

Empowerment

Volume 1, Issue 2

September 17, 2001

Coverage of People with Disabilities in Print Media

Print media is a powerful tool with the potential to shape developing attitudes and alter existing ones. Disability is a constantly changing construct that is influenced by factors like time, geography, culture, technological advances, and legislation at a minimum. Does print media influence society's perceptions and attitudes about disability? Researchers interested in how individuals with disabilities are represented in the media are looking at this very issue.

Print information has many functions, among those: to inform, to instruct or persuade, to stimulate imagination and creativity, and to express oneself. Are people with disabilities represented in print media, and how? A review of children's award winning books over a 10-year period revealed that very few portrayed any characters with disabilities (Marshak & Prezant, 2000). A contrasting review of 200 fictional children's books with disability content revealed that most focused on definitions of deficits and problems associated with life with a disability. Less than 5% actually featured people with disabilities in everyday situations or adults with disabilities who were employed in paying, interesting careers. Are we perpetuating negative stereotypes by either omitting images of people with disabilities or by emphasizing stereotypic notions through emphasis on deficits and problems to the exclusion of everyday lives?

Beth Haller (2001), a journalism professor and researcher from Towson University, has written about news reporting that captures individuals with disabilities at extremes of the spectrum, either as inspirational champions against adversity or as tragic figures with whom we should sympathize, but rarely as average people who deal with most of the same day-to-day situations as other people do. She raises the very important issue that news writers bring their own biases to their work, which become integrated into their portrayal of disability-related issues. Reporting only on the extremes sometimes results in erroneous and misleading images of people with disabilities.

A recent newcomer to non-profit disability-related organizations that addresses this issue is the National Center on Disability and Journalism (NCDJ). It was founded as the "Disability Media" project by Suzanne Levine, a photographer who sought to expand balanced coverage of disability issues in print media. She facilitated the

convening of an advisory panel to examine journalistic coverage of disability. The project evolved into NCDJ, whose mission is to "improve fairness, accuracy, and diversity of news reporting on disability." Through research, development, and dissemination of educational materials, NCDJ enhances awareness and preparation of journalists and reporters regarding disability coverage. An internship program is available through NCDJ that immerses journalism students in controversial issues affecting the disability community. NCDJ also publishes a newsletter that focuses on disability-related issues and perspectives.

As part of a collaboration with "Newswatch," called "The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly," NCDJ is enlisting the assistance of journalists, reporters, and others interested in compiling stories, headlines, photos, editorials, and cartoons that exemplify good, bad, and ugly coverage of people with disabilities. This effort is designed to encourage closer observation of the ways in which we depict people with disabilities in print and to then use the findings as a learning tool. The desired result is to identify and alter unfair representation of disability in print news media.

To report entries, contact the Research and Evaluation Office at (516) 465-1601 for forms, or e-mail the project directly at newsproj@sirius.com.

References

Haller, B. (2001). Opinion: Confusing disability and tragedy. *NCDJ News*. 1(1).

Marshak, L. & Prezant, F. (2000). Needles in a haystack: Books that develop children's vocational self-concepts. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Council for Exceptional Children. Vancouver, BC.

Inside this issue:

The Accessibility of Democracy Page 2

National Survey of DSS Offices and Assistive Technology Page 3

Prosthetics Take a Smart Step Page 4

The Accessibility of Democracy

There are over 35 million voting age persons with disabilities in the country but people with disabilities register to vote at a rate that is sixteen percentage points less than the rest of the population and vote at a rate that is 20% less than voters who have no disabilities. Low voter turnout for this group is due to low voter registration, accessibility problems at voting locations, and with ballots. A recent Federal Election Commission (FEC) report states that at least 20,000 of the country's more than 120,000 polling places are not accessible to individuals with disabilities (Dickinson, 2001).

*...if people with disabilities
voted at the same rate as
the non-disabled, five
million more votes would
have been cast...*
— J. Dickinson

In addition, the National Voter Independence Project found that over the past few years, independent surveys and court cases suggest that 40% of polling places in the country are inaccessible to people with disabilities. The situation varies from state to state. In 1998, a court settlement in Arkansas reported that 41% of the polling places in the state were physically inaccessible. In February 2000, a federal court in New York State found that in two counties, every polling place, except for one, was physically inaccessible, and in March 2000, a Philadelphia newspaper reported that 73% of the polling places in Philadelphia were physically inaccessible (National Voter Independence Project. Voter Accessibility Survey).

