

Dating the Media: Participation, Voice, and Ritual Logic in the Disability Dating Show *The Undateables*

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Abstract

Interventional television formats centering around the ritual transformation of “ordinary people” are not only followed by sizable audiences worldwide but also attract large numbers of aspiring candidates. Although the benefits and consequences of participating in such shows have long been debated within academia and beyond, research into actual experiences of participating in such television productions remains scarce. Based on in-depth interviews with participants of the disability dating show *The Undateables*, this article focuses on how contributors deal with their position in the production and how their experiences reflect the emancipatory claims of the program. By presenting the production process through the story and from the perspective of three participants, different modes of participation will be discussed, revealing how instances of submission, appropriation, and contestation of the production logic are linked to ideals of representation, notions about empowerment and voice, and to strategies of negotiating normalcy and difference.

Keywords

factual entertainment, disability representation, television production and participation, emancipation, voice, media ritual

Stories matter. Many stories matter.

—Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), *The danger of a single story*

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Introduction

“Due to such a huge interest we are sadly not able to get back to everyone. . . . We are looking for a mix of men and women, from different places, with a variety of disabilities or conditions, to make the series balanced and fair,” announces the official Facebook page of Channel 4’s *The Undateables* (2012–) in response to the large number of disappointed comments from those applying but never hearing back from the production. The program and its international adaptations have been matching disabled people with potential partners for six seasons at the time of writing, and the appeal of participating in this televised social experience has not diminished over the years. The above post also suggests that the key to the program’s success lies in the makers’ professed strong commitment to a diverse representation of the romantic aspirations (and ultimately, the “dateability”) of people living with disability.

Borrowing at times from conventions of participatory and reflexive documentary, *The Undateables* as a reality show first and foremost draws on the dramaturgy of life interventions. Originally produced by Betty TV for the British public service broadcaster, the series consists of sixty-minute episodes, each following three protagonists as they enter the world of dating with the help of an agency that specializes in finding partners for singles with physical, sensory, developmental, or other impairments (Vertoont 2017). The episodes combine voice-over narration, fly-on-the-wall shots, and interviews to present the participants’ daily life, their meeting with the agency representative, their receipt of a profile of an interested person, and the progression of the date from preparation to reflecting on the experience afterward. Some of the participants are followed as they move forward with their relationship, or are sent on a second date with a new partner. From season 2, episodes also revisit how some previous candidates are doing and how the show changed their lives.

Despite the proliferation of disability representations in today’s popular culture,¹ disabled people rarely appear in media texts as multidimensional participants with their own stories. Consequently, *The Undateables*’ exceptional focus on intimate relationships carries the potential of enhancing social learning about the daily experiences of people living with disabilities (Vertoont 2017), forcing viewers to reconsider their own politics of the normative (Richardson 2018, 332). Nevertheless, the educative and emancipatory claims of the program have been debated since the first episode was aired. While popular commentaries in the mainstream press have often praised the show for its sensitive and respectful approach to the subject, and its balance between entertainment and depth (e.g., Newall 2016; Pilgrim 2015), others—for example, disability activists—have repeatedly condemned the program for its patronizing tone, for reinforcing common stereotypes, and for exaggerating the protagonists’ struggles to conform to the limiting and normative dating behavior prescribed by the format (e.g., Caulfield 2012; cf. Vertoont 2017, 12). The long-standing debate about how disability should best be portrayed in the media (cf. Ellis 2016; F. Müller et al. 2012) has, in the case of *The Undateables*, been inflamed by strong opinions concerning the participants’ presumed (lack of) agency and the extent to which they have been empowered or exploited by and throughout the production process.²

With this polarized debate in the background, we have conducted a series of in-depth interviews with British and Dutch participants about their motivations, experiences, and evaluations of participating in the show, complemented by additional interviews with two production members of the original series about the casting process, format development, and challenges involved in working with this particular group of participants. As part of a larger project on the ritual significance of mediated participatory practices, our aim has been to move beyond the predominantly text-based approaches to audience participation in interventional television (cf. Weber 2014), and to “test” the alleged transformative and civic functions of “do-good TV” (Ouellette 2010) against the experiences of those involved in the show. How does the program do justice to, help, or shape the participants in their project? Who benefits from participating, on what terms and how? How do the participants conform to, or negotiate, the formulaic template on which the episodes are repeatedly based? And how do they relate to their representations not only as individuals but also as *instances of a* (presumed) *collective* (Kelty 2017)?

