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The Complexity of Disability

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The Complexity of Disability

Abstract

"The Complexity of Disability" is Chapter 11 in *Cross-Cultural Journalism: Communicating Strategically about Diversity*. Built on the hands-on reporting style and curriculum pioneered by the University of Missouri, this introductory textbook teaches students how to write about and communicate with people of backgrounds that may be different from their own, offering real-world examples of how to practice excellent journalism and strategic communication that take culture into account.

Disciplines

Communication | Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication | International and Intercultural Communication | Social Influence and Political Communication

Comments

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11

The Complexity of Disability

Chad Painter

Temple Grandin is one of the world's foremost experts in the design of more humane slaughterhouses. Such slaughterhouses are important to business because consumers demand animals to be reared, handled, transported and even slaughtered in ways that minimize pain and suffering.¹ Grandin, who has taught as an animal sciences professor at Colorado State University in Fort Collins for more than 20 years, regularly consults with companies such as McDonald's and Burger King about animal welfare. She also has designed corrals for handling cattle on ranches, as well as systems for handling cattle and hogs during veterinary procedures. Nearly 50 percent of cattle and 33 percent of hogs in the United States are handled by systems she designed. Grandin's work has revolutionized animal welfare.

Grandin was diagnosed with autism in 1950. The Centers for Disease Control classify autism spectrum disorders as a group of lifelong developmental disabilities caused by an abnormality of the brain. Impairments, which can range from very mild to very severe, include problems with social interaction and communication skills, as well as repetitive behaviors. Grandin's autism, she has said, enables her to excel in visual spatial skills while it leads

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- appreciate the individual and group complexity of defining disability.
- develop authentic stories that include people with disabilities and address issues that are of concern to people with disabilities.
- acquire the analytical capacity to select and decide whether advertising is inclusive or stereotypical.

her to perform poorly verbally. She says that she thinks in pictures, and she credits her visual thinking with helping her understand animals.

The animal-welfare and autistic-rights activist is hailed as the most famous person with autism in the world. The 2010 HBO film *Temple Grandin*, a semi-autobiographical biopic, won a Golden Globe and seven Emmy awards. Grandin is the author of six books, most notably the bestsellers *Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism* and *The Autistic Brain: Helping Different Kinds of Minds Succeed*. Finally, she was named one of *Time* magazine's 100 Most Influential People in the World in 2010.

Grandin has a disability. However, she is not defined by her disability. In this chapter, you will learn the tools to report effectively about people with disabilities, as well as learn how to include people with disabilities in advertising and public relations campaigns.



BOX 11.1

Defining Disability

KEY TERMS

There is no one accepted definition of disability. Disability is defined in the 1990 Americans with Disability Act to mean:

- 1) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. Major life activities include caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, seeing, hearing, eating, sleeping, walking, standing, lifting, bending, speaking, breathing, learning, reading, concentrating, thinking, communicating and working. A major life activity also includes the operation of a major bodily function, including functions of the immune system, normal cell growth, digestive, bowel, bladder, neurological, brain, respiratory, circulatory, endocrine and reproductive functions.
- 2) a record of such an impairment.
- 3) being regarded as having such an impairment. An individual meets the requirement of "being regarded as having such an impairment" if the individual has been subjected to an action because of an actual or perceived physical or mental impairment whether or not the impairment limits or is perceived to limit a major life activity. However, impairments must not be transitory or minor, meaning that the impairment must have an actual or expected duration of six months or more.

More than 56.7 million Americans—or about 2 in 10 adults—live with a disability, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Worldwide, more than 650 million people—or 10 percent of the total world's population—live with a disability, according to the United Nations. Those disabilities include disabilities one is born with, disabilities one develops through age, disabilities one incurs due to genetic health issues, disabilities related to accidents and war and disabilities related to job hazards. As such, disability intersects with the five major fault lines of age, geography, class, race and gender.

► FACTORS THAT LED TO INCREASE IN IMAGES OF DISABILITY IN THE UNITED STATES

Four factors directly or indirectly influenced mass media to include more images of people who have disabilities in news stories and advertisements. Knowing the history of people with disabilities can help journalists and strategic communication professionals add context to their stories and campaigns.

The first factor was the independent living movement, which started in the 1960s. Members of the independent living movement seek to establish a new philosophy about people with disabilities. This philosophy is distinguished from the medical model of disability, which sees a person's body as a "machine" to be fixed in order to fully participate in society. The medical model focuses on an individual's limitations and how to adapt technology and society to reduce those limitations. Negative stereotypes and connotations associated with the medical model of disability contribute to fewer occupational and familial opportunities for people with disabilities. Instead, people in the independent living movement subscribe to the social model, which places systematic barriers, negative attitudes and societal exclusion as the main factors in disabling people.

