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Shawn Burns
University of Wollongong, shawn@uow.edu.au

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Commentary

Words matter: Journalists, educators, media guidelines and representation of disability

Shawn Burns
University of Wollongong, NSW
shawn@uow.edu.au

A four-letter word starting with 'c', and "humour" have served to reinforce the message – words matter. In June 2010, individual but disturbingly similar cases of racism rocked leading sporting codes and organisations in Australia - the National Rugby League (NRL) and the Australian Football League (AFL).

Two former champion Australian sportsmen – one a recently retired rugby league star, Andrew Johns, and the other, a former Australian rules heavyweight, Mal Brown –were at the centre of a debate about words and, more importantly, the power of words.

Johns was accused of racial vilification while serving as an assistant coach to the NSW State of Origin rugby league team. Johns admitted to using a racial slur against Queensland opposition team member, Greg Inglis.

Johns was reported to have told one of his NSW charges, centre Beau Scott, to stop "that black c…" (expletive), in a reference to the Aboriginal player, Inglis. The incident erupted into front-page headlines when Johns's words motivated NSW indigenous player, Timana Tahu, to walk out on the state side and refuse to play in the team's upcoming clash with Queensland as a protest against Johns's comments.

Following the public outcry and media attention, Johns quit his position as assistant coach to the NSW team on Friday, June 11. *The Courier Mail* (12 June, 2010) in Brisbane reported Johns as saying:

> "Two nights ago, while trying to talk up the match, I made a disparaging comment about a member of the other team and, in the process of that, I referred to the colour of his skin. I should have thought more what I was saying about a player whom I have always admired and respected and I hope I can speak with Greg soon to explain what happened."

Five days later on June16, former Richmond Aussie rules player Brown created his own controversy by using another "c" word to describe Aboriginal footballers. In

what he maintained was a humorous description of indigenous players, Brown, at a fundraising luncheon, referred to them as "cannibals".

Fox Sports (June 17, 2010) reported Brown as saying in reference to poor lighting at an early Legends game in which he was a coach:

> "We have a distinct disadvantage, the West Australians, because the Victorians picked both sides. They cheated. They picked the best players. And because there were no lights on, I couldn't pick any of the cannibals. I couldn't pick Nicky Winmar or Michael Mitchell or Chrissy Lewis. All the good black fellows, we couldn't pick them because they couldn't see them in the light."

Brown later "reservedly" apologised for his comments.

> "I apologise reservedly because it was meant with jest and humour," he was reported on the Nine Network to have said.

Both incidents sparked public outcry, political condemnation and criticisms from the respective football codes. Brown, whose football heydays were in the 1970s, was largely painted as a relic; Johns was presented as being ignorant – by himself and others.

> "I can't apologise strongly enough. Thankfully I was able to relay that to him today and I am glad we were able to talk. I didn't realise until then how ignorant I was and I want to make that point to him when I get the chance to apologise to Timana in person," Johns told *The Daily Telegraph* on June12.

I could not help but ask myself and, indeed, I tweeted the question:

> "I've been pondering. Replace racial slurs with disability slurs – e.g. 'you run like a spastic'. Does Johns still have his SOO job?" (June 16, 2010)

What if the comments by Johns and Brown were about people with disability, instead of Aboriginal people? Would Johns still be a part of the NSW State of Origin outfit if he had said: "You have to get that spastic c…"? Would the criticism of Mal Brown have existed or the tapes even been played if he had told the luncheon a "humorous" joke about the "retards"?

While the football controversies had focused attention on racial vilification, the two incidents served to highlight the power of words. I have spent the last two years researching the power of words used by journalists – like those who would have spent time covering and contemplating the Johns and Brown incidents. While the Brown and Johns cases were centred on racial vilification, my research focused on the media representation of people with disability and, in particular, the words and phrases that journalists use in their stories.

In 1994, the Disability Council of NSW commissioned researcher and writer Joan Hume to develop media guidelines to assist and advise journalists on the representation of people with disability. Hume, who was paralysed in a car crash in 1971, had written extensively on disability in society and was considered a logical choice to develop the guidelines. The A4 booklet addressed issues such as word choice, the use of stereotypes, and how to approach and prepare for interviews with people with disability. But to what extent have journalists followed the Disability

Council of NSW Media Guidelines in their reporting since it was introduced? My general query led to these specific questions:

1) How do journalists frame their reporting of people with disability?

2) Why do journalists apply particular frames in their stories?

3) What impact do these frames have on community perceptions of people with disability?