The interviews³ revealed that the participants, while seemingly participating in the same process and telling rather similar stories in the end, are actually going through quite different trajectories. Over the course of the study, it became clear that such differences depended less on the national production contexts or the actual seasons in which the participants appeared, and more on the participants’ initial expectations, the message they wanted to convey, and their understanding of—and capacity to act upon—their roles as “contributors” in making the show. This article attempts to unpack the intricate relations between these factors and how they lead to structured differences in the experience of dating (with) the media, by presenting thick descriptions of the production process through the testimonies and from the perspective of three participants. These participants, each with different conditions, personalities, and agendas, have appeared in different seasons of *The Undateables*, and their participation also concluded differently—yet their trajectories can be considered typical in terms of the similarities they share with others interviewed for this project.

Questioning from different angles how *The Undateables* participants go through the stages of production serves two main purposes. Just as media texts are multilayered and open to opposing readings, so are participatory processes and practices. Placing different testimonies side by side in this regard allows us, on one hand, to shift our attention from the ultimately moot question of whether audience participation is empowering or exploitative—as rightly proposed by Kjus (2009, 295), it is probably both—toward the more interesting issue of “how it all works and for whom” (idem). On the other hand, the different points of emphasis in the three participants’ accounts (the negotiation of “normalcy” in the first, the possibility of taking ownership and control in the second, and conflicts over the definition of the “real” in the third) invite us to tie together aspects and theoretical implications of “media participation” that would have been hidden when solely focusing on the common patterns of the trajectories.

The stories of Cathy, Matt, and Annabel⁴ will be (re-)told below, relating them to each other and to the experiences of other participants. Occasionally, the narratives

will be juxtaposed with insights from the crew members—not as a means of validating the testimonies but to further nuance the power relations involved in the production process (Mayer 2016). At some points during the analysis, the textual features of the show will also be evoked, serving to capture the interplay and tensions between the representation of the dating process, the “pro-social” message the series intends to convey, and the lived experiences of the participants. But before proceeding to the accounts, and to further clarify these choices, a brief elaboration on the core theoretical considerations underlying our approach is needed, especially when it comes to how we look at the relation between the media text and the participants’ work of “being watched” (Andrejevic 2004) behind (and beyond) the scenes. Our starting point for this is conceptualizing “ordinary” people’s televisual representations as *ritualized* texts, and television participation as *ritual practice*.

The Ritual Logic of Text and Practice

When analyzing the different ways participants deal with their position in the production process, we follow a “de-centered” approach that not only focuses on actual participatory practices (Couldry 2012; Morley 2009) but also takes the social consequences of discrete media texts into account. Although our primary focus lies on production as a *social process* that “take[s] real individuals and submit[s] them to surveillance, analysis and selective display as means to entertainment and enhanced audience participation” (Couldry 2004, 72), we examine this process in relation to the logic of representation and its ideological implications (cf. E. Müller 2009), expecting that the two realms mutually shape each other. In particular, we intend to explore how and to what extent the transformative power of television participation, as *reinforced* by the ritualization of the media text (cf. Boross and Reijnders 2015), is translated into the *ordering logic* of the production process and reflected in the attitudes and actions of the participants involved (Boross and Reijnders 2017; Couldry 2003).

With “ritualization,” we refer here to those organizing principles of the media text that construct and justify the program’s authority to “transform lives.” Such elements involve but are not limited to the “before and after” logic of the intervention, the enactment of norms associated with dating, and the questioning of *la condition humaine* against the challenges implied by the “dis/ability divide” (Goodley 2014) when it comes to the “universal quest” for love. Given such structural and semantic features, signing up to participate in *The Undateables* is presented as something more than an opportunity to receive structure and guidance—and thereby templates for self-empowerment (cf. Ouellette and Hay 2008). Rather, it is framed as a patterned and regulated means to symbolically effect and to participate in the “serious life” (cf. Rothenbuhler 1998, 27): contrary to “lighter” versions of dating shows, where participation is often motivated and experienced as leisure activity (Syvertsen 2001), this program offers the protagonists relief from the undefined, ambivalent, and liminal status of being both disabled and single (Murphy et al. 1988). The show then sets

out to incorporate the participants into society as full (dateable) citizens, *provided* that they, in line with the defining message of such ritualized television formats, also make efforts to “overcome the odds” (Ellis 2016), or at least tame the obstacles associated with their conditions.

Our interest lies in how this textual process of “normalization in action” (Gray 2009, 160) is related to and manifested in the process of television *production* and in the power dynamics it involves. How does the production become the regulator of social action and how do the participants conform to, adjust to, or contest the above ritual logic? Our previous work on mediated self-disclosure showed that the perception of television productions as formal, authoritative, and extraordinary settings can facilitate the participants’ “will to act” (Bell 1992, 83) and their commitment to perform according to scripts dictated by the crew, *as long as* these scripts involve both a *clear* promise of transformation and a “transcendent” societal message articulated through the performances (Boross and Reijnders 2017). But what happens to this generic process when the “societal message” is ambivalent, the transformative benefit of participation is not taken for granted, or the participants have different takes on the “natural” authority of the production to arrange and portray their lives?

