

## MEDIA AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES: ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

*by Deni Elliott*

A physicist who is "a prisoner in his own body," a man with a facial disfigurement who illustrates that driving while drunk can bring about a fate worse than death, a woman who celebrates her ability to work despite a hearing loss--these are the people with disabilities who populate Medialand. Medialand is that mythical place that market researchers think reflects our dreams, hopes, and aspirations.

In Medialand, people with disabilities are not presented as people living the ideal life that we all would wish. Instead, they are presented as the stuff from which nightmares are made, included in Medialand as warnings, oddities, and symbols by which "normal" people can know their own worth.

They are presented in ways that are analogous to the offensive and destructive ways that women and other minority groups were portrayed by the media more than a quarter of a century ago.

News gives us the "aren't-you-glad-you're-not-him" stories. Advertising warns us not to "buy blind" and tells us that energy costs are "crippling." Entertainment media specialize in the inspirational superhero stories.

The offensive presentation of people with disabilities, while ethically problematic, is a particularly difficult problem to solve, because the public service groups that assist people with disabilities encourage media exploitation.

They give us poster children and warn that people who use drugs may end up disabled--an unbearable fate. It is understandably hard for media decision makers to see how they are doing harm, when the people representing individuals with disabilities encourage the negative depictions. But, the first step to understanding what it means to present people with disabilities in a positive way is to develop a sensitivity to the manner of exploitation.

## Categories of Exploitation

### 1. The Tin Cup On TV

What newsroom would turn down the opportunity to broadcast the need of a little girl who could read books at home if only her family could afford a \$10,000 visual aid? What newsroom would ignore the story of a 10-year-old boy collecting bottles and canvassing the neighborhood so that he can buy his mother an electric wheelchair? Not many would, but they all should.

The need to plead for mobility, visual, or hearing aids is not an individual problem: It is a societal ill. The individuals who attract media attention are not unique. They are only a few of many in equal or greater need. When reporters focus on individual need as though it were an episodic problem, they miss a larger story.

Imagine what would have happened if news media had presented Rosa Parks (the black woman in Montgomery, Ala., who refused to move to the racially segregated back of the bus, sparking a key boycott in the early days of the civil-rights movement) as though she were merely an old black lady who caused a commotion. Rosa Parks exemplified a societal ill; news media correctly focused on the meaning of the event: the larger civil rights issue.

So it should be with media coverage of people with disabilities in need. The individual's need to manipulate media attention raises an important question: What decisions have we made as a society when billions of dollars can be spent on various defense initiatives, but people have to beg for mobility, visual, or hearing aids?

The focus on an individual in need also raises questions of fairness. On what basis does the newsroom decide that one person's need is greater than another's? How does an editor explain to a distraught parent that last week's child's need for a bone marrow transplant is news and that this week's is not? The decision to publicize one individual's need is usually made on a number of factors--the slowness of the news day, how appealing the individual in need can appear to an audience, how

well the fundraisers create media events--that have nothing to do with how the individual's need relates to others.

## 2. Telethon Time

The media have done a great job of broadcasting the needs of various groups of individuals who have special needs: muscular dystrophy, Easter Seals, The March of Dimes. The problem with publicized group need is twofold. First, the focus on the dependency of special groups of individuals directs attention away from the larger question of why certain groups of people should be dependent on private philanthropy to get what they need. Society makes a choice to allow every person equal access to police or fire services and to disallow equal access to medical care or to certain aids.

The second problem is what happens when individuals who are sick or disabled are exploited to raise money for their need. Since the focus is on their disabilities, the understandable tendency is for the audience to see them as disabled individuals rather than as individuals who happen to have a characteristic that is, in some respects, disabling.

"Help Me. I Can't Hear You." The headline screams the little girl's plight. The Public Service Announcement is designed to attract givers. But, the little girl's problem is not so much a lack of hearing as it is a societal lack.

People who lack hearing can do everything other people can do, with the exception of hearing. They grow and marry and parent successfully, all without hearing. They teach, act, dance, become doctors, lawyers, and even college presidents. They may not make the best concert pianists, but that is a limitation they share with many hearing individuals.

