

If Hollywood was fair to people with environmental illnesses, what could it look like?



Film and television have enormous power to shape people's perceptions. If they portrayed chemical and electrical sensitivities fairly and responsibly, it could help acceptance. Hollywood has changed their unfair portrayal of other minorities, they can do so again.

Keywords: chemical sensitivity, MCS, EHS, electrical sensitivity, Hollywood, film, television, fair, responsible, comedy

About the picture

The picture above is from the filming of the documentary film *The Sensitive*, directed by Drew Xanthopoulos.

First impression matters

You never get a second chance to make a first impression, as the saying goes. That includes if the first time someone hears about multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS) or electrical hypersensitivity (EHS) is from a film or television program.

Once that first impression is made, it is a lot harder to change it.

Telling stories is a much more effective way of reaching people than telling them the facts. People want to be entertained in a way they can relate to.

Film and TV has enormous influence, as people involuntarily think they “saw it with their own eyes.” More than 40% of Americans admit they believe crime shows on TV are a realistic rendition of real-life police work (Economist 2020). The real number is likely higher, as some people may not admit to it, even to themselves.

An experiment in New Zealand had a large group of people watch the film *Joker*, which shows a person with a mental illness become extremely violent. Seeing the film gave the viewers a negative impression of people with mental illnesses, despite they are actually less likely to be violent than regular people (Scarf 2020).

Many people do not like to admit that television influences them. Instead, they believe it influences other people more than themselves (Paul 2000).

Given the enormous amount of money spent on television advertising, including political attack ads, it is obvious they work.

Tom Wolfe tells in his classic book *The Right Stuff* about the then-popular British film *Breaking the Sound Barrier*, which shows a British pilot as the first to fly a supersonic airplane instead of American Chuck Yeager. Afterwards, Yeager was often told that he was the second person to break the sound barrier – and that it required a trick shown in the film, which was also total fiction. Even the top officer of the U.S. Air Force believed the story about the “trick.”

The film industry’s portrayal of environmental illnesses

The film and TV industry usually portrays people with MCS or EHS as weird at best, and mental cases at worst.

The classic is the 1995 film *Safe*, which was written and directed by Todd Haynes. It features Julianne Moore as a demure, self-effacing suburban homemaker who few viewers would respect. The film actually has many authentic scenes in the

first half, but there are no explanations so they leave the viewers guessing what is going on. There are also other themes unrelated to MCS, such as New Age quackery and suburban angst, which further confuse the viewers into believing MCS is simply anxiety.

Recent examples of even more unfair portrayal of people with environmental illnesses are the series *Better Call Saul* and *Afflicted*, which are blatantly biased and unfair. (In-depth reviews of these and other films and programs are available through the link at the end of this article.)



Arrogant and clueless physician on “Afflicted.”

These programs shape people’s perception of environmental illnesses. They provide such a distorted picture that it is like watching *Duck Dynasty* or the Kardashians and thinking that is how Americans commonly live. Or watching an old Western film and thinking it informs about Native American culture.

Hollywood has changed before

Native Americans were portrayed as primitive and sadistic brutes in Westerns. In 1973 Marlon Brando won an Oscar, but he sent the Native American woman Sacheen Littlefeather to go on stage in his stead to receive the award. She calmly

made her speech protesting Hollywood's treatment of Indigenous people, while the audience booed her (TIME 2022).

Most of the characters on TV shows used to be male, with women shown in subordinate roles as wives and secretaries (Collins 2009: ch 10).

In 1966 an early attempt at showing a woman who was not subordinate was *That Girl* about a single woman living in New York, trying to make it as an actress.

In 1970 it was followed by the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, which went further. It showed a woman who realized she did not need a husband and kids to have a happy life. After a bad start she learned how to thrive being single with a good job and multiple boyfriends.

Thelma and Louise, about two women who become fugitives after one of them is raped, highlighted how women were still disbelieved and humiliated by all sorts of men in the 1990s. They become free of men on their spectacular road trip across the Southwest, but it doesn't last.

The 2022 film *Call Jane* came out shortly after women lost the right to an abortion in many American states. It is set in 1960s Chicago, before abortions became legal. The protagonist is an affluent woman who wants a second child, but her pregnancy goes awry and endangers her life. Nobody can accuse her of wanting a frivolous abortion, but the medical system refuses to help.

The 2023 Netflix series *Wave Makers* made sexual harassment such a hot topic in Taiwan that the president spoke out against it and anti-harassment bills were introduced in their parliament.

American television used to be all about white people. The occasional Black person was always in some subservient role, such as a servant or an entertainer on a stage.

For several decades the Black community in America had to make their own films with Black actors cast in normal roles (Smithsonian 2017).

Slowly, mainstream entertainment allowed Black people in normal roles too, pioneered by the television series *Good Times* and *The Flip Wilson Show*.

The 1977 television series *Roots* was the first time television confronted white America with what slavery was really like. Later films, such as *Selma* and *Hidden Figures*, showed the more recent racism.

Then in the 1980s came *The Cosby Show*, about a well-functioning Black family where the dad was a physician and the mother an attorney. They were eminently likable characters and role-models for the entire country.

