



SPOTLIGHT ON:

# Deaf Representation

Representation of the Deaf community in media and entertainment—and why it matters for Deaf audiences



In February 2022, *CODA* made history by becoming the first movie featuring a predominantly Deaf cast to win the Academy Award for Best Picture. And Troy Kotsur, one of the film’s stars, became only the second Deaf performer to be nominated for (and win) an Oscar. At the time, this moment was heralded as a landmark in the fight for greater representation for the Deaf community.

While issues of diversity and inclusion within the entertainment industry have been hotly debated in recent years by the entertainment press and other media outlets, disabled people have often found themselves left out of these conversations. Disabled communities have rarely been given the opportunity to tell their stories to mainstream audiences or see themselves represented on screen; and for those at the intersection of disability and other marginalized identities, such as disabled women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ people, the lack of representation is even starker.

Make no mistake, Deaf creatives were out there long before *CODA*. But many hoped that the success of the film—and other recent high-profile projects featuring Deaf cast members—would usher in a sea-change within the industry, leading to renewed interest in stories about Deaf characters among both audiences and media executives. And maybe, in the long run, that it would help to create space for other groups within the disabled community to similarly push for better media representation.

But while this recent wave of content has certainly led to increased exposure for many Deaf performers and creatives, it’s also underscored just how far we have left to go before Deaf audiences can see the true diversity of the Deaf experience reflected in the media they consume.

So, this report sets out to examine the current state of Deaf representation—and what needs to be done to build on the progress made in recent years towards a more diverse and more inclusive media landscape.

“There are so many networks, streaming services, and audiences willing to seek out content; catering to the lowest common denominator is not how this industry works anymore. That has been demonstrated by movies about people of different races and cultures, it just hasn’t extended to the disabled community yet.”

**MICHAEL EPSTEIN**  
Graphic Designer

“It’s not just an issue of hearing and Deaf, but an intersectional issue. There’s all of these subcultures and diversity within Deaf culture that need to be highlighted.”

**HAROLD FOXX**  
Comedian, Actor, Writer, and Producer

## IN THIS REPORT, YOU’LL FIND...

- |   |  |   |   |   |  |
|---|--|---|---|---|--|
| 1 | How media representation of the Deaf community has changed in recent years | 2 | What portrayals and storylines are most common, and most overlooked, in Deaf content          | 3 | The impact of Deaf representation in media on hearing and Deaf consumers     |
| 4 | The mediums through which consumers are seeing Deaf content today          | 5 | The role of social media and other technologies in creating new opportunities for Deaf talent | 6 | The major accessibility issues still faced by Deaf talent and Deaf audiences |

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- While Deaf audiences acknowledge the progress that has been made over the past few years, they still feel that **more needs to be done to improve the state of Deaf representation**—especially when it comes to representations in mediums other than film and TV.
- Although there may be more content about Deaf characters than there used to be, **this content fails to adequately capture the diversity of the Deaf community**. In particular, Deaf and hearing audiences are rarely exposed to content featuring Deaf people of color, Deaf LGBTQ+ people, and Deaf people who use tools other than ASL to communicate. And too often, the content that does exist leans heavily into overplayed tropes that perpetuate negative stereotypes about the community.
- To address these challenges, both on-screen and behind-the-scenes roles will need to become more accessible to Deaf talent. This can only be achieved if media companies are willing to think outside the box, and **challenge some long-held assumptions about the structure of the industry** and the pathways available to new talent.



## SECTION 1

# Representation Today

What does the current landscape of Deaf representation in media look like? And what impact does it have on audiences?

“

*A big shift occurred after #OscarsSoWhite. Big companies started to reach out to Deaf creatives like me asking how to include Deaf people, how to make the Deaf experience more positive, how to write our stories properly.”*

**JULES DAMERON**  
Director, Writer, and Actor

“

*I’ve noticed that people generally learn about Deaf people by what they see on screen. Before CODA, before some other shows, people would usually assume that if you’re Deaf, that means you read lips, you can use sign language, you cannot hear a scream... It took me a long time to realize that people think and act in those ways because of what they’ve seen on TV.”*

**JESSICA MARIE FLORES**  
Comedian, Writer, and Online Creator

“

*I think CODA opened a lot of eyes. Deaf people have been here all along; we’ve got Deaf actors, Deaf creators. But for mainstream audiences to see such a saturation of Deaf people on the screen was powerful.”*

**HAROLD FOXX**  
Comedian, Actor, Writer, and Producer

“

*I was that Deaf kid. I’m from a small town in Minnesota; I was the only Deaf person I knew. So, when Marlee Matlin won the Oscar, when she made it in Hollywood at that high of a level, it lit a fire in me. It meant that I could do it, too.”*

**DANIEL DURANT**  
Actor

# Over the past few years, there's been renewed interest in bringing Deaf stories to the screen

Recently, it feels like Hollywood has been paying more attention to the Deaf community than ever before. Since 2019, there have been a number of high-profile films featuring—and, in many cases, centered around—Deaf characters, from critically acclaimed Oscar-winners like *Sound of Metal* to big-budget blockbusters such as Marvel's *Eternals*. At the same time, Deaf characters also seem to have been popping up more frequently on the small screen, as hit shows like *Only Murders in the Building* and *You* have introduced Deaf actors to their casts and featured them in prominent storylines.

As a result of this trend, 79% of Deaf consumers believe that there's more representation of their community in TV and film now than there was a year ago—with 45% saying that Deaf representation has improved “a lot” over that time period. And it's clear that this content is making its way to Deaf and hearing audiences alike: **43% of hearing consumers and 56% of Deaf consumers report that they've watched at least one piece of media featuring a Deaf character within the past 6 months.**



## Q: DO YOU THINK DEAF REPRESENTATION IN TV AND FILM HAS IMPROVED OVER THE PAST YEAR?



“There seems to be a growing readiness to include marginalized groups— one that feels lasting.”

**JULES DAMERON**

Director, Writer, and Actor

“CODA was one Deaf community. Oftentimes there's this monolithic understanding of the Deaf community, which ends up being whitewashed. But there are other Deaf communities whose stories often go untold.”

**HAROLD FOXX**

Comedian, Actor, Writer, and Producer

“Right now, Deaf content is hot. Its popularity trends in and out, but there is also a more general, growing movement toward diversity in entertainment. People are demanding more diverse stories and actors. I think our community can ride that demand towards more opportunities.”

**JILL BRADBURY**

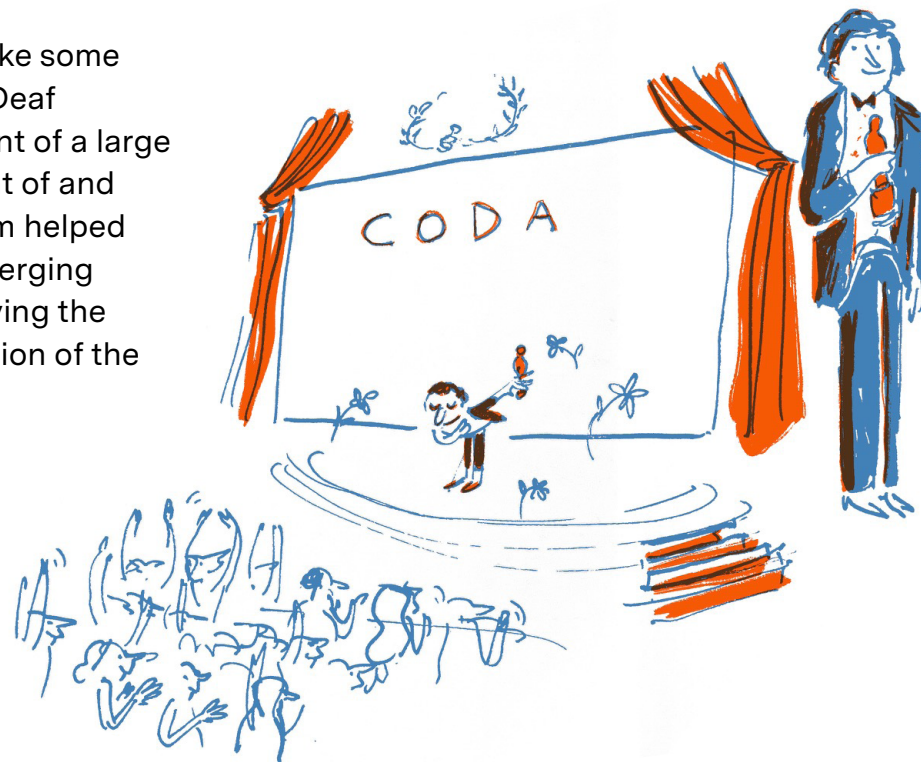
Theater Department Chair at National Technical Institute for the Deaf

Of the recent examples of Deaf representation in TV and film, arguably none of them attracted quite as much attention as *CODA*. On release in 2021, The Hollywood Reporter hailed it as a “watershed moment” for Deaf representation.<sup>1</sup> Later, the film went on to win 3 awards at the 2022 Oscars, including Best Picture, cementing its status as a major cinematic milestone.

**66%** of Deaf consumers agree that the success of *CODA* at the Academy Awards has **increased public interest** in stories about the Deaf community.

*CODA* was also notable because—unlike some previous high-profile films about the Deaf community—it featured the involvement of a large number of Deaf creatives, both in front of and behind the camera. As a result, the film helped grow the platforms of a number of emerging and established artists, potentially laying the groundwork for the continued expansion of the industry’s pool of Deaf talent.

And all of this positive movement has taken place against the backdrop of a much larger conversation within Hollywood about diversity and representation. Movements like Time’s Up—founded in the wake of the Harvey Weinstein scandal in 2017—and #OscarsSoWhite have drawn new attention to issues of systemic discrimination within the industry. Several of the Deaf creatives interviewed for this research suggested that such movements have helped to create space and draw attention to similar campaigns within the Deaf community.



### THE MOST RECOGNIZABLE DEAF ACTORS

25% of Americans can name at least one Deaf performer. Overwhelmingly, Marlee Matlin is the most recognizable Deaf performer currently working in the country; 67% of those consumers cited her as the first name that came to mind when thinking about Deaf stars.

However, many of the other names on this list are people who landed their break-out role within the past few years. Right now, we’re seeing the emergence of a new wave of Deaf performers, who are helping to spearhead the push for greater representation and more authentic Deaf stories.

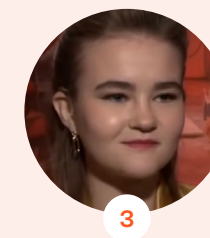
#### Q: WHEN THINKING ABOUT DEAF ACTORS, WHO’S THE FIRST PERSON WHO COMES TO MIND?



