

Disability in the News

The Australian Press 2004-2005¹

*A discapacidade nas noticias
A prensa australiana 2004-2005*

Resumo: A selección e ‘framing’ de historias sobre discapacidades e persoas con discapacidade feita polos medios de comunicación pode conformar as visións que a sociedade ten sobre as persoas con discapacidades. Para examinar esta teoría pesquiseuse sobre unha base de datos de xornais australianos comprendidos entre xaneiro de 2004 e decembro de 2005 os termos máis extendidos como *impairment* (minusvalía), *disability* (discapacidade) e *handicap* (deficiente) e descriptors de discapacidades específicas como xordo, cego ou discapacitado físico ou mental. Conduciuse unha análise das pezas encontradas na pesquisa examinando os tópicos cubertos, mencións a discapacidades específicas e “modelos” de discapacitado representados. Tamén se consideran as implicacións para a representación das persoas con discapacidades e para a educación ou formación xornalística.

Palabras-clave: discapacidades; persoas con diversidade funcional; Australia; representación; xornalistas; formación en xornalismo; medios de comunicación.

Abstract: *The selection and framing of stories about disability and people with disabilities by the media may shape public views about disabled people. To examine this theory a database of Australian newspapers was searched from January 2004 to December 2005 on the major terms impairment, disability, and handicap, and specific disability descriptors such as deaf, blind, and physically and intellectually impaired. An analysis of articles resulting from the search was conducted to examine the topics covered, mentions of specific disabilities, and the “models” of disability represented. Implications for representation of people with disabilities and for journalism education are considered.*

Keywords: *disabilities; people with disabilities; Australia; representation; journalists; journalism education; mass media.*

¹ Submitted to *Disability and Society*, October 2006. Thanks to Jim Cherney for helpful comments on an earlier draft, Beth Haller for helpful information and provision of otherwise inaccessible references, and Mary R. Power for comments and assistance with coding

DISABILITY IN THE NEWS: THE AUSTRALIAN PRESS 2004-2005

Disabling stereotypes which medicalise, patronise, criminalise and dehumanise disabled people abound in books, films, on television, and in the press. They form the bedrock on which the attitudes towards, assumptions about and expectations of disabled people are based. They are fundamental to the discrimination and exploitation which disabled people encounter daily and contribute significantly to their systematic exclusion from mainstream community life (Barnes, 1992).

It has long been considered that public opinion and attitudes towards social phenomena can be influenced and shaped by media presentations. "The mass media are, to say the least, a significant social force in the forming and delimiting of public assumptions, attitudes, and moods (Gitlin, 1980, p. 9; quoted by Haller, 1999)". Media scholars have used the notion of "framing" to describe how the presentation of social phenomena can shape readers' attitudes towards those phenomena. "A frame is best understood as the way information is presented and organised in the media and interpreted by the individual (Sieff, 2003, p. 260)". Entman (1993) has described frames as involving "selection" and "salience",

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a ... text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described". ... Frames, then, define problems—determine what a causal agent is doing, with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values; diagnose causes—identify the forces creating the problem; make moral judgements—evaluate causal agents and their effects; and suggest remedies—offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects (p. 52; italics in original).

Hence it is hypothesized that frequent repetition of frames about social phenomena can influence attitudes of both the public and people who are members of groups displaying those phenomena. As Auslander and Gold (1999, p. 1396) have said, "When [disability] labels are negative or derogatory, they may have a negative effect on the way [a] person or group is viewed, perpetuating negative stereotypes, prejudices, inferior status and dependency." Similarly, Blood, Putnis, and Pirkis (2002) are of the view that,

The specific ways in which the media label or categorise individuals or groups within our society may have serious ramifications. The labelling or stereotyping process is primarily determined by the way events are framed by the media. ... [Framing decisions] may have profound in-

fluence on the way the issue is perceived and acted upon by various audiences, Governments, and policy makers. Anecdotal evidence also suggests such “labels” may also have a profound negative influence on at-risk groups (pp. 77, 78).