In the 1970s and 1980s television shows started casting characters who were gay, but they were portrayed as weird people, and even as child molesters (Faderman 2015).

In the 1990s advocates from the gay community convinced Hollywood to try portraying them fairly – as normal people who just happened to be gay. The TV series *Northern Exposure* was an early such example. It also featured a character with MCS, who was as quirky as the rest of the cast.

The 1993 film *Philadelphia*, with Tom Hanks playing a young gay lawyer, greatly helped destigmatize being gay and HIV-positive.

The first television series with a major role for a gay character was *Will and Grace*, which became very popular. TV audiences accepted gay characters who were likable.

In 2012, then-vice-president Joe Biden stated on television that *Will and Grace* “probably did more to educate the American public [about gay people] than almost anything anybody’s done so far” (Faderman 2015: ch 33).

Other shows followed, such as *Modern Family*.

More recently there are TV shows about indigenous peoples, such as *Reservation Dogs*.

The film *Wonder* is another good example of humanizing someone whom people might otherwise look at as a freak. It’s the story of a young boy with a severe facial disfigurement who starts in school and overcomes the stigma in a positive way.

The film *Temple Grandin*, about a woman with autism, is also a positive non-freak story. Later came the TV series *As We See It*.

The TV comedy *Big Bang Theory* is about highly educated nerds. It shows they are not all alike, and can be quite likable despite their nerdy behavior. The show has been wildly popular for many years, even among nerds.

What is needed?

It is possible to produce good film and TV about minorities and people with disabilities without resorting to making a freak show. It requires a good understanding of the group that is portrayed. That has been sorely lacking in almost any program made about people with MCS or EHS.

The maker of the hit series *Reservation Dogs*, Sterlin Harjo, told *TIME* magazine in 2022 he wanted his shows to be liked by Native people. That is a good yardstick. Outsiders are often oblivious to how their portrayal of minorities really comes across. This writer has twice seen correspondence from journalists who did not realize their writings were offensive to people with environmental illnesses.

People with environmental illnesses want the same things out of life as everybody else, such as love, respect, the comforts of a home, etc. They don't need people's pity and don't want to be someone's sensation.

A few films have been made by people with sympathy towards the environmentally ill people (*The Sensitives*, *Final Insult*, *Electric Malady*, *Lo and Behold*), and by people from within the community (*Homesick*, *Where Can We Live*, *Elettra*).

All but one are documentaries and documentaries don't reach a large audience. They are not considered entertaining enough.

Educating the general population has to come in sideways, through entertaining film and television. The only film listed here that seems to fit the bill is *Elettra*.

Elettra features an actor who has EHS in real life. It is a fictional story about a woman who gets EHS and impotently rages against the symbols of the wireless lifestyle that makes her sick.

We need more stories like *Elettra* that are entertaining, realistic, sympathetic, and not sensational. Film that gently introduces the viewer to an unfamiliar illness, without ambiguity.

Ambiguity

Ambiguity leaves a void that is quickly filled by myths, stereotypes, and tribalism, as seen on social media and media reviews discussing MCS and EHS. Viewers need clear guidance.

The film *Safe* tried to be neutral on the controversy, with viewers and reviewers largely interpreting the unfamiliar negatively.

The detractors don't seem to have qualms about making their message clear, as seen in *Afflicted* and *Better Call Saul*.

As Nazi death-camp survivor Elie Wiesel said in his Nobel Peace Prize speech: "Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victims."

The case for a comedy

A comedy with major characters who have MCS or EHS could work. People with these illnesses encounter the same absurdities of life as everybody else. And several more that are specific to living with these disabilities.

Outsiders often have really weird ideas about what life with MCS or EHS is like. This includes doctors who see a couple patients in their office and read a few articles (written by other ignorant doctors) and think they know everything they need to know.

This can produce strange and absurd situations in real life, that can be used in a comedy. But, again, it is really important to bring along the audience so they can understand what goes on and not just resort to tribalistic myths.

A comedy can reach a broader audience who is not interested in learning about disabled people, but just wants to be entertained. Those are the people who need to be reached.

Even non-comedy films can show absurdities. An example is in *Hidden Figures*, where the Black female protagonist must walk across the NASA campus, in the rain, in high heels, to get to the "colored" bathroom as there are just "whites only" bathrooms in her building.

How to do it

The screen writers will need to learn a lot about what life with MCS and EHS really is like, and some of the absurdities these people encounter. They will need a lot of input from people who live with these illnesses. As they say in the wider disability community:

Nothing about us without us.

We have prepared two documents with ideas and practical information for screenwriters and novelists. See below.

More information

For practical information about how people with MCS live, for novelists and screenwriters, go to: www.eiwellspring.org/edu/MCSfictionGuide.htm

For electrical sensitivity, go to: www.eiwellspring.org/edu/EHSfictionGuide.htm

Articles about the actual harm caused by the media's biased portrayal of environmental illnesses are at www.eiwellspring.org/media.html.

For detailed reviews of film and television programs portraying people with MCS or EHS, go to www.eiwellspring.org/filmreviews.html.

For science-based (referenced) information about the illnesses, go to www.eiwellspring.org/intromenu.html.

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