Marlee Matlin



Lauren Ridloff



Millicent Simmonds



Nyle DiMarco



Sean Berdy



Katie Leclerc



Troy Kotsur



Daniel Durant



James Caverly



Lou Ferrigno

<sup>1</sup> Mia Galuppo, “We’re Not Deaf Actors — We’re Actors, Period”: “CODA”’s Watershed Moment in Representation, The Hollywood Reporter, August 4, 2021

Images: IMDB (Daniel Durant, James Caverly)

# Despite this growth in interest, Deaf people remain one of the least represented groups in media



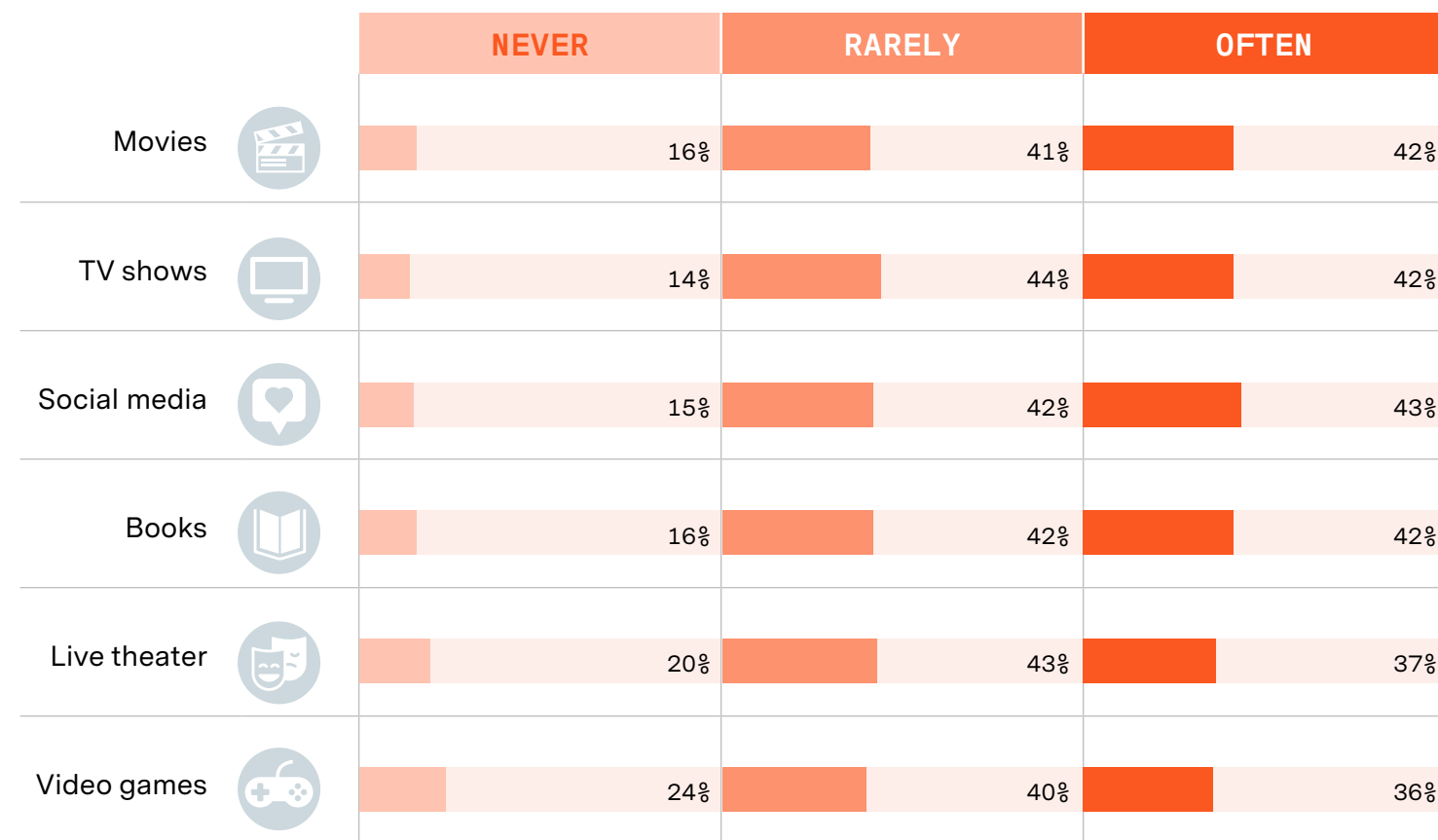
Even when compared to other underrepresented groups, Deaf representation in fiction still lags behind. Almost half of consumers (including 47% of Deaf consumers) say that the Deaf community is one of the minority groups they are *least* exposed to in the media they consume. This matters not just because it means there are fewer opportunities out there for Deaf performers, but also because it places an artificial limit on the breadth and diversity of Deaf stories that can be told.

However, this recent progress needs to be looked at in the proper context. Despite the positive direction of travel, overall levels of Deaf representation in media remain extremely low—and certainly far below the level they would need to be at for Deaf audiences to feel that their stories and their communities are authentically reflected back to them in the media they consume. **More than half of Deaf consumers say they “rarely” or “never” see their identities represented in film and TV;** and even greater numbers say the same about other media such as books, live theater, and video games.

**In the US, 14% of Deaf consumers, and 16% of hearing consumers, say that they’ve never watched a single piece of media that featured a Deaf character.** In other media markets, the problem is even starker: 29% of Deaf Canadians and 26% of Deaf Australians, for example, have never seen a Deaf character represented on screen or on stage. So, despite the recent uptick in content about this community, there’s a significant minority of Deaf consumers out there who have never had the opportunity to see this aspect of their identities in the media they consume.

**Q: HOW OFTEN DO YOU FEEL YOUR PERSONAL IDENTITY IS REFLECTED IN...**

*Deaf consumers, excluding those who do not consume these types of media*

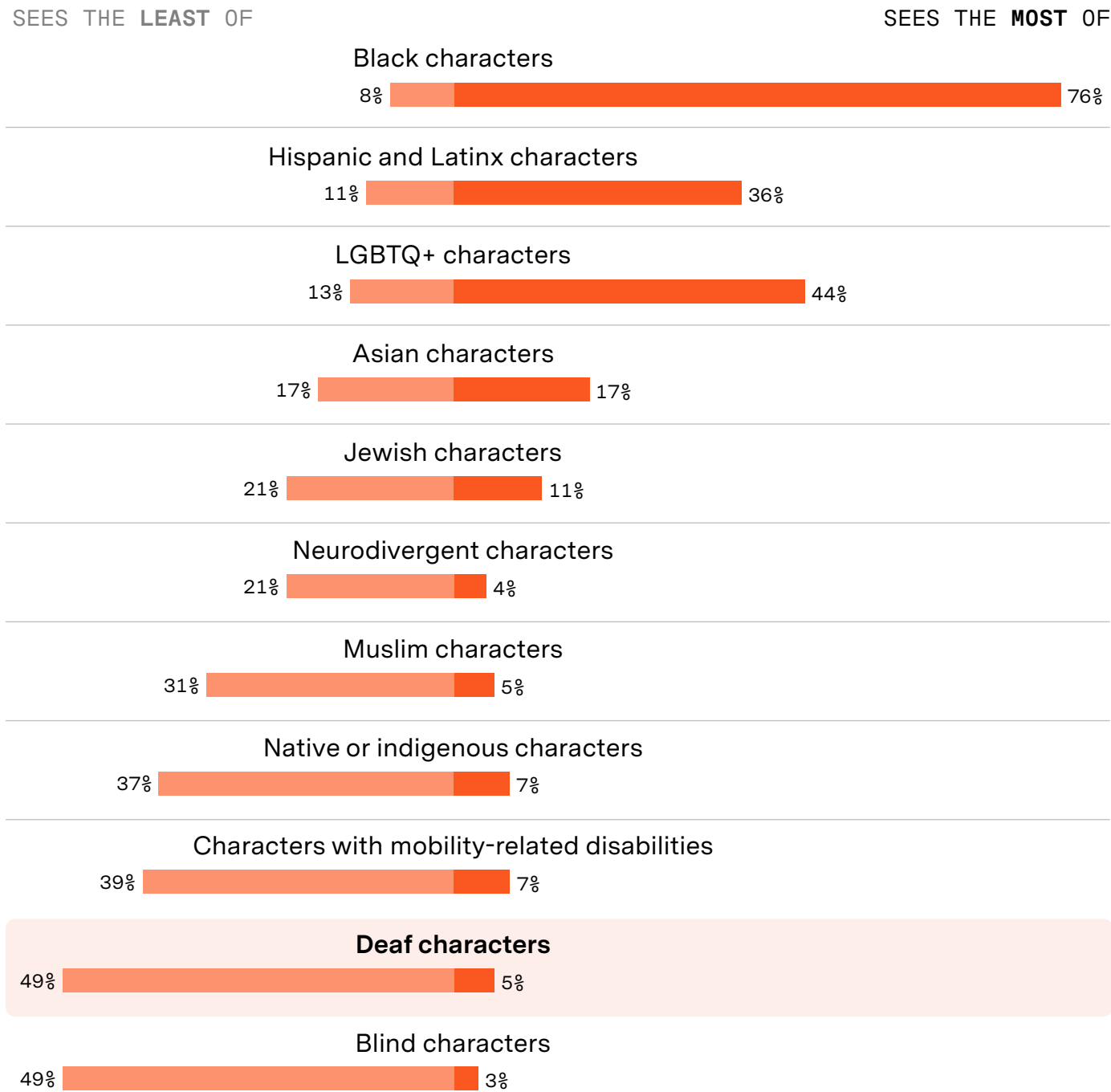


The Deaf community is incredibly diverse, and a person’s experience of deafness is bound to be shaped by a huge range of factors—including the age at which they became deaf, whether they have Deaf family members, whether they can use sign language, their sexuality, their race, and a whole host of other variables. There’s a myriad of stories within the Deaf community—and until there’s a sufficient volume of content that features Deaf characters, many of those stories will remain untold, and a certain percentage of the Deaf audience will continue to lack the opportunity to see their identities represented in film, TV, or other forms of media.

*“ There are not enough BIPOC Deaf people on screen...there aren’t Black Deaf stories, queer Deaf stories. That’s why I set up an acting school for BIPOC Deaf people. A lot of mainstream schools or workshops aren’t able to fully empower or recognize those groups of people.*

**JADE BRYAN**  
Filmmaker, Founder of Deaf Talent Media & Entertainment Consulting

**Q: OF THE FOLLOWING TYPES OF CHARACTERS, WHICH 3 DO YOU SEE MOST OFTEN IN MEDIA AND WHICH 3 DO YOU SEE THE LEAST OF??<sup>2</sup>**



While many of the Deaf creatives interviewed for this study acknowledged that there's now more on-screen Deaf representation than there used to be, they still felt that much more needs to be done before on-screen portrayals are truly reflective of the size and diversity of the Deaf community. Estimates suggest that around 1 in 20 people experience some form of hearing loss<sup>3</sup>—meaning that the Deaf community is of comparable size to other minority groups that are much better represented in contemporary media.

Moreover, some of these industry insiders expressed the fear that Hollywood's current interest in Deaf stories might simply be the

latest wave of a cyclical trend. They pointed out that there was a similar boom in content featuring Deaf characters in the late 1980s after the box office success of *Children of a Lesser God*; a boom which ultimately petered out with few long-term impacts.

To avoid repeating the same pattern, they argued, the entertainment industry will need to make larger, structural changes. The current momentum around Deaf representation can only be maintained if there are more people from the Deaf community in key decision-making roles across the length and breadth of the industry.

2. US hearing consumers

3. Sara Novic, *Don't Fear a Deafier Planet*, The New York Times, October 10, 2022

# Improving Deaf representation in media has the power to create systemic change for the Deaf community

At the moment, it's hard to say exactly what this current crop of content featuring Deaf characters means for the long-term future of Deaf representation. One thing, however, is clear: if we do see a rise in the number of stories about the Deaf community, that can only be a good thing for Deaf and hearing audiences alike.

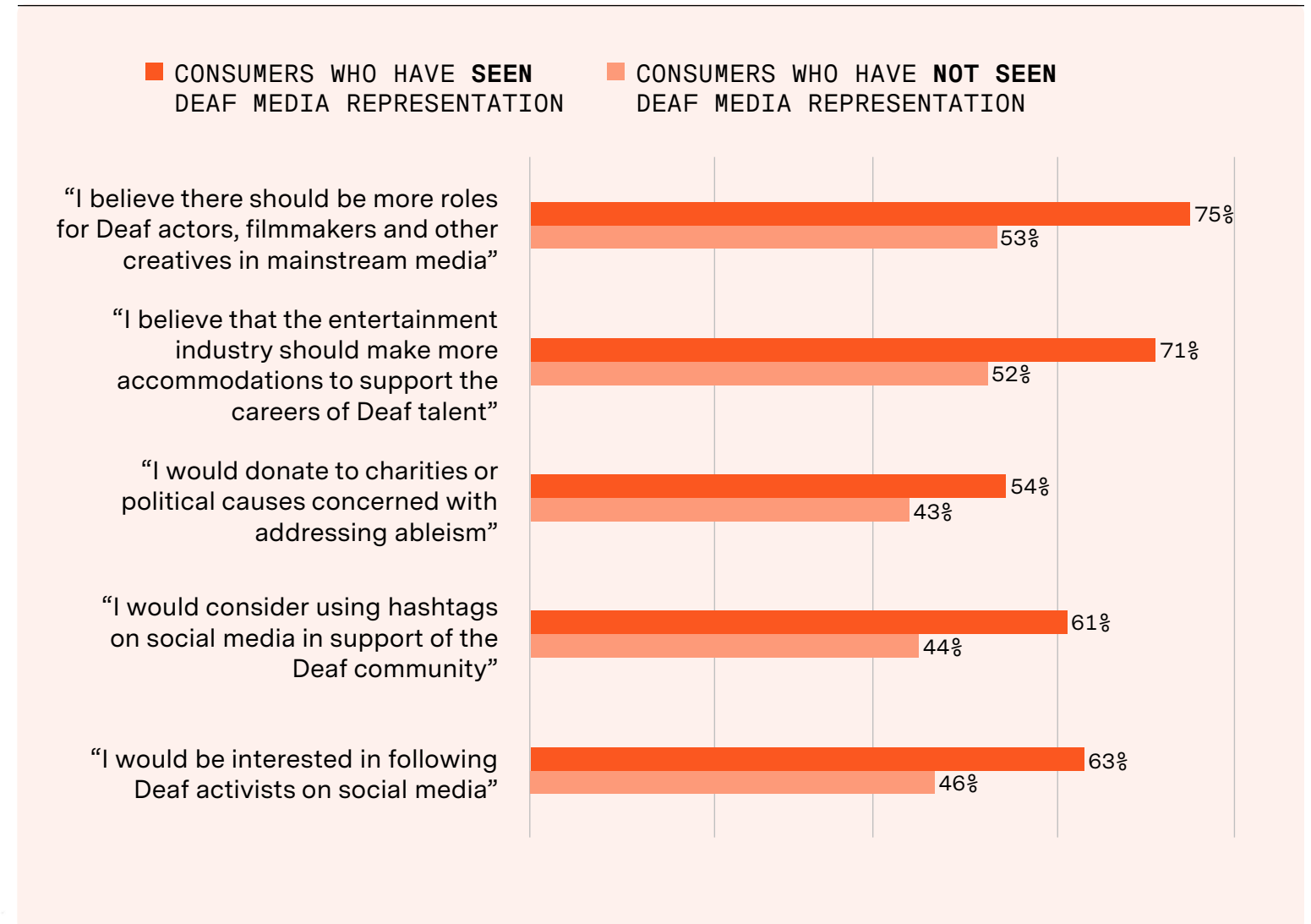
It's only human to want to see our identities represented in the media we consume. Over half (57%) of consumers say that they're more likely to watch a piece of content if it features "characters like me." But in the case of the Deaf community in particular, portrayals in media and entertainment can also have a major impact in shaping the way that consumers think about and relate to deafness and Deaf people.

