

Literature Review on Media Portrayal of People with Disabilities in Kenya

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Abstract

This paper is extracted from a literature review of an ongoing doctorate research in the field of Mass Communication. The paper looks at media portrayal of people with disabilities from a global perspective. It then narrows down to the Kenyan perspective since the study is being done in Kenya. From the review in this paper, it is clear that people with disabilities have been grossly underrepresented in the media. This overview is across the board in both developed and developing worlds. From the documents reviewed, that is, secondary data, although many countries seem to be doing something to include people with disabilities in the contemporary world of work, some nations have not really managed to take up mainstreaming effectively. In some countries of the world, people with disabilities have successfully been made visible in the sense that they are able to work in media stations, hence increasing their voice and visibility. An example of a country where main streaming has been successful is Denmark, where TV glad, a station run by people with disabilities and for people with learning disabilities operates successfully. In other countries, people with disabilities and organizations that advocate for their mainstreaming lament that media coverage of their issues is scanty and not impacting positive attitudes concerning them to the wider society. It is important to note that this is just part of the literature review research. In one of the journal articles, we may give a complete research finding.

Key words: People with disabilities, Wider Society

Introduction

Barnes (1992) and Klepper (1996) state that 'the history of the portrayal of disabled people is the history of oppressive and negative representation. This has meant that people with disabilities (PWD, hence forth) have been presented as socially flawed able bodied people, not as disabled people with their own identities'. According to Barnes (1992), the link between impairment and all that is socially unacceptable was first established in classical Greek Theatre. Today there are a number of cultural stereotypes which perpetuate this linkage. However, these depictions are not mutually exclusive; frequently one will be linked to another. This is particularly the case with fictional characterization. The disabled person as evil, for example, is often combined with the disabled person as sexually degenerate. The point is that the overall view of disabled people is decidedly negative and a threat to the well- being of the non-disabled community.

Media images and stories influence thinking and establish social norms. People with disabilities have endured misrepresentation, defamation, and lack of representation in the media news and entertainment. While the disability rights movement has made enormous strides in the past 30 years using law and policy development and civil rights advocacy, this movement has not yet altered the hearts and minds of many people who do not have personal experience with disability. Many still do not understand disability issues as rights issues (Barnes, 1995). This lack of awareness is a problem in the sense that the wider society may not have a positive attitude towards PWDs and this may slow down the process of mainstreaming and their being included in the normal daily activities. Catlet (1993) asserts that policy issues that a country has put in place to address the plight of people with disabilities affects the attitudes that the wider society may have towards them. In some countries of the world today, measures have been put in place to ensure some form of parity for PWD in the sense that persons with disability are portrayed as being able to do what everyone else can do including owning businesses and running media stations, for instance, ILO (2010) states that in Beijing, the 'One Plus One' Cultural Exchange Centre is a media operation run entirely by disabled journalists. In 2008, two of the company's staff became the first fully-accredited, disabled Chinese journalists in the history of the Olympics. Their radio shows now reach most parts of China.

A number of scholars in the area of mass communication are in agreement that the depiction of disability in the media plays a major role in forming public perception of disability. Perceptions created by the media informs the way people with disabilities are treated in the wider society (Sanchez, 2010; ILO, 2010; Catlet, 1993). "The media have been cited as a key site for the reinforcement of negative images and ideas in regard to people with disabilities. Moreover, when PWD appear in media, they are portrayed in a stigmatizing and stereotyped way, appearing either as superheroes or as objects of pity and compassion. Another problem which is also a part of the explanation to the described situation, is that very few people with disabilities work in the media industry (Penas, 2007). In 1966 the disabled writer Paul Hunter expressed the views of many when he wrote 'We are tired of being statistics, cases, wonderfully courageous examples to the world, pitiable objects to stimulate funding' (Barnes, 1992). Hurst (1995) states that the way that society is constructed - the characteristics of a particular built environment and the dominant attitudes and expectations of a people - can lead to restrictions on certain groups which deny them equal opportunity to participate in all areas of life. This occurs either through conscious discrimination or because society has not adapted to those groups' needs. Hurst's statement can clearly be seen to infer that the media has a role to play in making the society understand the needs of persons with disabilities.

In some countries of the world, policies have been put in place to ensure that PWDs are 'not discriminated against. Byers (2004) states that in America, The American with disabilities act (ADA) was introduced and put in effect. The ADA has profoundly changed how society views and accommodates its citizens with disabilities. Universal design -- the practice of designing products, buildings and public spaces and programs to be usable by the greatest number of people -- has helped create a society where curb cuts, ramps, lifts on buses, and other access designs are increasingly common. Curb cuts designed for wheelchair users are also used by people with baby carriages, delivery people, and people on skateboards and roller blades. The ADA has created a more inclusive climate where companies, institutions, and organizations are reaching out far more often to people with disabilities. Colleges and universities, for example, now accommodate more people with disabilities than they did before ADA, even though they have been obligated by law for nearly 25 years to make their campus and classrooms accessible.

