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Reporting disability

K. Green
University of South Australia

S. Tanner
University of Wollongong, stanner@uow.edu.au

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Reporting disability

Kerry Green
University of South Australia

Stephen Tanner
University of Wollongong, Australia

Abstract

People with disabilities tend to receive little coverage in the Australian media. Coverage, when it does occur, is often misguided, and helps to perpetuate negative stereotypes. This paper provides the findings of a small pilot study into the coverage of disability in the *Adelaide Advertiser*, a large daily newspaper, as a lead-in to a major national study. The study found – not surprisingly – that considerable work is required to help journalists understand disability and the potential impact of the words they use when writing about disability.
Introduction

People with disabilities make up nearly 20 per cent of the Australian population, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics [http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/c311215.nsf/20564c23f3183fdaca25672100813ef1/29ac3ed8564fe75ca256943002c4e3c!OpenDocument]. Yet when the news media report on people with a disability, there is a perception that the tone is negative – that disability equals a lack, or that there is something less than normal. Recognising this, a number of organisations have produced guidelines to help the news media report more positively, among them the Disability Council of New South Wales [www.disabilitycouncil.nsw.gov.au] and Accessible Arts [http://www.aarts.net.au/]. Such organisations enjoin the news media to change their news frames from ones that focus on the disability itself to ones that focus on the people concerned and to provide relevant information instead of “milking the emotive content of disability”, among other recommendations.

How, then, have the news media reacted? Does reporting about people with a disability, and disability itself, occur in a value-free environment, or are there still the negative connotations that the European Congress on the Media and Disability saw in 2003? [http://www.media‑disability.org/]. In a plenary positioning paper, the congress said:

The image of a person with disability in the society has been for a long time attached with a negative connotation, where the disability of the person is represented as the sole characteristics of the person … As the mirror of how society thinks and sees things, mass media can perpetuate this negative and subjective image of disabled people, contributing to stigmatisation and consequently to discriminatory attitudes towards disabled people in the society.

This paper presents the findings of a pilot study designed to reveal how people with a disability are portrayed in South Australia’s major daily newspaper, The Advertiser, in 2007. The study was a pilot for an ARC Linkage national project that inspects news media portrayals of a variety of minority groups within Australian society.

Methodology

This study is predicated on the widely held belief that media organisations – and the journalists working for them – are able to influence the way in which issues are presented to the general public. One possible outcome is that the media are able to influence how audiences interpret what they read, see or hear in the media. This is a complex field of inquiry – and one that has spanned a raft of competing claims, ranging from minimal effects at one end of the spectrum (a view popularised by Berelson (1959) and Klapper (1960)), to powerful effects at the other. In between sit a host of other explanations. One explanation that has gained currency over recent decades builds on the work of Goffman (1974) and Tuchman (1978). According to this theory, media organisations are able to frame issues. Framing has been described by Tankard et al (1991) as ‘the central organising idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration’ (cited in McCombs and Ghanem, 2001, p. 70). According to Entman (1993, p. 52):
Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating context, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. Typically frames diagnose, evaluate and prescribe.

As Entman (1993) and others point out (for example, see D’Angelo, 2002, Tewkesbury et al, 2000) media organisations are able to influence those issues which readers, viewers and listeners consider important by consciously focusing on some issues, while ignoring or underplaying the significance of others. The latter can be achieved by ‘burying’ stories inside the newspaper or down the play list, thereby reinforcing the audience view that the issue is not as important as those which feature on the primary news pages, or early in the news bulletin in the case of electronic media.

The effects of framing can be seen throughout the news selection process. At a fundamental level, journalists begin to frame an issue when they make a decision whether to cover a story or not. This fundamental question is built around what Masterton (1991) calls the criteria of newsworthiness. According to Masterton, whether a story is covered or not is influenced by a range of factors, including consequence, proximity, conflict, human interest, novelty and prominence (for a discussion of how these have been applied to media coverage of disabled sport, see Tanner et al, 2003, pp 123–41). The significance of these criteria can be boiled down to a number of questions: (1) how many people are likely to be affected by the story (consequence); (2) how close to your market did the story occur (proximity); (3) does it involve conflict; (4) how unusual is the event, or does it involve someone who would not normally receive media coverage (human interest); and is the event of interest because of who was involved, rather than what happened (prominence)?

