How can we improve portrayals of people with disabilities in the media?

The question and the problem

Images and stories in the media have the potential to influence society’s attitudes, norms and behaviours towards people with disabilities. Even events such as parasports and the Paralympics provide an opportunity to challenge society’s expected norms and perceptions regarding the capabilities of people with disabilities. Although there has been some improvement in the media portrayal of people with disabilities, these portrayals remain scarce and entrenched in stereotypes, social stigma and misrepresentations. People with disabilities receive far less coverage in all types of media and when they do receive coverage, it often reinforces negative stereotypes or doesn’t show the diversity of people with disabilities. This evidence brief aims to look at the core challenges faced with regards to media portrayals of people with disabilities focusing on coverage, representation, diversity in both sport and entertainment media.

Recommendations

- Recommendation #1: Increase disability representation within the media industry
- Recommendation #2: Increase training and education for media professionals on disability coverage and representation
- Recommendation #3: Avoid homogeneity and the “hierarchy of disability” in media portrayals and coverage.
- Recommendation #4: Educate and inform commentators and the public on parasports and increase positive coverage

“The portrayal of people with disability in the media is often stereotyped, evoking emotions of pity, fear, and admiration.”

[Leanne Rees, Priscilla Robinson & Nora Shields. 2017]
Challenges

Challenge #1: Across various types of media, people with disabilities receive less coverage and are underrepresented in mainstream media, and even disability specific programs.

- Various reviews and studies have cited several reasons for this lack of coverage and representation with the main findings being the media’s perception of what they consider to be the public’s interest resulting in reduced awareness, coverage and a lack of recognition.
- Disability has also not been an area that the media has felt obligated to cover as media representatives and their audiences are often unaware that disability is a phenomenon with their stories and experiences often overlooked or ignored.
- Another reason cited by many studies is that very few people with disabilities work in the media industry, with few people with disabilities as media representatives or part of the decision-making processes and production. Although some disability-specific media programmes can be found, such as television documentaries, people with disabilities rarely appear in mainstream programmes or their production.

Challenge #2: The media has been cited as a key source for the reinforcement of negative images and ideas of people with disabilities.

- Many studies have shown a trend that when people with disabilities do receive media and news coverage, they are often stigmatised or stereotyped, portrayed as either superheroes or as objects of pity and compassion.
- Negative stereotypes of people with disabilities, such as the “supercrip” or “victim” narratives, are often perpetuated in the media through entertainment such as films and TV, news and sports. These stereotypes create and contribute to social exclusion and discrimination.
- Misrepresentations are common, for example some studies and reviews found that the majority of programs portrayed people on the autistic spectrum to be above or have exceptionally high intelligence and other studies found that people with mental and intellectual disabilities were often portrayed as violent.

Challenge #3: Within media portrayals of people with disabilities, there is often a lack of diversity creating an idea that people with disabilities are a homogeneous group.

- Although a lack of diversity can be seen in terms of gender, age, race, culture, and socio-economic background – many studies have observed a “hierarchy of disability” in the media. Studies have found that people without disabilities tend to favour and greater acceptance is given to people with minimal disabilities.
- The vast majority of studies also observed that men and women are not equally represented in all forms of media including minority groups. People with disabilities are not a homogenous group, and their experiences and needs vary greatly depending on their disability, gender, age, race, culture, and socio-economic background. Failing to reflect this diversity can lead to further marginalisation and exclusion.

Challenge #4: Persistent stereotypes in media representation of athletes with disabilities.

- Multiple studies found that the Olympic Games receive significantly more coverage than the Paralympic Games with some studies finding as high as six-times more text coverage and ten-times more photo coverage.
- An explanatory theme was found in parasports as audiences experienced a high degree of difficulty in understanding the rules and differences which has a negative impact on the audience’s attention and interest.
- Additionally, negative references remained in media, underpinned by a “supercrip” narrative and medicalised descriptions of disability. To illustrate, there were inferences made that the Paralympic Games were not a “real” contest, and that the athletes were not regarded as “real” athletes.
**How did we find answers**

We conducted a review of reviews, examining systematic and literature review evidence on the topic on how people with disabilities are portrayed in the media. All recommendations are based on reviews of literature from low- and middle-income countries, as well as some reviews of literature from both high- and low-income countries where the recommendations made were transferable to low-resource settings. This evidence brief is based on the findings of two reviews of low- and middle-income country evidence, one review which covered literature from a range of settings, and three reviews concerning evidence from both high-and-low-income countries.

**Evidence-informed Recommendations and Actions**

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<th>Key Recommendations</th>
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<td><strong>Increase representation within the industry</strong></td>
<td>Media companies can take steps to increase the representation of people with disabilities in the media industry, for example by actively recruiting and hiring people with disabilities in all areas of the industry, including as media representatives, decision-makers, producers, writers, and actors. In addition, coverage should be increased in mainstream media and not just disability focussed programs.</td>
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<td><strong>Increase training and education for media professionals on disability coverage and representation</strong></td>
<td>Media companies should take active steps in training journalists and all media professionals on how to accurately and respectfully represent people with disabilities, disability-related issues and their experiences. This can include workshops, seminars and training programs that provide guidance on disability representation, best practices for working with people with disabilities, and strategies for avoiding negative stereotypes and stigmatising portrayals of people with disabilities.</td>
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<td><strong>Avoid homogeneity and the “hierarchy of disability” in media portrayals and coverage</strong></td>
<td>Media companies should increase the representation and coverage of under-represented groups as well as all forms of disability and not just minimal disabilities. It is also recommended to see more characters in mainstream films and tv shows with various types of disabilities from various backgrounds in order to avoid further marginalisation. This can also be achieved with legislation and censorship of production companies.</td>
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<td><strong>Educate and inform the public as well as commentators on parasports and increase positive coverage</strong></td>
<td>It is essential that commentators are trained in covering parasports to avoid and improve the current stereotyping and stigmatising narratives of supercrips, superheroes or victims. Parasports should receive equal coverage, text and images, to other sports. It is also essential to effectively communicate the rules and differences of parasports to effectively engage the audience and avoid confusion.</td>
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Policy priorities
As the media has the potential to influence society's attitudes clear guidelines as well as legislation is required to prevent negative stereotypes, exclusion and other forms of discrimination. It is highly recommended that production companies are subjected to legislation and censorship to ensure that they don't have misrepresented or stereotyped portrayals of people with disabilities. There is a need for media companies to have strict policies and goals to hire more persons with disabilities to increase representation of persons with disabilities working in the industry and represented as media professionals on television and especially as disability related events such as parasports. Policymakers are recommended to enforce a hiring quota in this regard.

Conclusion
This evidence brief on how people with disabilities are portrayed in the media reveals significant challenges that need to be addressed. Firstly, there is a lack of coverage and representation of people with disabilities in mainstream media, resulting from limited awareness and a lack of persons with disabilities in decision-making roles and more generally in the industry. Moreover, when represented, people with disabilities are often stigmatised and stereotyped, reinforcing negative images and perpetuating social exclusion. Additionally, the media tends to present a homogeneous view of disability, failing to reflect the diverse experiences and needs within this community. Lastly, parasports face unique obstacles due to persistent stereotypes and a lack of understanding among audiences.

Included sources

Peer Review: This brief was peer reviewed by Sarah Marks, Research Fellow at the International Centre for Evidence in Disability, LSHTM and Onaiza Qureshi, Knowledge Exchange Officer at Disability Evidence Portal, LSHTM.

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