There are three major pieces of legislation that address the voting rights of people with disabilities. The Voting Rights Act of 1965, established that persons who are blind or visually impaired are permitted to bring another voter into the voting booth to assist them to read and mark the ballot. The Voter Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act (VAEHA) requires that all polling places be physically accessible, be made temporarily accessible, or moved to an accessible location. The National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) requires service providers to offer voter registration to their clients. Despite this law, only 25% of people with disabilities have been offered the opportunity to register and vote by their service providers according to an N.O.D./Harris poll (2000).

To look at all these issues in detail and determine if progress has been made in this area, the National Voter Independence Project conducted two surveys to identify the existing barriers individuals with disabilities encounter when voting. The project surveyed people with disabilities who voted in the 1998 and 2000 federal elections regarding their experiences accessing the polling place, the voting area, and alternate ballot formats. The surveys were distributed by members of the Coalition for Accessible Political Elections through their e-mail networks. A total of 646 people responded to the survey, 377 in 1998, and 269 in 2000, from various states in the country. Following are some of the key findings.

Polling Place Accessibility:

The results showed that in both years, only 51% of the respondents could locate and get into the voting area without encountering problems. Forty-seven percent reported encountering barriers on the way or in finding an accessible route. From 1998 to 2000 there was a 2% increase in the number of respondents who reported that voters with disabilities would not be able to get into the voting area unless they were carried.

Voting Area Accessibility:

In 1998, 52% of respondents reported that their polling place did not have even one voting booth of sufficient size to accommodate a voter who used a wheelchair or other mobility device. In the 2000 survey, 41% percent reported the same problem. Comments were made that often the booths designated for voters with disabilities, when available at all, were too small to be used.

The Accessibility of Democracy (Continued from page 2)

Ballot Accessibility:

Survey respondents were instructed to ask whether ballots were available in alternative formats for voters who are blind or visually impaired. It was found that 81% in 1998 and 82% in 2000 of jurisdictions did not provide ballots in alternative formats for voters with special needs, even with advance notice.

In the 2000 survey, two questions were asked concerning the relocation of inaccessible polling places. This was asked to measure the impact of education efforts between the 1998 and 2000 elections. The results obtained indicate that inaccessible polling places are not being relocated in accordance with VAEHA. Two percent stated that their polling place had been moved to a more accessible location, 4% reported it was moved to an inaccessible location and 80% of respondents reported that their polling place had not moved.

It is clear that almost no improvement in voting accessibility for people with disabilities has been made in the past couple of years. It is important to secure the right of individuals with disabilities to vote and to do so in a manner similar to other citizens, that is, privately and independently. An interesting fact to keep in mind ... if people with disabilities voted at the same rate as the non-disabled, five million more votes would have been cast in the 1996 presidential election (Dickinson, 2001).

References

Dickinson, J., (2001). The sleeping giant of american politics: The disabled. <http://www.disabilityrights.org/900.htm>.

National Voter Independence Project. Voter Accessibility Survey (2001). <http://www.halftheplanet.org/departments/vote/intro.html>.

N.O.D./Harris Survey of Americans with Disabilities. (2000). www.nod.org.

White House News. Fulfilling America's Promise to Americans with Disabilities (2001) <http://whitehouse.gov/news/freedominitiative/freedominitiative.html>.

National Survey of Disabled Student Service Offices and Assistive Technology

The Research and Evaluation Center of the National Center for Disability Services has recently conducted a survey of Disabled Student Services (DSS) at colleges and universities across the country. The survey, which was implemented in collaboration with the Association of Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD), measured the use and accessibility of instructional and assistive technology. With almost 500 DSS professionals responding, here are some of the major findings:

- (1) Costs of assistive technology purchases and upgrades were found to be inhibiting service provision to students with disabilities.
- (2) Knowledge, awareness and understanding of assistive technology among students and DSS staff were found to facilitate service provision to students with disabilities.
- (3) Scanners were found to be the most common type of assistive technology on campus while recorded texts were rated as the most useful.
- (4) DSS offices in general are not highly involved with a variety of other campus entities including Career Services and the campus technology infrastructure as a whole.

