

DISABILITY AND ITS PORTRAYAL IN THE MEDIA

A CODE OF PRACTICE

Understanding 'Disability'

"How disability is defined is of crucial importance. The presuppositions informing particular definitions can be offensive and provide the basis of stereotyping and stigmatisation." (Barton, L., in Camilleri, J.M., 1998)

In its 1988 publication *The World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons* (WPA), the United Nations observes that:

"In most countries, at least one person out of 10 is disabled by physical, mental or sensory impairment, and at least 25 per cent of any population as adversely affected by the presence of disability." (WPA, 1988)

In reality there are no such sharp parameters, but different individuals possess a range of abilities to differing degrees. For example, visual ability ranges from people with near-perfect 20/20 vision through to those who need glasses, or who have restricted vision even using glasses, to those who can see nothing at all. The same is true of all other types of impairments, from people with minimal hearing loss, to others who are profoundly deaf from birth, from people with a little limited mobility to others who are completely confined to a bed, finally there are people with minimal learning impairment to those with profound learning impairments. The truth is we all have a range of abilities and limitations and in this disabled persons are no different.

This information can lead us to two conclusions:

- disabled people are not a small, marginalised minority but a significant section of the public and, as such, they are also directly consumers of media products;
- Disability is a very ordinary part of life.

Unfortunately, it is the commonly accepted myths and stereotypes about disabled people that make disability an extraordinary thing. The common assumptions about disability focus on the disabled person's lack of abilities. Indeed, the negative terms most frequently used to describe disabled people as: 'crippled', 'handicapped', 'less fortunate', all accentuate the disabled individual's biological (or medical) imperfections. All these negative terms compare disabled persons less favourably with their (presumably) more 'fortunate' brethren.

Even more 'politically correct' designations, such as, 'differently challenged', impaired, persons with special needs, etc., accent the disabled person's apartness, the disabled individual's dislocation from the group and the community. At best disabled people are viewed as having 'special' needs, at worst they are viewed as '*in-valids*', or '*handicapped*'.

"Of course there is nothing inherently wrong with these terms, it is simply that their meaning has been substantially devalued by societal perceptions

of disabled people; in short they have been turned into terms of abuse.”
(Barnes, 1997)

It would be hard to overestimate the damage caused by these negative terms and the resultant negative images of disabled people. It is also important to stress that in the same way as members of minority groups and women have recognised the power of the language and imagery used in the media and the way this can have a direct positive, or negative, impact on their lives, so too, disabled people are sensitive to the ways in they are represented in words, pictures and sound on the mass media.

For instance, the word “handicapped” carries powerful associations of disabled people as passive objects of charity always with their ‘cap in hand’, rather than active individuals contributing to society.

Unfortunately, many of the definitions of disabled people and Disability have been created by non-disabled who tend to equate disability with the individual’s physical and/or intellectual impairments. That is, they focus on the biological, or medical aspect. So widespread is this belief that it is biological impairment and lack of function which create disability, that the World Health Organisation (in the early 1980s) based its own definitions on these assumptions. The whole focus of this viewpoint is on the individual and their perceived inadequacy.

However, over the last twenty years this viewpoint has been systematically and widely rejected by disabled people and their organisations. They argue that by focusing on individual, medical inadequacies the, so called, ‘medical model’ of disability holds disabled people themselves responsible for any difficulties they may encounter during the course of their daily lives. At the same time it totally ignores the restrictive environments and disabling barriers created, not by the disabled persons, but by a society in general.

Thus, disabled persons have come to agree that Disability is mostly the result of social causes. In this way, disabled people have come to agree that:

- the term ‘impairment’ refers to individually based, functional limitation --- whether physical, intellectual, sensory, or hidden, while
- the term ‘disability’ is the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical and social barriers.

This shift of emphasis identifies the main cause of disability as ‘a highly discriminatory society which penalises those who do not conform to able-bodied perceptions of normality.’ (Barnes, xxxx). Therefore, a major contributory factor to disability is prejudice, stereotyping or ‘institutional discrimination’ against disabled people. In this respect the media has a major part to play in either perpetuating stereotyping and prejudice, or in educating the public towards a more understanding, positive attitude vis à vis disabled people.