Half of consumers in the US interact with a Deaf person, on average, less than once a month—and 31% say that they "never" or "almost never" come into contact with Deaf people. So it's easy to see why media portrayals of Deaf characters would play a large role in shaping public perceptions.

**76%** of Deaf people believe that the way their community is portrayed in fiction influences how they are **perceived in the real world.**



## ATTITUDES OF US HEARING CONSUMERS TOWARDS THE DEAF COMMUNITY





This influence can be both positive and negative. On the one hand, common storytelling tropes about deafness can serve to reinforce potentially harmful stereotypes; but on the other, portrayals of Deaf characters can also help raise awareness of the issues affecting this community and generate a sense of empathy among hearing audiences.

Indeed, the data suggest that exposure to content about Deaf characters has a significant and measurable impact on consumers' attitudes and beliefs. Hearing consumers who have watched media featuring Deaf characters are more likely to donate both their time and money to campaigns in support of the Deaf community; they're more open to following Deaf activists on social media; and they're more cognizant of

the challenges facing Deaf creatives within the entertainment industry.

Of course, correlation doesn't always imply causation. It's possible that some of this difference can be attributed to the fact that more cosmopolitan consumers are also the ones most likely to seek out and watch content featuring Deaf characters. But even for viewers who already have some level of understanding of issues affecting the Deaf community, seeing media about Deaf characters can prompt them to further educate themselves. **Over a third of consumers who've seen fictional portrayals of deafness, for example, say that the experience has caused them to look up information about sign language or about the Deaf community.**

For Deaf people, fictional portrayals of deafness can play a vital role in fostering a sense of community and making them feel connected to Deaf culture. The vast majority—some estimates suggest over 90%<sup>5</sup>—of deaf children are born to hearing parents. This means that many of these children (especially those who end up attending mainstream schools) grow up without regularly interacting with other members of their own community. **And 1 in 10 Deaf adults say that they “never” or “almost never” come into contact with other Deaf people.**

So, for a significant number of Deaf people, exposure to Deaf characters in media is a major part of what connects them to the wider Deaf community and Deaf culture. And for children learning ASL or other forms of sign language, seeing those languages on TV can help to reinforce key language skills, just as hearing children benefit from greater exposure to spoken languages.

Ultimately, for Deaf audiences, media representation isn't just about seeing their own identity in the stories they consume; it's something that can have very tangible effects on their community and the way that community is treated by others.

**Q: WHAT ACTIONS HAVE YOU TAKEN AFTER WATCHING A PIECE OF MEDIA THAT FEATURED A DEAF CHARACTER?<sup>4</sup>**



*“ I grew up in a hearing family, being the only Deaf person I knew. For a very long time, I did not see anyone like me in the media anywhere. I learned ASL very late in my life, around the same time that Switched At Birth was on TV. It was the first and only show I could find that had ASL in it and could help me learn.”*

**JESSICA MARIE FLORES**  
Comedian, Writer, and Online Creator

*“ The more that hearing people understand the Deaf community, the better they can adapt to us. The more exposure that hearing people have to Deaf people, the more receptive they'll be to including Deaf people more broadly—especially as it relates to employment.”*

**ERIK NORDLOF**  
Founder of DC Deaf Moviegoers and Allies

<sup>4</sup> US hearing consumers  
<sup>5</sup> *Right from the Start*, National Deaf Children's Society, May 2016



## SECTION 2

# Challenges

**What are the ways in which the entertainment industry needs to do better when it comes to Deaf representation?**

“

*We tend to generalize ‘the Deaf community;’ we act like the Deaf experience is one idea or one silo. That’s not how it works.”*

ALEXANDRIA WAILES

Choreographer, Performer,  
and ASL Director

“

*There are two different elements of accessibility. One, the content itself has to be relatable to Deaf people. Which is complicated, because you have to connect with and understand Deaf culture in order to accomplish that. The other element of accessibility is the media needs to be fully captioned.”*

JULES DAMERON

Director, Writer, and Actor

“

*There’s this culture in Hollywood of ‘that’s just the way it is.’ You have to do the entry-level things in order to get to the next thing. That creates so many barriers to entry for so many people—but particularly for Deaf people, who don’t have as much access to education and technical skills, and for whom those entry-level roles may not be accessible.”*

MICHAEL EPSTEIN

Graphic Designer

“

*We don’t have the luxury to just show up to an event and learn about whatever is taking place; nor can I just show up somewhere to network because it can be really overwhelming if you don’t have the resources you need to be able to communicate both ways. It takes a lot of advocating for yourself, which can be really burdensome.”*

JESSICA MARIE FLORES

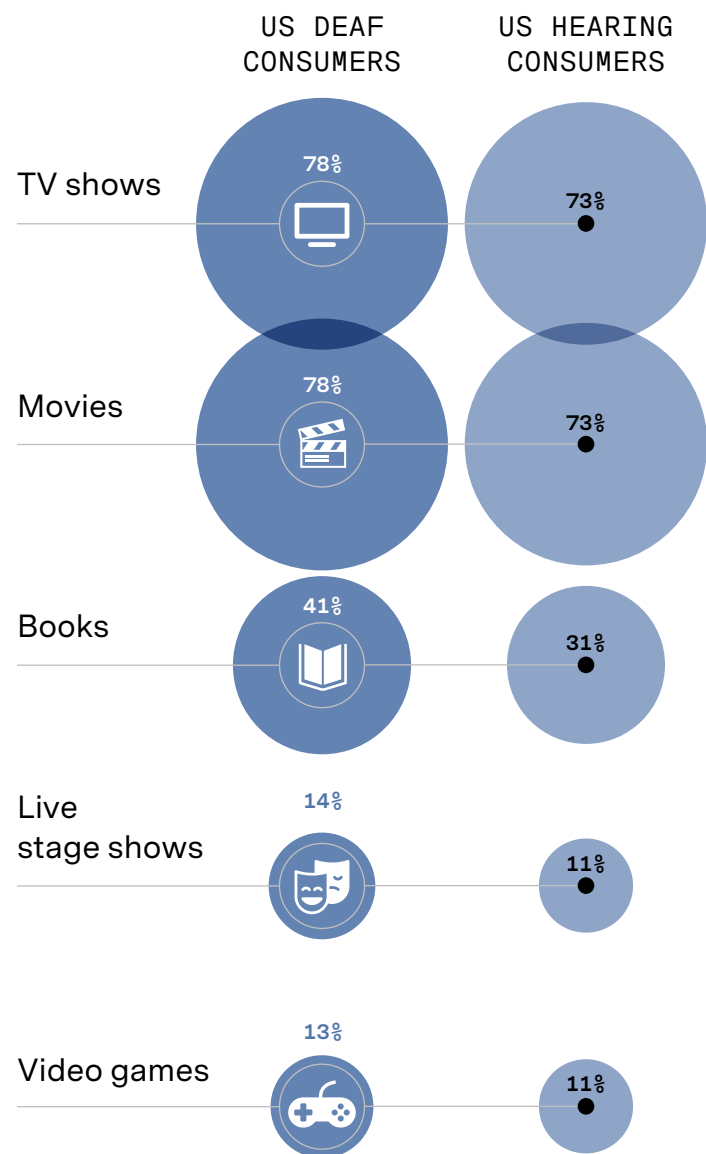
Comedian, Writer, and Online Creator

# Stories about Deaf people are still limited to certain genres and mediums

While most consumers, Deaf and hearing alike, recognize that there has been something of a boom recently in media portrayals of the Deaf community, it's clear that the impacts of these trends have not been felt equally everywhere.

Deaf people may be starting to see themselves represented in TV and film—but in other mediums, it's a different story altogether. **Fewer than half of Deaf consumers in the US, for example, have ever read a book that featured a Deaf character, and fewer than 1 in 6 have ever attended a live stage show featuring Deaf characters or Deaf performers.**

## % OF CONSUMERS THAT HAVE SEEN DEAF CHARACTERS REPRESENTED IN MEDIA



And in gaming, Deaf representation is even harder to come by; only 13% of Deaf consumers and 11% of hearing consumers can recall playing a video game that featured a portrayal of deafness. There are, however, a few recent examples of games that have attempted to buck this trend, including 2018's *The Quiet Man* and 2020's *Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales*.

Notably, these two games also demonstrate two polar opposite approaches to incorporating Deaf representation into the medium. In *The Quiet Man*, the protagonist's deafness is represented in-game through constantly muted sound effects—which led to complaints that the portrayal felt like too much of a gimmick, while also making the game less entertaining and less accessible for both Deaf and hearing players.<sup>6</sup>

By contrast, *Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales* was celebrated on release for its nuanced portrayal of a character who “happens to be Deaf.”<sup>7</sup> The character—street artist Hailey Cooper, portrayed by Natasha Ofili—is integrated into the plot on an equal footing with the game's other characters, with critics noting that her deafness was neither ignored nor made the defining feature of her personality. The critical and commercial success of the game suggests that this may be a more effective model, moving forward, for how to bring Deaf representation into the medium.

6. Joe Juba, *The Quiet Man Review: The Sound of Failure*, GameInformer, November 9, 2018

7. Laura Zornosa, *Meet the actress blazing a sign-language trail in new 'Spider-Man' video game*, Los Angeles Times, November 20, 2020

“ I recently saw an interpretation of a famous theater production that was half-Deaf, half-hearing. It was incredible. I had chills. It was so satisfying to watch. There were so many small things that happened that only a Deaf person would know to include or to communicate in that way. It's those small subtleties that make all the difference.”

**ERIK NORDLOF**

Founder of DC Deaf Moviegoers and Allies

But even within the world of TV and film, portrayals of deafness and the Deaf experience are not evenly distributed across genres. Broadly speaking, US media viewers report that they're more likely to see Deaf characters appear in more "naturalistic" genres such as dramas, reality shows, or comedies than in genres like horror, sci-fi, or superhero films. There are a few notable exceptions to this rule: Deaf actress Millicent Simmonds has a major role in the *A Quiet Place* franchise of horror films, while Lauren Ridloff played the first Deaf superhero in the Marvel Cinematic Universe in 2021's *Eternals*. But on the whole, the Deaf community is still being systematically excluded from more fantastical and otherworldly genres of storytelling.



