

# THE MEDIA'S PRESENTATION OF DISABLED INDIVIDUALS

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The Media has a great impact on the society. The Media can change the perception of people due to the great influence it has on people. Therefore, the researcher has found that the media is portraying disability in negative light. This paper is divided into four sections. In first section, the researcher introduces the definition of a disabled individual and disability. A description of the concept of media is also discussed in this part. In the second section, the researcher describes how the media is discriminating against the disabled individual in terms of employment, and by not giving them opportunity. The media is also seen to discriminate against disabled people by poor representation of disability. The third section deals with the cultural stereotype occurring in media which makes people think of disabled people as a poor, pitiable class, or as a burden on the society. Finally, in the fourth section, the researcher has analysed the problem and has come up with a conclusion.*

*Keyword: Media, disabled individual, discrimination, media stereotypes*

## METHODOLOGY

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### **Aims and objective:**

The aim of this paper is to throw light on the life of disabled people when they are portrayed wrongly by media and how it affects their life. As the media has a great influence on society, people think bad for disabled people. The researcher aims to show how the media must change its perception of portraying disabled people.

### **Scope and limitation:**

The scope of this research paper is limited to the descriptions of the standards of living of disabled people and the methods of exercising their right towards the discrimination they face. Furthermore, the researcher limits herself to the discrimination of disabled individuals by media only.

### **Research question:**

The following questions are been answered through the length of this paper-

- 1) What do we mean by disabled individual?
- 2) What do we mean by media?
- 3) How is the media misrepresenting disabled people?
- 4) What are the commonly occurring media stereotypes?
- 5) What should the media do in this matter?
- 6) How must the media actually portray disabled people?
- 7) What is the effect of these things on a disabled person?

### **Chapterisation:**

Chapter 1- Introduction  
Chapter 2- Media and discrimination of disabled people  
Chapter 3- Commonly recurring media stereotype  
Chapter 4- Conclusion

### **Sources of data:**

The researcher has used mainly secondary sources of data such as books, articles, reports etc.

### **Method of writing:**

The method of writing used by the researcher in this paper is analytical and descriptive.

### **Mode of citation:**

The OSCOLA 4<sup>th</sup> edition Citation Guide has been followed uniformly for the purposes of this paper.

# INTRODUCTION

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## 1.1 WHO IS A DISABLED INDIVIDUAL?

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Disability, as defined by the World Health Organisation means, '*Disability is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitation, and involvement limits. Impairment is a difficulty in body function or arrangement; an activity restraint is problem encountered by an individual in executing a job or action; while a involvement limit is a difficulty practised by an individual in involvement in life situation*'.<sup>1</sup> Disability is a complex phenomenon, reflecting a relation between feature of person's body and in which society he or she lives in. The world health organisation estimates that there are as many as one billion persons with disabilities worldwide.<sup>2</sup>

Disability is of many types, a person who has impairment in physical, mental and emotional, cognitive, sensory, intellectual disability, development and non-visible disability. The person can be disabled from the birth or during his or her lifetime.

People with disabilities are trying very hard to live the non-disabled life like as non-disabled being. But society does not treat them as non-disabled human being. People with disability have lower income, poor health than people without disability. These people are disabled by society not just by their bodies.<sup>3</sup> There are remembered as their disability they may not be remembering as their name or position. They will call him by their disability like blind boy, deaf person, mad fellow, lamb etc. Society takes them as model. Model is a framework for understanding information.

There are two main following model of disability:

**MEDICAL MODEL** - viewing disability the problem caused to disabled person by the diseases or some other health condition, which require absolute medical care in form of treatment by professionals. If disabled persons have some impairment it understood as their disability.<sup>4</sup> In this model, medical care is the main issue.

**SOCIAL MODEL** – the social model is primarily created by the society. It is a result of society's response to them and also created by disabled people by their experience of the wealth and welfare system which made them feel socially isolated. They are treated unequally in the society in which people with impairments are given no consideration. They are excluded from the mainstream of society because of their physical barriers. And these barriers prevent them from getting equal opportunities in education, employment and social opportunities.<sup>5</sup>

## 1.2 WHAT DO WE MEAN BY MEDIA?

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In general terms, media is defined as means of communication of information. Some forms of

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organisation, '*Disabilities*' <http://www.who.int/topics/disabilities/en/> accessed 10 August, 2014

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Supra* note 1 at p.4

<sup>4</sup> Ian Langtree, Disabled World, '*Definitions of Models of Disability*' (2009) <http://www.disabled-world.com/definitions/disability-models.php> accessed 15 August, 2014

<sup>5</sup> Grant Carson, Scottish Accessible Information Forum, '*The Social Model of Disability*' (2009) <http://www.ukdpc.net/site/images/library/Social%20Model%20of%20Disability2.pdf> accessed 15 August, 2014

media are: television, radio, press which include newspapers and magazines, films, books, internet, advertisement. It can be used for entertainment, news and current affairs, political awareness, education, advertisements etc. Media first came with the newspapers and magazines but after the passage of time media broadened by internet, radio, TV.<sup>6</sup>

