

Deaf Identities and the emergence of Deaf Gain  
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**Abstract:** Deaf culture bonds Deaf communities as supranational entities that share an imaginary which allows a connection at a global level. The fluidity in the understanding between two Deaf people from opposite sides of the world through signed languages is a surprising phenomenon.

Throughout his life, a Deaf individual who uses sign language is permeated with translations and mediations as well as a feeling of being like a stranger in their own country, not sharing the common sensorial acuity that is required for canonical communication among the hearing. Hence, the Deaf are (usually) bilingual, bimodal and surrounded by intermodal translations and interpretations. In this way, it is important to discuss how identification and ascription processes occur in the Deaf, and how Deaf Identities can surface differently, as the prevalent presence of stigma can ultimately contaminate these processes.

The Deaf population encompasses people with different hearing loss (or can we say 'Deaf Gain?'), different language and communicational choices and consequently different Deaf identities. Considering the Deaf Communities' heterogeneity, a jigsaw puzzle can be formed by its multiple identities and signed languages. This perspective is

one of the premises of ‘Deaf Gain’, a concept that has been groundbreaking during the last years in Deaf Studies.

**Keywords:** Deaf Studies; Deaf Identities; Deaf Gain; Deaf Geographies

**Introduction:** The Deaf individual is a complete human being that uses sign language to communicate and lives in a minority community. What binds Deaf<sup>1</sup> people together is not the lack of hearing but rather their language, mostly due to its visual-motor modality, a trait specific to signed languages. Deaf communities are a worldwide phenomenon powered by signed languages and, altogether, have woven many traditions, such as folklore, poetry, anecdotes and other forms of cultural richness. Harlan Lane used the expression *The People of the Eye* to designate the Deaf because sight is the Deaf peoples’ main sensorial approach towards the world that surrounds them (cf. Lane et al., 2010). Therefore, this explains how other concepts like the Deaf Nation, the Deaf World and the Deaf Way came into existence. The term ‘Deaf Way’ became popular due to a conference that took place in Washington D.C. in the Gallaudet University in 1989. This was a 6000-people gathering from several countries and from which resulted a publication with circa 150 articles, commonly used by academics working on Deaf Studies to this day. These experts describe it from multiple perspectives, tapping into various subjects and evoking several fields. The ‘Deaf Way’ is a way of being, of perceiving, of reacting, of thinking in a Deaf mind frame, that is similar all over the world. This concept, the Deaf Way, serves as a *Mythomoteur*<sup>2</sup> that gives the Deaf community a stronger sense of purpose, one of ethnic identity.

The Deaf World is a supranational network intuitively constructed by deaf people from around the world, holding together their common values. The Deaf World coexists with the one in which the hearing majority lives, but the latter are usually unaware of the former. The Deaf World has its own established idiosyncrasies, its own culture, languages, artistic manifestations and other vibrant elements.

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<sup>1</sup> Capital ‘D’ Deaf and lowercase ‘d’ deaf are commonly used in Deaf Studies as distinct terms since the 1970s. Therefore, the thesis will follow this convention. Lowercase ‘d’ is used when someone experiences deafness through hearing lenses - the medical perspective. A deaf person does not use signed languages nor does s/he feel integrated in the Deaf community. A Deaf person, on the other hand, not only feels part of the Deaf community but experiences signed languages and Deaf Culture in a positive way (cf. Woodward, 1972).

<sup>2</sup> This is a concept by John Alexander Armstrong in *Nations before Nationalism*.

The Deaf Nation is an utopian construct, especially prolific in the United States of America, although with some European occurrences, and has led to many debates as it is seen as a separatist effort from the Deaf community.

This essay aims to explore how Deaf communities have evolved throughout time in terms of internal organization, in terms of notions and theories presented mainly by Deaf Studies academics; to explore the evolution of these communities and its natural consequence of self-awareness and, more importantly, of Deaf identities and how all these dynamics culminate in the construct of 'Deaf Gain'.