My research started in 2008 when I interviewed Hume to explore the process of developing the guidelines and if she thought they have been effective 16 years later. It was about that time too when the feature film, *Tropic Thunder*, sparked outrage from disability advocacy groups. The film featured actor Ben Stiller as Tugg Speedman – a character in the film famous for his stereotypical and degrading portrayal of a man with an intellectual disability. A similar atmosphere of outrage and or disillusionment was present at the time the Disability Council of NSW media guidelines were introduced.

Since the United Nations proclaimed 1981 as the International Year of the Disabled Person, and from 1992 onwards, December 3 as the International Day of People with Disability, a list of movies about people with disability had been produced with many receiving critical acclaim. The films included: *Children of a Lesser God* (1986), *Rain Man* (1988), *Born of the Fourth of July* (1989), *My Left Foot* (1989), and *Scent of a Woman* (1992). The films featured some of Hollywood's biggest names, including Dustin Hoffman, who played an 'autistic savant' in *Rain Man*; Daniel Day Lewis, who played an Irish writer with severe cerebral palsy in *My Left Foot*; and, Al Pacino, who played an army colonel who is blind and intent on committing suicide in *Scent of a Woman*. Only one of the films, *Children of a Lesser God*, featured a 'real' person with a disability, Marlee Matlin – who is deaf.

Hume said: "In spite of all the International Year of the Disabled Person propaganda, the film media wasn't getting the message about equal opportunity and equal participation in all aspects of life."

Hume added that the film industry's approach to disability was part of the motivation for the Disability Council of NSW to create the media guidelines, but the stereotyped coverage of disability by the news media at the time was the primary catalyst for action. Prominent are the "supercrip" and "vicitim" stereotypes (Clogston 1989; 1990; 1993; Hume 1994; Haller 1997):

> "Brave crip superhero, such as Christopher Reeve's story; sob stories about doom 'afflicted' accident 'victims' usually 'wheelchair-bound'. Confined to iron-lung, cute little cerebral-palsied kids with calipers being patted on the heads by beaming politicians and bountiful do-gooders," she said.

Hume contended those images pushed the introduction of the guidelines for journalists to refer to when reporting on people with disability. "Many of these articles not only defamed and distorted the images of people with disabilities but used deeply and offensive language, such as outlined in the guidelines," she said.

The guidelines noted that words, such as 'moron' and 'invalid', were 'words to be avoided' in reporting about people disability. It was not uncommon then (in the early '90s) for people with Downs Syndrome to be referred to as 'Mongoloid' and people with intellectual disability to be called 'morons'.

With reference to the Disability Council of NSW Media Guidelines, I then conducted a textual analysis of television and newspaper items in New South Wales between 17 November and 17 December 2008 (incorporating five newspapers and six daily television news bulletins) to find out how much has changed. Over the four-week period, which included International Day of People with Disability, there were 38 newspaper articles and 36 television news stories about people with disability and/or the issues they face.

My analysis showed that words such as 'Mongoloid' and 'retard' were not used by journalists in a disability context. However, phrases that the guidelines considered to be offensive in the '90s - such as 'wheelchair-bound' and 'suffers from' - are still being used by journalists today. There were eight references to 'wheelchair-bound' (newspaper) and five instances of 'suffers from' (newspaper) being used in a disability context. Which is significant when compared to the total number of stories published about people with disability and/or the issues they face.

On how words are misused in stories about people with disability, I would argue that someone 'uses' a wheelchair – they are not bound to it. If someone was "wheelchair-bound" they would not be able to get out of it. My eight-year-old son, who uses a wheelchair, is not bound to it. The same can be said for the terms "suffers from". Do all people with disability "suffer" from it? A person may be blind, but do they "suffer" from it? Australia's Disability Commissioner Graeme, Innes, whom I interviewed for my research, is blind but it would be a hard case to argue that he "suffers" from blindness.

What news frames did journalists use to represent people with disability? I used a set of media models of disability, developed by the late John Clogston and his colleague Beth Haller (1989), to categorise the items about people with disability. Clogston and Haller's eight models of disability are divided along 'traditional' and 'progressive' lines. The 'traditional' models are: medical; social pathology; supercrip, and business. The 'progressive' models are: minority/civil right; cultural pluralism; legal, and consumer.

Of the 38 newspaper articles deemed to be specific about people with disabilities and/or the issues they face, 30 (78.9%) were coded as 'traditional' and only eight (21.1%) were considered 'progressive. Of the 36 television news items, 24 (66.6%) were considered 'traditional' and 12 (33.35) were 'progressive'. Overall, of the total 74 news items reported in the newspaper and television, 54 (72%) carried the traditional frames of disability.