Media is specifically designed to reach large audience and viewers. In the world of today, media became necessary like groceries and wear. It is correct that media is playing a role in strengthening the society.<sup>7</sup> It helps us to know the current situation around the world. It has a social and cultural impact on society and also it is broadly used to express message to build public opinion and consciousness.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. MEDIA AND DISCRIMINATION OF DISABLED INDIVIDUALS

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It is true that media is extremely important part of our everyday life. Media has the great influence on the society. However this influence was not always for the benefit of society especially when we are talking about the portrayal of disabled people.<sup>9</sup> Media continued to add the discrimination of disabled people in terms of employment, portrayal etc.

Do you remember when was the last time you have seen or heard disabled people on TV or radio? Have you ever seen a disabled person working like a non-disabled person in daily soap? On the other hand if you have seen also that may be program on disability. It is difficult to say any disabled people working in the mainstream programme, where disability is not the issue. The producers are not willing to take disabled person in the main role as they give to the non-disabled people and if he takes them they just show about their disability. If disabled people called in some reality show they are asked about their impairment only. Many producers would agree that they have never considered of taking impairment as disabled actor or filming an interview in the street with the member of the public.<sup>10</sup> Why they do not ensure that their programme reflects society as a whole and not only the one section of society and ignoring the impairment section of society. Some disabilities are poorly represented in media like mental illness presented in the programme linked with violent crime and there is no evidence to prove this portrayal. The disabled people portrayed in media as the socially flawed people not with their own identities.<sup>11</sup>

They are some programmes that are run and controlled by disabled people which deal with the portrayal of positive aspect of disability. One of them televisions like BBC television's one in four, channel 4's 'same difference', Derbyshire alliance of disabled people's newsletter 'Info'.<sup>12</sup> Typecast assumptions are based on superstition, myths and believe from earlier less progressive

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<sup>6</sup> 'Media Representation of Disabled People' < <http://www.disabilityplanet.co.uk/critical-analysis.html> > accessed 15 August, 2014

<sup>7</sup> A .Pushparaj, 'An Essay in the Role of Media' <http://www.publishyourarticles.net/eng/articles/an-essay-on-the-role-of-media.html> accessed 15 August, 2014

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> *Supra* note 6, at p.5

<sup>10</sup> 'Guide on Media & Disability' <http://www.mediaanddisability.org/portrayal.html> accessed 10 August, 2014

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> Colin Barnes, British Council of Organisation of Disabled People, 'Disabling Imagery and the Media' (1992) <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/Barnes/disabling%20imagery.pdf> accessed 15 August, 2014

period. We learned about disability through media.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. COMMONLY RECURRING MEDIA STEREOTYPES

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The media continued to enforce disability stereotype portraying disabled individual in media as in negative way.<sup>14</sup>

The media contributed to the discrimination of disabled individual. The person with impairment is not acceptable fully in society. In 1990s, the disabled writer Paul Haunt expressed his views of disability and also when he wrote, *'we are exhausted of being of figures, cases, wonderfully audacious examples to the world, pitiable objects to motivate funding.'*<sup>15</sup> As per him, he came across 10 stereotypes that the media used to portray negatively and one positive aspect. There are following cultural stereotypes occurring in media that researcher explained:-<sup>16</sup>

- The Disabled Person as plaintive and pitiable
- The Disabled Person as an objective of cruelty
- The Disabled Person as sinister and wicked
- The Disabled Person as impression or curio
- The Disabled Person as super handicap
- The Disabled Person as an objective of ridicule
- The Disabled Person as their have worst and only rival
- The Disabled Person as trouble
- The Disabled Person as sexually uncommon
- The Disabled Person as incompetent of participating completely in Community Life

**A. THE DISABLED PERSON AS PLAINTIVE AND PITIABLE** – there are many programmes which encourages pity so that non- disabled public can feel tolerant. Dependent disabled people are integrated in storylines to describe another character's goodness and feeling; this is regular feature of popular fiction. The disabled person is generally portrayed as superior feelings of sentimentality – as contrasting to genuine sympathy. The well-known example is the tale of John Merrick's 'The Elephant Man'<sup>17</sup>, which is now a successful play and film. It show that how Merrick, a man of non-disabled intelligence but with profoundly abnormal physical feature, is first kept captive in a fairground freak show and later rescued and cured by some person – an able bodied member. The Merrick's public humiliation that he is rescued by non-disabled men the audience got the feeling of pity and distress and at that time they are always reminded that disabled men are dependent

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<sup>13</sup> *Supra* note 12, at p.5

<sup>14</sup> *Supra* note 6, at p.5

<sup>15</sup> Colin Barnes, British Council of Organisation of Disabled People, *'Disabling Imagery and the Media'* (1992) [http://www.media-disability.org/documents/disability%20imagery%20and%20the%20media\\_CBarnes.txt](http://www.media-disability.org/documents/disability%20imagery%20and%20the%20media_CBarnes.txt) accessed 10 August, 2014

<sup>16</sup> *Supra* note 6, at p.5

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Sanegar, *'The Eephant Mar'* (1980)

upon goodness of non-disabled men.