One major social phenomenon and ubiquitous aspect of society is the presence of people with disabilities, whether congenital or acquired, in the community. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2004) provides a rate of 20% of all Australians reporting a disability (approximately 4,000,000 people). The extent to which people with disabilities are “visible” in society at a public level and the extent to which their characteristics and needs are understood by the non-disabled community may well be influenced by the presence or absence and type of representation (the framing) of their characteristics, needs and aspirations in the media. Haller is of the view that, “Because of numerous societal barriers, much of the general public gets its information about the disability community from media sources rather than through interpersonal contact (2000, p. 274)”. “Media-based perceptions depend heavily on the media frames used to communicate information about mental illness [or, more broadly, disabilities in general] (Sieff, 2003, p. 260)”. “How ... news stories about disability are played in the news media can sway public opinion about disability issues and toward the cultural representations of people with disabilities in general (Haller, 1999, p. 2)”. Haller also is of the view that consistent exposure to negative views of themselves in the media may influence the image people with disabilities have of themselves and their place in the world.

Clogston (1990, 1993; quoted by Haller, 2000, p. 275) provided a set of five “models” for analysing the attitudes displayed by the frames of newspaper articles and three more were added by Haller (1993). The first three models Clogston considered “‘traditional’ or more “stigmatising”, the fourth and fifth he named “progressive” because they represented disabled people as “active, full members of society”. Haller (1993) added the last three as a result of her study of press representations of the “Deaf President Now” movement at Gallaudet University in 1988. The models are:

1. the medical model, in which disability is presented as an illness or malfunction,
2. the social pathology model [in which] disabled people are presented as disadvantaged and must look to the state or society for economic support, which is considered a gift, not a right,

3. the supercrip model [in] which the disabled person is portrayed as deviant because of “superhuman” feats or as “special” because he or she lives a regular life “in spite of” disability,
4. the minority/civil rights model, in which disabled people are seen as members of a disability community, which has legitimate civil rights grievances,
5. the cultural pluralism model [in which] people with disabilities are seen as multifaceted and their disabilities do not receive undue attention,
6. the business model, in which disabled people and their accessibility to society are presented as costly to society in general, and to businesses especially,
7. the legal model, in which people with disabilities are presented as having legal rights and possibly a need to sue to halt discrimination,
8. the consumer model, in which people with disabilities are presented as an untapped consumer group; therefore making society accessible could be profitable to business and society.

Previous research on press representations of deafness issues (cochlear implantation of children and genetic engineering to prevent deaf children being born (or to cause it, as in the case of the Deaf lesbians who successfully had a Deaf child through artificial insemination; Power (2005, 2003) found that stories in Australian newspapers were pursued for their “newsworthiness” rather than as a result of reporters’ views on the matter (which seemed to follow the storyline rather than present their own views). Columnists however, expressed strong views, mostly coming down on the side of a “medical” (a condition to be cured) model of deafness rather than “social” (a life to be lived) one. Most of the columnists appeared to support a view of a world in which deafness (and, by inference, disabilities generally) should be avoided if at all possible; society would be a better place if disabled people did not exist. Henderson (2002, p. 19) for example, referred to, “bleating from our medical ethicists ... [and their] utterly absurd” comments. She stated, “With preimplantation genetic diagnosis ... defective embryos can be identified and discarded What a godsend. What a joy. Incredible, ground-breaking science that enables parents to provide the best chance in life for their children.”

The present study reviewed mentions of disabilities in a database of Australian daily newspapers to survey the number of such articles, the topics included and an analysis of these data by the eight disability model categories developed by Clogston (1990, 1993; quoted by Haller, 2000) and Haller (1993).

METHOD

A database ("Factiva") of Australian daily newspapers (Appendix A) was searched for the period January 2004 to December 2005 on a number of terms pertaining to people with disabilities: impairment, disability, and handicap, and specific disability terms: deaf, hearing impaired and hard of hearing, blind and vision/visually impaired, intellectually impaired and mentally retarded, and a set of terms pertaining to physical disability: physically impaired, physically disabled, physically handicapped, paraplegic, quadriplegic, amputee, and cripple. The search engine pulls up words containing any part of the more complex terms; for example, impair would also give impaired, impairment, impairing, etc. Terms such as autism, dyslexia and the like were not included in this search and will be followed up in later studies.