The second factor that has led to better representation and rights for people with disabilities was the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, sponsored by Indiana representative John Brademas. In the bill, lawmakers sought to extend and revise services that help people with physical or mental disabilities get or keep a job, to expand research and training programs for people with disabilities and to coordinate federal programs to better help and serve people with disabilities.

The third factor that increased information access and the awareness of the needs of people living with disability was television's introduction of open captioning and closed captioning. Open captioning, which is visible to all viewers, first appeared on the Public Broadcasting System in 1972. Shortly thereafter, closed captioning, or captions that are not visible until activated by the viewer, first appeared on PBS station WGBH-Boston. These text subtitles were created to assist people with partial hearing loss or people who are deaf to enjoy television programming.

The fourth factor that increased media awareness of people with disabilities was the Americans with Disability Act of 1990. The act, sponsored by Iowa Senator Tom Harkin, is a wide-ranging civil rights bill that prohibits job discrimination by employers, employment agencies, labor organizations and local, state and federal government entities against people with disabilities. The ADA also requires state and local governments to give people with disabilities an equal opportunity to benefit from all of their programs, services and activities. Further, businesses and nonprofit agencies must comply with basic nondiscrimination requirements—such as placing wheelchair ramps next to stairs—that prohibit exclusion, segregation and unequal treatment.

► FRAMING DISABILITY

Media shape public perceptions and attitudes. Media, therefore, can influence how the public feels toward people with disabilities. Members of news media “select the content and frame of the news, thereby constructing reality for those who read, watch, or listen to their stories.”²

Some academics argue that media still do not use acceptable language when describing people with disabilities.³ Paul Darke argues that “The representation of disability in the media in the last ten years is pretty much the same as it has always been: clichéd, stereotyped and archetypal.”⁴

Media framing can be seen in several predictable stereotypes for people with disabilities.⁵ The first stereotype is that they are “others”—that they are partial, limited and less than fully human. The second stereotype is that they are superhuman, overcoming overwhelming odds to live a normal life in a way that can serve as an example to others. Former Major League Baseball pitcher Jim Abbott is a prime example of this stereotype. Abbott, who pitched for four teams during his 11-year career, made the majors despite being born without a right hand. The third stereotype is that the burden or disability is unending, that a person living with a disability must rely on family, friends and society for support. The fourth stereotype is that disability is a sickness needing to be fixed or cured. This medical model, which often may be seen in telethons such as Jerry Lewis’ MDA telethon, shows people with disabilities as broken humans that can contribute to society once medical professionals “fix” them. The fifth stereotype is that people with disabilities, especially mental disability, are a menace to others, to themselves and to society. This “villain” stereotype, which is shown repeatedly in superhero movies such as *X-Men*, shows people with disabilities as evil and warped creatures that must be controlled or killed. The sixth stereotype is that people with disabilities, especially cognitive disabilities, are innocents who inspire others to value life. This stereotype can be seen in the eternally innocent portrayals of movie characters such as *Forrest Gump* and *Rain Man*’s Raymond Babbitt.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What images of people with disabilities have you seen in popular culture? How are the people represented and depicted?
2. As journalists, how can we use the elements of excellent journalism to overcome negative stereotypes of people with disabilities?

By embracing the elements of excellent journalism, media professionals can overcome these predictable stereotypes. As a journalist or strategic communicator, the best—and, really, only—way to frame people with disabilities is to rise above one-dimensional characterizations and explanations to show the complexity of their lives. People with disabilities are more than the six stereotypes listed previously. Further, people with disabilities are not defined by their disability—just like a person is not defined by his or her race, gender, sexual orientation or any other *one* factor. Journalists and strategic communicators must recognize and embrace the full life of a person, not just one aspect. John Clogston and Beth A. Haller proposed a set of media models that represent people with disabilities as full and active members of society instead of the more stigmatizing traditional models.⁶ Their models are:

- *Minority/Civil Rights*: A person with a disability is shown as a member of a minority group with legitimate political grievances.
- *Cultural Pluralism*: A person with a disability is considered a multi-faceted individual whose disability is considered one aspect of many. No unwarranted attention is paid to the disability.
- *Consumer*: People with disabilities are presented as an untapped consumer group that could be profitable to business and society.

