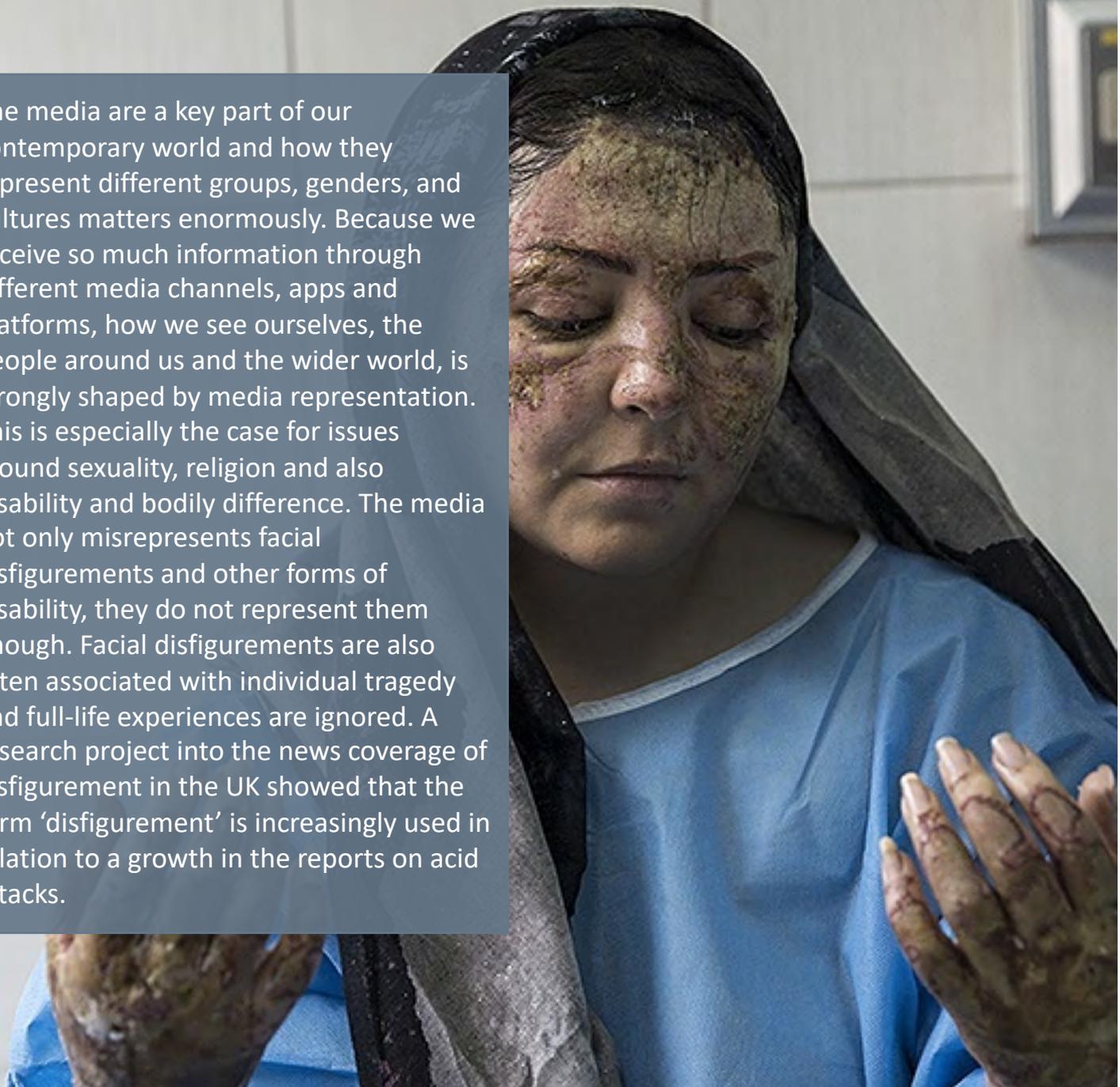


ACID ATTACKS AND THE DAMAGE OF MEDIA REPRESENTATION

The media are a key part of our contemporary world and how they represent different groups, genders, and cultures matters enormously. Because we receive so much information through different media channels, apps and platforms, how we see ourselves, the people around us and the wider world, is strongly shaped by media representation. This is especially the case for issues around sexuality, religion and also disability and bodily difference. The media not only misrepresents facial disfigurements and other forms of disability, they do not represent them enough. Facial disfigurements are also often associated with individual tragedy and full-life experiences are ignored. A research project into the news coverage of disfigurement in the UK showed that the term 'disfigurement' is increasingly used in relation to a growth in the reports on acid attacks.



KEY IDEAS

In recent years, facial disfigurement has been increasingly covered by UK tabloid newspapers in relation to acid attacks. Those stories tend to focus on the victim of the acid attacks, who are often shown to be female. In reality, men are also victims of acid attacks. The coverage focuses on describing the acid attacks and their aftermath in detail. These stories are often covered in a sensational way focusing on the altered appearance of the person subjected to the corrosive power of the acid and neglecting the deeper social problems connected to appearance-related attacks. While acid attacks are often the result of violence against women, there is no mention of the wider aspects that surround violence against women, such as patriarchy, sexism, and stereotypical ways of behaviour that are expected of women. Instead, for example, women are made to feel individually responsible for having suffered an acid attack because they did not prevent the violence which occurred in an abusive relationship (Johanssen and Garrisi 2018). This type of coverage reinforces the idea that disfigurement is a unique condition linked to exceptional circumstances while the statistics about the occurrence of disfigurement show the contrary (Garrisi, Janciute and Johanssen, 2018). More than 500,000 people in the UK have facial disfigurements and more than 1 million have significant disfigurements to their face and body. It is important that they are visible and adequately represented in the media.

Severe facial disfigurement is considered a disability under the Equality Act 2010.

Media representations of facial disfigurements needs to change from being sensationalist and stereotypical to focus on all aspects of the lived experiences of individuals with facial disfigurements. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram, can help in this context. They may enable individuals with visible differences to represent themselves in their own way and to challenge stereotypes (Garrisi and Johanssen 2018).

ACTIVITIES

1. Visit the blog of Katie Meehan, a social media influencer with a facial condition called Cystic Hygroma: <http://katiemeehan.co.uk/>. Does her blog reinforce or debunk stereotypes surrounding facial difference?
2. Read the stories of Prisha or Sam. How could their story be developed in a film script challenging common stereotypes about appearance?
 - i. Prisha's story
<https://www.changingfaces.org.uk/prishas-story>
 - ii. Sam's story
<https://www.changingfaces.org.uk/sam>
3. Go to changingfaces.org.uk and use one of the stories of a person with a facial disfigurement whose story has been also covered by the mainstream press. What are the main differences between the self-representation on the blog and representation of disfigurement in the mainstream media?
4. Pitch an idea for a campaign to promote bodily diversity in the media.
 - i. What would your main message be in one sentence?
 - ii. Which image would you use for the campaign (choose one)?

KEY READINGS

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