**Q: IN WHICH TV & FILM GENRES DO YOU SEE THE MOST AND LEAST DEAF REPRESENTATION?<sup>8</sup>**

MOST	LEAST
Drama	Animation
Documentaries	Comic book / superhero
Reality	Action & adventure
Romance	Horror
Comedy	Science fiction

In particular, consumers report a noticeable lack of Deaf representation in animated films and TV shows. This is, to some extent, symptomatic of a broader problem: the lack of representation in content targeting younger audiences.

**Only 37% of hearing parents and 47% of Deaf parents have watched a kids' TV show or movie with their child that featured a Deaf character.** This is despite the fact that more than 7 out of 10 parents say it's important to them that their children are exposed to Deaf culture through the media they consume.

There are a few high-profile examples of children's media that include Deaf representation. *Sesame Street* and *Bluey* have both featured Deaf characters in individual storylines; and the recent DreamWorks series *Madagascar: A Little Wild* incorporated a Deaf character into the main cast. But these examples are few and far between. Which means that Deaf parents and parents of Deaf children are limited in their abilities to expose their kids to their own culture and help them develop signing skills—and children in hearing families are deprived of opportunities to learn about the Deaf community.

*“ There are disabled kids who think they're alone in this world, that they're the only ones that experience these things, that the world was built against them. Well, it was built against them! But there are ways to restructure the world to have it be made for them, and seeing disabled people in media helps make that vision seem possible. That's what representation and access to these areas can promote.”*

**BOBBI - ANGELICA MORRIS**  
FWD-Doc Team Member and  
Disability Advocate

8. US hearing consumers

# Fictional portrayals of deafness have yet to reflect the true diversity of the Deaf community

While diversity efforts have to start somewhere, they tend to begin at the top of our societal power structure and work their way down. Men continue to win significantly more Oscar nominations than women,<sup>9</sup> white performers continue to be awarded more than BIPOC actors,<sup>10</sup> and in a study of 900 popular movies from 2007 to 2014, LGBTQ+ characters and disabled characters were found to represent just 1.1% and 2.7% of speaking roles, respectively.<sup>11</sup>

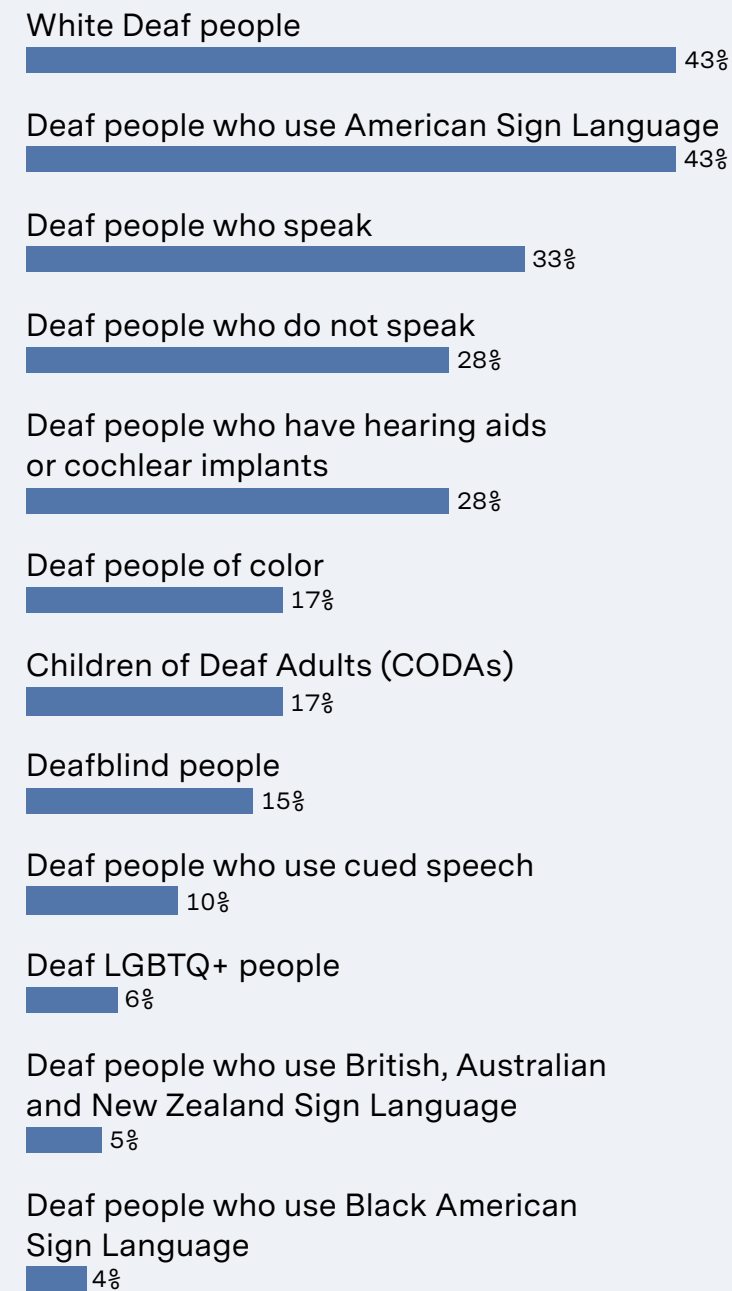
So it's unfortunate, if not particularly surprising, that fictional portrayals of deafness have, more often than not, tended to center the experiences of straight white people—often at the expense of Deaf people of color and Deaf LGBTQ+ people. **In the US, hearing consumers are over twice as likely to have seen media featuring white Deaf people as they are to have seen media featuring Deaf people of color.** And only 6% of hearing viewers have ever seen a Deaf LGBTQ+ person portrayed in fiction.

“It seems like there’s this assumption that all Deaf people sign. One time I went to a comedy show where there were captions displayed on the screen, which was awesome. But the next performance of theirs I went to, they only had a sign language interpreter. At that point, I didn’t have hearing aids and I had only taken one semester of ASL classes. So, I wasn’t able to tell what was going on.”

**BOBBI-ANGELICA MORRIS**  
FWD-Doc Team Member and  
Disability Advocate



## WHAT TYPES OF DEAF CHARACTERS HAVE HEARING AUDIENCES SEEN REPRESENTED IN MEDIA?



Then there’s also the issue of language. In the US, the majority of media featuring Deaf characters consumed by hearing audiences features characters conversing in American Sign Language—despite the fact that, in reality, ASL is simply one of many communication tools used by the Deaf community, and there are many Deaf people with limited to no ASL fluency. **While Black American Sign Language (BASL) may be rapidly growing in popularity and awareness within the Deaf community,<sup>12</sup> fewer than 1 in 20 consumers have seen it referred to in film, TV, or other forms of media.**

This lack of representation matters, in part, because it leads mainstream audiences to have a limited view of what the Deaf community looks like and a limited understanding of how Deaf people interact with others. While the vast majority of US consumers have heard of ASL, fewer than half know what a cochlear implant is, and only about 1 in 10 are aware of the existence of alternative signing systems such as BASL, cued speech, or BANZSL.

Consumers who have seen a piece of media featuring a Deaf character report seeing white Deaf people who speak, have hearing aids, and/or use American Sign Language more than any other representation. Deaf people of color, Deaf people who use alternative methods of communication like cued speech or Black American Sign Language, Deafblind people, and LGBTQ+ Deaf people remain relatively unrepresented.

9. Nadine Wojcik, *Why men win more Oscars than women*, Deutsche Welle, April 24, 2021

10. Dan Zak, *These charts explain how Oscars diversity is way more complicated than you think*, The Washington Post, February 26, 2016

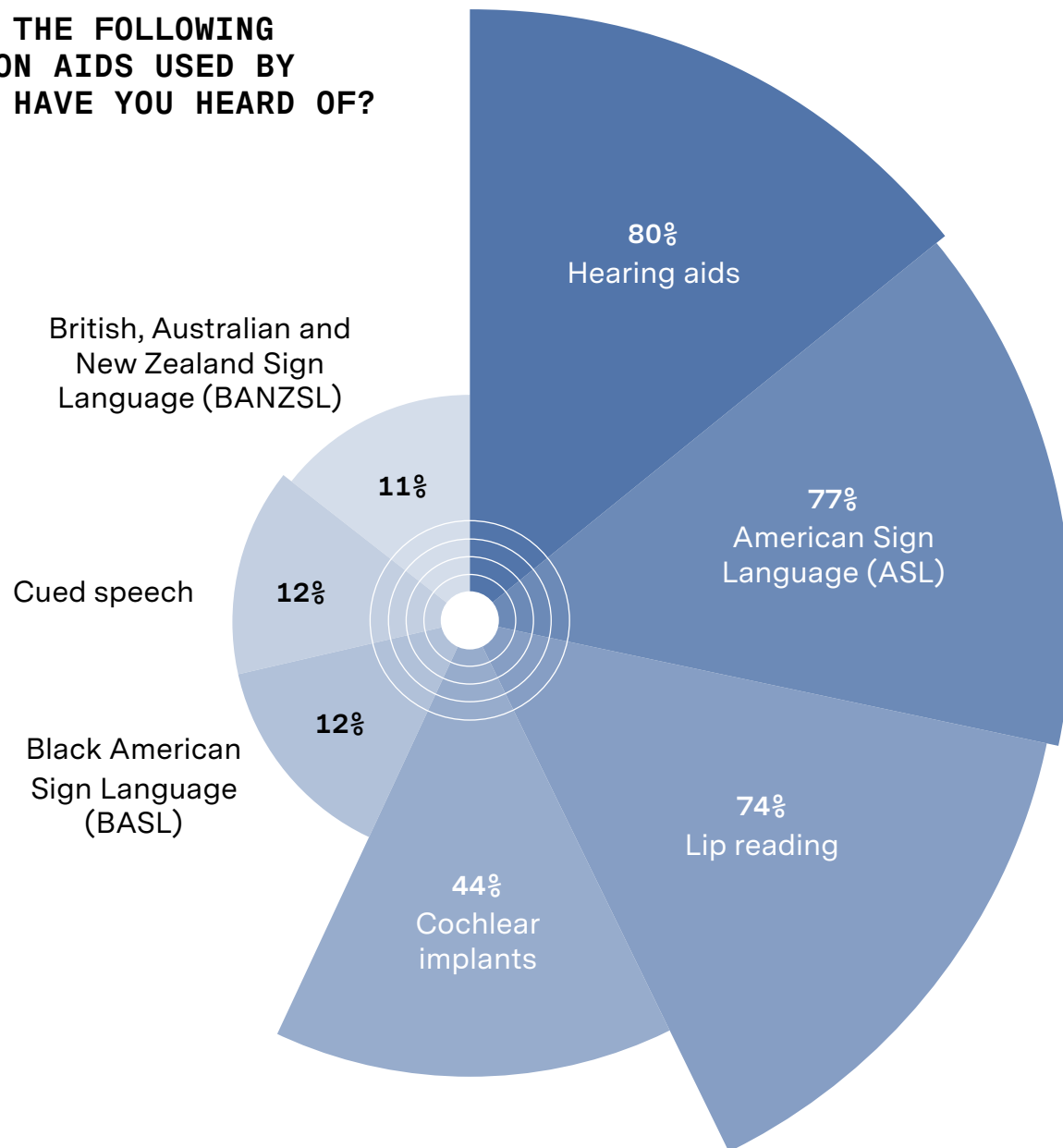
11. Dr. Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti, Dr. Katherine Pieper, Traci Gillig, Dr. Carmen Lee, Dylan DeLuca, *Inequality in 700 Popular Films*, USC Annenberg and The Harnisch Foundation

12. Allyson Waller, *Black, Deaf and Extremely Online*, The New York Times, January 23, 2021

As a result, consumers not only report a limited view of what Deaf people look like, but also a limited understanding of how Deaf people interact with others. Hearing consumers report having heard about ASL, hearing aids, and lip reading at over double the rates of other communication methods commonly used by Deaf people.



**Q: WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING COMMUNICATION AIDS USED BY DEAF PEOPLE HAVE YOU HEARD OF?**



This broad lack of understanding of the Deaf community is important to acknowledge, as the ways audiences learn to identify deafness on-screen have direct repercussions for the everyday lives of Deaf people—often leading to inaccurate assumptions and barriers to accessibility. For the Deaf and disabled community, misconceptions about their needs and capabilities have tangible effects, as it can cause hearing people to limit Deaf access to certain experiences or underestimate the ability of Deaf people to work in hearing-dominated spaces.