The Poynter Institute offers several tips for journalists and strategic communicators looking to report a fuller, non-stereotypical, picture of people with disabilities. First, understand who falls under the definition of a person with a disability. Next—this one seems like a no-brainer, but you would be surprised—talk to people with disabilities when doing stories about disability. Finally, focus on the person, not the disability.⁷

The best news for aspiring journalists and strategic communicators: Disability issues are rich territory for unusually rewarding stories.⁸ Disability issues still receive very little coverage by the media, and most disability coverage is clichéd, despite disability issues being interesting and complex. As a result, thoughtful stories that embrace excellent journalism can stand out from the crowd and change the way people think about these issues.

ProPublica reporter Jennifer LaFleur suggests some handy tips for someone trying to cover disability better. First, become extremely familiar with laws such as the Americans with Disability Act, which are extremely complex. Second, uncover issues in your area. You can do this by talking to disability advocates, learning about complaints by sending Freedom of Information Act requests to government agencies, checking for Americans with Disability Act lawsuits in your area and—probably most importantly—observing what is happening around you. Third, practice. Like all types of journalism, you will become better at reporting about disability issues the more you actually report about these issues.



BOX 11.2

From the Field: Chris Hamby



Chris Hamby, BuzzFeed

Chris Hamby won the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for Investigate Reporting for his series “Breathless and Burdened,” which he wrote while at the Center for Public Integrity. In the series, Hamby wrote about how some lawyers and doctors rigged a system to deny benefits to coal miners stricken with black lung disease. His reporting led to remedial legislative efforts.

Q: What challenges did you face reporting the story—especially in terms of reporting on people with disabilities?

A: When you’re reporting on a population like coal miners in West Virginia, they are skeptical about people from Washington or New York coming in and writing about them. There have been a lot of negative portrayals. The negative points are not true, but they are sensitive about how they are portrayed. I tried to get past that by being around and learning a lot about coal mining. I started by talking about their work. They can see you’re legitimately interested. I was surprised about how forthcoming people were about their disease.

It is very difficult to be talking to someone who is 46 and looks in good shape, and then after 15 minutes they start making this horrible gasping sound. I didn’t know the appropriate thing to do: going on with the interview, leaving them alone,

(Continued)

BOX 11.2 Continued

taking a break or stopping. They wanted to press on because this was the first time anyone really listened to what they had to say. I interviewed the family of Steve Day. At the end of my interview, I asked the standard question: "Is there anything I didn't ask you?" His wife was sitting there crying; she said, "Thank you so much for listening to us. No one ever has." I didn't know how to respond, but that's what makes this type of journalism challenging but rewarding. There were a lot of moments like that.

You don't want to portray people as caricatures. They gave me a lot of trust. It was important to me to portray their stories with sensitivity. These people didn't need to talk to me. It shook them up for a while.

Q: What tips do you have for journalists who are reporting similar stories?

A: Don't assume that people don't want to talk to you.

Don't put on airs. They will sniff out an artifice immediately. Don't sweet-talk them. Just be genuine. Tell them the good and bad of talking to you. If they're hesitant, kindly ask them what they're concerned about. Sensitivity is important here. Be genuine.

Don't immediately sit down and start talking about how their lives are ruined. Learn about the world they inhabit, even if it won't go into the story. The interview will be better if you connect with sources.

► **GROUP COMPLEXITY: THERE ARE MANY TYPES OF DISABILITY**

Disability culture is not any different from many other cultures because "persons with disabilities share a common bond of experiences and resilience."⁹ There is not one monolithic group called the "disabled." Instead, disabilities are individual and differ in the adjustments required. Further, some people do not identify as people with disabilities. Instead, there is a myriad of types of disability. For example, the American Community Survey includes six different questions to distinguish between visual (blindness or difficulty seeing), hearing (deaf or difficulty hearing), ambulatory (walking or climbing stairs), cognitive (difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions), self-care (ability to dress or bathe) and independent living (activities such as running errands, visiting a doctor's office or shopping) disabilities.

Embracing complexity and understanding the plethora of disabilities and people with disabilities is important to achieving excellent journalism. Journalists also can add

context such as social and cultural backgrounds, political and legal history and economic implications. Finally, journalists can tell the story from the point of view of the interviewee, bringing the voice of the people to the listener, reader and viewer.