The three accounts presented here exemplify different participatory attitudes and strategies in this regard: Cathy’s trajectory is characterized by *submission* to the rules of the production in the process of negotiating her dateability, Matt’s story shows how *playing along* with the production logic can involve tactics of influencing and appropriating this logic for one’s own interest, and Annabel’s story highlights the conflicts arising from *contesting* the transformative claims of the show and the way she is intended to be represented to support such claims. In the following, we survey the whys and wherefores, as well as the consequences of these differences for the *Undateables* experience, in particular, and for a more nuanced understanding of the social functions of participating in reality genres, in general, beginning with the story of Cathy.

Submission to Media Logic: Cathy’s Story

Getting on the Show

Cathy was approached by members of *The Undateables*’ production team asking her to participate in a new program about disability and dating. Introvert that she is, she felt this was an opportunity to connect with someone outside of her immediate social circles: “I had boyfriends before, but never really dates. And I thought: the crew would be like my wingmen. So even if the date was going to go wrong, you know that there is someone looking out for you.”

Conceptualizing the production as a “safe environment” also surfaces in other recollections: participants often expressed their distrust of online dating (“people might have bad intentions”) or recalled how such attempts had been unsuccessful from the outset: “When people see the pictures, they ignore me. So I hoped that the program would find me a match,” stated another participant, Bart.

Participation, however, is never framed solely as a strategic means of changing one's private life; this prospect is, in virtually all accounts, juxtaposed to a greater societal purpose. As Cathy argues, "I also wanted to open up other people's eyes. To educate people in society. Yes, I'm disabled but I still live a very normal life. People don't expect disabled people to date or have those feelings or opportunities really." For others, showing how they live normal lives is also driven by the desire to challenge common perceptions of disability as a "personal medical tragedy" (cf. Vertoot 2017). "I liked that the program also showed the positive things in life. There are many things I like to do, and my disability does not affect this," another participant, Jasper, explains, suggesting that the light-hearted tone of the show can also inspire people to apply.

At the same time, Cathy's claim that going on the show challenges societal expectations involves a certain circular logic. The show, in her reasoning, simultaneously serves as an outlet for *proving* the "dateability" of the candidates and catalyzing their *becoming* "dateable." This latter, transformative potential of joining the show is often referred to by both participants and production members as "the magic of television." "Maybe we're just capable of achieving something that online dating cannot. We can reach people in these amazing ways, or encourage contributors to push a bit their limitation," one of the producers explains. However, as Cathy's story shows, performing magic takes time.

Being in the Production

"First we did some test shots, and then they introduced me to the matchmaker. Then, it was all about waiting for a matching profile," Cathy recalls, indicating that the dating agency was strongly involved in the matching process.

This is, however, not always the case. While the agency is one of the "format points," the production also tries other ways to recruit potential dates. "People don't really use dating agencies anymore, they'd rather go on Tinder," one of the producers admits. Still, the production keeps the format. "They don't want to come across like this is a TV-arranged date, they just want to make it more authentic. Less contrived. But not everybody does go through an agency," a participant from the later seasons explains, indicating how outsourcing all the matching to "experts," at least on the screen, authorizes the interventional credibility of the program.

Finding a good match might be challenging for many reasons—including, as the above producer maintains, that some participants have "unrealistic expectations, just as *we all* have with dates." And what the candidates ultimately "get" can also work against their project of self-normalization. This is what happens with Cathy, as shown by her disappointment when finally receiving a profile:

He lived like a good four hours away from me. And it was still another disabled person. It looked like they said "you are disabled so you have to date another disabled person." Whereas I wasn't brought up like that.

In her account, this matching is experienced as a reinforcement of existing categorizations she wanted to break free from.

Just like Cathy, candidates generally move forward with their “match,” even if *normally* (i.e., either “ideally” or in “real life”) they would not go out with them. This is commonly explained by the imperative of “being open”—so frequently recited by the narrator of the show. However, while this mantra can be read as the expression of a universal truism challenging the “us”/“them” binary (i.e., people in general need to make compromises in the world of dating, cf. Richardson 2018), for candidates like Cathy, the above imperative apparently implies the opposite: she needs to lower her expectations. Others explain their accepting attitude by the fact that they have already invested much time and energy in being part of the production. Dutch participant Martijn even goes on a second date with someone he felt uncomfortable with the first time. “Maybe they were towards the end of filming and it was going to take too long to line up another date. Or they needed more time with this contributor in the program,” one of the producers recounts some possible reasons for the Dutch production sending the participant with a mild learning disability on a second date. “It is just for the broadcast,” Martijn agrees after some persuasion, testifying that the “bigger picture” often keeps candidates committed to participating, even if it does not seem to be in line with their original expectations.