The same can be said of any disability. The disability is a characteristic of an individual that may present difficulty with a particular set of tasks, but that disability is only one, not always important, characteristic. When the disability is the focus, as it is with mass appeal fundraising drives, the individual disappears behind the disability.

The audience is encouraged to think of people with disabilities as dependent, unable to care for themselves. Why else would there be drives to raise money for them?

Such presentations perpetuate the view of people with disabilities as subhuman, unable to function normally. Some people with disabilities are severely dependent, but most are not. Presentations of people with disabilities as dependent, particularly in the absence of positive presentations, imply that the dependent and needy are reflective of all people in that group.

### 3. The Superhero

If the audience is accustomed to feeling sorry for and superior to people with disabilities, it is only natural that the "He's a credit to his disability" stories will follow. Some of these inspirational stories nest comfortably into the stories of subhumans; they are stories of people with disabilities who manage to perform spectacular tricks like walking or earning a living.

"When I Was 20, I Learned to Walk," proclaims a headline over a story about a young man who regained the use of his legs following a stroke and who finished a college degree. Becoming ambulatory was a personal challenge that was not necessarily connected to his ability to successfully attend school.

"My deafness doesn't stop me," reads the headline on a story about actress Stephanie Beacham. It's hard to imagine how her deafness could stop her, unless her hearing problem is related in a rather bizarre way to her mobility. What could have stopped this actress is a society that includes hearing as a criterion for success.

Sometimes, people with disabilities deserve news features or straight news stories, because they deserve meritorious notice for some special talent such as athletic ability or scientific aptitude. However, the writers of such stories are sometimes too impressed by the disability to let the achievement stand on its own.

Physicist Stephen Hawking has yet to be mentioned in the media without discussion of his physical disabilities. Yet, the affects of Lou

Gehrig's Disease have nothing to do with the scientist's work in theoretical physics. From initial write-ups on Dr. Hawking, I assumed that he fit the superhero stories already described--that he was a scientist who was outstanding simply because he was also disabled. It was only through discussions with other physicists that I learned that Dr. Hawking is, indeed, among the most brilliant scientists of this century. The focus on his disability has obscured his legitimate claim to fame.

Dr. Hawking is no more impressive because he is a "crippled physicist" than Marie Curie was impressive because she was a "woman scientist" or James Earl Jones is impressive because he is a "black actor." The adjectives are descriptions of accidental traits that have absolutely no bearing on the importance of these people to society.

#### 4. Fate Worse Than Death

When I tell a group of journalists that people with disabilities should be treated as "normal" by the media in the same way that "women" and people from all ethnic groups are treated as normal, some brave soul usually interrupts with the comment that my analogy doesn't hold, because there is nothing abnormal about being female or black, but that there is something abnormal about being disabled.

Being a woman is no longer generally considered a disability, but it wasn't long ago that a brilliant or athletic girl would not have had the same opportunities as a boy. If we create a world where only the physically perfect can succeed, then being or becoming disabled can, indeed, be a fate worse than death.

Disability as tragedy, and its accompanying metaphor of disability as punishment, serve as the basis for a horribly effective series of campaigns designed to discourage drug use and drunk driving.

"Most of the damage caused by drunk driving can easily be fixed in a body shop," reads the head on the PSA. Below a page full of prostheses, the tag line reads, "Don't drive drunk. Dying isn't the only thing that could happen to you."

A man, sitting in a wheelchair, faces away from the camera. The headline, "Drugs do more than kill," says it all.

No one would deny the effectiveness of these campaigns, but they are effective at the expense of people who have disabilities. Wheelchairs and prostheses are liberating, not limiting, to the people who choose to use them. However, we are encouraged to think about the objects in a negative way when they are presented as something to be feared.

It is true that some people who have disabilities have them because of accidents or negligence, but most do not. PSAs like these imply that people who have disabilities deserve them.

The implication is visual, not logical. Most people would deny that the implication holds, if they stopped to think about it. But, these types of persuasive techniques are emotional. They encourage feeling, not thought. And, that negative feeling may surface the next time someone sees a person using a wheelchair instead of the next time that person reaches for a beer.

In addition, these PSAs exploit one group of people to benefit another. The harm to the exploited group cannot be justified. Imagine the public reaction if a pro-choice group used a persuasion campaign that included pictures of dead, battered children with the slogan: Now or Later?

