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Monitoring the media since 1993

Reporting on disabilities: Too little, too limited

People with disabilities constitute a considerable part of the South African population, yet coverage pertaining to people with a disability is very low and very limited in the media. In the few instances that this population groups is reported on, the coverage fails to raise the rights of the disabled and actually perpetuates societal stereotypes.

According to the statistics acquired from Statistics SA, from the 2001 Census report¹ the following divisions have been made from a population figure of 44,819,778.

Sight	724,169
Hearing	453,104
Physical	668,082
Intellectual	279,094
Communication ²	146,164
Emotional	354,495
TOTAL	2,255,982

Note that people can be categorised in multiple categories. In total, 5.0% of the South African population is differently-abled. This is a significant proportion of the entire population.

This commentary is based on Media Monitoring Project (MMP) continuous monitoring of a range of human rights issues as part of our Anti-discrimination Unit. The monitoring was necessitated by the MMP's core objective of promoting a media culture that promotes the rights and dignity of all people.

The Integrated National Disability Strategy White Paper underscores the importance of the transformation of attitudes, perceptions and behaviour towards people with

¹ "Prevalence of disability in South Africa", published by Statistics South Africa, 2003.

² Communication skills are the skills needed to use language (spoken, written, signed, or otherwise communicated) to interact with others, and communication disorders are problems related to the development of these skills (<http://www.minddisorders.com/Br-Del/Communication-skills-and-disorders.html>)



disabilities. This is perhaps one of the greater challenges to overcome as people in general have a limited view of what people with disabilities can do.³ This means media face a great challenge in their duty to inform, educate and disseminate information. Not only do the media have the power to shape people's perceptions and views, they have the power to influence policy as well. Thus it is important that media reports responsibly about people living with disabilities. Responsible reporting includes challenging stereotypes, myths, misconceptions and highlighting the stigmatisation that this community is subjected to.

The following newspapers were monitored from 12th January 2007 – 7th March 2007.

- Beeld;
- Business Day;
- Daily Sun;
- Mail and Guardian;
- Saturday Star;
- Sowetan;
- Sunday Sun;
- Sunday Times;
- The Citizen;
- The Star;
- The Sunday Independent; and
- The Weekender.

There was limited coverage of disability issues in this 8-week period. As a result the findings are based on a very limited sample. A qualitative review of the papers highlighted that there is still a tendency to sideline rights of people living with disabilities. The research found that in most cases the media tend to concentrate on the disability of the subject instead of looking at the human rights issues related to the story. Moreover, the media tend to dramatise and sensationalise disability issues. Often mention is made of a person's disability out of context. However, it is important to stress that looking beyond a subject's disability must not mean ignoring it.

Human Rights in coverage

People with disabilities, have the same constitutionally granted rights to education, proper housing, and rights of association and right to dignity and privacy. While the Constitution reflects the struggles faced by the majority of South Africans and outlaws discrimination on grounds of race, gender, sex and disability, the State does not always succeed in ensuring citizens have their rights met. For disability issues to be taken seriously and given the attention that they deserve there is a need for a

³ McClian, C.V. 2002. "Governance and Legislation in South Africa: a contemporary overview" available online http://www.disabilityworld.org/01-03_02/gov/southafrica.shtml



paradigm shift, from looking at them from a limited perspective to a human rights perspective.

Media do have a task to inform the public at large about issues people with disabilities face, such as access to social amenities and about their rights at large. Informing the public also means that the articles should reflect these rights, and possible problems in successfully exercising these rights as well as possible solutions.

But rather than emphasising these, many stories that covered disability issues actually further infringed on subjects; rights, in particular the right to dignity. This issue is particularly difficult with the issue of disability as some disabilities may undermine a person's dignity and privacy in daily life. However, the media have an obligation, when reporting on people with disabilities and especially when attempting to get resources for them, to keep their dignity in mind. Most of the coverage on disability were articles in which appeals were made for the person featured.

An example of an article which seems to have compromised a boy's right to dignity through presenting him as a "charity case", despite his role heading the household for his siblings was "Have a heart and help Lifa". This article, published by *Sowetan* (9/2/2007, p. 8) of 15-year old homemade wheelchair user, who is said to be looking after his siblings after losing his mother. His father is in jail. An appeal was made to raise money for a proper wheelchair.

The article does not mention that the fact that as a child heading a household, he represents a failure on the State's mandate to provide for children. Instead of encouraging the State to perform their duty, as the media ought, the article rather appeals to the general public. Although *Sowetan's* intention appears good, the article did not dwell much on his abilities, in spite of him being able to look after his siblings and make his own wheelchair. The "wheelchair" which he used to get around also compromised his ability to get to school and so his right to get education was also compromised. The article, therefore, compromised his right to dignity, but also failed to hold the State accountable for his constitutional rights.

Another article which also compromised a disabled boy's dignity was in the *Daily Sun* (27/02/2007, p. 10). The article entitled "Help Orifha get to school ", featured a seven-year old boy whose mental and physical development has been slowed down by cerebral palsy, which was only recently diagnosed. The report focused on how much he is "suffering" from his condition and how he can not do things that children his age are capable of. An appeal was made to raise money for a wheelchair for him.