From a journalistic perspective, these questions manifest themselves as the 5 Ws and H: ‘who, what, why, where, how and when’. If these questions can be ticked off, then the story is likely to be covered. How it is ultimately framed, however, is a separate matter, and one that ultimately has input from a range of people in the news chain, extending beyond the allocated reporter, to the photographer or cameraman who takes the accompanying photographs or footage, the sub-editor who tidies up the copy, and may change the thrust of what the reporter had intended by re-working sections of the story to give it a changed emphasis, or a headline that does not reflect the content, and finally, the editor who has the ultimate say on whether (or how) the story is run, and where in the paper or bulletin it will appear.

The study:

The pilot study looks at a constructed fortnight of content from *The Advertiser* in 2007, using Newsbank as its source. The advantage of using Newsbank over hard-copy versions of *The Advertiser* lies in the capacity to do keyword searches with a greater degree of confidence that relevant stories are identified. The disadvantage lies in the fact that it is possible to miss stories that might have been identified by keywords other than those employed. Overall, the researchers believe the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.
Two searches were conducted. The first used the keywords: - Disab* (disabled, disability, disabling, disable), suffers from, wheelchair, impair* (impairment, impaired), Special Olympics, Paralympics. This produced 38 reports. The second search used the keywords: incapacitated, insane, invalid, infirm, retarded, handicapped, freak, spastic. This produced a further four occurrences, giving a total of 42 stories identified by keyword searches. Of these, 13 were eliminated as being “not relevant” because they either were not about disability or because the same story appeared in more than one edition of an Advertiser issue. Where this occurred, the second edition version of a story was counted and the earlier version discarded. This produced a final sample of 29 articles, with 18 of primary relevance and 11 of secondary relevance (that is, where the primary focus of the article was on something other than disability).

This content analysis was then followed by a discourse analysis, in which the 29 articles were assigned a descriptive category (negative, positive, neutral or mixed) to describe the overall tone of the reporting. Of the 29 articles: 13 were negative in tone; 6 were positive; 4 were neutral; and 6 were mixed. These results are contained in Table 1, below. Further analysis identified themes, examples of language, stereotypes, attitudes and emphases. In comparing treatments by The Advertiser to “good practice”, the study measured the articles against the recommendations of the Disability Council of New South Wales.

Table 1: Category and tone

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The Disability Council of NSW has published Media Guidelines for reporting on disability (Hume, 1994). Media guidelines in relation to people with a disability are presented on:

- appropriate descriptive language;
- avoiding common stereotypes; and
- reporting on, communicating with, and interviewing.

The shift in attitude and emphasis these guidelines seek to achieve is from:

- the disability itself to the individual(s) concerned;
- excessive emotional coverage to normal human empathy and interest;
- a focus on the trauma of their personal suffering to the adequacy of the community’s response;
- milking the emotive content of disability to the provision of relevant information.
- the individual(s) as being a part of society’s fringe to their being an integral part of the general community;
The primary aim of this pilot study is to ascertain whether reporting in The Advertiser during 2007 on issues related to disability, demonstrates an awareness and application of the suggested guidelines.

The reportage

The 29 articles identified as relevant to this study appeared in six separate sections of the paper: news, opinion, features, foreign, sport and magazine. By far the greatest number (17) appeared in the news section, with five in opinion, four in features and one each in foreign, sport and magazine. The stories ranged from brief, uncontextualised reports of 42 words to a large political policy report of 1080 words and a magazine feature of 1329 words. Reports in the news section were typically fewer than 300 words, providing little capacity for contextualisation.