Accepting one’s fate and going with the flow of the production, however, is not simply a symptom of blind submission but is often related to the participants’ uncertainty about the options they have for negotiating their idea(l)s. In such accounts, the lack of experience with dating *and* filming are often intertwined. “Looking back, I wouldn’t have gone on a blind date. But I hadn’t really done online dating before. Otherwise I would have said no to certain things,” Cathy asserts, illustrating how participants without a dating routine seldom question how things are set up by the program. Relying on what they presume to be the logic of the production sometimes prevents participants from moving forward—or moving on—at their own pace. Jasper, for example, waits for weeks to figure out if his date liked him:

I heard nothing for a month, and only a few days before the show was on TV did they say that she didn’t want another date with me. Yeah. I thought they wanted to show a second date on TV as well, so I expected them to take the initiative.

At the same time, production imperatives can also be perceived as a pragmatic reason for not getting a second date after being unsuccessful with the first one: “They were obviously on a really tight schedule so they weren’t able to find another date. I would have liked that though,” explains Andrew, highlighting that while some of the participants return to the show in later episodes, his career as an (un)dateable ends at this point. So does Cathy’s.

The Afterlife of Participation and Cathy’s Final Reflection

For Cathy, the option of follow-up did not really arise. “I think that’s because we didn’t end up going on a second date. Obviously they want to highlight the good stories, which is fine,” she asserts. This equation of “good story” with “happy ending,” and the

related assumption that if your date is unsuccessful, you are not worthy to participate anymore, is articulated by many participants as an axiom. “They cannot show everybody again, that’s logical, and they need to give the people a good feeling about the program,” explains Jasper with some resignation as to why he was not invited to take part in a revisit episode.

This reasoning is, in fact, quite in line with the producers’ considerations. One of the producers asserts,

Big series are not recommissioned unless they fit the American model . . . sort of we need a happy ending. Not that the audience is gonna leave if the contributors don’t get Cinderella at the end. The audience is not that stupid and superficial. But the more complex the story, the more it costs: it takes more time and effort to make it, which the production company doesn’t want to hear.

An inevitable consequence of these commercial considerations is the emergence of the recurring format. As another producer explains,

Once you get in series 2, you follow a model that works. Like practicing the date with your mom. That genuinely came about in the first series. But then the subsequent series have looked back like all right, the fake date with the mum. We need to do that.

Due to this repetition, however, Cathy loses interest in following the show: “It is all the same kind of story now. I’m lucky I was in the first series, so it was pretty much my story.”

Similar to Cathy, the participants are generally positive about how they come across in their episode. “It was a quite complete picture of my life except that I also play chess, but it is not really interesting for television, I think,” Jasper summarizes. For some, getting on air also involves the promise that publicity would increase their eligibility, even if their date on the show was a failure. Cathy’s reflection shows a slight disappointment in this respect: “It was mainly women who reacted, saying that the show was great. But there weren’t any men, which I thought was quite funny.” Bart becomes rather disillusioned about the entire experience: “You learn that you can date, because you have done it on TV. But then you always get excuses. They like me because they know me from TV. But the moment we meet in real life, they get scared.”

The ending of Cathy’s story—and the trajectory of other participants we have encountered so far—is certainly not an example of the “American model” described above by the producer. Trusting in the “magic of TV,” these participants go through a process that actually confirms that they are less dateable than others. And although they positively relate to their “mediated self,” the project *to frame* themselves in a way that challenges societal assumptions is often seen to fail in the end. But not all the stories are the same: some participants manage to benefit from and make the most out of their experience. While taking part in the same process, their participation signals different patterns, complexities, and contradictions. One of the “winning it all” participants was the U.K. audience’s favorite, Matt.

Appropriating Media Logic: Matt's Story

Getting on the show

Matt got on the program through a charity contacted by the production. "They get thousands of people applying, but this is a personality-based show and they are picky with who they choose. So they would rather go and find the contributors themselves," he explains, illustrating that "talent scouting" remains an important casting strategy for the production, irrespective of the volume of applications after the success of the first season. "And there is me, just coming out of film school, needing relevant contacts with a mainstream broadcaster. So this is a good starting point, I thought," he continues, revealing that connecting with the industry is more alluring to him than the prospect of benefiting from a date.

In this respect, Matt is one of those participants who are, to varying degrees, skeptical about the core business of the show. "I know that I can date. And I don't think it's ideal to meet somebody you've never met before and then have that filmed as well," Wendy, another popular participant, explains, motivating her participation with her love of being around cameras.