LANGUAGE & TERMINOLOGY

“We are seen as ‘abnormal’ because we are different, we are problem people, lacking the equipment for social integration. But the truth is, like

everybody else, we have a range of things we **can** and **cannot** do, a range of abilities both mental and physical that are unique to us as individuals. The only difference between us and other people is that we are viewed through spectacles that only focus on our inabilities ...” (Brisenden, in Camilleri, 1998)

Disabled people are not necessarily “special” simply because of their disability, it is therefore important to avoid imagery which portrays them in extreme terms, such as the ‘hero’, or ‘victim’ approach.

The dominant view of disability is that the disabled persons must necessarily lead to an unfulfilling and “tragic” life, unless a person is super-humanly courageous or determined. It is only the ‘superhuman’ ones who succeed in leading a “normal” (i.e. approximating to able-bodied) life. This effectively means that disabled people are represented as either *VICTIMS* or *HEROES*.

- **VICTIMS** - are portrayed as tragic, helpless and pathetic
- **HEROES** - are portrayed as eternally cheerful, super-humanly good and tremendously courageous. In fact, in disability circles, ‘heroes’ are often disparagingly referred to as ‘super-cripples’, or ‘super-crips’

In this way even when broadcasters think that they are presenting positive images of disabled people by praising them for achieving something that would be unremarkable if done by an able-bodied person, all too often this is patronising to disabled people, and reinforces stereotypes.

The use of particular phrases and terms in one’s language can be purely subjective and result in inaccurate, patronising and ultimately damaging imagery.

AVOID

- emotive terms like ‘afflicted’, ‘stricken’, ‘sufferer’ and ‘victim’, instead, use the phrases ‘*someone who has*’, or ‘*a person with*’ an impairment. These phrases are more neutral and less value-laden.
(For instance, saying that a person “suffers” from multiple sclerosis is often not based on an awareness of either the impact of the disease on that person’s life, or of their attitude towards it. Many people simply regard the difficulties associated with their disabilities as a normal part of life. This should not be portrayed as “heroic stoicism” but as an assertion of the NORMALITY OF DISABILITY.)
- using phrases such as, “confined to a wheelchair”, instead, describe a person as a “wheelchair user”
(wheelchairs empower rather than confine and disabled people regard them as a straightforward mobility aid, just like a pair of shoes)
- generalising. Do not refer to ‘the disabled’ as if they were a homogenous group, instead of a diverse group of individuals.
- making assumptions or generalizations about how disabled people feel – check with them -- they are the experts where their own lives are concerned.

CHECK YOUR STORY

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Does my production employ these stereotypes and assumptions?
- Is it patronising, or does it make the disabled person a mere object of pity?
- Is the disability relevant at all?

The terms used to describe some conditions have become stigmatizing and insulting, so do NOT use the terms spastic or mongol, but instead refer to people as *'having cerebral palsy'* or *'having Down syndrome'*.

Put the person first

A major problem with having an impairment, especially an impairment that is obvious to the eye, is the fact that one's 'impaired' condition tends to obscure the fact that there is a person there. That is why terms, such as, *'the disabled'*, *'the blind'*, and so forth, **must always be avoided** precisely because they focus entirely on the disability and dehumanise the people referred to in this way.

Instead, use the terms *'disabled people'* or *'persons with disabilities'*.

BE POSITIVE

Advice and consultation

Consult disabled people, and their organisations about the issues affecting their lives. They are the experts in these matters.

Authors, scriptwriters, journalists and reports must be responsible and check the accuracy of their work before it is made public. In order to avoid inaccuracies they should seek advice from organisations controlled and run by disabled persons. Information about these organisations can be obtained from the Kummissjoni Nazzjonali Persuni b'Dizabilità's (National Commission Persons with Disability) website: <http://www.knpd.org>.

Disabled people and discrimination

The general public is often unaware of the environmental and social barriers that prevent disabled people from living full active lives. Any portrayal of disabled people, in whatever context, must reflect the disabled person having to confront on a daily basis environmental and social barriers.