ILO (2010); Penas (2007) and Kisumu Workshop (2009) assert that the media generally depicts people with disabilities according to common stereotypes such as pity and heroism. Disability advocates often call this type of societal situation the "pity/heroism trap" or "pity/heroism dichotomy" and call instead for its supporters to 'Piss on Pity' and push forward with inclusion instead. When reports are about the "plight of the disabled" they rely on the pity or medical model of disability.

Sanchez (2010) puts it rightly that the media - television, radio, newspapers, magazines, the Internet, social media and other forms - play an important role in influencing public opinion and attitudes. The choice of words, images and messages can determine perceptions, attitudes and behaviours. It can also define what does or does not matter to individuals and the world around them. How people with disabilities are portrayed and the frequency with which they appear in the media has an enormous impact on how they are regarded in society. PWD have grossly been under-represented in the mainstream media yet a number of scholars state that they are part of the population we have in the world today.

ILO/UNESCO/UNICEF/WHO proclamation, December 3, 1997 has put it rightly, that “No country can afford to turn its back on 10% of its population.” Sanchez (2010) and Barnes (1992) state that one-tenth of the world’s population, or 650 million people, live with a disability. Sanchez (2010) gives the following statistics of disability in some countries as shown in the table below,

Table 1: Statistics of disability

Country	Disabled Persons
Cambodia	700,000
China	83,000,000
Ethiopia	5-8,000,000
Kenya	3,000,000
Tanzania	3,000,000
Thailand	2,000,000
Uganda	5,000,000
Vietnam	8-12,000,000
Zambia	690,000-1,000,000

Source: Sanchez (2010)

Hurst (1995) goes beyond generalized statistics of PWD and provides a more intricate statistical representation that, there are 500 million disabled people worldwide. Of these, 55 million are blind (11%), 70 million are deaf (14%), 130 million have a severe intellectual impairment (26%), 20 million have epilepsy (4%) and 160 million have some sort of mobility impairment (32%). The incidence of impairment varies according to age, geographical and economic conditions.

While there are some disability-specific media programmes, such as television documentaries, disabled people rarely appear as part of mainstream programmes. When they do appear, they are often stigmatized or stereotyped, and may appear as either objects of pity or super heroic accomplishment and endurance. Sanchez (2010) states that including them in regular programmes on television and radio in addition to other types of media can help provide fair and balanced representation and help to counter commonplace stereotypes that perpetuate negative perceptions of disabled persons. Portraying people with disabilities with dignity and respect in the media can help promote more inclusive and tolerant societies (ILO, 2010).

Regarding global approaches on disability, Pineas (2007) states that the creation of a Council for Disability on public television and radio has recently been agreed in Slovenia. This Council is made up by several representatives of the national disabled persons’ organizations and must monitor the adequate treatment of this collective in the Slovenian public media.

TV Glad in Denmark is the first television channel in the world, for and about persons with disabilities related to learning. Its latest initiative has been the creation of a web page called "The Specialists". The aim of this web is to be a forum where persons with learning difficulties may express themselves, and make their interests, concerns and abilities known. Within its contents, the aim is to promote the video format, showing all types of stories that will be classified to facilitate the search of their content. The web page allows an inside look into the potential and abilities, mostly unknown, of persons with learning difficulties, and will also open up the possibility of hearing them with regard to issues that concern and affect them (Pineas, 2007).

In Spain, the Council for the Support of Persons with Disabilities in the Audiovisual Sector was created and is made up of a total 18 institutions in this sector (television, radio, advertising agencies, production companies, advertisers, etc.). The institutions that make up this Council signed a manifesto that includes the following principles:

- a). Respectful treatment of persons with disabilities based on their personal dignity.
- b). A transversal and normalized portrayal of disability, in proportion with their representativity.
- c). Promotion in accessibility to the media.
- d). Promotion of the labour integration of persons with disabilities in the media (Penas, 2007).

ABM is a non-profit organisation that, for over 20 years, works in Germany to increase the levels of social awareness with regard to disabilities. Its aim is to facilitate access to the media for persons with disabilities from an integrating perspective between the media and NGOs of persons with disabilities. ABM's activity consists in promoting the visibility of this collective in all spheres of the media, especially in programmes that are not related to disability, from the perspective of the social model and human rights (Pineas,2007).

Disability in Kenya

In Kenya there are a number of groups fighting/ advocating for the rights of people with disability, for instance, Handicap International(HI), Deaf Empowerment Kenya(DEK).They face challenges in that they have a lukewarm relationship with the media thus their voices are not being heard. Kisumu workshop (2009) states that in 2007, a situational analysis carried out by Handicap International on reporting of disability issues in Kenya by the print media revealed that the media in Kenya hardly engaged in disability issues because of scanty knowledge on the subject. Another major finding of this report was that whenever issues concerning PWD are covered, they are mainly centered on the disability and not the personality. He added that most of the items analysed were not issue oriented hence always laced with pity.

Based on this analysis, Handicap International (HI) in collaboration with GTZ, AED/USAID decided to have a training for the media on Effective Reporting of Disability, HIV/AIDS so that the media can add their voice to the disability cause in Kenya. The training came amidst belief by Handicap International and partners' belief that the media in Kenya can help some 1.5 million persons with disabilities in Kenya that are often discriminated against and excluded from schools, work opportunities and health services to become more visible in their societies. As long as this large group of people was still invisible, the inequalities experienced by them will remain largely unknown to the general public.