The preponderance of news articles – 58.6 per cent of the sample – could be interpreted as a welcome indication that reporting on the lives of people with a disability was seen as important enough to have a presence in the news section of the paper. However, that presence must be considered in the context of just 17 articles in a 14-day period in which thousands of stories were published in the paper’s news section. Additionally, with the average number of words at just 223, the articles provide little room for contextualising the lives of those reported on. But even more telling, only five articles – 17.25 per cent of the sample – could be characterised as having a positive tone. Of the remaining news articles, six were negative in tone, three were mixed negative/positive, and three were neutral. On this score alone, the European Congress on the Media and Disability’s gloomy plenary positioning paper would seem to describe reporting in The Advertiser in 2007.

Perhaps more problematic were the five articles categorised as opinion pieces – all five of these articles were identified as negative in tone. This could be a more damaging proposition than the lack of positivity in the news section if one accepts the claim that the opinion pages have a major influence in setting agendas for society. The negative tone of all five articles appearing in the opinion section would, then, give society an indication of what attitude/s to adopt towards people with disability. However, the situation is more complex than that – three of the five opinion articles were letters to the editor. What does it mean when all of letters to the editor referring to disability convey a negative tone? Certainly, it must raise a concern that the attitudes of the letter writers reflect the attitudes of society at large; further there must be concern that publication of such attitudes in agenda-setting sections of the paper like the opinion section have the capacity to confirm or reinforce negative attitudes on the part of society as a whole. Additionally it raises concerns that the choices might reflect the views of letters editors who have the capacity to determine what is/is not published. This suggests one view/stance could be favoured over another.

In the features section, one might expect to find a more contextualised and, perhaps, a more empathetic treatment because journalists have greater capacity to choose the stories they will cover, and the angles they will take, rather than having them thrust
upon them by the daily emerging news agenda, as tends to happen in the news section. Additionally, the features section allows journalists greater latitude with story length. With more words at their disposal, journalists have greater opportunity to provide adequate context for their stories, and perhaps explain and interpret rather than simply report. Even here, however, the emphasis is on negativity in tone: of the four feature articles identified, two were characterised as negative, one as mixed, and one as positive.

Reporting on the lives of people with a disability, The Advertiser shows it still has some way to go before it can truly say it meets the guidelines of the Disability Council of New South Wales, guidelines that are broadly reflective of other such codes, both within Australia and internationally.

**Tone and diction**

The following examples of the language and diction used show how news media, mostly unconsciously, produce negative portrayals:

On January 19, two articles were published. The first of these was a local news report about a worker’s compensation claim for post-traumatic stress disorder. Descriptive terms used included “suffering”, “incapacitated” and “disorder”. The second article, headed “Killer Mum Insane”, reported the committal to a “mental hospital” of an “insane” woman who had killed her three sons. Although some support groups have attempted to “reclaim” terms such as “insane” in an attempt to redefine their connotative meanings, they are largely perceived as connoting negativity.

February 3 witnessed the publication of a feature referring to a celebrity charity ride by the Redbacks (cricket) vice-captain who “suffers from” a heart complaint, and two articles in the opinion section, which mentioned disability in the context of other issues. One of these was in a regular column written by Geoff Roach, who posed a list of questions, including: “Why is the Rann Government so recalcitrant about providing anything like proper care and facilities for the state’s mentally ill and disabled?” The other was a letter about a speed camera obstructing the footpath, which included the comment: “If this were a wheelchair-bound, sight-impaired or otherwise-incapacitated person, the danger would be even greater.” Both references, while well meaning, perpetuate the perception of disabled people as groups requiring “Big Brother” assistance from the government.

On March 31, The Advertiser published four news articles concerning or mentioning disability. One feature article in the magazine section also mentioned disability in the context of another topic. Three of the news items concerned access to services for people with disabilities or for their carers: in one instance by referring to wheelchair access, in another to carer services for the aged, and in a third to employment opportunities. The fourth news item, “Mother-killer Insane”, linked crime and mental illness by referring to a “chronically paranoid schizophrenic”, who would be confined to a “mental unit” because of his “insanity”. The feature article was an excerpt from a speech by Mayor Walter Vertoni about his city of Rome, in which he claimed that this city provides “a network of support for those who are in difficulty and at risk of being marginalised; to help the elderly who are not self-sufficient, minors with problems, and the disabled”.
On April 5, *The Advertiser* printed two news items that related disability and crime, again adopting a negative frame for the reporting of disability. One of these reported on “a Sydney couple, who killed their blind, disabled son out of love and desperation”, while the other argued that drug-induced crime should not be subject to the “defence of mental impairment”, and that “temporarily psychotic” criminals should be distinguished from those with “ordinary mental impairment”. The other two items published on this day were more positive in tone: one on a sporting celebrity recovering from a painful and disabling leg injury; the other an article on service provision to people with deafness in Mitcham’s “deafness friendly city”.