In the absence of better mainstream education about deafness and the Deaf community, media portrayals will continue to play a major role in shaping the assumptions that hearing audiences make about Deaf people. So it's vital that these portrayals start to reflect the true richness and diversity of the Deaf experience.

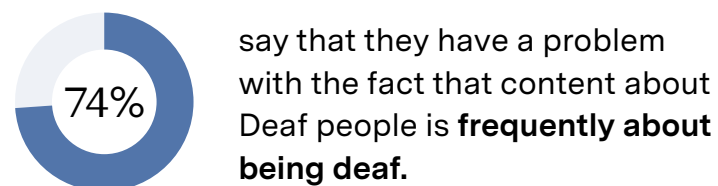
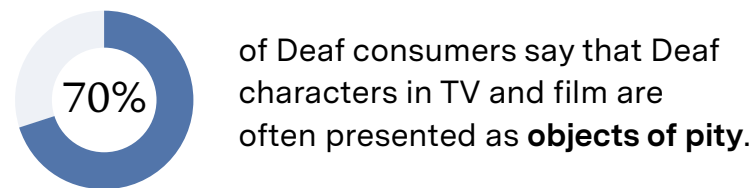
“The idea is to have an ensemble of different kinds of Deaf stories. For example, people who do well using cochlear implants generally come from stable homes; it can be a white, upper-middle-class kind of thing. There are other challenges, in families where English is a second language or coming from a lower socioeconomic background, that can affect how well someone fares with a cochlear implant.”

**ERIK NORDLOF**  
 Founder of DC Deaf Moviegoers and Allies

# Stories about Deaf people tend to be “about deafness”, and often perpetuate negative stereotypes about the Deaf community

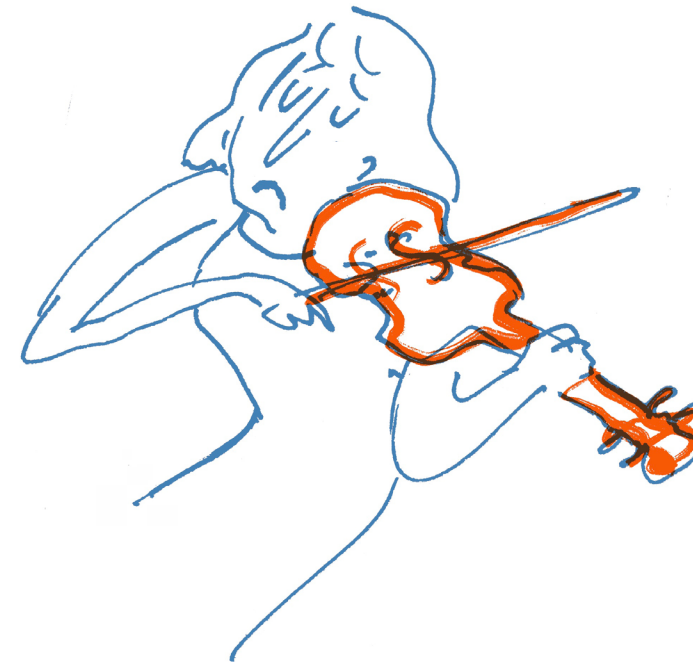
Think about the last piece of content you engaged with that included a Deaf main character. Was it about music? Coming to terms with hearing loss? A musician coming to terms with their hearing loss?

When it comes to media portrayals of the Deaf community, there are certain tropes that show up time and time again. Too often, Deaf characters are portrayed as unfortunate victims of circumstance; unable to communicate easily with the hearing world and largely dependent on the charity of others.



Moreover, Deaf audiences are acutely aware of the way in which these repetitive tropes and cliches help to reinforce prejudice and stigma about their community. **63% of Deaf people agree that “Hollywood perpetuates negative stereotypes about Deaf and hard of hearing people.”** In particular, they worry about the way in which these portrayals may lead hearing people to make assumptions about their intelligence and ability to communicate, or may encourage them to see them as victims rather than as peers.

These reductive portrayals of deafness are a problem not only in Hollywood, but in literature as well. Of the top 10 most widely read books featuring Deaf characters, only one—Stephen King’s *The Stand*—integrates Deaf characters as part of a larger story in which deafness or hearing loss is not one of the most prominent plot points.



This is not to say that stories which center their characters’ deafness should not exist. But ideally, they would be just one part of a much broader spectrum of content, including stories in which Deaf characters face challenges and overcome obstacles that are not related to their hearing loss.

Among Deaf creatives interviewed for this study, there was a common desire to see Deaf characters imbued with a greater sense of agency, and for writers to start telling stories that focus on the more mundane, humorous, or positive aspects of life as a Deaf person. They want to see more Deaf characters who are defined by qualities other than their deafness; and they want media companies to dig deeper, and tell a much wider range of stories about the Deaf community.

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

We asked Deaf consumers to describe the negative stereotypes about the Deaf community they most often see depicted in media. The most common responses included:

#01  
“Deaf people are unintelligent”

#02  
“Deaf people are always dependent on others”

#03  
“All Deaf people can use sign language”

#04  
“Deaf people can’t do things normal people can do”

#06  
“Deaf people can’t communicate well”

#09  
“Deaf people are all victims”

#10  
“All Deaf people can read lips”

#05  
“All Deaf people have complete hearing loss”

#07  
“Deaf people can’t speak English”

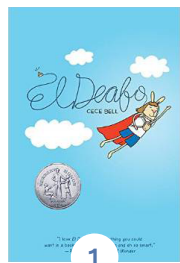
#08  
“All Deaf people consider themselves disabled”

This doesn't mean, however, that writers should sugarcoat the Deaf experience and ignore the very real issues of prejudice, discrimination, and accessibility barriers that many Deaf people are forced to confront on a daily basis. In fact, Deaf viewers say that "dealing with issues that affect Deaf people in the real world" is the single biggest factor that contributes to making a fictional portrayal of a Deaf character feel authentic.

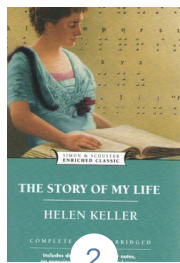
In other words, audiences want writers to acknowledge the realities and the challenges that come with being deaf, but to do so

in a way that doesn't reinforce negative stereotypes about the community, or reduce Deaf characters to their deafness. Getting that balance right is by no means an easy task. And that's just one reason why it's so important to bring Deaf writers and directors into the creative process and allow them to tell their own stories. By imbuing scripts with the lived experience of their community, Deaf creatives can bring a level of nuance and authenticity to portrayals of deafness that simply cannot be matched by writers approaching the topic from the outside.

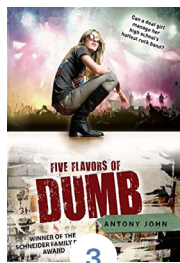
**Q: WHAT'S THE MOST RECENT BOOK YOU READ FEATURING A DEAF CHARACTER?<sup>13</sup>**



**1**  
**El Deafo**  
CeCe Bell



**2**  
**The Story of My Life**  
Helen Keller



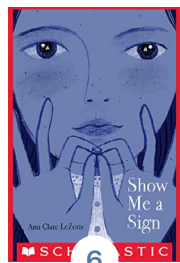
**3**  
**Five Flavors of Dumb**  
Antony John



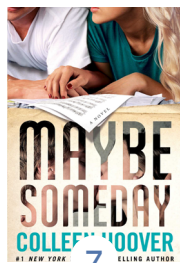
**4**  
**The Stand**  
Stephen King



**5**  
**Deaf Like Me**  
Thomas S. Spradley



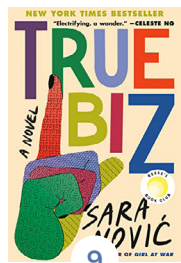
**6**  
**Show Me a Sign**  
Ann Clare LeZotte



**7**  
**Maybe Someday**  
Colleen Hoover



**8**  
**Song For A Whale**  
Lynne Kelly



**9**  
**True Biz**  
Sarah Novic

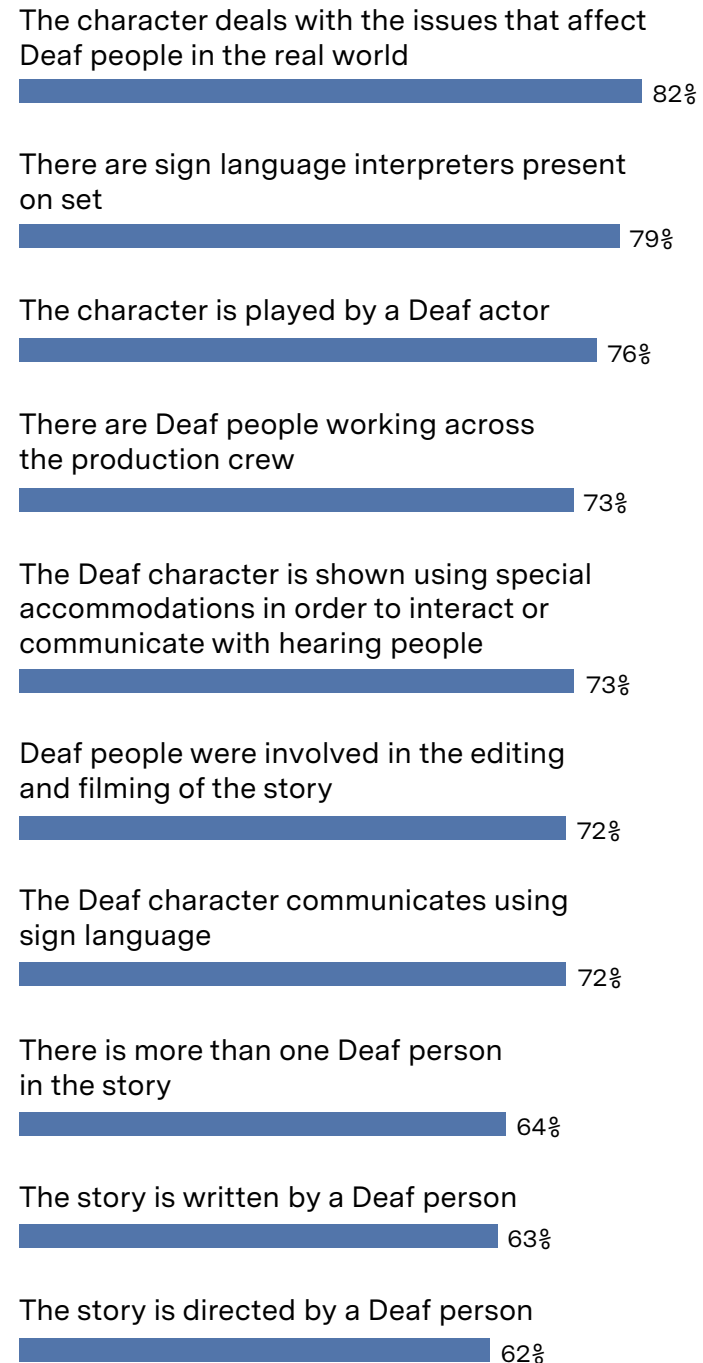


**10**  
**Signs of Attraction**  
Laura Brown

13. US hearing consumers

**Q: WHAT MAKES A PORTRAYAL OF A DEAF CHARACTER FEEL AUTHENTIC TO YOU?**

% of Deaf respondents who consider this an "important" factor in making portrayal of Deaf characters feel authentic



*“ Dig deeper. Get over the Deaf thing and just see what stories are there. We have stories; we just happen to be Deaf.”*

**DANIEL DURANT**  
Actor

*“ You can't serve people when you don't know who they are or what their stories are.”*

**JILL BRADBURY**  
Theater Department Chair  
at National Technical Institute  
for the Deaf



# Content is often still inaccessible to Deaf consumers

“It takes a long time for acceptable behavior and inclusive decisions to be made by people who are not a part of the community they’re accommodating.”