The prevalence of disability increases as one ages, and the combination of rising life expectancy and lower birth rates is creating an aging population worldwide—especially in European countries such as Italy and England, Asian countries such as Japan and China and North American countries such as Canada and the United States. While the trend has not yet impacted the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, the United Nations expects the vast majority of people 65 and older to live in what it terms “developing countries” by 2050.

According to the 2012 American Community Survey, 0.8 percent of people under the age of 4 reported a disability, compared to 5.3 percent of people 5–15, 5.5 percent of people 16–20, 10.4 percent of people 21–64, 25 percent of people 65–74 and 50 percent of people over the age of 75. The American Community Survey (ACS) is a mandatory, ongoing statistical survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau that samples a small percentage of the population every year—giving communities the information they need to plan investments and services. Notice the sharp rises in disability percentages between age 64 and age 75. About 14 percent of the U.S. population was 65 or older in 2013, and that number is expected to rise to 21 percent by 2050, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. This rise could have significant effects for all Americans in terms of government policies and health care. For example, a large older population—one that tends to vote in larger numbers than younger generations—might impact political debates about Medicare and Social Security. Similarly, older adults consume a disproportionately large share of health care services, and these adults could influence the skills and services, as well as settings, provided by a health care workforce.

These issues provide tremendous opportunities for enterprising journalists to explore stories and issues of great interest to readers and viewers. Journalists should reflect on the generation fault line when writing about disability. By reflecting on fault lines, reporters and editors can better determine the interests, decisions and actions of sources; can provide a way to identify missing cultural voices; can identify additional story angles and perspectives needed for authenticity; and can reframe a story or add complexity.

Journalists also could report on issues such as oppression, discrimination, inequality and poverty while writing about people with disabilities. This focus could lead to the class fault line. People with disabilities do tend to earn less, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In 2012, the median income for a person with a disability during the previous 12 months was \$20,184, which was only 66 percent of the median earnings for those without a disability.¹⁰ Consequently, 23 percent of people with a disability were considered to be below the poverty line, compared to 15 percent for those without a disability.

Further, 30 percent of people who received income-based government assistance had a disability, and 18 percent of those assistance recipients had difficulty walking or climbing stairs. Class, one of the five fault lines, is a combination of one's economic, political, educational and social standing. As journalists educate themselves more about how fault lines such as class intersect with disability, they have the opportunity to better inform the public about the link between disability, earned income and poverty.



BOX 11.3

From the Field: Nick Turkas

Nick Turkas has worked for the Arthritis Foundation for 15 years. He currently serves as a senior vice president of community development, based in Charlotte, NC.



Nick Turkas

Q: *What are some misperceptions or misconceptions about people with arthritis?*

A: Most people have a picture of a person with arthritis as an elderly woman in a rocking chair or old man shuffling behind a walker. While older people most definitely are more likely to live with arthritis, it is far from the whole story. Arthritis is the most common cause of disability in the U.S. Arthritis is an umbrella term used for a group of more than 120 medical conditions, all of which affect one or more joints. The most common forms of arthritis include osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, gout and osteoporosis. Pain, stiffness, swelling and difficulty moving a joint are common signs and symptoms of arthritis. Arthritis is most common among women and senior citizens. Nonetheless, arthritis is not just an older person's disease. Nearly two thirds of people with arthritis are younger than 65 years old. More than 300,000 children in the U.S. live with arthritis.

Q: *What should journalists do to better understand arthritis—to better report about arthritis and tell the stories of people living with arthritis?*

A: Do what journalists do best. Take time to get to know their subjects and listen to what their experience has been with the diseases. People with chronic conditions will typically tell you about the process of being officially diagnosed, how their life has changed and their response to those changes. The

(Continued)

BOX 11.3 Continued

changes may include periods of frustration and celebration. It's within those periods that great stories can emerge.

For non-profit organizations, it is important to showcase the relationship with its funders and supporters. Investors in a community-based organization often have compelling reasons for that involvement and a vision for a better future.

Q: *What should advertisers and public relations professionals do to feature or showcase people with arthritis without being stereotypical or offensive?*

A: People with arthritis are typically portrayed as severely disabled or superhuman. The truth is that arthritis is a spectrum. In addition, people with arthritis experience flare-ups, which are intense pain and swelling, and remission periods of reduced pain and increased energy. These flares and remissions wax and wane sometimes without known reason.

► DISABILITIES IN THE NEWS

There is an intersection between health and disability. Some people are born with a disability. However, health issues, if left unchecked and uncared for, can lead to disability. Other mental and physical disabilities can happen due to occupational hazards, accidents or war. The media recently have focused on four health issues related to disability, each of which we will discuss more below. Each also is related to common issues in all disability stories such as policy, regulation, medical care, accommodations and workplace safety. Journalists easily can obtain this information on government websites such as Disability.gov or NIH.gov, and health groups such as the American Diabetes Association.