On May 22, *The Advertiser* reported on the annual charity event “Convoy for Kids”, organised by Novita, in which “more than 300 children with a range of physical disabilities took part”.

Following the handing down of the 2007 Federal Budget, two letters published on May 23 problematised government funding for services to people with a disability. One of these was written by a source with a disability, who comments on:

> Treasurer Peter Costello’s selective discrimination regarding the one-off $500 bonus to be paid to age pensioners. Those of us who have to rely solely on the disability support pension, and whose chemist prescription bills have gone through the roof, financially got zilch.

The other was part of a debate happening in the Letters section at the time, concerning how each party might effectively “cut back services to vulnerable members of the community”. A news item also published on this day records research findings about “people with a condition called mild cognitive impairment. This is a transitional stage between normal ageing and dementia, in which a person’s mental abilities have started to deteriorate”. In the features section of the paper, two characters from the entertainment program, *Little Britain*, are mentioned: “the difficult and demanding wheelchair-bound Andy and his selfless carer Lou”.

On July 17, a news report headed “Shot hero would still do it all again” emphasised the heroism of a man who intervened in an attack, being shot in the process. The article described him as gaunt and pale, “sitting in a wheelchair”, placing much emphasis on the terrible cost of his actions upon his quality of life, and his monumental stoicism and courage in the face of suffering.

On August 3, *The Advertiser* published two news items mentioning disability in the context of reporting on other issues. The first of these discussed an industrial relations dispute over underpaid shopping trolley workers: “Many of them are vulnerable workers with physical or intellectual disabilities.” The other item neutrally incorporates athletes with a disability in reporting on funding for the Olympics and Paralympics.

September 17 saw the publication of an item in the local news section of the paper, raising awareness about Stroke Week.

On October 10, a letter to the Editor, headed “Run-down system”, criticises Adelaide’s public transport for being inadequate for those who rely on it, including:

> a considerable number of people with disabilities who are, for one reason or another, unable to drive but who do not qualify for taxi vouchers or cannot
afford to use them for every journey they need to take. Government attitudes towards this last group of people border on contempt. Some are even denied access to anything other than trains because of regulations which do not allow their mobility aids to be carried on buses and trams.

On October 19, a news article reported on a proposal to provide a “companion card” to carers for people with disabilities, which would entitle carers to discounts at sporting events. “It doesn’t make sense for the person with the disability to get a discount if he or she can’t attend an event without the help of a companion.” A second news item on the publicity activities of various politicians over preceding days mentions disability in passing, citing a media release from the office of Liberal member Kym Richardson, claiming that he “delivers for young disabled surfers”. The release promises that a re-elected Coalition government would provide $10,000 to fund the SA Disabled Surfers Association, which conducts “have a go” days at Moana Beach. The media release assures that “Mr Richardson attends each one [of these events] to assist participants.”

The final set of articles collected for analysis, printed on December 6, included two news items related to the topic of disability. One of these reports on an award given to a volunteer, Ms Bolt, at the Royal Society for the Blind of South Australia by the foundation set up by the actor, Paul Newman. Society spokeswoman Alyssa Late said Ms Bolt was a great role model “not only because of her vision impairment but because her energy and determination have allowed her to achieve a lot on a personal level”. The second news item considered the development of a ministerial advisory committee comprising of nine South Australians “who have experienced life with a disability”. In the features section, a review of the film 1408 dealt obliquely and pejoratively with the theme of mental disability, describing how “madness ensues” in a film about a “writer slowly going insane”.