**ALEXANDRIA WAILES**  
Choreographer, Performer,  
and ASL Director

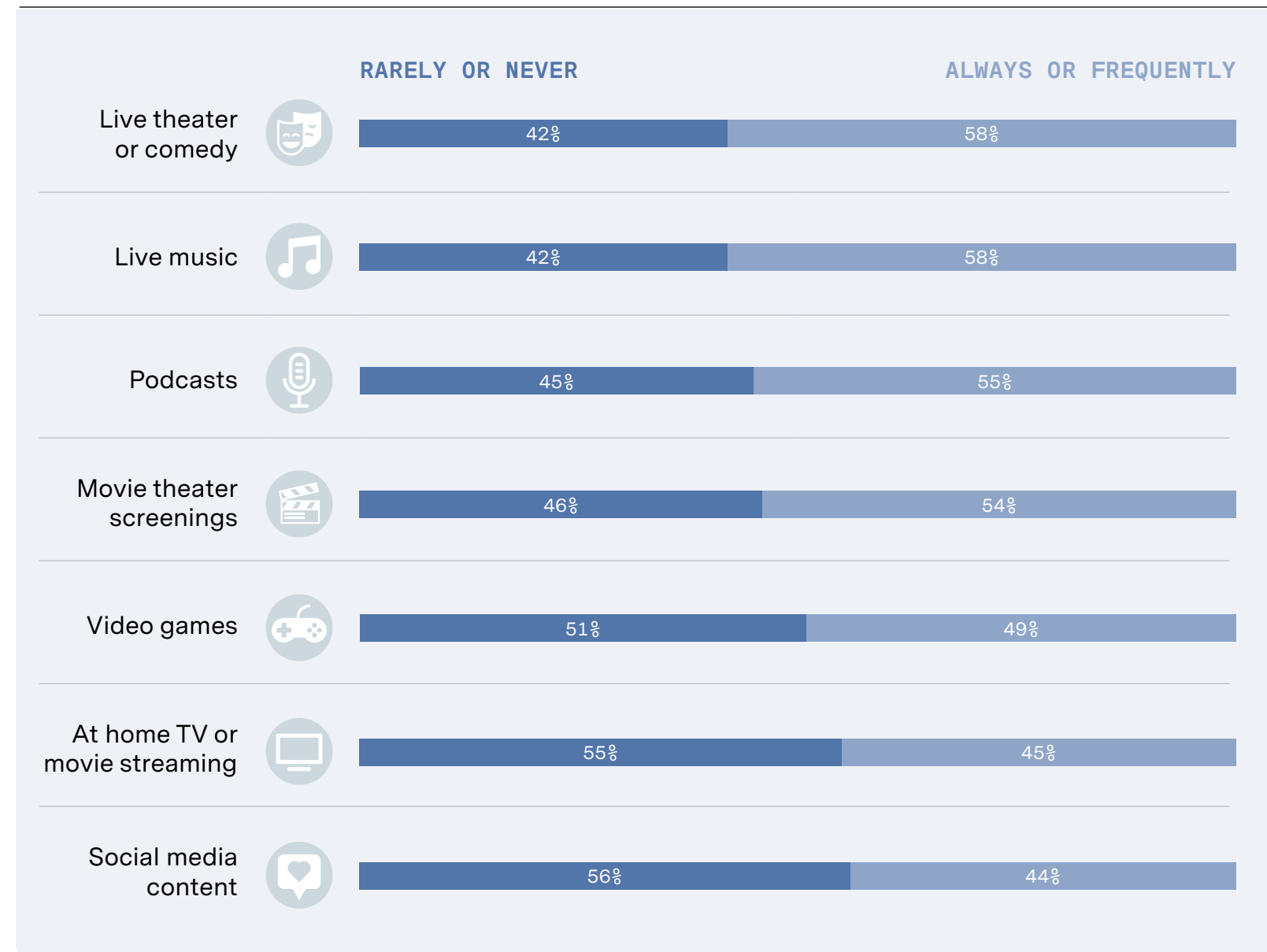


However, adding depth and authenticity to media portrayals of deafness means very little if Deaf audiences are not able to engage with that media on an equal footing to their hearing counterparts. And unfortunately, accessibility barriers for Deaf viewers are still commonplace—and are not limited to any one medium.

On streaming platforms like Netflix and social media services like Instagram and TikTok, closed captioning seems to be gradually becoming more common. But this process has not been an entirely smooth one. Notably, YouTube encountered strong backlash from some Deaf creators on its platform when it shut down its Community Captioning feature in 2020, forcing creators to either manually upload their own captions or rely on third-party tools or automations.<sup>14</sup>

But it’s live events where Deaf consumers say they most frequently run into accessibility challenges. **Among Deaf people who have been to a live theater or live comedy show, just 30% and 28%, respectively, say that they’ve been offered some form of accessibility aid, like a captioning device or an interpreter.** 23% of Deaf people say they “always” have difficulty accessing live music performances, and 21% say the same for live theater and live comedy.

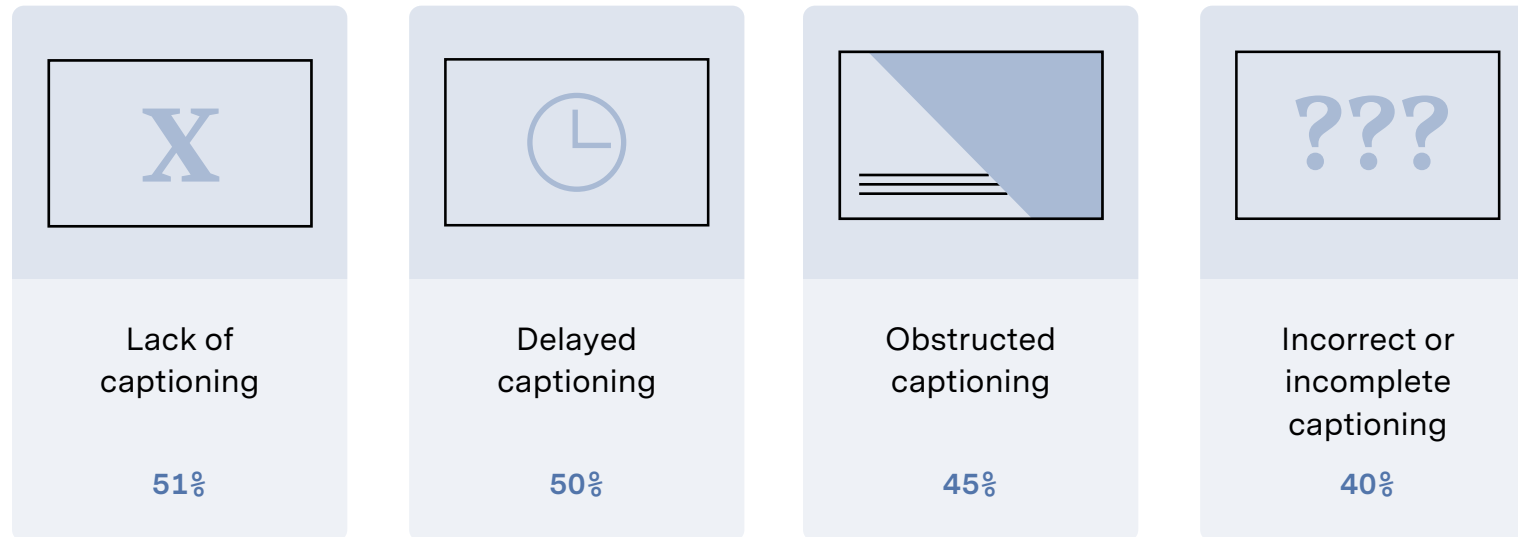
## HOW FREQUENTLY DEAF CONSUMERS ENCOUNTER ACCESSIBILITY BARRIERS ACROSS DIFFERENT MEDIA CATEGORIES<sup>15</sup>



15. Excludes consumers who have no interest in these types of media

14. Kim Lyons, *YouTube is ending its community captions feature and deaf creators aren't happy about it*, The Verge, July 31, 2020

## MOST COMMON CAPTIONING ISSUES ENCOUNTERED BY DEAF CONSUMERS



However, 2023 could be a landmark year in terms of bettering in-person access. FWD-Doc, a group of documentary filmmakers with disabilities and allies, recently partnered with the Film Event Accessibility Working Group to jumpstart a collective reporting of data related to accessibility successes and failures across industry events.<sup>16</sup> The resulting Film Event Accessibility Scorecard is a powerful tool available to all, connecting event organizers with their audiences to create the most successful, most accessible events.

At the same time, Deaf pressure groups have been fighting to make open captioning (i.e. where captions are displayed on screen) more common in movie theaters. While some theaters now offer personal closed-captioning

devices upon request, these devices can be cumbersome and unreliable, especially if not maintained properly. One Washington D.C.-based group, DC Deaf Moviegoers, for example, is currently working to pass *The Open Movie Captioning Requirement Act of 2022*, which would require a certain percentage of movie showings in the District to use open captioning.

But captioning on its own is not a panacea for accessibility. Many Deaf consumers report that, even when captions have been made available to them, they can be hard to see, incomplete, or out of sync with the actions on the screen. In part, this may be due to an overreliance within the entertainment industry on automated transcription software. While better than it used to be, this software can still result in noticeable errors—leaving Deaf viewers feeling as if their experience has been deprioritized.

Of course, given the sheer diversity of the Deaf community, no single approach to accessibility will ever be able to meet everyone’s needs. Making live and at-home entertainment more accessible to Deaf audiences will require a combination of tools—from captioning to human interpreters to better volume controls. To get that balance right, media companies will need to listen to their customers, and actively engage with the activists and campaigners who have been working at the forefront of these challenges.

<sup>16</sup> *Film Event Accessibility Scorecard*, FWD-Doc

“It’s really nice that we have a lot more technologies available to us now. But they’re not perfect. You’d be shocked by how much meaning can be lost if one word is wrong in the captions.”

**JULES DAMERON**

Director, Writer, and Actor

“To be able to go to any movie theater, at any time of day, and be able to see any movie we want is not something that exists for Deaf people right now, due to a lack of open captioning in theaters. I loved watching foreign films growing up because they always have captions; I know those movies will always be accessible to me. It’s weird to be alienated from content in your own country.”

**ALEXANDRIA WAILES**

Choreographer, Performer, and ASL Director



## SECTION 3

# Moving Forward

**How can the industry address these barriers and create more—and more authentic—stories about Deaf characters?**

“

*The main problem is that there are not enough stories told about Deaf people in the media. We need more stories out there in order to represent the full community.”*

**JULES DAMERON**

Director, Writer, and Actor

“

*Deafness is not a linear experience even within the realm of disability. If you hire multiple people from the Deaf community with different perspectives, their own personal stories will be a testimony for all to overcome the obstacles of inaccessibility in society.”*

**BOBBI-ANGELICA MORRIS**

FWD-Doc Team Member and Disability Advocate

“

*We are tired of hearing actors playing Deaf roles...Let's work together and see how we can tell the stories in the ways that Deaf people would actually want to be portrayed. More and more Deaf people are becoming consultants, which is great. Hollywood is a huge machine. It can be sad when Deaf people get left behind or marginalized. I want to see that change, where more people are open to collaborating with new types of talent and supporting different types of people.”*

**JADE BRYAN**

Filmmaker, Founder of Deaf Talent Media & Entertainment Consulting

“

*The industry needs to be more serious about the top-to-bottom nature of everything. Your diversity and inclusion program should not just be about actors or about writers, it needs to include everyone.”*

**MICHAEL EPSTEIN**

Graphic Designer

# To create more authentic Deaf content, Deaf people need to be given a seat at the table

If media and entertainment companies are trying to learn how to make their portrayals of the Deaf community more authentic, they could start by looking to previous examples of content that has been well-received by Deaf viewers. And among recent fictional portrayals of Deaf characters, CODA stands out from the rest; not just for its awards success, but also for the strong positivity it generated among its Deaf audience.

79% of Deaf viewers who'd seen CODA felt that, on balance, it was a good example of Deaf representation; more than any other high-profile film or TV show.