When putting information together for your stories, concentrate on a few journalistic tools. First, find the human element in the story (see Ch. 12 for more guidance). The focus structure, which follows one individual as a representative of a larger group, is a useful tool for making complex or abstract stories meaningful to readers. This technique also allows you to put the person first instead of emphasizing the disability. Second, be cautious with language. As the Missouri Group writes in *News Reporting and Writing*, "Words are powerful. When used negatively, they define cultures, create second-class citizens and reveal stereotypical thinking. They also change the way people think about and treat others."¹¹ It is not about being zealously "politically correct"; instead, it is about

having the freedom—and responsibility—to choose precisely the right word. Speaking of word choice, you should define and reword technical terms to make them clearer for readers or viewers. A useful question to ask an expert is “Can you restate that information in terms that would be understandable to a non-expert audience?” Third, add context through the use of historical examples and issues, data and statistics and medical and other academic research. Census.gov has a wealth of statistical information, and your newsroom’s clip morgue can provide a treasure trove of material about how an issue has been written about in the past.

Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE)

More than 4,500 former professional football players sued the National Football League, claiming that the NFL concealed the link between football and brain damage. CTE is defined by the Centers for Disease Control as a “progressive motor neuron disease characterized by profound weakness, atrophy, spasticity and fasciculation similar to amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS).” Typical signs and symptoms include a decline of recent memory and executive function, and mood and behavioral disturbances—especially depression, impulsivity, aggressiveness, anger, irritability, suicidal behavior and eventual progression to dementia, according to the CDC. Initial signs and symptoms typically do not occur until decades after the trauma was received.

Obesity

Obesity simply means having too much body fat, according to the National Institutes of Health. Researchers conducting the 2009–2010 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey found that more than 66 percent of adults and 33 percent of children aged 6–19 are considered to be overweight or obese.¹² Being obese increases the risk of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, arthritis and cancer.

About 29.1 million Americans, or 9.3 percent of the total population, have diabetes, and the figure continues to rise.¹³ Some population groups—African-Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Asian-Americans, and Pacific Islanders—have a higher risk of developing type 2 diabetes. This increased risk could lead journalists to focus on the race and ethnicity fault line when reporting stories about type 2 diabetes. People over the age of 65 also were more likely to have diabetes. About 11.8 million people over the age of 65 (or 25.9 percent of the subpopulation) have been diagnosed with diabetes.¹⁴ Journalists have the opportunity to focus on the generation fault line when reporting stories about diabetes.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

The main features of ADHD are inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity lasting more than six months and causing problems at school, at home or in social situations.¹⁵ In 2013, the Centers for Disease Control reported that 6.4 million American schoolchildren between the ages of 4 and 17 had been diagnosed with ADHD. Boys are more likely to be diagnosed than girls. By high school, nearly 1 in 5 boys are diagnosed with ADHD. When reporting about ADHD, especially among school-aged children, journalists may choose to concentrate on the gender fault line.

Casualties of War

As of the time of this writing, 18,675 American military personnel have been wounded in the war in Afghanistan since 2001, and 32,222 were wounded in Iraq between 2003–2011, according to the Congressional Research Service.¹⁶ Injuries could be physical such as amputations or severe burns, or mental such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Advances in medicine enabling doctors and nurses to save lives where wounds would have been fatal in previous wars are one reason for the increase in non-fatal casualties. Journalists covering such stories should provide that necessary context when telling the stories of wounded military personnel. Further, there is an aspect of complexity to these stories because not all injuries are the same, and the way people react and respond to their injuries can be dramatically different.

► A NEGATIVE WORD

President Barack Obama signed Rosa's Law on October 5, 2010. In the bill, the people-first terms "individual with an intellectual disability" and "intellectual disability" replaced "mental retardation" and "mentally retarded" in all federal health, education and labor laws and policy. Forty-three states have enacted laws or are taking steps to remove the word "retarded" from their laws. Why? The "R-word," or "retard," is considered the social equivalent of other offensive terms based on race, gender and sexual orientation.¹⁷ Eliminating hateful language is the impetus for the "spread the word to end the word" campaign.

