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Disability and the Media: The Ethics of the Matter

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Advertising, news, and entertainment media have an important shared agenda: they all sell a dream of life-styles and beliefs. They give us heroes and villains. They tell us what is good and bad and what does not fit into the dream. According to the media, people with a disability do not.

The categories of stereotypes that media use to portray people with disabilities are damaging to perceptions of people with disabilities. So too is lack of presentation. For the most part, people with disabilities simply do not exist for the camera's eye.

The people with disabilities whom we meet through the media include a talented physicist who is described at the top of news stories written about his accomplishments as "a prisoner in his own body." The presentations include a man with a scarred face who is used to illustrate that driving when drunk can result in "a fate worse than death." And they include a teenaged girl who rates a feature story because she is managing to get through high school despite her blindness.

Disability could be presented as a usually unimportant consideration as media consumers work to achieve the dream world that media promote, but it does not happen that way. Rather, people with disabilities are presented as the stuff from which nightmares are made. They are offered as oddities and symbols of fear by which "normal" people can know their own worth.

People with disabilities are presented in ways that are just as offensive and destructive as the ways that women and minority groups were presented by media more than a quarter of a century ago.

News gives "aren't-you-glad-you're-not-him" stories. Advertising warns

us not to "buy blind" and calls energy costs "crippling." Entertainment media specialize in inspirational "supercrip" stories.

The offensive presentation of people with disabilities is an ethical problem for media. Presentations that result in harm to individuals need to be justified, but it is not surprising that media managers would have a hard time understanding that people with disabilities are harmed by negative presentations when some of the major offenders are the public service groups with public service announcements.

These groups give us poster children. They warn that people who use drugs may end up disabled—a fate worse than death. In working on their own ethical problems concerning the presentation of people with disabilities, media managers must begin by understanding that their own sensitivity may, at times, be greater and more on target than those being exploited. This is not much different from the fact that for decades some minorities and women missed the realization that they were being exploited.

CATEGORIES OF EXPLOITATION

The Tin Cup Television Spot

What newsroom would turn down the opportunity to broadcast the need of a little girl who cannot read without a $10,000 visual aid? What newsroom would ignore the story of a ten-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 or visual or hearing aids is not an episodic individual problem; it is a societal ill.

The individuals who attract media attention are not unique from those who lack such media savvy. They are only a few of many who have equal or greater need. When reporters focus on individual need as though it were an episodic problem, they miss a larger story and are necessarily unfair to those in need who fail to attract such attention.

There is no moral basis upon which a newsroom can decide that one person's need is greater than another's. Nothing but the capriciousness of the business explains how it is that last week's bone marrow transplant is news and that this week's is not. The decision to publicize one individual's need is economic: the slowness of the news day, how appealing the individual in need can appear to an audience, how well the fund raisers create media events. But the outcome, if it results in a lack of fair treatment, is unethical.

Additionally, journalists have a professional responsibility to see the big picture. Imagine what would have happened if news media had presented Rosa Parks as if she were an old black lady with an episodic complaint rather than a symbol for all African-Americans who were forced to give up their seats to white people. Instead, Rosa Parks exemplified a societal ill; news

media correctly focused on the meaning of the event to the larger civil rights issue.

So it should be with media coverage of people in need. The individual's attempt to manipulate media attention raises a question that should not be missed by savvy reporters: What is going on when millions of dollars can be spent on a new bomber and people have to beg for mobility or visual or hearing aids?

Telethon Time

In recent years the media have worked well with promoters and public relations firms to raise money for various groups of individuals who have special needs: muscular dystrophy, Easter Seals, the March of Dimes, and others. Publicized group need, however, has two problems. First, the focus on the dependency of special groups of individuals directs attention away from the larger question of why people with disabilities 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 and to certain aids. That is the story that needs attention.

The second problem is the exploitation of individuals. The disability or illness is offered as the basis for negative comparison. The underlying message is, "Television viewer, look at this person who, because of a disability, is not capable of being 'normal' in the ways that matter to you. Disability means that the person affected cannot take care of his or her own needs. This person is dependent on you. Won't you help?"

It is not true that these individuals are dependent on philanthropy or that disability implies a loss of autonomy. It is society and the policy decisions that make the telethons necessary. A disease or disability of the week is no more sensible than a gardening need of the week or this week's hungry people. It may be an embarrassment that society does not care for all people in terms of their needs; we ought not to extend that embarrassment by allowing exploitation in addition.