A Deaf individual is a member of a linguistic and cultural minority, who uses sign language to communicate. It is usually someone who participates in the gatherings of the Deaf community and both consumes and contributes to Deaf Culture. The Deaf community is a network of people and organizations that live around the interests, values and traditions of the Deaf. From Deaf education, to Deaf art, to Deaf theatre, to Deaf cinema, all are means or forms of Deaf expression. Deaf leadership, Deaf associations movement, Deaf activism, all are part of the endeavor for Deaf Rights amidst other examples. These are all as if conceptual and active clouds that gravitate in the Deaf World.

Signed languages are full-fledged languages that function in a tridimensional space and are the result of hand movements, body language and facial expressions. They have complex internal grammatic rules, and are independent from the oral languages they share territory with.

Throughout the times of Ancient Egypt, Deaf people were believed to be oracles of the divine and were treated as demi-gods. In Ancient Greece, Aristotle believed that the deaf had no ability to reason, since they were not able to speak, but this was not a sign of the times, because Socrates understood that the hands of the deaf and their facial expressions were able to convey effective communication among themselves and held meaning. (cf. Plato, 360). The true linguistic status of signed languages took centuries to become scientifically and socially accepted. Some individual attempts took place early on, but it was only in the eighteenth century that the first school for the deaf was founded, thus constituting a large community from which sprang linguistic norm and development. In effect, in 1760, the Abbe Charles-Michel de l'Épée founded the first

school to use sign language as a teaching method, as well as other artificially created signs, in order to teach deaf people how to read and write and become knowledgeable in several topics. This methodological model was used in Europe and in the United States of America and was showing good results. However, the Oralist<sup>3</sup> agenda was obviously against using signed languages in deaf education. The Milan Congress was the pinnacle of Oralism and, in 1880, approved a set of resolutions<sup>4</sup> which would transfigure all deaf lives from then onwards, for generations to come.

Over the centuries, many scholars have debated the concepts of nation, state, and nationalism: which originated which, how they come about and their internal dynamics. Eric Hobsbawm, in his book *Nations and Nationalism since 1840: Programme, Myth, Reality*, wrote a synthesis of several aspects and he expressively mentions the effort necessary to define these concepts:

“Attempts to establish objective criteria for nationhood, or to explain why certain groups have become ‘nations’ and others not, have often been made, based on single criteria such as language or ethnicity or a combination of criteria such as language, common territory, common history, cultural traits or whatever else.” (Hobsbawm 1990:5).

Hobsbawm goes on to explain Joseph Stalin’s conception of nation: “A nation is a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture”. Aspirations are not the only fabric nations are made of, but these aspirations evoke a sense of nationalism, and all these are ideas and conceptual networks that cannot be taken as isolated phenomena.

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<sup>3</sup> Oralism is the system that designates the practice of oral method over the gestural method. Oralists are people who believe that deaf/Deaf people have to use their vocal abilities and go through life without the usage of signed languages. The oralist agenda aims to eradicate the use of signed languages in education and deaf/Deaf people daily lives and focuses only in vocal rehabilitation, speech therapy and aural residues.

<sup>4</sup> Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf, informally known as The Milan Congress. The resolutions declare that the pure oral method shall be used and not signs nor the simultaneous articulation of oralism and signs, which are considered to undermine the oral method. Milan banned bimodalism.

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“Nevertheless, to insist on consciousness or choice as the criterion of nationhood is insensibly to subordinate the complex and multiple ways in which human beings define and redefine themselves as members of groups, to a single option: the choice of belonging to a ‘nation’ or ‘nationality’. But nationality, as Hobsbawm describes is not reducible “to a single dimension whether political, cultural or otherwise”. (Hobsbawm 1990:8)

A common example of an extra territorial supranational nation is mentioned by this author: the example of Jews whom identify themselves as such and do not share the common traits one ascribes to Jews, namely “religion, language, culture, tradition, historical background, blood-group patterns” (Hobsbawm 1990:8). So, to Hobsbawm, the main premise is that if a large group identifies as a nation they can then started to be seen and treated as one.