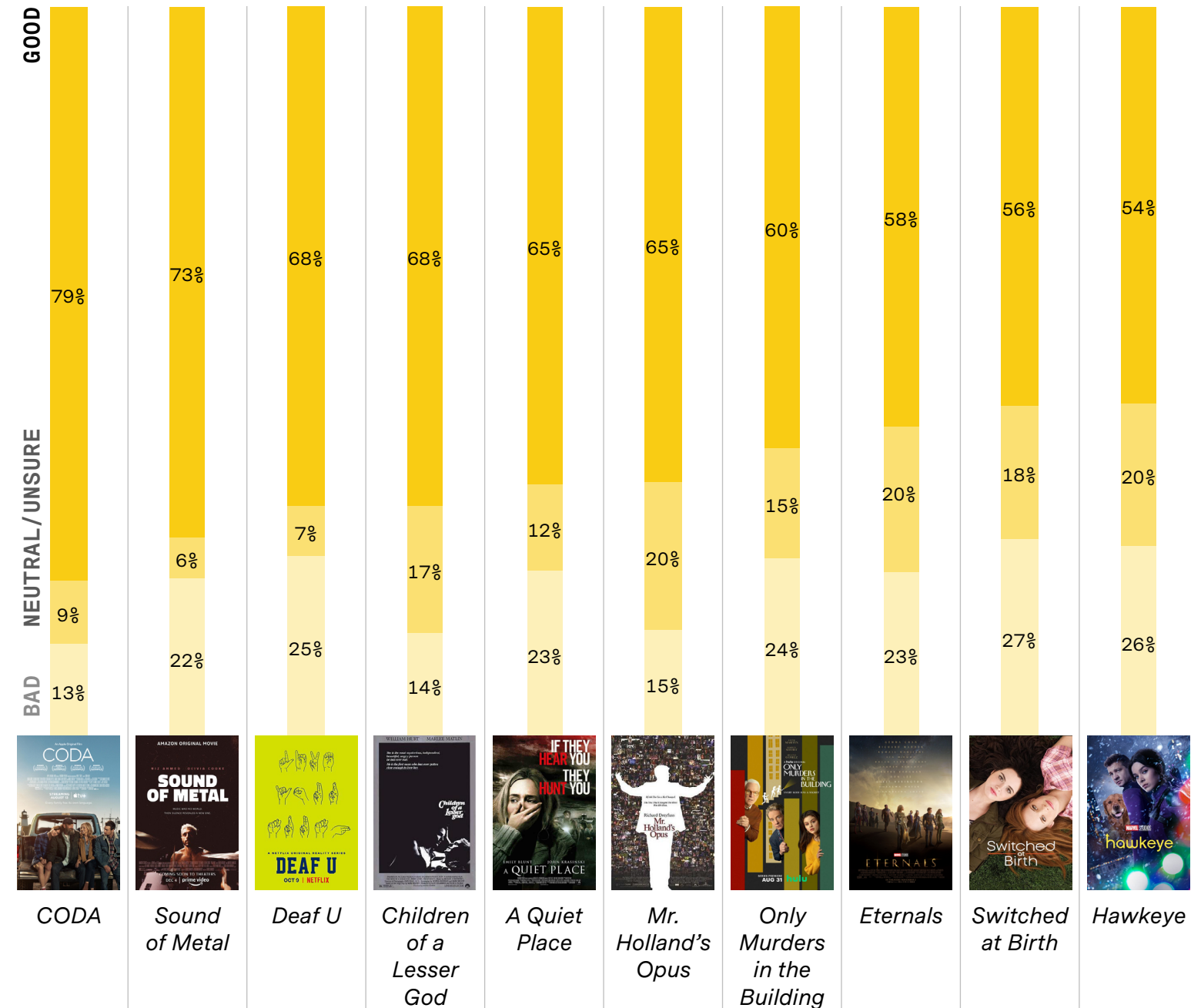
Additionally, 4 in 10 viewers described the film as "authentic" to their experience of deafness, while fewer than 2 in 10 felt that it was an inauthentic portrayal of deafness.

This is not to say that the film was without its faults. Some critics, for example, took issue with the film's focus on music as a pivotal plot element, arguing that it played into long-standing stereotypes about the Deaf community.<sup>17</sup> Others felt that it portrayed its Deaf characters as overly dependent on the help of their hearing family members.<sup>18</sup> But despite these critiques, it's clear that, overall, Deaf audiences felt that the film was a strong role model for what positive Deaf representation ought to look like.



## Q: DO YOU THINK THESE FILMS AND TV SHOWS ARE GOOD OR BAD EXAMPLES OF DEAF REPRESENTATION?

Includes only Deaf viewers who have seen these pieces of media



17. John Hendrickson, *The Tension at the Heart of CODA*, The Atlantic, March 25, 2022  
 18. Billie Anderson, *Despite its Oscar win, CODA is still a film that depicts deafness as a burden*, The Conversation, February 18, 2022

So, what was it about the film that gave it this sense of authenticity? Partly, it was the fact that the film cast multiple Deaf actors—Troy Kotsur, Marlee Matlin, and Daniel Durant—in starring roles, and gave them plenty of dialogue; about 40% of the film’s dialogue is in ASL.

This sort of casting accuracy is, increasingly, becoming a baseline expectation within the Deaf community.

**69%** of Deaf consumers say that it’s important to them that **Deaf roles are always filled by Deaf actors**—with authenticity being the most frequently cited explanation.

This may not be as relevant in cases where characters have only recently lost their hearing or are in the process of doing so (such as Riz Ahmed’s character in *Sound of Metal*), but for characters who are supposed to be Deaf since birth or fluent ASL speakers, Deaf actors can bring a sense of verisimilitude to the role that simply cannot be replicated by a hearing performer.

### Q: AS A DEAF PERSON, WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO YOU THAT DEAF ROLES ARE FILLED BY DEAF ACTORS?



But while on-screen representation is important, so too is having Deaf professionals represented behind the scenes in both creative and technical roles.

**68%** of Deaf viewers say that it’s generally obvious to them when a **Deaf character has been written by a hearing person.**

“*When it’s their story you’re writing, it should include their perspective. Marginalized groups are capable of telling their own stories. The industry needs to trust that.*”

#### JADE BRYAN

Filmmaker, Founder of Deaf Talent Media & Entertainment Consulting

And while *CODA* may not have had a Deaf writer, it did make extensive use of on-set interpreters and consultants, including two “ASL masters”—Alexandria Wailes and Anne Tomasetti—who played a crucial role in ensuring that scenes featuring sign language were directed, shot, and edited correctly.<sup>19</sup> When we spoke with Daniel Durant, one of the film’s stars, he talked about the positive impact that this had on him as a performer—and suggested that more productions ought to embrace this approach moving forward.

19. Amy Kaufman, *The Deaf still face 'outright discrimination' in Hollywood. How 'CODA' broke the mold*, Los Angeles Times, August 13, 2021

## CASE STUDY

# CODA

**CODA** star Daniel Durant on the film's creative process, and what lessons it can teach us about producing authentic and resonant portrayals of deafness.



What do you think it means for a piece of content to be an authentic representation of the Deaf experience?

**DD:** You can easily tell whether it's a hearing writer or a Deaf writer; they won't use Deaf colloquialisms, or their house won't look like a Deaf house. Those details make it obvious the writer didn't do their research or didn't consult with somebody from the Deaf community—that the writer just wrote what they know.

What do you think it was about CODA that made it feel authentic to many Deaf viewers?

**DD:** CODA has many great examples of Deaf authenticity because the writers and directors did the work to really consult with the Deaf community. We used signs that Deaf people would actually use, and the way the family dynamics and house was set up was really

accurate. I haven't seen many other movies that show what a Deaf family, a Deaf household, looks like. Deaf people are usually just in small, short pieces of a larger story.

Was there anything in particular about the production process of CODA that you think contributed to the sense of authenticity?

**DD:** The key thing is the "ASL master," or ASL dialogue coach. We had two of them on the CODA set.

Their job was to make sure our signs would match the script and that the English would translate well to ASL. An ASL coach was next to the writer and director at all times watching the screen, so they could see our signing and make sure nothing was cut out of frame. Also, when we ad-libbed, they would let the director know what we said.

The ASL dialogue coach makes Deaf actors feel confident and comfortable because we have a Deaf eye watching us behind-the-scenes, right there, live. It's important to have a person like that behind you—a team.

Is that becoming the standard within the industry?

**DD:** Not yet, no. I've been on other shows where there's no ASL dialogue coach, which meant I had to do all of that work myself.

I had to do extra work with the director and writers and interpreters to make sure everything was well done and clear. The director and script supervisor don't know ASL so, of course, they tend to say "it's fine, it looks OK." Even an interpreter will say everything looks fine, but I'll still feel unsure.

When an ASL dialogue coach is there, I feel much more confident because they have the authority to interject, to make creative decisions alongside a director, and to generally advocate for the Deaf point of view.

What are the biggest barriers in the entertainment industry to making that happen?

**DD:** It's ignorance. I understand that the industry doesn't understand what being Deaf means, so people's natural reaction is fear.

I will never forget showing up on set to film CODA, alongside 100-200 crew members, and none of them had ever worked with a Deaf actor before. I could tell they were a bit nervous at first. But, a few days in, it's like they had forgotten we were Deaf. Because the set had proper accessibility in place, it quickly became apparent to them how easy it could be to work together.

However, while *CODA* was, in many ways, a step in the right direction, there's still a long way to go before Hollywood becomes a truly accessible industry for the Deaf community. While the success of films like *CODA* has helped to boost the profiles of Deaf actors, some have suggested that Deaf people of color are still not getting the mainstream attention they deserve. **Notably, no Deaf person of color has ever been nominated for an Academy Award for acting.**

Another major challenge for the industry is the lack of Deaf representation in behind-the-scenes roles such as production, design, filming, and editing. While there have been a number of think pieces and op-eds published recently on the importance of uplifting Deaf creatives, this is an issue that has received comparatively far less attention. Industry insiders interviewed for this study commented on just how rare it was to see Deaf professionals filling these sorts of more technical positions—even on productions that prominently featured Deaf characters.

To an extent, this lack of behind-the-scenes representation is a result of the same accessibility challenges that afflict many other industries. Despite their legal obligations to do so under the Americans with Disabilities Act, many workplaces have been slow to make the kinds of accommodations necessary to support Deaf and disabled employees.

**73%** of Deaf consumers believe that **barriers to employment are a “serious problem”** for the Deaf community.

But there are also some unique cultural factors within the entertainment industry that make this problem particularly acute. Much of the industry operates on a strictly hierarchical system, with new entrants, regardless of their skills or qualifications, expected to put in their time as production assistants (or “runners”) before moving into more challenging and more specialist positions. These positions often require large amounts of face-to-face or over-the-phone interactions with senior colleagues; and studios may be unwilling to make basic accessibility accommodations for these entry-level positions.

If you're an experienced industry professional, you might have the clout to secure an interpreter or other accessibility aides; but doing that at the early stages of your career is another proposition entirely. And if those junior roles remain inaccessible to much of the Deaf community, then there won't be a pipeline of Deaf professionals moving into those more senior positions.

While some employers within the industry have tried to address these challenges, it's clear that more needs to be done. **82% of Deaf consumers and 66% of hearing consumers believe that media and entertainment companies should make more accommodations to support the careers of Deaf professionals.** And a key place to start would be with those lower-level positions. Ultimately, the most effective way to bring more Deaf talent into the industry would be to create alternative entry-routes for both on-screen and technical talent that are more accessible to the Deaf community, while at the same time building a more inclusive and welcoming culture at every level of the Hollywood pyramid.

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

### Deaf creatives and professionals on the access barriers within Hollywood

“ There’s a fair amount of communication that takes place over the phone or in large meetings, which isn’t as conducive to my skillset and communication style. There are a lot of roles that could, in theory, be accessible to anyone with disabilities, but the way that they’re currently set up becomes a sticking point for a lot of people.”

**MICHAEL EPSTEIN**  
Graphic Designer

“ There need to be more Deaf people in greater positions of power in order to make a difference throughout the creative process. I don’t like the idea of having a fully hearing production team earning great pay for Deaf content. We have to start thinking about the balance of power there.”

**JULES DAMERON**  
Director, Writer, and Actor

“ It would be really powerful for people to take the burden of accessibility off of us. We have to advocate for ourselves constantly, every day, which can feel discouraging.”

**JESSICA MARIE FLORES**  
Comedian, Writer, and Online Creator

“ I’ve had to make a lot of compromises in terms of my access because, in this industry, my presence may be important but it’s not seen as a priority.”

**ALEXANDRIA WAILES**  
Choreographer, Performer,  
and ASL Director

“ A lot of times, even if they are looking to cast Deaf people, they want people who can produce spoken language. And yet we have hearing people come in to fill roles as Deaf individuals who can hardly sign.”

