

Authentic Disability Reporting and Inclusion in Journalism

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Themes

- What's "disability" and who identifies as disabled?
- Understanding ableism and inspiration porn
 - Choosing disability-related stories
- Including disabled people's perspectives
 - Avoiding disempowering language
 - Choosing images
 - Accessibility of content
 - Being a disabled journalist
- Working with disabled journalists

What is 'disability'?

"Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others" / [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities](#)

"Disability is something that happens when people with impairments face barriers in society; it is society that disables us, not our impairments, this is the thing all disabled people have in common. It is something that happens when the world we live in has been designed by people who assume that everyone is the same." / [NZ Disability Strategy](#)

Some people with chronic illness [consider](#) they are also disabled through, for instance, experiencing pain.

Disability identity

NZDS 2016-26:

"For some of us, the term 'disabled people' is a source of pride, identity and recognition that disabling barriers exist within society and not with us as individuals. For others, the term 'people with disability' has the same meaning and is important to those who want to be recognised as a person before their disability."

Swedish terms: "Personer med funktionsnedsättning" is preferred.

Preference for people-first language in learning disability community.

If in doubt, ask!

Context: understanding ableism

Centre for Disability Rights - Disability Writing and Journalism
Guidelines:

"Ableism is a set of biased attitudes and beliefs about disability that harm and disadvantage disabled people through both individual discriminatory actions and large scale, discriminatory social institutions and systems.

Ableism can explain anything from an employer denying a qualified wheelchair user a job to a Deaf person not being able to understand a politician's stump speech [campaign speech] because of a lack of a sign language interpreter to a child with a reading disability failing a class because their grade was determined entirely by timed, written exams."

What is “inspiration porn”?

“**Inspiration porn** slants stories and images of disabled people in a way that allows a **nondisabled audience to feel warm and fuzzy**, but regards the disabled person as nothing more than an **object** that produces these positive feelings. Inspiration porn often also highlights how nondisabled people themselves are considered “inspiring” for doing things that would be considered mundane in a context that didn’t involve a disabled person as an **object of pity**.”

An **inspiration porn** story may be about how a disabled teen was asked to prom by a popular girl or boy who **felt sorry** for them or **sacrificed** their “real date” to be nice and compassionate. It may show a disabled person being **photographed without their permission** as a “good Samaritan” helps them get their lunch or cross the street. It might feature a disabled athlete, and promote the message that **disability is nothing more than a bad attitude...** it creates an **unnecessary hierarchy** where nondisabled people are better than disabled people, and disabled people only live to inspire and entertain the nondisabled masses.”

From [CDR guidelines](#)

Choosing stories: Disability framing to avoid

Disabled people as feel-good inspiration

Focusing on a non-disabled saviour or their good deed

Simplistic "overcome the odds/overcome disability" narratives

"The only disability is a bad attitude"

Disability as pitiable, hopeless, tragic

Reducing people to their disability

Assuming that if disability is relevant at all, it must be headlined

Do report on

- Policies, practices, events, attitudes etc. that needlessly disadvantage disabled people
- Disability-related angles on just about any major social or environmental issue (employment, education, parenting, transport, climate change...)
- Disabled people and communities advocating for change
- Positive examples of disability representation and visibility
- Stories involving disabled people where the main focus is something else - mention disability only if relevant

Voice of Disabled People (1/2)

- Take disabled people's perspectives into account when picking an angle; ask open-ended questions when possible.
- If the story has a disability focus, quote/feature at least one disabled person prominently.
- Be prepared to communicate and/or meet in ways that work well for the disabled person (as well as you). This is crucial and may take additional time.

Voice of Disabled People (2/2)

- Avoid leaving disabled people's perspectives out of the picture (e.g. reporting murders of disabled relatives, disabled child stories or treatment research stories).
- Family members are not stand-ins for disabled people unless the person specifically wants them to be.
- Aim to research disability-related organisations before speaking to them – do they have disabled people on their board? Do their own media releases quote disabled people? Do they employ disabled people?

Language

Avoid

- Suffering from ... / Lider av...
- Wheelchair-bound / Rullstolsbunden
- Handicapped / Handikappad
- Retarded
- Differently abled / Funktionsvarierad
- Funktionshindrad
- ...

Examples of what to use:

- Disabled, has [particular impairment] / har en funktionsnedsättning
- Wheelchair user / rullstolsburen alternativt använder rullstol
- Autistic / autistisk
- Blind/low vision / blind alternativt har en synnedsättning
- Deaf/deaf/hard of hearing / döv alternativt hörselskadad
- Learning/intellectual disability / intellektuell funktionsnedsättning
- Experiences mental distress/ mental illness/ mental ill health
- Leva med psykisk ohälsa

Images

- Images are strong first impressions
- Take care with stock images - do they buy into any stereotypes?
- Don't use images of mobility aids without the actual people
- Read this (tongue in cheek): [How to be disabled according to stock photography](#)

Content accessibility

- Include [alt text](#) with images, so screen-reader users know briefly what they contain and why they're there.
- Aim to caption all video content.
- Aim to provide voice-overs videos which would otherwise contain only text-on-screen over music.
- Include text articles under video and radio segments, and/or verbatim transcripts.
- For longer or more complex visuals and interactives which are not fully analysed in article text, if possible provide the data in an alternate form e.g. a CSV file.
- If you're making your own site, blog etc., read this friendly [guide](#) to the web accessibility guidelines.

Being a Disabled Journalist

- You battle inaccessible or otherwise challenging aspects of your job regularly (usually which could have been designed differently).
- You may then need to ask for assistance often, and explain the same problems regularly to multiple people.
- You often have to work harder than your non-disabled colleagues to prove yourself or compensate for the ways in which your disability makes things slower. You feel this pressure.
- You are afraid of disclosing non-visible impairments, for which flexible working arrangements or other accommodations would be beneficial, in case you are then treated as fragile or less capable.
- You may face (usually unintentional) discriminatory or ableist assumptions or beliefs from your colleagues or from the people you are reporting on.
- You are a minority; it's lonely.

Working with Disabled Journalists

Employers:

- Remember that newsroom diversity must include disability
- Preferably with all employees, individually check in on how things are going from time to time

For everyone:

- Remember that disabled people are individuals and we all work differently. Communication is key.
- Be adaptable and flexible.
- Be proactive about including disabled people in less formal, social settings.
- Don't be afraid to offer help but remember it's not personal if we politely decline it.
- General tip: please don't touch us or our things without asking, just as you wouldn't for anyone else.

Notes, references, things to read/bookmark

Reporting appropriately on mental health is important and isn't our area of expertise. Here are a couple resources (from New Zealand) on the topic:

- Advocacy org Changing Minds has produced mental health [stigma reduction guidelines](#)
- The Mental Health Foundation has produced [media guidelines](#).

Other references and good reading:

- [Disability Writing & Journalism Guidelines – Center for Disability Rights](#) (many other sets of guidelines exist but we'd recommend this one)
- [How to be disabled, according to stock photography](#)
- [An easy-to-understand page about the Web Accessibility Guidelines](#)
- [A fantastic guide to alt text](#) (more nuanced than many pages google suggests)
- [An explanation of the social model from People with Disability Australia, and this lively discussion on how it represents disability](#)
- [UN Convention on the rights of Persons with Disabilities](#)
- [NZ disability Strategy 2016-26](#)
- [Stella Young: I'm not your Inspiration thank you very much \(Ted Talk\)](#)
- [Read disabled writers \(and profile them!\). You could start with this NYT disability series.](#)

Please note that some material in the presentation is brainstormed from our experience and that of friends and others in the disability community, hence not every statement is referenced.