To tap into the question whether nation and state precedes nationalism or if it is the other way around, one must mention John Armstrong’s work, from 1982 *Nations before Nationalisms*. Armstrong disagrees with Hobsbawm and postulates that nations do precede nationalism, since it is a constructed identity and feeling towards the nation itself. In his book, Armstrong mentions a Norwegian anthropologist’s, Fredrik Barth, who proposed

“a social interaction model of ethnic identity that does not posit a fixed “character” or “essence” for the group, but examines the perceptions of its members which distinguish them from other groups. Concentration on these attitudinal boundary mechanisms affords three major advantages: Because ethnicity is defined by boundaries, both the cultural and the biological content of the group can alter as long as the boundary mechanisms are maintained. Although Barth points out that his boundaries may have territorial counterparts, he emphasizes that ethnic groups are “not merely or necessarily based on the occupation of exclusive territories”. (Armstrong 1982:4-5).

Considering that we are looking upon the Deaf construct of nation, as an imagined community, it is both essential and elucidative Benedict Anderson's definition of nation:

“an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.

It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” (Anderson, 1983:5-6)

In the case of Deaf people, they consider themselves to be a linguistic cultural minority and some go as far as calling it an ethnicity because of its idiosyncrasies, since the Deaf do share a specific physical attribute, a language and a cultural specificity. Truth be told, most Deaf Europeans put lesser focus into the idea of a nationalist internal organization of the Deaf Nation, although there are scarce examples such as Berthier and others, still amidst the French Revolution spirit who have considered the ‘deaf-mute nation’<sup>5</sup> comprising 23,000 French citizens (cf. Ladd, 2003). Meanwhile, in the United States, John J. Flournoy actually tried to organize a movement to build a Deaf-State for Deaf citizens. (cf. Van Cleeve & Crouch, 1989). Still, these enterprises were more prolific in the United States than in European countries, a fact that may be explained with historical, political and geographic reasons. Both historically and politically, the United States have always been more flexible to individual or group endeavor, than the countries in Europe. The old continent's national borders are a result of a much more negotiated dynamic and of course, a consequence of the recognition of peers, these being, other (more politically hegemonic) nations. The established nations look upon other newly formed nations and recognize by inviting them to diplomatic events and other official meetings so they can represent their nation, in doing so, they are recognizing their existence. In the middle ages, nations had to be recognized by the Pope, thus, the Vatican State had to accept the nations as such for others to follow and recognize them too. Nevertheless, the American Deaf when affirming their wish to

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<sup>5</sup> Deaf-mute is no longer an acceptable term, but it was at that time.

build the Deaf Nation, were not very worried about its legal separate status, focusing much more on its functioning like an intentional community, similar to what was referred by Lyman T. Sargent:

“an intentional community is a group of five or more adults and their children, if any, who come from more than one nuclear family and who have chosen to live together to enhance their shared values or for some other mutually agreed upon purpose.” (Sargent, 2010:6).

Steven D. Emery describes another useful concept to this essay, in his work *Citizenship and the Deaf Community - Deaf-Ship*:

“Arguably it is possible to state that there are many Deaf people who could relate to the metaphor of a ‘Deaf-Ship’, a ‘ship’ on which they are proud to be able to move freely around, by possessing the ability to use and converse in sign language.” (Emery, 2011:3).

This is, more precisely, the objective of the Deaf Nation, a place where one can experience world in a Deaf Way and exert his or her Deaf-Ship with no restrictions. As Emery states: “Multilingual and multicultural nation states appear to be the “norm”, with different communities and cultures co-existing with one another, but many minority groups do not enjoy equal citizenship.” (Emery, 2011:6).

To justify the complexity of the supranational dynamics of the Deaf World described in this essay, one can easily assume that there is a shared imaginary that bonds the Deaf people together. Numerous Deaf individuals have similar life stories and experiences based on being deaf, which have in fact molded their existence overall. (cf. Holcomb, 1994; Gil, 2010). The shared imaginary existence can be easily demonstrated if one observes a conversation between two Deaf individuals from opposite sides of the globe, chatting about their school experience, or their holiday family dinners. The reader may ask him or herself: “But if they are from opposite sides of the world, how do they communicate? Are signed languages universal?” No, signed languages are independent, and there are many different signed languages in the world, there is no one universal sign language. Actually, some countries may even encompass within their

borders more than one sign language, which occurs due to many factors, being the most common geographical barriers or community distinct dynamics. However, an artificially created signing code exists, called International Signs. This is not a language on its own, being rather a simplified sign code, but it proves itself useful when required. International Signs is mainly used for worldwide conferences and other multicultural gatherings, allowing Deaf people from different countries to communicate amongst themselves. There is a permeability, or should we call it flexibility, about the visual-motor modality of language. Using highly iconic signs enables one to chat in International Signs, which are a mixture of American Sign Language, British Sign Language and other signs that are considered very visual and intuitive.

