

# OPEN ACCESS

The world's first and only disability-focused broadcaster, AMI, is proving itself as accessible to producers as it is to the community it serves.

Producer partners just need to follow one rule:

audience first



*Crip Trip* (Catapult Pictures)

For a niche broadcaster, Accessible Media Inc. (AMI) boasts a **REMARKABLY BROAD AUDIENCE.**

That's because AMI's mission is to entertain, inform and empower Canadians with disabilities—and with nearly 30 per cent of Canadians age 15 or older currently experiencing a disability, AMI's target audience includes approximately 8 million people across every demographic, from all over the country. "We're one channel, so we have to be everything to everybody," acknowledges Cara Nye, AMI's director of content development and production.

AMI has come a long way since it was established in 1989 as the National Broadcast Reading Service, which operated a radio reading service before it launched The Accessible Channel in 2009. The Accessible Channel, a must-carry specialty channel that included closed captions and described video for all of its programs, evolved into AMI-tv; AMI-télé, its French-language counterpart, was launched in 2014. A fully accessible free streaming service, AMI+, was added in 2023.

As a broadcaster dedicated to accessible programming, and focused on creating and commissioning original shows focused on disability, AMI is the first and only of its kind. As such, it has developed—and continues to develop—a roster of programs as diverse as the disability community itself. Past, current and upcoming series include travel docuseries, cooking shows, a gardening show, a fishing show, a show about disabled entrepreneurs, a docuseries about disabled entertainers, a docuseries featuring a vision impaired psychic, and an *Amazing Race*-style competition show. AMI is also moving decisively into the kids' space ("If you're thinking about reshaping views and attitudes toward disability, let's get them while they're young, right?" says Nye) and into scripted series.

"We're really looking at anything that anybody wants to consume," says Nye.

And how does AMI know what viewers want to consume? A research panel of more than 300 participants, all members of the disability community, is one major way. Every year, the panel participates in a program monitor, reviewing synopses of series to help the broadcaster gauge what types of shows its audience is interested in. AMI also does "deep dives" on its on-air series, in which it asks the panel "questions about characters, about plot lines, where they'd like to see the series go. Is it resonating with them? What do they want to see more of? Less of?" explains Nye.

No doubt, AMI is finely attuned to its audience—and hungry for fresh content. That makes the broadcaster

particularly open to partnering with producers, disabled or not, to create the kinds of series its viewers want to watch.

When choosing who to work with, AMI has one overarching requirement. AMI's producer partners must be prepared to centre the disability community through storytelling, hiring practices, and the production process itself.

"If you're pitching us a show, the most important thing is that it's guided by the disability community," says Nye. "It doesn't mean that you, as a producer, have to have a disability yourself. But you really should be engaging with the community in roles that control that narrative: writers, producers, directors, editors."

René Brar is head of development at BC's Big Time Decent Productions, whose first scripted series recently got the green light from AMI. *Adapting* is a coming-of-age half-hour dramedy about a girl with cerebral palsy, determined to lose her virginity before winding up in a wheelchair. Brar affirms the importance of having "the right folks tell the story"—in this case, creator Rachael Ransom, whose real-life experience with cerebral palsy guides the script. Having a disabled individual helm the show



*Postcards From... Saskatoon* (Black Rhino Creative)



*Pretty Blind* (AMI, Club Red Productions, Torrential Pictures, Flow Video Inc.)

does much more than check a box; it ensures that the show is “authentic, stronger, more genuine,” says Nye.

“We loved that the script for *Adapting* connected to universal themes: of acceptance, of family, of friendship, of getting laid in high school,” says Brar. “But Rachael was able to do it by telling a very, very specific story that I don’t have access to.”

This universal-in-the-specific quality applies equally well to Big Time Decent’s unscripted series *Underdog Inc.*, which AMI has renewed for a second season. *Underdog Inc.* is the company’s latest entry in the ever-popular trucker docuseries category. The show follows Dale Kristensen, a daring “hotshot trucker” who first appeared on Global in *Backroad Truckers* (also produced by Big Time Decent)—and who happens to be a little person.

Both shows steer clear of what Brar calls “inspiration porn,” shows in which “you just root for the little guy and all the disabled characters are saintly. Avoiding that is really important for us, and I believe for AMI as well.”

Apart from inclusive storytelling, AMI also stresses the importance of including—and accommodating—disabled individuals on set, whether they’re members of the cast or crew. “To work with us, it’s essential to have a really robust DEI plan. How are you going to engage employees from the disability community?” says Nye.