At the same time, Matt and Wendy are also driven, so they say, by a missionary goal. For Matt, it is less about educating society at large and more about helping others with the same condition. Matt claims,

I didn't like how they represented us in the first season. They didn't make people watching it feel like they could go out and get a date just because they saw this guy doing it. And as a person with a background in TV, I know how to make sure things go down the right way,

This suggests that even if dating is more or less a pretext in his personal project, he still expects that people with the same disability will be encouraged to put themselves out in the dating market, *provided* that the condition is represented *properly*.

This frequently reported striving for "proper representation," consequent to the dissatisfaction with *how* or *by whom* a specific condition in previous episodes had been portrayed, conveys a striking combination of individualization and essentialization: it rejects a single depiction of a specific condition, while maintaining that certain individuals are more suitable to inspire or represent *others*. Wendy's intention to raise awareness by bringing nuance into the portrayal of her condition also relates to this pattern: "many think that people with dwarfism are the same, but we're not. So I wanted to tell my story."

Given the format and the voiceover running through the episodes, the question remains to what extent this aspiration to diversify the public perception of different conditions can lead to success (cf. Cathy: "they are all the same kind of stories"). Still, Matt is quite confident that his story will come across the right way, given his knowledge about television making. His savviness also shines through in his recollection of the details of the production process.

Being in the Production

“We would first start filming mid-October, and finish in December. A lot of the time it was following Matt around, so we can cut together a montage,” Matt describes the first steps of the filming, revealing—as can be recognized also by the plural form—how consciously he *plays along*. Although often highlighting his awareness that he lacks real “creative control” in the process, he attests to the enjoyment of helping the crew with finding shots.

Playing along also involves Matt’s realization that his story cannot run without some representation of jeopardy. “When we got to the actual dating, it was all in my head,” he recalls. “They want the date to be awkward. This is factual entertainment, not a documentary. Big difference.” And although excitement about his date does not trigger any symptoms of his condition, he successfully delivers some shaking, pleasing the crew at the moment of the “money shot” (Grindstaff 2002) and conforming to the requirements of the genre: “It was cold so it looked like I was nervous. And I was very underweight then as well. So there wasn’t too much of a worry about not ticking their boxes.” Matt also recognizes that he has to reinforce the positive vibe of the program: “there was this sense to go ‘yes, she’s a lovely lady,’ just to be light on camera.”

Matt’s cooperation and his carefree reflection on the experience pay off: due to the success of his episode, he returns in the following season for a new date.

I didn’t want *Channel 4* to forget my face. And I knew how to make the show even better. I told them how to cast my date. Don’t match me with someone just because we like the same music. Find somebody that has the same goals, dreams, and aspirations.

Matt recalls how he took control over the matching protocol to increase the chances of making the date more successful—and the show less contrived. Ironically enough, Matt’s project becomes *more* than successful: with the new date, he meets the love of his life. They are followed on two dates, and their evolving relationship is followed up by the program every year. “We also had a secret date, in between recordings,” Matt reveals. “I knew they wanted to film everything, but we really needed time away from the camera.”

This episode of dodging the crew again shows Matt’s skill in playing along with the production while also setting boundaries to turn participation to his benefit. This duality of engagement and critical distance also comes to the fore in his final reflection on the program.

The Afterlife of Participation and Matt’s Final Reflection

Channel 4 is quite fuzzy cutesy, that is the kind of stuff they make. You get girls, middle-aged moms who find us cute and adorable. Then you’ve got those who want to watch simple people failing. And then there is another demographic who is so angry about the title that they have to watch it. That narrows down to their success,

Matt explains elucidating the popularity of the program, and employing an ironic tone that underlines his skepticism about the educative potential of the show. Wendy likewise calls into question whether the media text is able to destabilize the disability dichotomy simply by claiming that searching for love is a universal—and universally challenging—quest (Richardson 2018): “At the end of the day, it’s a group of people with disabilities telling their stories about how difficult dating is.”

“I never had too many problems with my segments,” Matt concludes.

But the semiotics of filmmaking is tricky. Others might not be able to pick up on all the details. When we were not on the same page, I could stop them and say “don’t even bother filming, because you are not going to get any useful footage out of it

“And in the end, I think I benefited from *The Undateables* more than anybody else. Not only do I work within the industry, I’m actually happily married.”

Matt gets what he wants: his savviness and assertiveness enable him to build reciprocity into the producer-participant relationship at critical moments of the process. However, as our final story will show, not everyone who wants to exercise agency and take a share in authoring the production manages to do so. By scrutinizing the conflicts experienced by a candidate in the Dutch version of the show, we look at the whys and wherefores of some contradictions of participation that could not be reconciled.

Contesting Media Logic: Annabel’s Story

Getting on the Show

I was interested in working in television, so I actually went into this more like a self-promotion thing than finding that prince charming. That would be a lovely bonus in the process, but I knew that I was very picky,

Annabel admits. For her, the idea of a media career relates to the positive memory of taking part in another production—a game doc that remains a recurring reference point when talking about her *Undateables* experience. “It was a travel show where I was just one of the contestants,” she stresses, noting that her disability was not in focus at that time.