Tallies were made of occurrences in each of the categories and comparisons made of the rates of occurrence ("the full database"). Mentions of the terms listed above in the full database were obtained and their very large number (10,089) precluded detailed analysis. Brief surveys of the topics in the categories were made and counts of terms done. These are reported in the tables below. Because of the large number of hits on these terms, for a more in-depth view a selection of articles was made by taking items at random, mostly every fifth or (in the very large databases) every twentieth item (the "select database"; $N = 141$). A content analysis of the select database articles mentioning the terms was conducted and major issues reported were analysed and tallied. The select database articles were also analysed using the models of disability description developed by Clogston (1990, 1993; quoted by Haller, 2000, p. 275) and Haller (1993). In the present study the author and another scholar experienced in the communication studies field independently coded the articles in the select database. Seventy-four percent agreement was obtained on first reading. Articles upon which there was disagreement were reread and discussed by both coders until an agreed list was determined on the basis of the predominant model in the articles. The agreed articles list was then also used to determine the frequency of occurrence of mentions of different disabilities and of the topics covered by the articles.

RESULTS

The following tables detail occurrence of terms found in the full and select searches described above. As mentioned above in the two years surveyed 10,089 references to disability occurred in the Australian press in the full database. This number was too large to examine in detail but

random checks of topics found mentions of disability and people with disabilities in reports of road accidents, disability as cancer sequelae, opening of medical centres for disability treatment, medical treatment of people with disabilities, availability (or the lack of) disability pensions, “distressing” artwork in government offices portraying disability, disabled people’s access to jury duty, and the like.

Table 1 shows the distribution of the commonly used terms “impairment”, “disability” and “handicap”.

Table 1. Occurrence of terms impairment, disability and handicap in the full database

Term	Number	%
Impairment	737	39
Disability	1061	55
Handicap	101	5
Total	1899	99

Table 2. Occurrence of disability terms in the full database

Term	Number	%
Deaf	1994	87
Hearing Impaired	228	10
Hard of Hearing	69	3
Total	2291	100
Blind	6741	96
Vision/Visually Impaired	311	4
Total	7052	100
Intellectually Impaired	40	41
Mentally Retarded	57	59
Total	97	100
Physically Impaired	14	1
Physically Disabled	73	5
Physically Handicapped	19	1
Paraplegic	253	18
Quadriplegic	430	31
Cripple	479	34
Amputee	121	9
Total	1389	99
GRAND TOTAL	10829	-

Table 2 shows frequency of occurrence of the commonly used terms for major disability categories. The major sensory disabilities of deafness and blindness get the most mentions, with fewer mentions of the other terms used with physical and intellectual disabilities. This finding

in the Australian press does not duplicate Haller's (2000) opinion for the USA that "if they limp, they lead?"; that is, that the press pays more attention to various types of physical disability than other disabilities.

Table 3. Frequency of "disability models" categories in the select database

Category	Blind		Deaf		Retarded		Physical		Total	
	N.º	%	N.º	%	N.º	%	N.º	%	N.º	%
Medical	5	21	12	31	0	0	2	4	20	14
Social Pathology	2	8	5	13	17	63	6	13	30	21
"Supercrip"	4	17	6	15	0	0	9	18	19	13
Civil Rights	6	25	4	10	10	37	6	12	26	18
Cultural Pluralism	5	21	5	13	0	0	6	12	16	11
Business	1	4	0	0	0	0	4	8	5	4
Legal	0	0	1	3	0	0	18	35	19	13
Consumer	1	4	6	15	0	0	0	0	6	4
Total	24	100	39	100	27	100	51	101	141	98

*Following Clogston (1990) and Haller (1993)

Table 3 shows the division of articles into the categories devised by Clogston and Haller. Overall the social pathology model is the most frequently mentioned category, followed by medical. Taken together these two "traditional" models make up the largest group; 35%), then minority/civil rights (18%), supercrip equal with legal (13%) with cultural pluralism, business and consumerism obtaining the fewest mentions. It would appear that the "traditional" models of medical and social pathology and supercrip still dominate press reporting, with relatively less mention of "progressive" models.