In the United Kingdom, Nicola Clark started the People Not Punchlines campaign to change hate speech law to include people with disabilities. In the U.K., it was illegal to communicate in a manner that was threatening, abusive or insulting, and intended to harass, alarm or distress. However, the law previously did not extend to people with disabilities even though an estimated 90 percent of people with learning disabilities were verbally abused or assaulted because of their disability. Clark started the campaign after realizing that hate speech directed at people with disabilities was becoming common in society and national television.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What would you do if someone you are interviewing uses the word “retarded” in an interview?
2. What factors would you use to decide whether to include the word in the story or not? Does it matter if the person who used the word has a disability herself/himself? Why or why not?



BOX 11.4

Associated Press Stylebook

DISABILITY AND EXCELLENT JOURNALISM

The Associated Press is a nonprofit media cooperative owned by its member newspapers, radio and television stations, which contribute stories to the news service and use content produced by its staff journalists. The Associated Press Stylebook is almost universally used in newsrooms and classrooms, and, as the AP writes, it is “essential for journalists, students, editors and writers in all professions.” What follows is the 2012 entry for “disabled, handicapped, impaired,” edited by Darrel Christian, Sally Jacobsen and David Minthorn.

Disabled, handicapped, impaired: In general, do not describe an individual as disabled or handicapped unless it is clearly pertinent to a story. If a description must be used, try to be specific. *An ad featuring actor Michael J. Fox swaying noticeably from the effects of Parkinson's disease drew nationwide attention.*

Avoid descriptions that connote pity, such as *afflicted with* or *suffers from multiple sclerosis*. Rather, *has multiple sclerosis*.

Some terms include:

Cripple: Often considered offensive when used to describe a person who is lame or disabled.

Disabled: A general term used for a physical or mental disability. Do not use “mentally retarded.”

Handicap: This should be avoided in describing a disability.

Blind: Describes a person with complete loss of sight. For others, use terms such as *visually impaired* or *person with low vision*.

Deaf: Describes a person with total hearing loss. For others, use *partial hearing loss* or *partially deaf*. Avoid using *deaf-mute*. Do not use *deaf and dumb*.

Mute: Describes a person who physically cannot speak. Others with speaking difficulties are *speech impaired*.

Wheelchair user: People use wheelchairs for independent mobility. Do not use *confined to a wheelchair*, or *wheelchair-bound*. If a wheelchair is needed, say why.

► PEOPLE-FIRST LANGUAGE

Using people-first language is putting the person before his or her disability.¹⁸ Words have meaning “because the terminology reveals the thinking behind them.”¹⁹ Some words are hurtful and can set people apart in a negative way. Other words can be respectful, and it is a matter of respect to see a person or community first, to see a person or community before a disability. People should not be defined by their disability; they are people first.

Double Consciousness: Practicing double-consciousness is understanding different cultures from their cultural perspective. By practicing double-consciousness, journalists and strategic communicators will identify why people-first language matters to many and also why mentioning disability only when it is pertinent to the story makes sense.

People-first language puts the person before the disability, and describes what a person has, not who a person is. Are you “myopic” or do you wear glasses? Are you “cancerous” or do you have cancer? Is a person “handicapped/disabled” or does she have a disability?²⁰

People with disabilities want to be accepted just like anyone else. The media shape public perceptions and attitudes; therefore, media use of language is important.

► DISABILITY AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

Inclusive Advertising: To show people with disabilities as they really are; part of the mainstream, not superhuman or inferior

Inclusive Advertising

Strategic communication professionals must take into account the needs and preferences of people with disabilities. One characteristic of inclusive advertising is that such ads incorporate images of people with disabilities, a change from previous ideals of physically perfect models in ads.²¹ Marie Hardin argues that people with disabilities typically ignore advertising because it does not adequately reflect their lives. However, the people she interviewed were aware of positive advertising images of people with disabilities, and they internalized the able-bodied ideal typically found in advertising and other types of media.²²

In 1984, blue jeans manufacturer Levi Strauss was the first advertiser to use a person with a disability in one of its ads.²³ The ad featured a man in a wheelchair popping a wheelie. McDonald's followed in 1986, featuring one of its employees, who had a disability, in an ad. DuPont aired a commercial in 1987 featuring Bill Demby, a Vietnam veteran shown playing basketball on his two prosthetic legs. Since these advertisers first

showcased people with disabilities, the concept of such advertising has become more commonplace in the United States and the United Kingdom. However, while some improvement has occurred in terms of inclusiveness—such as themes of empowerment and disability pride—advertisements also generally stigmatize people with disabilities. Beth Haller and Sue Ralph argue that certain themes found in ads “convey underlying messages that disabled people are broken and in need of repair, are awash in tragedy, or are Supercrrips, who are put on pedestals for just living their lives.”²⁴