"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 a societal lack that makes it a problem. People who lack hearing can do everything other people can do except hear. They grow and marry and parent successfully. They teach, act, dance, become doctors, lawyers, and college presidents. They may not become concert pianists, but neither do most hearing folks. The same can be said of any other disability. The disability is nothing more and nothing less than a characteristic of an individual that may present difficulty with a particular set of tasks. That disability is only one of many characteristics that any person has. When the disability is the focus, as it is with mass appeal

fund-raising 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 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.

The Supercrip

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 what are hailed as 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 is not necessarily connected to his ability to attend school successfully.

"My Deafness Doesn't Stop Me," reads the headline on a story about actress Stephanie Beacham. It is hard to imagine how her deafness could stop her unless her hearing problem is related to her mobility. What stopped this actress was a society that included hearing as a criterion for success.

Sometimes people with disabilities deserve news features or straight news stories because they merit 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 achievement get in the way.

Physicist Stephen Hawking has yet to be mentioned in the media without discussion of his physical disabilities. Yet the effects of Lou Gehrig's disease have nothing to do with the scientist's work in theoretical physics. From initial write-ups I read on Hawking, I assumed that he fit the supercrip stories already described—that he was a run-of-the-mill scientist who was outstanding simply because he was also disabled. It was only through discussions with other physicists that I learned that Hawking is indeed among the brightest scientists of this century. The focus on his disability obscured his legitimate claim to fame. 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 no bearing on the importance of these people to society.

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, someone usually interrupts to remind me that my analogy does not 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 was not long ago that a brilliant or athletic girl did not have the same opportunities as boys. If we create a world in which only the physically perfect can succeed, then being or becoming disabled can indeed be a fate worse than death.

Disability as a fate worse than death, and its accompanying metaphor of disability as punishment, serves 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 headline on the public service announcement. 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 protheses are liberating, not limiting, for the people who choose to use them. Users and others, however, 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. Public service announcements like these imply that people who have disabilities deserve them. The implication is visual, not logical. Most people, if they stopped to think about it, would deny that the implication holds. But these types of persuasive techniques are emotional. They encourage feeling, not thought. And the negative feeling created by the campaign may surface the next time the consumer sees a person using a wheelchair instead of the next time the person reaches for a beer.

In addition, these public service announcements exploit one group of people to benefit another. The harm to the exploited group cannot be justified. Imagine the following pro-choice campaign: Pictures of dead, battered children lie across the billboard. The headline reads: "Now or Later?" A kicker reads: "Prevent Their Births or Expect Their Deaths." 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 set of metaphors that have taken on meanings of their own. When words with negative connotations are used in conjunction with words that denote disabilities, the denotations begin carrying negative connotations in other contexts. For example, 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 the offense to a group in society.

It is not likely that media would use terminology like "jew somebody out of it" as a way of describing getting an exceptionally good deal, although the phrase had vernacular use long after the reference was made concerning one ethnic group. How long has it been since you've seen a commercial-land father chide a sobbing boy by saying, "Stop acting like a girl!" The offense of women is taken seriously now. People with disabilities deserve the same consideration.

THE IMMORALITY OF THEM AND US

It is unethical to present people with disabilities in negative or exploitive ways 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 not true of most people within that definable group. Providing accurate representations is a journalistic responsibility, but it holds to some extent for those working in advertising, public relations, and entertainment media as well. It is no more reasonable to expect "normal" presentations of people with disabilities in persuasive communication than it is to expect normal presentations of any other people. But people with disabilities should be represented as a normal part of society.

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 media managers to change public perceptions. Journalists have a history of noticing and promoting oppressed groups in society. Through positive presentations,

public relations, advertising, and entertainment, media reinforce the idea that *they*—the oppressed or isolated—are like *us* in all of the important ways.

In the past thirty years, criteria by which we measure success in the United States has grown broader than the designations of white and male. No longer do we hear young African-Americans 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, as is the hope of the ADA, it would not be a tragedy for someone to use a wheelchair. It would not be professionally limiting for someone to lack vision or hearing.

Media can help by presenting people with disabilities as they now present women and minorities. Media can provide entry into society for people with disabilities by treating them as people.

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