There are differences among the groups of people with disabilities. Blind people get the most mentions in the minority/civil rights model, deaf people are highest in medical, retarded people in social pathology and physically impaired people in the legal model. However these categorisations are distorted in the case of deaf people by the inclusion of twelve mentions of cochlear implants in "medical" and in the case of physically impaired people by the inclusion of eighteen court cases to do with damages awards in "legal". If the awards for damages given by courts are taken out of the physically impaired group results the number of reports in the legal model drops to zero. Similarly, the total of seventeen in "social pathology" for intellectually impaired people is inflated by the occurrence of twelve reports of crimes against them in the period surveyed. All entries in "medical" for the deaf group were stories about cochlear implants or the stock market performance of Cochlear Inc., the company that makes the Australian implant.

Table 4. Topics mentioned in select database

	Deafness		Blindness		Retardation*		Physical**		Total	
	N.º	%	N.º	%	N.º	%	N.º	%	N.º	%
Metaphorical use	38	37	25	44	7	16	16	20	86	30
Personalities	15	14	10	18	2	5	2	2	29	10
Technology	15	14	4	7	0	0	1	1	20	7
TV, Movies, etc.	14	13	3	5	7	16	8	10	32	11
Accessibility Issues	2	2	2	4	0	0	0	0	4	1
Accommodation	0	0	0	0	2	5	3	4	5	2
Employment	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	2	5	2
Charity/Fundraising	3	3	2	4	1	2	3	4	9	3
Education	1	1	0	0	0	0	2	2	3	1
Business Matters	3	3	1	2	0	0	0	0	4	1
Damages, Awards	2	2	1	2	3	7	18	22	24	8
Crimes	0	0	2	4	10	23	3	4	15	5
Other	10	10	6	11	11	25	23	28	50	17
Total	104	100	57	103	44	101	81	99	286	98

* Includes mentally retarded, retarded, intellectually impaired

** Includes physically impaired, disabled, handicapped, paraplegic, quadriplegic, amputee, cripple.

Table 4 shows the number of cases under topics found in the select database. Major topics of stories about people with disabilities were their portrayal in movies and TV (somewhat of an artefact of movie and TV review columns) and mentions of well-known personalities who are disabled or who work with the disabled (often in fund-raising contexts; e.g., a visit of Christopher Reeve to Australia occurred in the survey period). Damages awarded as a result of court actions also appeared frequently, especially for physically disabled people, and there were reports of a number of crimes against intellectually impaired people in the period surveyed.

As can be seen from Table 4 there was a large number of stories not easily classifiable under major topic headings. Such topics in the blind group included mention of blind dates, window blinds, people who spent a large amount of money on veterinary services for a blind dog, blind waiters serving meals to sighted patrons in the dark in a London restaurant, and Picasso's claim that painting was the art of the blind.

Deafness-related topics included the release from prison of a Deaf man who had been wrongly imprisoned for forty years, the Deaflympics, and a deaf dog who was a family pet.

For intellectual impairment there was a series of articles on the desirability of pregnant women taking iodine, the Palestinian use of a retarded man as a suicide bomber, a series of stories about an American Deathrow inmate who was being IQ tested to see if he could be executed and the death of Rosemary Kennedy.

For physically impaired people topics included the fiftieth anniversary of the Salk polio vaccine (and ironically a report of an outbreak of polio in Indonesia), the treatment of physically impaired people during the Holocaust, and the story of a physically impaired man who survived the 2005 Boxing Day Tsunami.