Children who are abused should not be exploited to encourage the termination of pregnancies, even if it is sometimes true that unwanted children are abused. People with disabilities should not be exploited to discourage drinking or drugs, even if it is sometimes true that people who drink or use drugs become disabled.

The fate-worse-than-death category of exploitation has spawned a series of metaphors that have taken on meanings of their own. We read in news stories and headlines that people are "confined" to bed or to a wheelchair. They are "imprisoned" by (heavy) braces or by their own bodies. These are words we use with people who are put in jail for wrongdoing. If we allow these words to be acceptable descriptions of people with disabilities, it should not be a surprise when words denoting disabilities are used in a negative fashion.

"Don't buy blind," the ad warns, and the consumer knows immediately that "blind" is a bad thing. "Cuts cripple services," says the newscaster, and the viewer knows that something bad has happened. The fact that the words are used metaphorically does not justify their offensiveness.

### The Immorality of Them and Us

My argument is that it is unethical to present people with disabilities in negative or exploitive ways. It is unethical, because it is inaccurate and unfair to an oppressed societal group. The challenge of presenting people with disabilities in a normal or positive fashion gives media a new possibility for enlarging our understanding of what it means to be "normal."

The negative presentations of people with disabilities are simply not true presentations of most people within that definable group. Providing accurate representations is a journalistic responsibility, but it also holds, to some extent, for those working in advertising, public relations, and entertainment media.

No one would say that Medialand represents an accurate picture of American life. In advertisements, the representations are both bigger and better than life. One wouldn't expect "normal" presentations of people with disabilities any more than one would expect normal presentations of any one. But, people with disabilities should appear in commercials and advertisements, and they should be represented as a normal part of the scene.

It is especially important to be sensitive to the need to present oppressed groups in a positive light. No more is being asked for people with disabilities than what was asked for women or ethnic groups. Principles of fairness and equity demand that no less be provided.

The interaction of various types of media creates a special power for changing public perceptions. Journalists have a history of noticing and promoting society's oppressed groups. Through positive presentations, public relations, advertising, and entertainment, the media can reinforce the idea that they--the oppressed or isolated--are like us in all of the important ways.

In the last 30 years, the criteria by which we measure success in the U.S. have grown larger than white and male. No longer do we hear young black people say they wish they were white, because so many more opportunities would be open for them. One can be female or a member of any ethnic group and be a success.

If our criteria were broadened a little more, it wouldn't be a tragedy for someone to use a wheelchair. It wouldn't be professionally limiting for someone to lack vision or hearing. The media can help by presenting people with disabilities as they now present people who are women and people who are black. The media can provide entry into society for people with disabilities by treating them as people.

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## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Elliott states that "It is understandably hard for media decision-makers to see how they are doing harm when the people representing individuals with disabilities encourage the negative depictions." Give examples of some "negative depictions" of disability you've seen from fundraising charities.
2. If a fundraising group that wants to "help the handicapped" came to you requesting a sob story, how would you respond?
3. Why does Elliott suggest that newsrooms turn down the opportunity to cover a 10-year-old boy collecting bottles to buy his mom an electric wheelchair? What does she suggest that reporters should do when faced with this story?
4. What often prompts decisions to run a "tin cup" story?
5. What does Elliott say is wrong with telethons or any mass appeal for funds?
6. What problem did media focus on Stephen Hawking's disability cause for Elliott?
7. What's the problem with those effective drunk-driving ads?
8. Why is the headline "Snow cripples Chicago" offensive?
9. How is coverage of people with disabilities similar to coverage of blacks or women several decades ago?

## COVERING DISABILITY STORIES: WHAT'S WRONG, WHAT'S RIGHT

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why did reporters cover the Gallaudet University uprising as hard news? How is this different from disability stories reporters often encounter?
2. The Handicapped Hero, Superhero, Overcomer: Describe this character. What's wrong with focusing on such stories?
3. What do most reporters fail to cover--issues or individual triumphs? Why? Should this change? If so, how can it change?
4. List three of the most common bad choices of language used in disability stories. Why are these terms bad choices? What terms should reporters use instead?