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Writing about disability: Victoria’s Bar None campaign

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Abstract

The media’s role in covering disability issues is often explored from a perspective of those outside journalism, yet it is a fundamental point that any change in the practices of reporting disability must come from the media itself. This paper explores a Victorian government campaign to recognise people for increasing access for disabled Victorians. The pioneering element of the campaign was that it was based on a partnership with Leader Community Newspapers, one of the largest newspaper networks in Australia, and was accompanied by a commitment from Leader to analyse how journalists used language around the reporting in their newspapers of disability issues.
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In autumn 2007 Leader Community Newspapers in Melbourne was approached by CPR, a corporate public relations firm representing the Victorian Government.

Leader, which publishes 33 free tabloids to 1.8 million readers every week, was selected to be part of a pioneering project that was designed to not only drive coverage of an issue but help shape the way the issue was reported.

In this instance, the project was to promote the concept of access for disabled Victorians. The program emanated from the Victorian Office of Disability and its goal was to identify the people, the organisations and the institutions across Victoria that provided access – in physical, emotional and vocational terms – to people with disabilities.

The Office of Disability, through CPR, chose Leader as its metropolitan media partner for the program that was called Bar None. CPR decided to liaise with regional media on a location-by-location basis. Leader was to be the only metropolitan media: there would be no other print, and no television or radio involved.

The project was simple enough in conception: the State Government would spend advertising dollars to promote the campaign in Leader papers and invite readers to nominate people for their support of the access principle. Leader would support the campaign editorially by running stories generated from the nominations (see accompanying story). The campaign would run for several weeks and culminate in a formal event at the Melbourne Town Hall where every nominee would be celebrated.

While the advertising-editorial mix was not unique to Leader’s media partnerships, there was another responsibility attached to the program: the Office of Disability wanted Leader to embark on discussions around a charter for reporting disability, with the intention of the charter becoming adopted more widely through the media.

Historically journalists have shied away from attempts to impose linguistic constructs on the profession, perceiving them to be “terminology” or “jargon” and running counter to journalists’ determination to speak plainly and communicate succinctly. But journalists have also been routinely adept at changing their language and style of expression to accommodate changes in language. The most profound issue for most journalists is that they feel certain terminology is about “political correctness” and therefore about salving sensitivities instead of “telling it like it is”, which they perceive to be their central professional responsibility.

However, the proposed development of the charter was arguably suited to Leader for two reasons. The first is that Leader is a community newspaper network that works closely with, and reports, on individuals within distinct communities. It is far more likely that Leader journalists will be reporting on activities and people relevant to the charter than their colleagues in metropolitan media. The second reason for engaging Leader with the charter was that Leader’s 196 editorial staff are predominantly younger than many other media outlets. As such, a charter devised by those reporters offered a greater chance of the messages being integrated in to the broader media as Leader’s journalists moved on to metropolitan or regional newsrooms.

Yet the critical issue, recognised initially by Leader’s senior editorial team, was not about the external audience but the internal audience: the journalists themselves. Leader staff spent several meetings with the Office of Disability and CPR planning the
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best way to communicate the message behind Bar None and the charter. In the end, it was resolved to bring a CPR representative, plus two lobbyists active in disability issues, George Taleporos and Stella Young to Leader’s head office in Blackburn to address one of the company’s regular editors’ meetings.

Taleporos and Young drew on some general observations about the failings and traps in reporting about disability: there were some glaring examples of how reporters from a range of newspapers— including the Leader network— had routinely used phrases such as ‘wheelchair-bound’ for those people using wheelchairs; adopted patronising tones when writing about people with a disability by assuming some form of mental dysfunction or turning the individual into their disability— “His life is crippled”, or referring to individuals with a disability only by their first name. It was a confronting and challenging presentation, but it had such a positive impact that four of the 28 editors immediately volunteered to be part of a group Leader established to devise the charter. Although the membership of the charter group waned because of staff departures, there was a regular group of journalists who were able to workshop the emerging document.

The starting point was pre-existing disability reporting guidelines from the Queensland, West Australian and NSW governments, and the style guide from the US National Centre for Disability and Journalism. (See www.disability.qld.gov.au; www.dsc.wa.gov.au; www.ncdj.org/styleguide.php; www.discoun.nsw.gov.au)

The Leader guidelines evolved from these after a series of discussions within the group of editors, but also after Leader started running the stories of the nominations.