The question of why journalists use particular frames to represent people with disability is not as easy to answer. The journalists I interviewed, however, did provide insight into the mindset of the working journalist. Most acknowledged the use of stereotypes and traditional frames of disability and, more significantly, the use of a limited selection of frames. Illawarra and South Coast NSW-based journalist William Verity and Damien McGill made succinct points:

> "Because they think people will read the piece if it's a sob story. Maybe they will, maybe they won't. People do like to read about positive things," McGill said.

McGill's observation was representative of the media treatment of disability issues, which is, journalists use limited frames - primarily the heroic and tragic frames - to represent people with disability. Verity, too, believed the frames used by journalists to represent disability were limited and relied on the use of clichés and stereotypes.

> "Disability in the news is largely represented through cliché' … the cliché that we are all happy with in regard to disabled people are brave, they are courageous, they are good people. They are good, courageous and or victims," Verity said.

How do these media frames impact on community perceptions of people with disability?

Australian Disability Commissioner, Graeme Innes, said:

> "People with disabilities are almost inevitably depicted in the media as victims or heroes. We are neither of those. We are just people who want to be agents of our own destiny. What that does is reinforces the negative way in which society put limits on people with disability."

It can be argued, as Innes does, that the use of limited frames consequently limits the community perceptions of disability, and understanding of what it is like to be a person with disability. Given that the media has the capacity to set the agenda and tell people what to think about, if not what to think, then the challenge for journalists, journalism educators and students is to appreciate the alternative frames of disability and not be limited to the familiar and, indeed, cliched story line.

This is where guidelines, such as established by the Disability Council of NSW, are useful. The guidelines encourage journalists, journalism educators and students to critically appraise the words they use because words are the tools of their trade. The 'traditional' frames of disability, and stereotypes, as defined in the guidelines, are to be avoided.

I am, however, reticent to support anything that seeks to dictate to journalists what they can say and how they can say it. While Australia does not have a Bill of Rights that protects freedom of speech, any measure that could be interpreted as an attack on the freedom of the press would be rightly criticised and dismissed by the media and the wider community. One journalist I interviewed suggested that guidelines have a place, but the smell of "political correctness" may see that place quickly relegated to the bottom of the newsroom filing cabinet or the 'deleted' folder.

Nevertheless, I believe that media guidelines on specific issues, such as disability and race, have a critical role to play. Guidelines, like those produced by the Disability Council of NSW, are a means to raise awareness. It would be wrong to consider such guidelines dictatorial (they are called 'guidelines' for a reason) and it would be equally incorrect to dismiss them as acts of 'political correctness'. Hume's guidelines (1994), for example, draw attention to the concept of people first language - espoused by Snow (2008) and others.

The people first concept is as it sounds. People with disability are not defined by their disability; people with disability are people before anything else, and should be treated and represented that way. The Disability Council of NSW Media Guidelines explain:

> People with disabilities are people first, with feelings, emotions, desires, aspirations, frustration and needs just like anyone else. For many people, having a disability is an unavoidable fact of life, not something necessarily to be dramatised, feared, ridiculed or denigrated (Hume 1994, p. 4).

Snow, who has written extensively on people first language, explains the concept this way:

> 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? (Snow 2008, p. 2)

This is where the true value of such guidelines is found. While there is a potential for people to dismiss the guidelines as idealistic and dictatorial, they are essentially an awareness-raising tool. Like all tools, there is the potential for the guidelines to be neglected – effectively left out in the rain to rust – and its potential to change the way journalists portray people with disability weakened by lack of awareness. Which, as Hume alluded, was a concern in the dissemination of the Disability Council of NSW Media Guidelines to the media, and thus the journalists' awareness of how disability stories could be better reported.

As the Johns and Brown racial vilification incidents highlight, there is value in awareness-raising. Johns was shocked at his own "ignorance" about the power of his words and the capacity they have to offend and, in his case, vilify. There have since been calls from high-profile Australian sporting identities for more to be done to educate people about the power of their words. Former AFL champion, James Hird, put it well when he spoke about the Brown incident on the Nine Network:

> "Often a lot of comments that get made are about a lack of education about what those comments will do and how they will affect people. I think the more we can educate the community on respect, whether it be for religion or for race, the better we all are. I don't think it should be said at all, I think the education will say that even if it's said in jest, it's still hurtful and shows a lack of respect," Hird said (June 17, 2010)

Hird was commenting on the racial vilification issues that continue to grip sport in Australia, but he could easily have been speaking about the words that journalists and others use to represent people with disability.

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SHAWN BURNS is a former state television news director, chief of staff and journalist and now lectures journalism at the University of Wollongong in the School of Journalism and Creative Writing. He has a son with severe physical disabilities and is a passionate advocate for an inclusive society, including education, employment and media representation.