According to her, 55 per cent of the cast and crew of the buddy docuseries *Crip Trip* (Catalpult Pictures) identify as having a disability. For the news parody series *The Squeaky Wheel: Canada* (Hitsby Entertainment), 100 per cent of the creative team are disabled. “Those are

very high bars,” says Nye, but it’s not just about stats: “The producers that we like to work with are the ones who are willing to understand what it takes to work with people with disabilities, engaging them and asking the questions early on.”

For Black Rhino Creative, the prodco behind AMI’s multisensory travel series *Postcards From...*, that means strict eight-hour days during production. It means ensuring that series host Christa Couture, who is an amputee, feels comfortable on screen and has her needs met on set (“Like you would with any talent, but we’re just dialled in that much more,” says director/producer Ryan Mah).

It also means training directors and producers in the use of integrated described video (IDV), a method of producing content for visually impaired audiences. In contrast to described video—which tacks on an audio track to relate what’s happening on screen—IDV bakes accessibility into the production, with the show’s host or a cast member describing what’s happening on screen.

Nye explains it this way: “With described video, a third voice comes in to say, for example, ‘Cara puts on her reading glasses.’ With IDV, I might say, ‘Oh, I can’t read a thing without these.’” Mah describes the method as “producing every episode like it’s going to be on the radio.”

AMI pioneered IDV, and it’s just one more way the broadcaster prioritizes its audience. “Described video is great, but it can be quite annoying to people who don’t require it,” says Nye. “We’ve actually heard from people that they’ll watch the same show in different rooms because their spouse or child doesn’t want to hear that description. Not a very inclusive experience.” IDV, on the other hand, is seamless, and makes content accessible to everybody.

“The feedback has been phenomenal,” says Nye. “We’ve been impressed with how our producer partners have stepped up to incorporate IDV into their productions. Black Rhino, for example, can just do it with their eyes closed.”

“We’re even hearing of producers who are starting to do that in their other productions, too,” Nye adds. “Because why not?”

For his part, Brar of Big Time Decent calls AMI “a dream” to work with: “They’re willing to find strong partners and trust their judgment.” Mah of Black Rhino concurs: “They’re amazing. They’re very passionate about making sure the content is accessible for everyone.”

AMI’s focus on accessibility is simply a focus on audience, and it’s an audience no other broadcaster can claim to cater to in the same way. Nye is grateful for the partners who help deliver the content that audience craves.

Says Nye: “The fact that we have such great production partners, who are willing to work with young creators and bring their stories to the screen—that is what success looks like to me.”

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*Underdog Inc.* (Big Time Decent Productions)

In consultation with the Disability Screen Office, we adapted the following from Emily Ladau’s *Demystifying Disability*. It provides helpful guidance on which terms to use when referring to people with disabilities. Remember, it’s always best to ask a person which terms work best for them based on their own lived experiences and identity.

## Say this!

## NOT this

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>disability / disabled</b></li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>person with a disability / disabled person</b></li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> differently abled (unless preferred)</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> handicap / handicapped</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> special needs (unless preferred)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>has a disability</b></li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>is disabled</b></li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> afflicted by</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> suffers from</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> victim of</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>person who is able to</b></li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> high functioning</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>person who is unable to</b></li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> low functioning</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>neurodivergent*</b></li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>person with Autism / Autistic person*</b></li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>person with a cognitive disability / cognitively disabled person*</b></li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>person with an intellectual disability / intellectually disabled person*</b></li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>person with a learning disability / learning disabled person*</b></li> </ul> <p><small>* These types of disabilities are not all the same but are often grouped together.</small></p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> mentally challenged</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> mentally handicapped</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> mentally retarded</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> slow</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> special-ed</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>able-bodied (if not physically disabled)</b></li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>does not have a disability</b></li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>neurotypical (if not neurodivergent)</b></li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>nondisabled</b></li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> normal</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> regular</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>person who uses a wheelchair</b></li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>wheelchair user</b></li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> wheelchair-bound</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> confined to a wheelchair</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>little person</b></li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>person of short stature</b></li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>person with dwarfism / dwarf</b></li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> midget</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>person with a mental health disability</b></li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>person with mental illness / mentally ill person</b></li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>person with a psychiatric disability / psychiatrically disabled person</b></li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> crazy</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> disturbed</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> insane</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> lunatic</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> mad</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> psychotic</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>person with a physical disability / physically disabled person</b></li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> cripple</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> invalid</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>accessible parking / restroom</b></li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> disabled restroom</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> handicapped parking</li> </ul>

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