Therefore, if you are showing the difficulties confronting a disabled individual, or group, *do not merely focus on the individual's physical or mental impairments*, but upon the *broader social causes* of the problems, for example:

- the inaccessible social environment for wheelchair users;
- negative social attitudes which persons with intellectual impairment must confront;
- inaccessible means of communication and information for people with sensory impairment (blind and Deaf people).

Disabled people and charity

At all costs avoid depicting disabled people as receivers of charity. Disabled people should be shown interacting with both disabled and non-disabled people as equals, that is, giving as well as receiving. In the majority of instances, disabled people are only shown as passive recipients of pity and charity.

Disabled people have complex, rich and multi-faceted personalities and wherever possible this fullness of character should be accurately projected. Show them in situations which illustrate a full range of emotions and activities, similar to those experienced by non-disabled human beings: joy, sorrow, etc. Show them in different aspects: parent, lover, provider, sibling, friend, etc.

Disabled people and comedy

Disabled people should not be ridiculed or made the butt of jokes. Remember:

- Deaf people are not stupid
- Blind people don't bump into everything in their path
- Mobility impaired people don't do 'funny' walks
- Intellectually disabled people are not totally devoid of feeling, avoid depicting them in the Gahan mould.

Uncreative writers, limited comedians and unscrupulous advertisers should be cautioned to avoid negative imagery and severely disciplined where they exhibit deliberate bad taste.

Disabled people and sensationalism

Don't be sensational when portraying disabled people. This is especially true if a disabled person has either been the victim of, or the perpetrator, of violence.

Disabled people and sexuality

Disabled people are not sexually abnormal, so avoid showing them as such. In reality, disabled people are neither asexual, nor are they sexually voracious. Disabled people

should be shown in loving, give and take relationships, with the same sexual needs and desires as other non-disabled people.

Disabled people and the disabled population

The media should ensure that when showing disabled people, they are representative of the diversity which exists in this group: youngsters, teen-agers, adults, parents, single, elderly people. Always ensure appropriate gender and race representations.

Recruitment of disabled people

The broadcasting media must make more effort to recruit disabled people to work in mainstream media organisations. Media attitudes towards disabled people will certainly improve if disabled people are integrated in all levels of the media.

Equal Opportunities and Design for All

In order to ensure equal opportunity employment for disabled people, media organisations must ensure that their buildings, equipment, policies and practices are disability friendly. As a first step, broadcasters must ensure that the physical environment in which they operate is fully accessible according to *Design for All* principles.

Under Act I of 2000 the Equal Opportunities (Persons with Disability) Act (EOA) proprietors and managers of broadcasting stations are duty bound to ensure that disabled persons are provided with equal opportunity treatment at all levels.

Copies of the EOA and Design for All Guidelines may be downloaded from the Kummissjoni Nazzjonali Persuni b'Dizabilità's website on: <http://www.knpd.org>.

Employment of disabled actors

Wherever possible the portrayal of disabled characters should be carried out by disabled actors. In the past female parts were played by boys, as women were not allowed to act. Until relatively recently, white actors would play the part of black characters, as they would play the part of Native American, or Asian characters. If this is no longer acceptable, then it is high time that the community of disabled persons is given the chance to develop acting talent from among genuinely disabled people. To this end, pressure should be put on the University of Malta to ensure that its courses in the dramatic arts, theatre and communication studies attract disabled students.

Disability Issues training

Besides employing more disabled people, there is an urgent need for the broadcasting media to organise training in Disability Issues for all its members of staff. Only in this way will individuals working in the media become more fully aware of the implications of their productions on society in general and disabled persons in particular.

Accessible media content

Media personnel must strive to ensure that all media content is produced in accessible forms for disabled people. For instance, all TV programmes should be accompanied by sign language and subtitles for Deaf people and all print media should be available in alternative formats for blind people (braille, audio tape, or in electronic format). This will give a clear signal that disabled persons are valued members of our community and thus, efforts must be made to fully include them into the mainstream of social life.

NOTES

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