There are four major ways advertisers can approach inclusive advertising. Disability-focused general marketing, which is conducted for profit instead of for philanthropy or social responsibility, “utilizes generic media to promote disability-related products or services.” Disability-focused narrowcasting is similar to disability-focused general marketing, but messages are directed to “carefully selected subgroups in ways most likely to reach them and influence their purchasing decision.” In disability-highlighted marketing, a company will feature disabilities thematically in its advertising, usually by focusing on a consumer or employee with a disability. While disability issues are not directly discussed in such advertising, the message is front and center. Disability-integrated marketing also features people with disabilities, but draws no particular attention to them or the disability.²⁵

The Web offers advertisers new opportunities to reach potential consumers who have disabilities. As a group, people with disabilities are more likely than other groups to use the Internet for getting information about products and services, shopping online, getting information about health, making travel plans and arrangements and paying bills. However, a person with a disability, much like the general population, values the Internet, particular websites and Web advertising only if all three clearly make their lives more manageable.²⁶ The key for strategic communicators, then, is to focus on the product and how it improves a person’s life, not on checking a box by including an image of a person with a disability or narrowcasting the message toward the disability itself.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What images of people with disabilities have you seen in advertising? Describe how the ad fit into one of the four major categories: disability-focused general marketing, disability-focused narrowcasting, disability-highlighted marketing or disability-integrated marketing.
2. How are images similar and different in traditional advertising, Web-based advertising and advertising on social media?



BOX 11.5

From the Field: Tim O'Brien

**Tim O'Brien**

Tim O'Brien is the head of the Pittsburgh-based public relations firm O'Brien Communications. He previously worked for Tollgrade, Ketchum and Magnus/Catanzano. He is a frequent contributor to the Public Relations Society of America publications *PR Strategist* and *PR Tactics*, where this article originally appeared.

"One of the tenets of professional communication is, 'Know your audience.' With this in mind, the most serious mistake that a communicator can make is to lump all of those with some form of disability into a single 'disability community' heading on an audience matrix.

While the level of sophistication depends on the nature of the communications program, it is always a good practice to treat any general demographic as an umbrella for many subsets within—each with its own mindset and self-interest. Take the time to customize your communications plans to address the differences between these subsets.

Do the necessary research to identify the attitudes of your targeted audiences. You may be surprised at the results and how they vary between demographics within a targeted audience.

That said, the following are some mistakes to avoid:

- * Don't assume that people with disabilities do not work. The [American Community Survey] reported that in 2008, about 39 percent or 7.5 million working age adults with some form of disability were employed. And this does not take into account those who are able to work but were unemployed because of the recession.
- * Don't assume that all of those with a particular disability share the same attitudes toward the same societal issues. One person with Parkinson's disease may favor embryonic stem cell research funding, while another may strongly disagree for his or her own reasons.
- * Don't project your own feelings about particular disabilities on the targeted audience. How we think we would react if we had a certain disability is probably different from how those who actually have a certain disability have responded to their challenges.

(Continued)

BOX 11.5 Continued

- * Don't dismiss the emerging language of disability as political correctness run amok. The accepted language of disability is called 'people first,' which simply places the emphasis on the individual and not the disability. It provides proper context for all communications. We know it's not acceptable in general conversation to refer to a colleague as 'the fat guy at the corner table,' or the 'old woman in the conference room.' We should know better than to refer to a colleague as 'that wheelchair-bound sales rep,' or to describe the son of a coworker as 'retarded.'
- * Don't patronize. It is common, especially in PR circles, to want to recognize individuals for their dedication or hard work. But when we add a layer to this recognition, calling people with disabilities 'courageous' or 'brave' simply for doing their jobs, we could be crossing a line that has an unintended effect on the individual. Often such recognition could be perceived as disingenuous, shallow and without substance.

The best way to communicate to people with disabilities (and every other demographic in society) is to treat them with even-handed respect. Language is important, of course. But perhaps most important: PR professionals must avoid using a 'one size fits all' approach to communicating with this growing group of individuals."²⁷

Ads That Work

Strategic communication practitioners can create ads that feature people with disabilities without those ads being offensive to that community. The key is to show people with disabilities as they really are—not superhuman or inferior, but part of the mainstream, part of "real life." Strategic communicators also must realize that there is a wide scope of disabilities, so they should move away from just depicting people who are deaf or people in wheelchairs. Finally, practitioners should remember that ads and stories are visual and present messages, and think critically about the message that the advertisement is sending both visually and textually.