These findings were recently presented at the Association for Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) Conference in Portland, Oregon and the Fourth International Conference on Higher Education in Innsbruck, Austria. AHEAD has committed resources to address professional development for DSS staff in response to these and other findings. The complete article, including implications and recommendations developed from this survey, will be published in an upcoming edition of the *Journal of Special Education and Technology*. A reprint of the article may be obtained by contacting Fran Prezant at fprezant@ncds.org, or Stephen Morabito at smorabito@ncds.org.

Prosthetic Devices Take a Smart Step

Advances in prosthetics technology are opening doors of opportunity for lower limb amputees to "live their lives without limitations." The Flex-Foot, a lower limb prosthetic device for amputees of all ages and activity levels, is providing amputee athletes with the necessary mobility and flexibility needed to compete more effectively. Each Flex-Foot, made from carbon fiber and titanium (known for their light weight, strength and flexibility), is custom made according to the individual's weight and height for a more anatomical fit. Depending on the individual, different types of soft thermal plastics are chosen to form sockets molded to fit the residual limb, thus allowing greater muscle flexibility. What makes the Flex-foot unique is not only its C-shaped design, which is based on the leg structure of a cheetah, but its ability to store and release energy so the individual exerts less effort when walking. In addition, each Flex-Foot features a full-length toe lever that allows amputees to take quick, full-length strides; an active heel that results in a more natural gait; and shock absorption to reduce pain and increase comfort so amputees can wear their prosthetic devices longer. Instead of straps and buckles to hold the leg in place, the Flex-Foot uses suction which results in an airtight fit that allows for greater flexibility and mobility. Thus the prosthetic remains in place in virtually any position when running, walking, jumping, or climbing.

Although the improvements made by Flex-Foot has taken prosthetics design a long way from the conventional wood and plastic limbs in giving lower limb amputees the ability to walk, hike, climb mountains, and run marathons, these prosthetic devices are still somewhat limited. According to Guy M. Houser, Director of Research and Development of Seattle Orthopedic Group Inc., "The current technology today uses individual components that are assembled into a limb system. There is no communica-

Sensors will alert a microprocessor of the changing terrain conditions, which will automatically make changes in the position of the leg to accommodate this new terrain.

tion between components or an overall control system that is monitoring the patient's movement and directing the limb motion." Thus, most artificial limbs cannot adjust to uneven or rocky terrain. To combat these deficiencies, The Department of Energy's Sandia National Laboratories, a Russian nuclear weapons laboratory, and Seattle Orthopedic Group are currently collaborating on a new prosthetic device called the Smart Integrated Lower limb, which is scheduled to be marketed in the Year 2003.

This new prosthetic leg has a microprocessor-controlled module and sensors implanted into the leg, which will control the knee, ankle, and socket. Sensors will alert a microprocessor of the changing terrain conditions, which will automatically make changes in the position of the leg to accommodate this new terrain.

Also, unlike current prosthetics that are composed of separate parts such as feet, ankles, and knees, the Smart Integrated Lower Limb is designed as a complete

limb with a variable-geometry socket. This will be able to sense how much swelling has occurred and will change size to accommodate for this swelling so the amputee can wear the device for a longer time without worry of pain or possible infection. Like the Flex-Foot, the "Smart" leg aims to reduce the level of energy needed to cover the same distance as a non-amputee and facilitate a more natural walking gait.

As technology in the prosthetics field continues to advance, hope is on the horizon for an artificial limb that performs all the functions of a natural arm or leg. Furthermore, it provides a promising future for children born with multiple birth defects or individuals confined to a wheelchair. With the support of companies such as Adidas whose commercials depict athletes with disabilities using such technology, these products may become more accessible to all individuals who need them.

CONTACT INFORMATION	EMPOWERMENT CONTRIBUTORS
<p>Research and Evaluation Center National Center for Disability Services Stephen Morabito, Editor 201 I.U. Willets Road Albertson, NY 11507 E-mail: smorabito@ncds.org Telephone: (516) 465-1607 Fax: (516) 747-3358 TTY: (516) 465-1619</p>	<p>Marguerita Burke Fran Prezant Andrea Rodriguez</p> <hr/> <p>Special thanks to Ken Anderson and the Steps Toward Employment Program for their reproduction services.</p> <p>This document is available in most alternate formats.</p>