The article compromises his and his family's dignity by focusing on their humble background. This effect was compounded by presenting the article in a way which implied that it is because of his background that he has cerebral palsy. This is a misrepresentation of the issue and has no bearing on his condition, as cerebral palsy



can affect anyone no matter their social status. It seems that in this case, the State has also failed in their duty as it was an NGO, not State health that determined his condition. This is in spite of the fact that he has the mental age of a one year old and is seven.

Some effort was made to highlight the right to education in two articles, which is arguably more important for people with disabilities who may not perform physical labour as others may. Though by law public schools are required to admit all learners and to provide the necessary educational requirements without discrimination, the implementation of this law, has been very difficult due to financial and human resources. Children with disabilities are still not fully integrated into the public school system⁴. Media could remind the relevant authorities of this, and make a demand for more resources to be allocated to the education system, so that all learners have access to education.

It is very disturbing that most reports on people living with disability carried out by the papers monitored appealed for donations to help the disabled. There is a need however, for the media to make a concerted effort to highlight human rights and not to compromise their dignity. However, due to the scarcity of coverage on disability, if such stories were excluded, coverage on people with disabilities would be even scarcer.

Stereotypes upheld

Some papers reported on disability in a manner that did very little to educate the public about disabilities. If anything, the reporting served to perpetuate negative stereotypes and showed very little understanding of disabilities.

The Star in its Business Report (19/02/2007, p. 12) carried an item related to a new tax legislation regarding people who are mentally impaired, under the headline "Tax break for Nutters". Such reporting not only shows poor journalistic ethics and lack of understanding as well as stereotyping of people living with mental illness. It undermines them and does nothing to educate the public about mental disabilities. At its best it only supports stereotypes that people with mental disabilities are "nuts", and are subsequently rewarded for that with a tax break.

All people have a right to dignity and proper representation in the media. That means media must consider the possible consequences of what is written, and how people will read the article. The media at large still use terms such "wheelchair bound" and "crippled" (*Sowetan* 9/02/07, p. 8, "Have a heart and help Lifa") which give the impression that by virtue of being in a wheelchair they can not do anything for themselves and need to be pitied.

⁴ McClian, C.V. 2002.



Beeld (25/02/2007, p. 1) carried a story about a boy who gave his friend, who is living with dwarfism, his medal after competing and finishing a race that able bodied children took part in under the heading "Lyfwag gee toe sy medaljie aan Ryn" ("Bodyguard gives his medal to Ryn").

The accompanying picture also seems to emphasise the boys' different sizes through the use of a low camera angle looking up at the children, making Ryn appear to tower over his friend. Moreover, the article claims that Ryn "suffers" from his condition – dwarfism; however, by interacting and competing in a race that able bodied children took part in he proves that he is not suffering from his condition but is managing it well.

The reporter seems to be intrigued by the fact that he was playing with "normal" children. However; he was merely exercising his natural inclination and right to play. It seems that a more positive news angle for the story would be to show how this boy, despite his dwarfism, lives a normal life and competes against normal-sized children of his own age.

In another instance, *The Star* (12/01/2007, p. 1) published a story about 17 year Refilwe Makau who was born with no legs, under the headline "Brave girl determined to succeed", the article seems to imply that it is strange for someone in her circumstances to even dream of success. They portrayed her dreams as something out of the ordinary and very unusual because of her disability. This kind of reporting typifies people with disabilities as miserable and sad, with no hope for the future.

A more positive news angle could have been how her daily life is lived, and her hope for the future. The picture which shows her from above looking small and vulnerable, isolated on the other side of a ditch could have rather reinforced the this more positive message.

These two articles serve to uphold stereotypes about the persons living with a disabilities. The result does not inform readers in a positive way about the respective conditions or really give insight of what it is like living with a disability. While the "nutter" story informs, it promotes stereotypes and even stigma.

Stereotypes challenged

Other articles performed better in terms of challenging stereotypes around people with disabilities. These articles did not concentrate on children, but adults who are changing their own lives for the better, despite their disabilities.

The Citizen (2/03/2007, p. 10) carried a story about a man who built a guest house from his disability grant. This shows that differently-abled people are not hopeless



and can manage their lives well. In fact, it is reported he is doing so well, that he struggles to keep up, as more and more patrons want his services.

Daily Sun (7/03/2007, p. 28), reported on a group of visually impaired people from Soweto who want to turn an unused building into a college to give visually impaired people “skills through high school and technical classes”. The article, entitled “All they want is an unused old building”, shows the progress made towards this goal.

Another good example was by *Sowetan* (15/02/2007, p. 20), which carried an article about the Tumelo home for the disabled, which was set up by the community itself. The article, entitled “Tumelo Home for disabled kids struggling to carry on” explains that “the home looks after 35 disabled children who have a surprising love of life and often get into mischief”.

Stories such as these provide role models for children with disabilities as well as show the public in general what people with disabilities can accomplish. Seeing people with disabilities as human beings, who are trying to actively shape their lives, despite their impairments. Such good journalistic practices should be encouraged as they help demystify stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding people living with disabilities.

Conclusion

The African Union has declared the first decade of the new millennium as the African Decade of Disabled People. In order to support this initiative, media can:

- Cover disability more frequently in the media;
- Cover disability better in the media, through considering human rights in the coverage and not infringe the right to dignity of subjects;
- Consider the human rights angles to stories and highlight instances where the State should be supporting those with disabilities;
- Debunk stereotypes; and
- Highlight cases where people with disabilities achieve great things.

By Dawu Sibanda and Sandra Roberts