In this respect, Annabel has some doubts about *The Undateables*, more specifically, about “being shown together” with people with learning disabilities. This, in her view, would risk the questioning of her own intellectual capacities as well: “when you are in a wheelchair, people tend to think that there is something wrong with you mentally as well.” Similar concerns about the homogenous perception of all the participants frequently return in different accounts. “Society likes to put disabilities in one big basket and go ‘they are disabled, and we treat them all the same,’” argues Matt, pointing out the problem with the conflation of different disabilities into the same identification (Richardson 2018, 336). Yet it appears that this seemingly diversifying claim also implicates another hierarchical (and again, essentializing) distinction for several

participants: we are not different from “normal” people in general but different from another group of disabled people.

This boundary work is manifested not only in some respondents’ concerns regarding textual representation but also in the interaction with the production members during the filming. “I sometimes had to remind the crew that they don’t have to talk to me like I’ve got a learning disability,” admitted Matt, for instance. However, while he takes such instances relatively easy (“I wouldn’t throw anyone under the bus”), for Annabel, the way she felt she was treated and conceptualized as a disabled person became a core constituent of the social experience of the production process.

Being in the Production

In the travel show I learned that they don’t have to tell me exactly what they are going to do. But with *The Undateables*, I never knew what was going to happen next. Until the very last minute I didn’t know that they scheduled a date for me,

Annabel recalls, conveying an overall sense of being kept in the dark; this is not unique to her experience. However, other participants usually reacted permissively to this *modus operandi* of the production. “They already know what they want. They do not turn up at your door with a blank piece of paper not knowing what they’re going to do,” Andrew asserts, apparently having no problem relying on a script according to which he would be portrayed. The rules of dating are seldom questioned either: they are rather seen as an inevitable part of television making. “We are not allowed to correspond until the date. If there is an introduction before, it will not be real on camera. They want natural reactions,” Wendy explains detailing the almost ontological necessity of going on a blind date, even if, under ordinary circumstances, this would not be her “first choice.” In her reading, “realness” is associated with the element of surprise and “naturalism” with the artificial situation of the blind date, plausibly illustrating how complying with the ritual norms of reality TV presumes, as Couldry (2004) argues, a “higher reality” attributed to the media.

Similarly to Annabel, Bart gets informed about a match and sent on a date the same day. However, while being annoyed at not having the chance to “prepare normally,” he attributes this procedure to the above-mentioned logic of surveillance entertainment. Annabel, in turn, conceives this arrangement as a reflection of the crew’s patronizing behavior. “They were afraid that people would cancel on me, and then I would feel disappointed,” she asserts.

I can imagine doing that to someone with Down, but I was like “guys, I’m thirty!” I understand that you can get cold feet when you sign up for something like this. Just be honest and don’t treat me like a little kid!

As the production moves forward, the uneasiness with the presumed misperception of Annabel’s capabilities results in constant struggles with the crew over what kind of story is to be told—and the climax of the clashes becomes the filming of the date.

Between shots, I asked my date, “how did you come to the show?” And he said, “well, they made a Tinder profile for you and then I responded.” And I was like “excuse me?” At that moment the director came in and said, “you should not talk about this right now.” I was done at that point. I’m more than able to put myself on Tinder. But I don’t like Tinder. It should be my choice. The next day, I sent an angry email to them that I’m withdrawing from the show.

Although the deal breaker for Annabel is the questionable method for recruiting her date, other factors also contribute to her quitting, all boiling down to her growing dissatisfaction with both the banality and the inauthenticity of the story she has become part of. While being disappointed about how “lame” the date overall was, she also feels that her behavior had constantly been policed by the crew up to that point.

I can be a little sarcastic, but whenever I made comments they would reach out and say, “Annabel, you can’t do that.” It makes you look really bad. Well, that’s me. If they want to portray me, why do they say that?

Other participants were also confronted with the fabricated nature of certain aspects of the performances requested from them; however, instances of censorship—including what they would *normally* do and how they would *normally* act—are generally accepted in the name of “what looks good on TV.” “My ADD affects me more than my dwarfism, but they wanted to film something physical here”—Wendy admits, slightly underplaying in this way her initial aspiration to tell *her* story. Next to (re)framing the participants’ condition as an obstacle in their love life, participants are sometimes also asked to be positive and optimistic when reflecting on their dating experience. “First I said that it’s not a match, but [the producers said] it is not a good line in the whole program. So I rephrased to sound more positive,” a Dutch participant recalls noting how he had to conform to the intended light-hearted tone of the program—and what Matt has intuitively called “being light on the camera.”