Although there is this possibility among sign language users, and given that international meetings without a common sign language can flow easily, we should never assume that the Deaf World is a homogeneous mass. Not only is the national culture embedded in each individual, but there are also several types or should we call stages, of Deaf Identities. As Thomas K. Holcomb wrote:

“Deaf people are not alike. Some deaf people struggle with what it means to be deaf throughout their lives. Other deaf people have a strong sense of identity early on. Some deaf people associate more with hearing people. Yet others prefer to have as little to do with hearing people as possible. Some deaf people sign, and others don’t. Some wear hearing aids, and others don’t. Some have cochlear implants or want them. Others shun them completely. Some use their speech regularly, and others decline to use their voice at all.” (Holcomb, 2013:63).

Much has been written about Deaf Identities, before and after Thomas K. Holcomb’s *Introduction to American Deaf Culture*, but in this book, the author organized the possible seven Deaf identities one can occupy. These can and do change throughout one’s life and are not finite in themselves but rather ongoing and everlasting processes.

(1) “Balanced Bicultural Deaf people are people who are sincerely comfortable in both the Deaf and hearing communities” (Holcomb, 2013:67) and have no preference between the two. They are usually fluent signers and may or may not be fluent oral



speakers, although this is usually the case. Some may use hearing aids, but this is not a mandatory trait.

(2) Deaf Dominant Bicultural individuals are those who generally function well around both Deaf and hearing people, but they would prefer to be among those who can sign, despite them being Deaf or hearing. The most important factor to them is that their interlocutors are signed language users. These individuals are usually those who try to teach sign language to the people who are closest to them, regularly present in their lives. They are those who request sign language interpreters the most, to translate and mediate their communication needs. They always prefer to have their communication assisted by a sign language interpreter but if an interpreter is not available, they will usually use notes, mime or resort to speechreading.

(3) Hearing Dominant Bicultural Deaf people are individuals who for some reason are far from the Deaf community, be it due to professional choices, geographical distance or other reasons. The fact is that they function well within the Deaf community but have a limited contact with it. It is not a matter of choosing people but rather a question of life circumstances that have led them to be further away from the Deaf community, hence constraining contacts with other Deaf individuals.

(4) A Culturally Separate Deaf individual is one who voluntarily reduces hearing contact to a minimum:

“After years of frustration with hearing people due to communication obstacles, patronizing attitudes, insensitivity, and oppression, Deaf people with this identity may decide that to live more effectively they need to avoid situations in which awkward interactions with hearing people are required.” (Holcomb, 2013:69).

These are individuals that tend to go to the Deaf club for their social life, to a Deaf religious gathering (or some other form of religious Deaf group, being a meeting, a mass or other kinds of religious gatherings) and play sports in Deaf teams, among other examples.

(5) A Culturally Marginal individual is not comfortable in either the Deaf or hearing community and most likely is not fluent in sign language nor speech. These individuals avoid general contact, or others avoid them, since communication with them is often problematic due to a low proficiency linguistic level and lack of social skills.

(6) The Culturally Isolated individual is the one who chooses to reject signed languages and other Deaf people. This choice is, from the perspective of a Deaf person:

“a life of isolation and loneliness” (Holcomb, 2013:70). Hearing parents of deaf children usually consider this to be a proof of assimilation into the majority culture but keeping a deaf child from a natural language can take its toll linguistically, cognitively and of course, socially.

(7) Finally, the Culturally Captive individuals who those who are usually overly protected by family or educational staff, or other people that keep them from knowing that there is such a thing as the Deaf community and signed languages. They are totally unaware of the educational, social and other opportunities for the deaf/Deaf.

