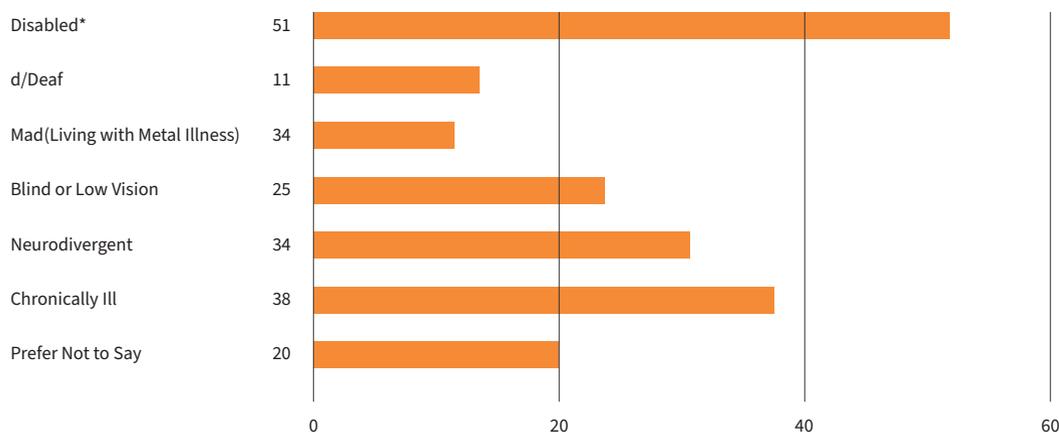
It is recommended that broadcasters, digital platforms, streaming services, funders and distributors collaborate together with the BSO and other equity-seeking industry organizations to develop strategies to meet the Directives and provide a common approach to creators and producers. This will ensure that strategies are devised to encourage early, thoughtful incorporation of the Directives by creators and producers, rather than trying to incorporate them prior to a project hitting the market. Consensus will reduce delays during development or production and ensure that the impact on budgets is consistent across stakeholders.

It is expected that these next steps will go a long way to supporting the structural change that the Directives are intended to initiate. The BSO intends to work with stakeholders to form a Collaborative Network to implement these Directives.

# APPENDIX A - DEMOGRAPHIC CHARTS

## Target Demographics:

To account for intersectionality, the total is more than the number of self-identifying participants.



# APPENDIX B - GLOSSARY

**Audio description**, also known as video description or described video, is a form of narration used to provide information surrounding key visual elements in a media work for the benefit of Blind and visually impaired audiences. The term audio description is used here as it was the term used by focus group participants.

**Masking** is a process by which an individual changes or “masks” their natural personality to conform to social pressures and can be used by neurodiverse individuals to blend in better with neurotypical society.

**Neurodiverse or neurodivergent** is the concept that people can experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways, and there is no one right way. While neurodivergent refers to the diversity of all people, it is often used to refer to autism, ADHD and other neurological or developmental conditions. Neurodiverse refers to a group of people but individuals are neurodivergent.

**Neurotypical** refers to someone who has the brain functions, behaviours and processing considered by society to be standard or typical.

---

\* Participants in this category self-identified using the umbrella term ‘Disabled’ without any more detailed identification.

**thank**  
you



[www.bso-ben.ca](http://www.bso-ben.ca)  
[www.beingseen.ca](http://www.beingseen.ca)

  
**BSO**  
BLACK | BUREAU DE  
SCREEN | L'ÉCRAN  
OFFICE | DES NOIRS