In fact, Annabel also intends to be “light” on the camera, but she performs her easy-goingness through the articulations of her low expectations. “I’m pretty happy the way that I am right now, so if you can’t find a match it’s also fine by me,” she recurrently stresses to the producers. Yet this attitude not only diminishes the stakes around which the program is built but also calls into question the interventional power of the show. In this respect, the conflicts between Annabel and the production are largely based on the incompatibility of what she wants to convey about her “genuine self” and what is expected from her as a mediator of the show’s “universal message,” namely, the ideal state of *not* being single; the former apparently deconstructs the latter.

The Afterlife of Participation and Annabel’s Final Reflection

After the failed date, Annabel does not return for the follow-up interviews. Nevertheless, her episode is broadcast: she had previously consented to the use of already recorded footage. “In the end, I was pleasantly surprised. And I am really proud of my quotes,

they are pretty damn Annabel”—she enthused when talking about her segments. Still, although the end product does not mirror her negative experiences behind the scenes, Annabel retrospectively admits that *The Undateables* was probably not the best program to “date” with. “Maybe it’s my fault because I went in with a certain feeling,” she ponders.

With the travel documentary, they kept telling me, “oh you are so cool” and I thought The Undateables would be the same. But they were looking for someone who is hopelessly devoted to finding love, and that’s not me. A friend of mine is participating in the upcoming season. She’s really insecure and feels like this is a once in a lifetime opportunity. They are filming with a new crew now. I am hoping they will be good to her.

In 2014, there was a rumor circulating in Dutch news media that one of the Dutch *Undateables* participants had been sent on a date with a professional actor. Although the production refuted the accusations, Annabel’s reporting on the fake Tinder profile suggests that the recruitment strategies of the Dutch adaptation have not always been entirely transparent. Although the lack of such accounts in the original version again underlines the importance of not treating the productions as one undifferentiated whole, our interest, at least in the context of this article, lies less in the ethical implications of production practices than in the reasons why Annabel’s participation became so difficult relative to other (Dutch) participants’ experiences.

Contrary to those applying with romantic hopes, Annabel intended to use the show as a springboard to her future career in the media—just like Matt. However, while Matt knew what it took to meet his goal, Annabel was not willing—or able—to play according to the rules of the game. Rather, she kept expecting *validation* from her participation: she wanted to be recognized as a unique individual (just like in the travel show), to have her personal take on the subject matter acknowledged and accurately portrayed (as it should be in a documentary), and overall, to have her account of her abilities (apparently so central to her identity) listened to and valued.

It seems that Annabel picked the wrong show for such aspirations. Still, one wonders why her voice was so ineffective in the production process, considering that participating in this dating show is seemingly being designed and destined not only to make matches but also to tell stories. This leads us to our conclusion and a more general discussion of possibilities and obstacles with regard to participants’ voices being heard in *The Undateables* and beyond.

Conclusion

On some level, *The Undateables* was meant to be an easy watch. It repeats things every time. And that’s also why there is that narration over that is criticized for being quite patronizing. . . . In terms of how that takes away from the contributor’s voice . . . I suppose in some respects it does. But that is where the talent of a good filmmaker comes into play. Where you tell someone’s story through the sequences you film with them in a way that you get to see this whole personality come through in a very simple way. It’s kind of deconstructing a person and putting them back together. (Producer, *The Undateables*)

The procedure followed for writing this article is not that different from the “deconstructive method” described by the producer: we “cast” participants whose motivations and experiences are distinct yet typical to our pool of respondents, and highlighted aspects of their experience by retelling (“editing”) parts of their testimonies. Yet the constructs resulted from the seemingly similar method intended to serve a different end: we aimed at complicating the story of what it means to be a television participant, and to capture how and to what extent different experiences in this regard—commonly overlooked by theoretizations based on textual approaches to reality television participation—reflect the transformative potential of the program.

Consequently, we have followed three routes into and through the production of *The Undateables*. As we have seen, participants got on board with different agendas, each resulting in quite different trajectories. Cathy’s story showed that those applying without prior dating experience and in the hope of finding a match are likely to be disappointed in the end: the participation ultimately reinforces their difference (also vis-à-vis less introverted and more popular participants), suggesting that they are indeed less “dateable” than others. Matt’s story testified that the more you understand the role you are expected to perform as a participant, the more you can influence the production to serve your own interests (cf. also Syvertsen 2001, 335). Finally, Annabel’s story revealed how conflicted participation becomes when the genre and the terms of negotiating the participant’s reality versus the “higher reality of the media” (Couldry 2004) are read differently by the parties involved.