**Themes**

The 29 articles analysed contained a variety of themes. Four articles reinforced a link between crime and mental illness or impairment. Two articles sought to raise awareness of a particular condition or of research related to a particular condition. Four articles alluded to the heroism of their subjects with a disability, two of these actually using the word ‘hero’ in the heading. Eight articles discussed issues related to accessing resources including funding, service provision, employment and physical access to buildings. Five items considered a particular condition; of these, two reported on a condition experienced by a sporting celebrity. Nine of the articles mentioned disability in the context of reporting on other issues. For all of these nine articles, an overall negative tone of discussion was noted. In six of these nine articles, disability was posited as an emotive example to illustrate a point.

**Language and Stereotypes**

There has been considerable research into the role of the media in perpetuating stereotypes (see Antrim, 1997; Auslander and Gold, 1999; Hardin and Preston, 2001; van Krayenoord, 2002). Much of the research focuses on the tendency of media reports to reinforce negative attitudes and stereotypes – a trend that was confirmed
by this study. Very few of the articles used appropriate descriptive language, instead commonly using terms that begin with ‘in’ ‘im’ ‘dis’ ‘un’ or ‘de’, which imply a lack of something, or some sense of inferiority (NSW Disability Council, [http://www.disabilitycouncil.nsw.gov.au/archive/94/hume.pdf](http://www.disabilitycouncil.nsw.gov.au/archive/94/hume.pdf) Examples included: incapacitated, disorder, insane, impairment. At times the reportage did not emphasise the individual over the condition, instead referring to “the disabled”, rather than to the “person with a disability” which is the Disability Council’s preferred descriptor.

In its guidelines for media reporting on disability, the NSW Disability Council lists a number of stereotypes journalists should try to avoid reinforcing (1994: p.12). These include:

- treating people with a disability as objects of pity or charity;
- treating disability like a monumental tragedy;
- aligning disability with representations of degeneration (including crime);
- assuming people with disabilities lead boring or uneventful lives and that it is extraordinary if they succeed;
- implying that families of people with disabilities are exceptionally heroic for living with a fate worse than death;
- implying that people with a disability are more heroic or courageous than other people; and
- contrasting “disability” with “normality”.

Unfortunately, the articles analysed indicate the reporting in *The Advertiser* reinforced each of these stereotypes at some time during 2007.

Much of the reportage was complicit in reinforcing stereotypes of victimisation or disempowerment, commonly referring to the person as “suffering from” a disability, as “wheelchair-bound, sight-impaired or otherwise-incapacitated”, as the subjects of charity events, or as “vulnerable” members of the community, with “special needs”. Such reportage implies disability is indeed a “monumental tragedy”. One article in particular documents the disabling injury to a young man during a shooting, and conveys the immense loss he experienced, with the disruption to his previous “normality” at the onset of his disability. He is described as “pale and gaunt…sitting in a wheelchair”. As such, the emphasis of this article is less on this man’s heroic bravery in the act of intervening in a crime, and more on the monumental tragedy of his ensuing disability, and of his heroism in stoically coping with his condition.

Another stereotype frequently reinforced in the reporting was an association between mental disability and criminal activity, thus aligning disability with representations of degeneration. Common in such reporting is the use of inappropriate language, such as “insane”, or “chronically paranoid schizophrenic”. These reports also linked disability with violence and irresponsibility, thus also making them complicit with a tendency towards infantilising representations of individuals with disabilities.

Perversely reinforcing the stereotype that the ‘families of people with disabilities are exceptionally heroic for living with a fate worse than death’, the article detailing the legal justification of a couple’s pity-killing of a “blind, disabled son out of love and desperation”, does not attempt to balance the reportage with the contrasting perspective that such a form of pity and such a murderous act are never justifiable.


this case, the reportage implies the fact of the disability somehow justifies the family’s
decision it could not live with the disabled individual, choosing instead to kill him. The extreme act of the parents is presented in terms of their “pity” and their “love”; in this way, they are still represented heroically and depicted as bravely carrying out an act of mercy for the benefit of their “disabled son”.