The newspaper group had come to an arrangement with Taleporos and Young that they would monitor the coverage of the stories pertaining to the Bar None campaign, which included the nomination profiles. There was still some reporting that went on while the charter was being devised, which made their weekly critique more important.

This worked two ways— initially, the messages that Taleporos and Young had identified to the editors was filmed and put on YouTube (See http://au.youtube.com/watch?v=LWmd760R7ok&feature=related). The short film, which is still available, was designed for the reporters who were not part of the initial address to the editors. It was the reporters, after all, who would be doing the bulk of the work on the campaign. The footage also served to remind editors of the message they had heard several weeks before. All editorial staff were notified of the YouTube address and urged to watch it.

The second part of the strategy was Taleporos and Young’s weekly analysis of the Bar None stories throughout the Leader newspapers. This was sent to me as group news editor for dissemination. My decision was made early in the campaign after reading one critique that to send the full document to reporters, editors and sub-editors would have been counterproductive: it would have been too confronting for many of the editorial staff and risked undermining staff goodwill towards the campaign. Instead, I picked out some glaring examples of the good and awful and circulated it. We also mentioned the criticisms during the charter meetings.

The Taleporos and Young package was followed by the draft charter, which was sent around but couched in the terms that it was a dynamic document that was designed to eventually capture and reflect our editorial learning from the Bar None campaign.
The guidelines were received without much comment. Some cynics might have concluded that this lack of direct response to the charter reflected a deep aversion among journalists to subscribe to the charter’s goals. However, the evidence was just the opposite.
At the end of the campaign, there were more than 300 nominations across Victoria. Most of them were generated through Leader Community Newspapers. A special ceremony, featuring the famous homeless singing troupe – the Choir of Hard Knocks – performed at the Melbourne Town Hall to celebrate the campaign and the nominees.

In December 2007, the campaign won a State Government communications award. On many measures, it was exceptionally successful.

The central issue, however, from a journalistic perspective, was the application of the reporting guidelines. In this, there was more qualified success.

The guidelines’ existence implied an acknowledgement of the need for our editorial staff to think about not only what they wrote but also how they interacted and interviewed people with disabilities. Leader held a post-mortem on the guidelines after the campaign and identified several areas where they could be improved.

1) The guidelines needed to be more explicit and have more examples of what to do and what not to do. In their first incarnation, the guidelines were too vague and lacked application.

2) There was a traditional unwillingness to fully embrace the concept of ‘a set of guidelines’. This reflects a long-standing professional scepticism about being told how to portray people, whether it is a racial, gender, age, or disability issue.

3) And that for the guidelines to have a full impact, they needed to be adopted by more sub-editors too. This group of largely older journalists are the defenders of the journalistic vernacular, the style custodians, who are perennially suspicious about changes to language. The unfortunate result of not having sufficient support for the guidelines among some of the sub-editors was that headlines, picture captions and even some stories did not observe the guidelines’ spirit. As a consequence, some of the reporters and editors’ best intentions were not as successful as they could have been.

This was by no means a universal experience: there were some sub-editors who shared the engagement and enthusiasm with the guidelines that distinguished them from many of their other editorial colleagues. But there was not unanimous support for the guidelines.

4) Some of the external expectations about what were achievable in the charter failed to consider the realities – and immutabilities – of journalistic expression. This led to polarities of views about what was reasonable. For example, one newspaper’s headline “We want to help others” – was criticised in the weekly round-up because “…recognising the rights of people should never be referred to as helping”. “[IT] was probably the worst headline.” Conversely, one editor wrote: “[D] isability as a result of injury IS (editor’s emphasis) a tragedy and coming back from that to compete at an elite level IS (editor’s emphasis) an extraordinary achievement.”

Leader still has the guidelines and they are still a dynamic document. But the widespread adoption of their principles is still some way off: a second Bar None
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campaign, which was originally slated for 2008 but put on hold until 2009, promises the best opportunity to revisit and revise what was a grand and on-going experiment in journalism’s professional development in Australia.

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