Despite the differences resulting from the participants’ level of savviness or their actual take on dating, all three stories shared the element of motivating participation with the purpose of conveying an educative or inspiring message about the disability experience. This is typically articulated through the positioning of the self as *essentially* similar and/or different from other (groups of) people. For Cathy, the mediated performance of dating serves as evidence and a lesson for society that she is not different from the nondisabled. For Matt, the societal drive is a combination of encouraging others to go on dates and underlining the diversity of people living with the same condition. In Annabel’s case, participation can be read as a series of attempts to demonstrate her normalcy through distancing herself from people with learning disabilities.

Nevertheless, the desire to (self-)emancipate through taking part in the program is not without contradictions. To be recognized *as equals*, the participants enter into a process in which they ultimately take on a variety of *subjugated* positions: they adhere to staged scenarios and conceal parts of their stories to conform to normative dating scripts and the production’s vision about what looks good on TV, including their portrayal as being dependent on an agency to get a date and, thus, risking the reproduction of a victimized image of people living with disabilities. In this respect, the “extraordinary” dating situations presented in the program indeed reinforce the resemblance to those *liminoid* rituals where the transgression of social boundaries ultimately serves the reinforcement of the *status quo* outside of the temporal and authorized setting of the performances (cf. Boross and Reijnders 2015). As a result, the educative impact of the show is commonly called into question even by those participants who fully embraced it at the beginning of their trajectory.

A more general explanation of why the show is experienced as failing at this premise lies in the apparent tension between the production's effort to showcase its power to *order* social reality (i.e., successfully dealing with the participants' socially liminoid status of being single and disabled, cf. Murphy et al. 1988) and the fact that this ordering work is to be accomplished not only on a largely unpredictable terrain but also amid a variety of mundane production process pressures. Consequently, the makers' investment in the participants' story increasingly turns into reliance on and repetition of format points, derived from previously successful moments. Returning to the interplay between text and practice discussed in our framework, it is this aforementioned process where the ritual logic of media *production* and *representation* converge: the more the actions and the self-presentations of the participants are organized by format points, the more normative and predictable the terms on which the program speaks about dating and disability become.

If we assert that the "transcendent" promise of "do good television" is the refiguration of how particular groups of people are rendered socially legible to others (Marvin 2013), the question the above process ultimately raises is whether emancipation can be achieved by molding distinct voices into a single story. As the testimonies of the participants suggest, *The Undateables* in this respect remains more the story of normalization than the naturalization of difference (i.e., making difference seem natural): a story being recurrently told through the strategic selection of situations, characters, and reactions that are presumed to be in line with audience expectations, while leaving certain personalities, accounts, and choices undocumented.

Considering recent trends in reality programming where the promise of individual transformation has increasingly been tied to rhetorics of social justice (Weber 2014), the selective logic outlined above exemplifies the production of what one could call the *myth of participation*, referring to how principles of participatory inclusiveness and diversity are increasingly utilized by traditional media institutions to reinforce their perception as privileged sites of value production (Couldry 2003), while continuing to restrict access to those who are unable (or unwilling) to conform to normative and limiting scripts.

Nevertheless, the program makers seem to be aware of the above tensions between normalization and the valuation of difference; this also explains why "diversity," as seen in our "Introduction," becomes the key trope in justifying why applicants must be turned down by the production. It is a question for further research how and whether this tension can be resolved at all when "ordinary people" become the representatives of a collective in the media, and what kind of interplay between dispositions, logistics, and other factors of the production processes result in participatory practices that are, not infrequently, implemented in ways that "turn out to be inconsistent with their purpose" (Kelty 2017). In our view, this means moving beyond mere economic explanations and striving for complex stories and holistic accounts of participant-production staff interactions (Mayer 2016), exploring further how the possibilities of doing justice to participation (and participants) are constructed, interpreted, and negotiated vis-à-vis the educational and entertainment value of television making.

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Notes

1. For an overview of the historical changes in disability representation, see, for example, Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick (2017) and Ellis (2016).
2. *The Undateables’ openness to such oppositional* interpretations is well illustrated by Richardson’s analysis, as he demonstrates how the very same sequences can be read *both* as ironic attacks against prejudice and as revivals of archaic freak show conventions—concluding that this duality makes the show exceptionally problematic to critique via textual analysis (Richardson 2018).
3. Data collection took place between March and July 2016. Recruitment started with identifying and contacting participants in the British and the Dutch versions of the show via social media ($n = 33$). After several follow-ups resulting in four positive responses, the project continued with snowball sampling. Ultimately, we conducted a total of eleven, approximately ninety-minute interviews (including five British and four Dutch participants, and two crew members from the British version). Although Dutch production members refused to participate in this study, the sample provided a good reflection of the “Undateables population” in terms of demographics and the seasons in which the participants appeared, and potential differences between the two production contexts were taken into consideration when analyzing the participants’ responses (and will be indicated where relevant).
4. To safeguard the anonymity of the respondents, pseudonyms are used throughout this paper. The crew members quoted are referred to as “producers.”

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