There are plusses and minuses to the use of advertisements featuring people with disabilities. The audience for such ads is twofold: people with disabilities and people without disabilities. The major advantage to these ads is that using people with disabilities meets important social responsibilities and enhances the potential consumer base to include patrons who have disabilities. There also can be a sense of altruism when people with disabilities are used in advertisements. However, strategic communicators

must be careful to avoid perpetuating stereotypes. Public relations practitioners also must be cognizant of depicting people with disabilities as part of normal, everyday life.

► CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, you explored the term disability to understand better that there is no one definition of the word. Further, you learned about group complexity. There are many types of disability, and disabilities are individual and differ in the adjustments required by people. The way that media frame disability can have a major influence on how the general public sees and understands people with disabilities. By using people-first language, which does not define a person by his or her disability, journalists can be more respectful to those people with disabilities and more accurate in their stories. Advertisers and public relations practitioners can incorporate inclusive images of people with disabilities to broaden their target audience without being stereotypical or offensive. Finally, you learned ways to include complexity, context, voices and the five fault lines to tell better, broader stories about people with disabilities.

► SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Rewrite the following sentences to include people-first language.
 - 1) The wheelchair-bound senator was campaigning for reelection.
 - 2) New Mexico's handicapped turned out for a rally.
 - 3) Disabled man wins award for volunteerism.
 - 4) Agency purchases apartment to house the disabled.
 - 5) Dental program for the mentally retarded faces cuts.
 - 6) City to add more handicapped parking spaces.
 - 7) The mayor's son is autistic.
 - 8) The principal's daughter is a special-education student at his school.
 - 9) Peter Dinklage is a famous midget actor.
 - 10) The quadriplegic veteran does not consider herself handicapped.
2. Find an advertisement featuring a person with a disability. Does the advertisement meet the five criteria in the TARES test? Why or why not? If it does not satisfy one of the criteria, what aspect needs to be changed to make the ad more ethical?

TARES test²⁸

The original TARES test is a checklist of questions the creators of every persuasive message should ask themselves to determine the ethical worthiness of the message.

T = Truthfulness: Are the claims, both verbal and visual, truthful? If the message communicates only part of the truth (and many ads do), are the omissions deceptive?

A = Authenticity: Would you buy your own reasoning about the uses and quality of the product advertised?

R = Respect: Am I willing to take full, open and personal responsibility for the content of this ad?

E = Equity: Is the recipient of the message on the same level playing field as the ad's creator? Or, to correctly interpret the ad, must that person be abnormally well-informed, unusually bright or quick-witted and completely without prejudice?

S = Socially responsible: If everyone financially able to purchase this product or service did so, would society as a whole be improved, keeping in mind that recreation and self-improvement are worthy societal goals? If there are some groups in society that would benefit from using this product as advertised, are there others that could be significantly harmed by it? Are there ways to protect them?

3. How do journalists and advertisers get to know the stories and buying profiles of places, people and neighborhoods that have gone uncovered, under-covered, underserved and under-researched? They find places to tune in to a community's frequency, a "listening post." Find such a listening post for people with disabilities in your community. While you're there, "listen" with all your senses. Read bulletin boards, pamphlets, leaflets, etc. Sit down and have a conversation about what's going on in the community. Listen carefully to the language people use to describe themselves and what they do. Take your cue from them. Show up with an open mind and be willing to be wrong about a place or person.
4. Read Mike Sager's article "Vetville" (www.esquire.com/news-politics/a10561/marines-veterans-iraq-0811/). Was Sager's piece an example of excellent journalism? Why or why not? How were the five fault lines used in the article? Were there any necessary fault lines missing?

► NOTES

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Americans with Disability Act: ada.gov

Disability information for Australia: australia.gov.au/people/people-with-disabilities

Centers for Disease Control: cdc.gov

U.S. Census and American Community Survey: census.gov

Disability information for Ireland: citizensinformation.ie/en/reference/checklists/checklist_disability.html

Disability information for United States: disability.gov

Disability information for England: gov.uk/browse/disabilities

National Institutes of Health: nih.gov

"Not Acceptable R-Word" PSA: r-word.org/r-word-not-acceptable-psa.aspx

Disability information for Scotland: scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Equality/disability

Disability information for Canada: servicecanada.gc.ca/eng/lifeevents/disability.shtml

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