A signed language is a natural language for a deaf/Deaf individual because it is a language acquired without any effort. Signed languages are complete languages and they have the advantage to be received and produced by means that do not require aural abilities, making them natural languages for the deaf/Deaf. Being Deaf and using sign language does not mean one rejects the official national language being used in one's country, but usually means that one can learn to read and write it, depending on personal choice, to undergo rigorous speech therapy and learn how to speak and speechread. Sign language and oral/written language transforms the Deaf individual into what linguists call a bilingual person. Since these languages function in a visual-motor modality and vocal-aural modality respectively, this Deaf person is bilingual and also bimodal. In addition, since the Deaf have a culture of their own, inserted in the national (hearing) cultural frame, they are also bicultural people. This the Deaf individual – bilingual, bimodal, bicultural. All these coexisting dynamics potentially turn the Deaf into a people whom, on a on cultural, linguistic and communitarian level are rich with experiences and knowledge that can only expand our cross-cultural conscience on diversity in hearing societies.

Identity is an individual path each of us sets out on but it is also a collective process. Personal identity is a constant ongoing course of the individual, providing one with crucial pieces for personality development, giving one an individual sense of direction a comfortable feeling of well-being with oneself and a referential of sameness among others. Although its expansion is critical in early years, it continues to develop during adulthood through all social interactions, via the various roles one assumes, by engaging in networking, relationships and other elements. All will all build up to become our cultural identity. (cf. Erikson, 1968; cf. Jenkins, 2008). As Stuart Hall

stated: "Identity, in this sociological conception, bridges the gap between the "inside" and the "outside" - between the personal and the public worlds." (Hall, 1992:597).

Just being *audiologically* deaf does not grant you an automatic run for 'Deaf Identity'. Deaf Identity is a fluid concept as all identities are and are not only a result of a recognition of self-sameness – identification - but also, ascribed by others so identity is an intensely mediated construct (cf. Jenkins, 2008). The main issue about identity formation in deaf people is the *stigma* that occurs simultaneously as identification and ascription and can also damage the well-being of deaf individuals. Goffman theorized *stigma* as an attribute, behaviour or reputation that is perceived as negative, and in the case of deaf people, it materializes into notions such as being perceived as unable to hear, unable to speak, unable to communicate, unable to think or to reason, to be seen as flawed, handicapped, disabled. These constructs are gravely damaging to the construction of the image and self-image of the deaf individual. Such *stigma* occurs between virtual social identity and actual social identity and it conditions deaf people's behaviour, reactions and responses, being a clear example to the phenomenon that Jenkins mentions: that identity itself may also cause behaviour. (cf. Goffman 1963; cf. Jenkins, 2008).

To aggravate such circumstances, 95% of the deaf are born in hearing families, which creates a disruptive channel for cultural transmission. Imagine you were born in a family setting that functioned in a communication template which you could not access and that was mediated by a culture you did not naturally understand nor identify with – this is seldom the Deaf experience on growing up in hearing homes. They are strangers in their own country, sometimes not even feeling they belong to their own family (in the more extreme cases). These are the reasons for the existence of schools for the Deaf and Deaf clubs; they constitute natural signing communities and barrier free spaces and are central to the lives of Deaf individuals. Settings such as deaf schools or Deaf clubs provide the room for identity growth for the Deaf, they are cozy spaces where they can truly be themselves, communicate in their natural languages and share experiences with people who are alike.

In the past, Deaf associations and Deaf clubs were accused of being closed spaces for the mainstream public and/or with a very private access. Deaf only settings were viewed as creating social division, rather than being a congregational space. As signed languages gained recognition more and more hearing people started to take

workshops, courses and, suddenly, more interpreters were available, and the Deaf engaged in more mainstream contexts, like television, theatres, congresses, among others. Today, Deaf spaces are now signing spaces for all signers. Sociologically, the evolution of Deaf communities nowadays finds itself culminating in the recent notion of Deaf Gain, a way of viewing the Deaf of the world as peoples who have a precious and positive impact on the world and on themselves.

Deaf gain is a concept coined by Dirksen and Murray, who have been writing for many years on the bright side of being Deaf. There is a baffling testimony in the beginning of their book on Deaf Gain that illustrates this concept to perfection:

“Aaron Williamson<sup>6</sup> began to lose his hearing at the age of seven. Having spent the rest of his childhood in visits to audiologists, he now wonders. “Why had all the doctors told me that I was losing my hearing, and not a single one told me that I was gaining my deafness?” (Dirksen & Murray, 2014: xv).

