YouTube users with disabilities help to normalize differences on platform

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Ruby Ardolf, 14, has her own YouTube channel, featuring familiar aspects of a teen's daily life, including videos of her making slime and her after-school routine. There's also merchandise with messages of kindness and inclusion.

Yet Ruby is not a typical teen vlogger. She is one of 12 people worldwide with an inherited condition called Stromme syndrome, which results in microcephaly (small brain), impaired vision and motor functioning.

YouTube channels about Ruby or other individuals with disabilities provide visibility into their daily lives and have drawn viewers, which promotes neurodiversity. Neurodiversity is the idea that developmental differences are not disorders to be treated but differences to be respected.

Special Books for Special Kids, which often shows children with disabilities, has more than 1 million subscribers.
Ruby's channel, Angie and Ruby, which co-stars and is produced by her mother, Angie Ardolf, has more than 100,000 subscribers and millions of views.

**Benefits From Social Media**

When Angie Ardolf learned of her daughter's condition, she started a blog for family and friends to keep up-to-date on news and information about Ruby. What she received in return was not just awareness, but people who related to her and accepted Ruby. Their YouTube channel grew out of the same desire to provide information, but this time to a larger audience.

"Since I've been posting regularly, our whole family has a better relationship overall because when we get together, they already know stuff that has been going on in her life," Angie Ardolf said. "Same at school. The girls in school they know what's going on. They can say, 'Hey I heard you went to the movies this weekend.' She can't facilitate that all the time herself."

Creators with disabilities say they have gained many benefits from social media participation. A few positives include support and acceptance, discovery of other people with similar conditions, information sharing and even income.

There also is a belief that their contributions can improve public perceptions and acceptance of people with disabilities, they say.

Amythest Schaber, 28, promotes autism awareness on YouTube and, like Ruby and Angie Ardolf, has 100,000 subscribers. Schaber began her channel, Neuro Wonderful Ask an Autistic, out of a desire for autism to be perceived as something different from what she was seeing.

"When I began to think that I might be autistic, and I went searching online, I mostly found information that was either very medicalized and difficult to understand or were resources written for the non-autistic parents of autistic children," she said. "Much of this information was presented in a negative manner that made autism seem like something scary or tragic. . . . I decided to fill the gap. My goal was to be a source of information for people who are wondering if they are autistic, or anyone who wants to learn more about autism and what being autistic means."

Elizabeth Ellcessor is an assistant professor of media studies at the University of Virginia. She researches access to digital media technologies and cultures, particularly with respect to neurological and body differences. Ellcessor says mainstream representations of people with disabilities are few but web content can fill that void.

"Creating content can be so important because so little mainstream content is made by or for disabled people," she said. "You don't have tons of representation with disability out there, disabled creators to follow and look up to, so content creation and creating spaces where people can see themselves either in blogging or semi-scripted contexts like web series becomes really important avenues for a different kind of media for people to engage with."

Ellcessor also cautioned against placing too much emphasis on believing that people living with disabilities experience media in a completely different way. Ellcessor said they also find information, form connections and share cat videos.

**Online Accessibility**

Accessing online material, however, can be a challenge for people with different abilities.
For example, people with different abilities may use assistive technology to access online material. People with difficulty seeing may require audio descriptions, while individuals who are deaf benefit from closed captioning. Many creators with disabilities may have to rely on a partner to assist them with the experience.

Other elements of social media culture can also be difficult for people with disabilities. The decision to try to make money can be tied with moral considerations that other people do not need to consider, such as a fear that viewers may misjudge the creators' intentions as self-serving rather than educational. Then there are also expectations of constant presence and availability, which can be challenging for anyone.

"As an autistic person, getting on camera and projecting a likable persona, a persona that I call YouTube Amythest, is exhausting," Schaber said. "I can schedule an entire week around creating, and then recovering from the creation of a single video."

Despite those challenges, individuals with disabilities have been successful in creating their own terms for success, Ellcessor said.

"These may be communities where it's OK to say 'not going to be on for two days, DM me if urgent' or communities where contacting others to say this person is arguing with me, I don't have energy, can you take it up instead?" she said.

Social media could redefine what is popular and promote content about education and awareness, Ellcessor said. Doing so would make room for a more diverse experience for users and creators.

Ruby's mom Angie agrees.

"Hearing people say that they accept her differences — Ruby is awesome. Ruby is beautiful. Ruby is funny. That has always been my mission," she said.

"YouTube or any social media is that safe place to look and to wonder and to ask a question so that when you confront someone in real life you have gotten information you need to know that everyone is different and [you can] just be friendly."