The expectations of the training workshop were:

- a). Linkage between media and persons with disability
- b). Networking between the Disability movement and the media
- c). Reporting of disability as part of development issues which are affecting everyone in the society
- d). Disability will be highlighted more by the media
- f). Positive imaging of persons with disability by the media

Penas (2007) asserts that only the fruitful cooperation of NGOs and the media will achieve the objective of increasing and improving the portrayal of people with disabilities in mainstream media.

Okwemba (2010) states that Media and movies portrayal of the mentally ill in their language and images is said to reinforce and sustain the stigma on mental disability. Okwemba (2010), citing Professor Ndetei and Dr Nelly Kitazi argues that lack of understanding and misconceptions about mental illness is still fuelling stigma in many parts of Kenya. Okwemba (2010) citing Dr Kitazi further states that the main reasons why people stigmatize the mentally ill is because they link the disease to madness or lunacy, a curse or demonic possession. People with a mental disorder are viewed as dangerous, aggressive, and uncoordinated. It is this stigma that is the root cause of mistreatment, social exclusion, and poor management of people with mental disorders and disability. Although not rampant now, families still chain or hide from the public their mentally retarded patients, practices that were banned in the 19th century.

Giving a report on media's role and post election violence that took place in Kenya in 2007, Chesire (2007) observes that, the media does not understand why it should or how to cover stories about disabled people. The media prefers to cover other special interest groups, mainly because it does not appreciate the need to focus on disabled people or the potential interest in stories about disabled people.

Statement of the Problem:

"No country can afford to turn its back on 10% of its population."

(ILO/UNESCO/UNICEF/WHO proclamation, December 3, 1997)

World Bank (2004), Sanchez (2010) and Cumberbatch (1992) state that people with disabilities make up approximately 10 per cent of the global population. As a group, they are often grossly under represented in the media. The under representation, then entails that the mass society who watch/view and listen to media may end up not knowing much about them. The media is a powerful means of disseminating information to the mass.

It greatly informs, alerts and determines what the mass will talk about. It therefore has great impact on the attitudes that the mass society hosts about things, issues and perceptions generally. According to Barnes (1992), how the media portrays disability can help increase awareness throughout society about the realities faced by disabled persons, reduce stereotypes, prejudices and harmful practices, and promote awareness of their capabilities and contributions. How people with disabilities are portrayed and the frequency with which they appear in the media has an enormous impact on how they are regarded in society. Media, in the form of television, radio, print, movies and theatre is a uniquely powerful shaping tool. It shapes the way in which society views and understands the world (Catlet 1993). World bank (2004) states that media coverage of sport events involving persons with disabilities can play a major role in creating more positive and accurate perceptions. For example, the growing profile of the Paralympics has significantly contributed to increasing recognition of persons with disabilities. Over 300 million people watched television coverage of the 2000 Sydney Paralympic Games. This single event significantly increased awareness of the capabilities of persons with disabilities.

According to Auslander and Gold (1999), the media is the key reason for the negative images and ideas with regard to people with disabilities. Disability has not been an area that the media has felt obligated to cover because media representatives and their audience often do not know that disability is a phenomenon, for instance, disability sports exists and is authentic, but media seems unawares. In fact, some people seem to think that disability sports are not legitimate sports, but instead something less (DePauw & Gavron, 1995). According to DePauw (1997), people with disabilities continue to be excluded from sports because they fail to meet the societal "norm" of physicality. Athletes with disabilities feel the only time they are mentioned in the mainstream media is when the media wants to perceive them in a stereotypical way (Day, 2000; Hardin & Hardin, 2004; Nelson, 1996).

In many countries, disabled persons often lack access to information about policies, laws and improvements in programmes and services that directly affect them (National institute on Rehabilitation Research (2001), Sanchez (2010), Lacheen (2000)). This knowledge gap perpetuates their exclusion from mainstream social, economic and political life. A major reason for their exclusion from the mainstream activities is largely a result of the mass society being unaware of their plight or assumption that they are not able to do what any human being who is able does. Kisumu workshop (2009) states that the mass society's view of people with disabilities as being objects of pity may greatly affect the attitude they have on them. Penas (2007) observes that whether one uses media on a micro or macro level, it has the unequalled capacity to examine, communicate, educate and inform about people, places and ideas. Penas (2007) further states that the media has an important role to play in facilitating societal tolerance and inclusion of people with disabilities in every day activities. Barnes (1992) asserts that portraying people with disabilities with dignity and respect in the media can help promote more inclusive and tolerant societies.

From the above review, it comes out clearly that the media is a powerful means in mainstreaming of people with disabilities. It has a major role to play in sensitizing the mass society regarding the plight of people with disabilities. Training journalists in media coverage of people with disabilities and also incorporating people with disabilities to work in media houses may very well facilitate in enhancing the process of mainstreaming and hence increasing their visibility.

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