**HAROLD FOX**  
Comedian, Actor, Writer, and Producer

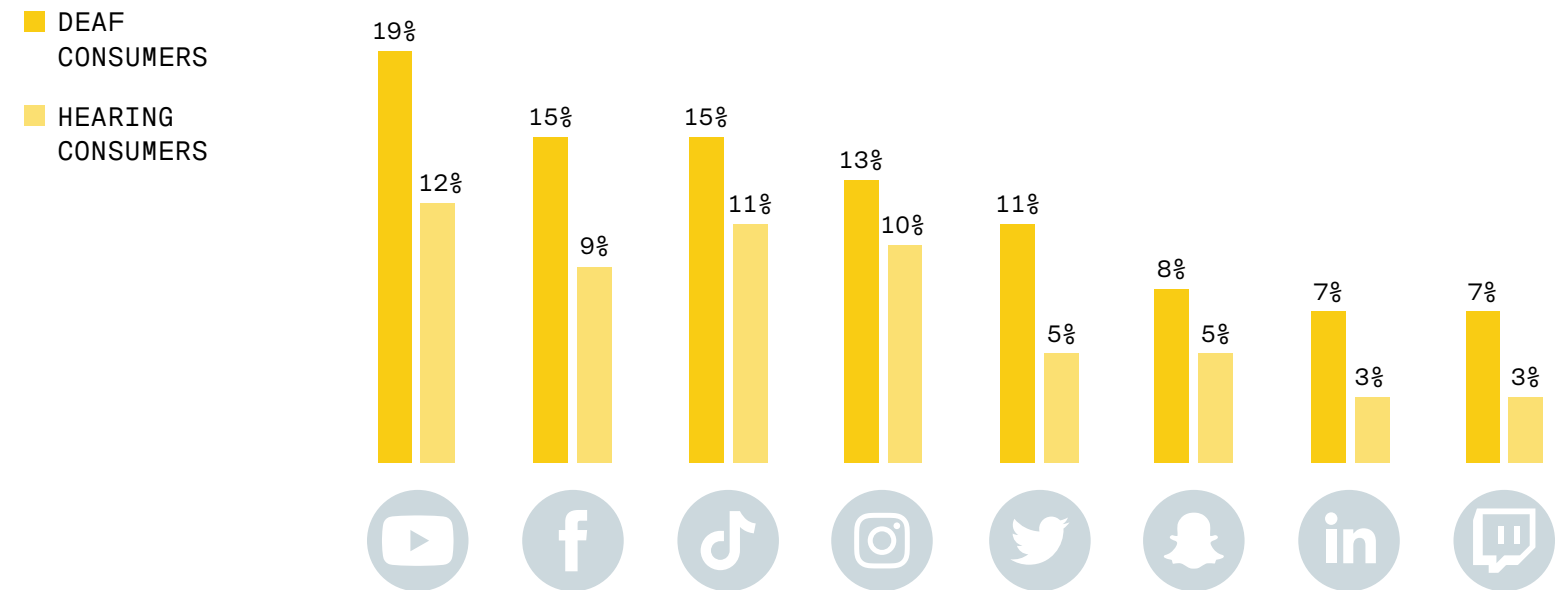
# Social media has created new opportunities for Deaf creatives to start building their own audiences

“How often do you see a Deaf person in real life? Not often. But on social media, you have the chance to see us. It used to be so hard to find Deaf people in the media, but with social media you can see Deaf people anywhere, all the time.”

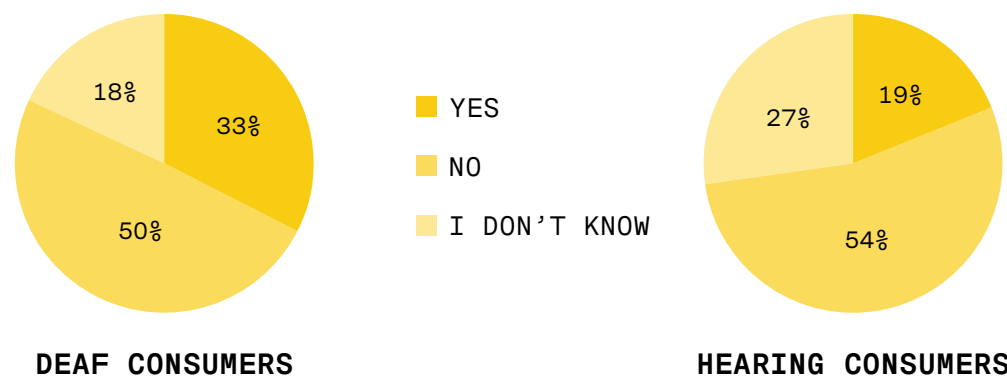
**DANIEL DURANT**  
Actor

Fortunately, there are already some signs that the changing media landscape—and, in particular, the increasingly important role played by social media as a tool for performers and other creatives—has started to create more accessible pathways into the entertainment industry.

**Q: ON WHICH SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS HAVE YOU SEEN CONTENT FROM DEAF CREATORS?**



**Q: HAVE YOU EVER SEEN CONTENT FROM A DEAF CREATOR OR INFLUENCER ON A SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM?**



Social media has changed the rules of the game for everyone, Deaf and hearing alike. Now, actors, writers, comedians, and other creatives have the ability to start growing an audience and building a personal brand without having to go through the industry’s traditional gatekeepers. And while this model has both its pros and cons, it does mean that, for Deaf creatives, they have a new avenue to connect with audiences in a way that bypasses some of the industry’s traditional barriers to accessibility.





On many social media platforms—especially video-based platforms like YouTube and TikTok—there is now a small but growing community of Deaf content creators and influencers. And many of today’s generation of emerging Deaf performers say that these sorts of platforms played a crucial role in helping them get a foot in the door and practice their craft.

A third of all Deaf consumers, and about a fifth of hearing consumers, have been **exposed to at least one piece of content from a Deaf creator on social media.**

Moreover, 67% of Deaf consumers who’ve seen this sort of content believe that Deaf creators have an overall positive impact on the Deaf community—compared to only 17% who feel they have a negative impact. Social media not only

gives Deaf creators a platform to promote their own work; it also enables them to bring more mainstream attention to aspects of Deaf culture, and raise awareness of issues affecting their community.

At the same time, the social internet has also created new spaces for Deaf people to come together and interact with one another. 35% of Deaf consumers are a member of at least one online Deaf community group or forum. These forums both help to build a sense of shared identity—especially relevant for those who didn’t grow up in Deaf families and don’t regularly interact with other Deaf people offline—and provide a space for community organizing. As these sorts of spaces continue to become more active and more popular, they may make it even easier for grassroots campaigns within the Deaf community to gain traction and breakthrough into the awareness of the consumer mainstream.

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

### Deaf creatives on the impact that social media has had on the Deaf community

“A lot of hearing people are curious about Deaf people; what we do, what we need. I figured, why not tap into that? So, I recorded a video and put it on YouTube, and Deaf people began to watch and comment things like, “that’s how I feel!” And that was the first time, at 25 years old, I really realized there were other Deaf people out there like me. I truly had believed up until then that it was just me and my bad luck. Social media really created a community for me.”

**JESSICA MARIE FLORES**

Comedian, Writer, and Online Creator

“Through social media, I have so much more access to the work of Deaf storytellers and visual vernacular all over the world. That said, it is harder for Deaf and hard-of-hearing artists to build a hearing audience than it is for hearing artists who use sign language to build a hearing audience.”

**JILL BRADBURY**

Theater Department Chair at National Technical Institute for the Deaf

“You can see how people’s worldview is really shifting without even leaving their homes, just from going on social media. That’s a huge benefit of social media: to be able to connect different people, experiences, stories, to others all around the world. There are so many brilliant Deaf artists out there doing all of this amazing work that deserves to be elevated to TV or to stage that just haven’t yet. The more people can empower the work of Deaf creatives by sharing their work on social media or checking out what’s happening in Deaf theater companies, Deaf TV shows, the better.”

**ALEXANDRIA WAILES**

Choreographer, Performer, and ASL Director

# To meet the growing demand for more diverse Deaf stories, the industry will need to make long-term changes to increase accessibility and accountability

3 powerful commitments the industry can make to improve Deaf representation in media and better serve Deaf audiences.

01

## Make roles across the industry more accessible, and create more pathways for up-and-coming Deaf talent

“One issue is the power that Deaf people have in entertainment: most stories about Deaf experiences are told by hearing people. The next level of the issue, beyond getting Deaf creatives in the door, is getting a variety of different perspectives from the Deaf community at the table.”

**JILL BRADBURY**

Theater Department Chair at National Technical Institute for the Deaf

Fortunately, Deaf creatives are *already out there* creating content and telling their stories. The challenge for the industry is to do a better job of finding those people, amplifying their voices, and offering the tools necessary for them to succeed.

### THIS INCLUDES:

- Hiring sign language directors and offering accommodations readily throughout the hiring and production process.
- Committing to hire Deaf talent across the production line, particularly on projects where there is a Deaf role or storyline.
- Increasing collaboration between Deaf and hearing talent, as well as creating mentorship opportunities for Deaf people working in the industry.
- Hiring Deaf consultants to guide behind-the-scenes inclusivity initiatives.

02

## Make more content fully accessible to Deaf audiences

“I really would advocate for any movie, at least those that include a Deaf character, to always have open captions. Closed caption devices have been a source of frustration for Deaf people in the past; I never go see movies with closed captioning anymore.”

**ERIK NORDLOF**

Founder of DC Deaf Moviegoers and Allies

Although developments in technology have significantly improved the accessibility of media overall, major hurdles still exist between Deaf audiences and the content they wish to engage with—particularly for live events and movie screenings.

### THIS INCLUDES:

- Expanding the number of events and screenings where captions or interpreters are made available.
- Investing in higher quality captioning.
- Listening to activists and campaigners pushing for greater accessibility.
- Providing a wider range of accessibility aids, rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all approach.

03

## Produce not only more Deaf content, but a greater variety of Deaf content

“It shouldn’t be about the authenticity of Deaf content, it should be about sheer volume of Deaf content. It’s about making tons and tons of Deaf content until it becomes just another fact of life.”

**MICHAEL EPSTEIN**

Graphic Designer

Until there’s a sufficient volume of Deaf content available across the media landscape, there will always be parts of that community who don’t see themselves reflected.

### THIS INCLUDES:

- Introducing Deaf characters into more mediums, particularly video games and literature.
- Expanding the range of genres in which Deaf characters are represented—and, in particular, invest more in content targeted towards kids and families.
- Telling stories about deafness that go beyond existing tropes and overdone themes.
- Creating more roles for Deaf people of color, Deaf LGBTQ+ people, and those who don’t communicate using ASL.



**DEAF WEST THEATRE**

Founded in Los Angeles in 1991, Tony Award®-winning Deaf West Theatre (Artistic Director, DJ Kurs), engages artists and audiences in unparalleled theater experiences inspired by Deaf culture and the expressive power of sign language, weaving ASL with spoken English to create a seamless ballet of movement and voice. Committed to innovation, collaboration, and training, DWT is the artistic bridge between the Deaf and hearing worlds.

**WORDS AND ANALYSIS BY**



DJ Kurs



Jeff Perri



**NATIONAL RESEARCH GROUP**

A leading global insights and strategy firm at the intersection of content, culture and technology. The world’s most powerful marketers turn to us for insights into growth and strategy for any content, anywhere, on any device.

**WORDS AND ANALYSIS BY**



Fergus Navaratnam-Blair



Lucy Murrey



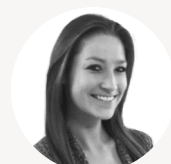
Grady Miller



Cindi Smith



Keith Wagstaff



Mary Moczula

**DESIGN AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY**



Design by Olivia Reaney-Hall



Illustrations by Hannah Robinson



**METHODOLOGY**

Data in this study is based on a survey of 1,000 members of the Deaf community, ages 18 to 64, across the US, UK, Canada and Australia (including a mixture of deaf people, hard of hearing people, and CODAs), as well as a survey of a comparison audience of 1,000 US consumers in the same age bracket (weighted to reflect national population data in terms of age, gender and ethnicity). Both studies were conducted in September 2022.

Findings also reflect the outputs of interviews conducted with Deaf professionals working within the media and entertainment industry. We would like to extend our sincerest thanks and appreciation to everyone who gave their time to contribute to this study.

**TERMINOLOGY**

The Deaf community is not a monolith, and people within that community have developed many different ways of talking about it. For consistency, this report uses Deaf—with a capital D—to refer to all those who identify as a part of the Deaf community, including deaf and hard of hearing people as well as Children of Deaf Adults (CODAs) and other close family members of deaf people. Meanwhile, lower-case deaf is used to refer to the physical condition of hearing loss.