DISCUSSION

These data show that people with disabilities are visible in Australian press reports. Overall their representation does not present them or their lives in a favourable light. The majority of reports portray them as needing either medical or social (community/government) support rather than as mostly self-determining and capable individuals (Table 3). There is very little evidence in these reports of the "social/cultural" model of people with disabilities living relatively normal lives with their disability or of Clogston's and Haller's "progressive" categories of mentions. Although some articles recognise people with disabilities as having civil rights (and this is encouraging as signalling an emerging awareness of people with disabilities' rights and concerns), as can be seen in Table 3 many other articles for all disability groups adopt a medical or social pathology model of disability and focus on people with disabilities' difficulties in adjusting to and their dependence on "normal" society, not on them being (as they and their advocates would argue) disabled by the barriers to living that societal structures and attitudes put in their way; i.e., in Clogston's terms, the articles present models that are "more traditional or more stigmatising". This analysis supports for Australia Haller's (2000) claim that, "newer cultural narratives about disability are currently in conflict within news media images. The newer civil rights narrative must compete with the more entrenched, and potentially 'handicapist' cultural images of disability (p. 283)".

The topics covered in the articles (Table 4) do not appear to reflect the interests and concerns of people with disabilities but rather those that journalists have selected as newsworthy. Most people with disabilities' and their advocates' concerns focus around such issues as accessibility, employment, education, and accommodation and these appear less frequently in the Australian press than those that are not so central to their concerns.

Of particular interest is the large number of articles (overall 30%; range from 20% to 44%) which use disability terms as a metaphor for aspects of events in the news. Metaphorical use of "blind", "deaf", "retarded" and "physical" occurred quite frequently, the highest use of the terms metaphorically being blind and deaf. "Blind to the consequences of his actions", "Blind rage", "Deaf to pleas for leniency", "Deaf to requests for overseas aid", "The government inactivity has retarded the economy", and the like were typical of such metaphorical uses. Most physically impaired metaphorical uses came via "Cripple(d)" which was used in such phrases as, "Train strike cripples Sydney commuters", "Hospital services crippled by inadequate funding", and "Creditors seek damages from crippled company". "Retarded growth for the economy" was found in that area. We have noted that it is likely that constant repetition of frames of the "traditional/stigmatising" models of disability may influence public and personal views of people with disabilities. It seems possible that the usually negative frames in which metaphorical use of disability terms are couched may also contribute to these perceptions.

Haller's (2000) finding that "If they limp, they lead?" (i. e., that the press tends to focus on stories about physically disabled people) is not borne out in the Australian data. In the cases where a disability is specified in an article, in the majority of cases it is people with sensory disabilities, not physically disabled people (Tables 3 and 4). Haller analysed news images rather than text and it may be that there are systematic differences in presentation between the two genres. It would be of interest to examine further whether this genre difference and other differences between the Australian and American data represent differences in attitude towards disabilities and their newsworthiness among these nations.

In the Australian data are a relatively large number of reports to do with legal matters, both of people suing for support or damages because of post-accident disabling conditions and crimes committed against people with disability (there was only a very small number of reports of crimes committed by people with a disability). The Australian data found a 5% rate for crimes against intellectually impaired people. Clogston's 1993 paper had a category of "Victimization" which averaged 3% over the four years he surveyed. "There is no doubt about the media's crucial influence in the production of stereotypical images. This implies, however, that the media can also be a powerful vehicle for changing stigmatizing representations of mental illness [and disabilities more broadly] (Angmeyer & Schultz, 2001, p. 485)".

Hence the need for ensuring that journalists are made aware of modern approaches to the terminology used in describing people with disabilities, how they may be represented in articles and the importance of

seeking the views of people with disabilities in writing about them ("Nothing about us without us!"). Haller (2003) has provided a resource for journalists to learn more about disability issues and sources where they may obtain information on disability issues from knowledgeable organizations and individuals. A similar resource for Australian journalists would be very helpful. It seems likely that Australian journalists are not well enough educated in understanding modern philosophies of disability; for example, the desirability of social-cultural explanations rather than medical/pathological ones. It appears necessary for disabled people and their advocates to work assiduously to make journalists more aware of such approaches: in their undergraduate training, by inservice professional development seminars and, above all, by disabled peoples' personal contacts with journalists.

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