**Attitudes and Emphasis**

Because the majority of articles were negative in tone, it is unsurprising that a number of problematic attitudes and emphases were registered in *The Advertiser*’s reporting on disability during 2007. For example, the articles on crime uniformly stereotyped the condition they referred to, as well as sensationalising the issue. These articles also tended to emphasise the disability rather than the individual, by using phrasing such as “chronically paranoid schizophrenic Enoch Samuel Wright” or “mental impairment becoming the new ‘drunk’s defence’”.

A number of the articles with a negative tone also ‘milked the emotive content of disability’, particularly in articles where disability was posited as an example to illustrate a point, as in this woman’s diatribe against traffic cameras: “If this were a wheelchair-bound, sight-impaired or otherwise-incapacitated person, the danger would be even greater.” This tendency may also be seen in various attempts at using the media for political manoeuvring or mileage, for example in the media release: “Richardson delivers for young disabled surfers”, or in writer Geoff Roach’s politically loaded question: “Why is the Rann Government so recalcitrant about providing anything like proper care and facilities for the state’s mentally ill and disabled?”

Generally the articles with a negative tone treated their subjects as fringe elements of society lacking scope for full participation, being “confined to a wheelchair” or “incapacitated”. They were represented in terms of a social category that includes vulnerable members of society: “those who are in difficulty and at risk of being marginalised; … not self-sufficient, minors with problems, and the disabled”. At times, people with a disability were also represented as especially needy, in one case seeking compensation for their disabling condition; in another requiring access to special transport measures (often not provided): “Some are even denied access to anything other than trains because of regulations which do not allow their mobility aids to be carried on buses and trams.”

In analysing the articles to discern the attitudes and emphases they imply, the latent content of articles with a mixed tone is particularly noteworthy. Such articles generally appeared to use a positive frame of reference, but nonetheless used problematic language, such as “suffers from” or “confined to a wheelchair”, which ultimately detracted from the positive tone of the article. This clearly indicates the need for media practitioners to be highly aware of the politics of language use, and to be sensitive to the particular recommendations suggested by the Disability Council.

In contrast to the articles with a negative or mixed tone, the articles that were attributed a positive or neutral tone generally exhibited the kinds of attitude shifts and reporting emphases recommended by the Disability Council of NSW in its guidelines for the media, including: a focus on the individual, rather than the disability; non-sensationalised coverage registering normal levels of human interest and empathy; reducing emphasis on personal trauma and suffering, instead questioning community
responses; representing the individual as an integral part of the general community; and, representing individuals with disabilities as ‘normal’ people dealing with a range of daily problems.

On occasion, though not frequently, the articles with a positive tone also actively sourced and quoted individuals with disabilities, thus enabling them to represent themselves, rather than being spoken for by and through others.

**Conclusion**

Although this is a pilot study, and is not generalisable to other elements of the news media, in particular to other forms of media, it nevertheless reveals a number of problematic areas of reporting by *The Advertiser*. In particular, the representation of people with disability in the newspaper is far lower than the proportion of the audience they represent. As the Australian Bureau of Statistics notes, people with a disability represent almost 20 per cent of the Australian population, yet they were represented in only 29 articles out of the thousands that appeared in the sampling period. The preponderance of negativity in tone, the language and stereotypes presented and the attitudes and emphases portrayed, show the paper still has some considerable way to go before it represents people with disability in the way they themselves would wish to be portrayed. How this can be achieved will, hopefully, emerge from the findings of the broader ARC Linkage project which extends its coverage to include other vulnerable groups within society. While employing a similar methodology, the larger project is national in focus, and includes a broad cross-section of newspapers.

The national project also goes beyond the pilot study in seeking to understand the extent to which individual journalists are able to frame their stories according to their own beliefs (and experiences of disability), or are guided by in-house policies and long-held misconceptions about the nature and extent of disability within society.

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**Kerry Green** is Professor and Head of the School of Communication, International Studies and Languages at the University of South Australia, Adelaide. 
Kerry.Green@unisa.edu.au.

**Stephen Tanner** is Professor and Head of the School of Journalism and Creative Writing at the University of Wollongong, NSW. stanner@uow.edu.au

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Response Ability website for Media Reporting on Mental Illness www.responseability.org