Deaf Gain is the peak of the evolution of a paradigm which has slowly shifted perspectives “from an overarching framework of normalcy to one of diversity” (Dirksen & Murray, 2014: xv). The dark ages of full focus on diagnose, therapy, rehabilitation and signed languages prohibition are hopefully ending, and have perished already in many Western countries. There is a new understanding about the Deaf/deaf and their linguistic cultural minorities worldwide. “Deaf Gain is inherently multidisciplinary, situated at the intersections of several fields: neuroscience, linguistics, sensory studies, history, art, architecture, and philosophy, among others.” (Dirksen & Murray, 2014: xxiii).

Deaf Gain is decomposed into specific theoretical notions. The first dimension of Deaf Gain is Deaf Benefit, which is the idea that deafness may bring benefits on an individual level, for example, visual acuity which is higher in congenially deaf individuals (cf. Neville, Schmidt and Kutas, 1983; cf. Neville and Lawson, 1987; cf. Bavelier, D et al., 2000). Deaf Gain is not about deafness being better than hearing, but surely establishes the idea that being hearing is not better than being deaf. This premise

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<sup>6</sup> Aaron Williamson is a British performance artist. He asked this question during a lecture to a graduate class in deaf studies at Gallaudet University in 2002. (Dirksen & Murray, 2014: xxxix).

leads us not to advocate becoming deaf, neither hearing, but to embrace who and what we are, questioning the reasons for which a deaf person should want to become hearing, in the first place, as the medical paradigm once has lead us to believe. Wishing to be hearing is something not all deaf people feel. Some of them are not even given a choice, being chirurgical intervened at a very early age with the insertion of cochlear implants.

Also as a part of the Deaf Gain, is the notion of Deaf contribute which is, in synthesis, how the Deaf have contributed to improve humanity, not only by the visual perspective they bring into society, but also through signed languages and their cultural products: Deaf literature, Deaf art, Deaf Humor and Deaf Culture in general.

Deaf Ahead is another concept which is also a part of Deaf Gain. It encompasses innovation, the thinking ahead, being in the vanguard of contributes or benefits, culminating by creating something that never existed. Examples of this are Wladislav Zeitlin (Deaf), the inventor of technologies that were pivotal for the creation of the television, Vincent Cerf (Deaf), one of the fathers of the internet (together with Bob Kahn (hearing)). And, the most famous, Thomas Alva Edison, acclaimed as “America’s greatest inventor” who is responsible for the creation of several equipment but most importantly, the long-lasting light bulb.

## **Conclusion**

“Roland Barthes recounts a scene viewed from his window. He sees a mother walking along with her small son; the boy is holding one of her hands, while she pushes an empty stroller out in front of them with the other. What strikes Barthes about the mother and son – strikes him enough, that is, to make a note of both what he saw and the date (December 1, 1976) – is their manner of walking “together”: “She walks at her own pace, imperturbably; the child, meanwhile, is being pulled, dragged along, is being forced to keep running, like an animal... She walks at her own pace, unaware of the fact that her son’s rhythm is different. And she’s his mother!” How to walk together (how to live together) in such a way that recognizes and respects individual rhythms?” (Barthes, 2012: xxvii).

Is there a common wish from the majority and minority to live together and accept each other? Is the hearing majority open to recognize and acknowledge Deaf Gain? What is still missing so we all can walk side by side? Are the hearing willing to accept Deaf communities' dreams? Are the current efforts for inclusion answering the Deaf communities' wishes and honoring the principles of Deaf Gain? It is crucial to create spaces where the Deaf have full accessibility and the opportunity to be themselves, to display their identity without repression. To discuss these realities is both urgent and relevant, so that mentalities can shift. Governments and other entities should create platforms for mutual understanding, as well as, places for Deaf cultural manifestations to occur. Deaf cultural dynamics require active participation from the community and they should not be viewed as a mere inclusive purpose, but rather as source of valuable culturally Deaf contribution. Deaf artists, Deaf actors, Deaf journalists and other professionals are vehicles of both social and cultural representativity that can trigger effective social changes.

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