This entirely uncooperative view of disabled people appears frequently in the media, both on TV and in the press. Picture of disabled children, repeatedly appear on TV to perpetuate the myth that disability is synonyms with poor health and pain. Recent research shows that most information of disabled men in TV is about medical treatment and impairment related cures. Besides having pity them, the constant medical treatment of impairment helps to divert the public attention from the social factors of disability.<sup>18</sup> The charity has also the main role in the discrimination. They carry on portraying disabled people as pathetic to increase money and engage able bodied participants.<sup>19</sup>

**B. THE DISABLED PERSON AS AN OBJECTIVE OF CRUELTY** – in reality disabled people subject to violent abuse by non-disabled men and this is usually reflected in the media. Besides contributing to the misguided belief that disabled people are entirely helpless and needy such image of the disabled people sometime can lead to the violence. Throughout history disabled individual have been the victim of violence. In medieval period disability was connected with evil and black magic. In several areas the murder of disabled men approved by religious leader.<sup>20</sup> For example, Martin Luther, the protestant, said he saw the demon in disabled children and suggested killing them. In industrial revolution the similar practices have been sanctioned by the science and to some extent by media. During the nineteenth sanctuary the scientific perspective for violence against the disabled people was given by the theories of Charles Darwin and Eugenics movement. Concerned with racial degeneration eugenicists repeated the ancient traditional fear that disabled people was a grave threat to British and European society. They said for the safeguard of human in future by killing the disabled children by process of sterilization and segregation.<sup>21</sup> It is also common but hardly discussed by openly the doctors compliance with the parents of disabled children allows impaired children to pass away if the impairment is unforeseen. Disabled children are more expected to be dumped by their parents, they have less possibility of being adopted also they are more vulnerable to physical and sexual violence. Literature and media portrays to disabled people are incapable to look after themselves and then subjected to violence.<sup>22</sup> On the one hand it subjects them to violence because people get to know about that they are weak. On the other hand, it is good to show by media because if some people are becoming violent against the disabled people other people can help them. So when people get to know about the violence good people of society will help them.

**C. THE DISABLED INDIVIDUAL AS SINISTER AND WICKED** – this is the most common stereotype in our society and it is reflected in media also. The people who have physical impairment are most commonly called as sinister and evil because they look different. Media portrayal of disables as this has a great influence on children. Children start

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<sup>18</sup> *Supra* note 12, at p.5

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> National Disability Authority, 'Violence against People with Disabilities: Seminar Proceedings' (2004) <http://www.nda.ie/cntmgmtnew.nsf/0/BE967D49F3E2CD488025707B004C4016> accessed 15 August, 2012

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> *Supra* note 20, at p.7

becoming afraid of disabled people and try to be remaining as far from them as they can. It is a major obstacle for disabled individual to successfully integrate into the community.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly the fictional programme on TV often portrays disabled people as criminals and monsters. Like in the cult series 'the fugitive'<sup>24</sup> the hero's search of one armed murderer was never ending search. And director David Lynch uses a „dwarf“ person to exemplify evil. Newspaper articles sensationalising the connection between impairment and criminality are common in both tabloids. The message came out of this stories is these people cannot be trusted and are a risk to children and should be protected up.

Such distributing imagery is not correct and does much harm to public perception of people who is suffering from emotional distress and disabled community as a whole is suffering from this type of emotional distress. Yet in general they will become more introvert and perceptive than brutal and aggressive, they are additional likely to avoid rather than assault and if given the appropriate support to them they are perfectly capable of living in our society.

**D. THE DISABLED PERSON AS IMPRESSION OR CURIO** – disabled person are sometime are included in the storyline of films and fictional programme to make certain atmosphere usually a disabled character who presents a threat, danger to society, mystery or deprivations otherwise to insert character to the visual impact of the creation. This hurt the feeling of disabled and dilutes their humanity by reducing them to objects of curiosity. The well-known example of this is the well-liked spaghetti western 'the adequate, the inadequate and the ugly'<sup>25</sup> in the beginning scene the character played by one of the actor is told about the activities of an old enemy by a beggar with no legs known as 'half soldier'. This character provides a powerful image of harshness, sinister and brutality. This 'half soldier' moreover conveys the communication that people without the legs are half human.

This typecast is the vision of disabled people as exotica. Similarly John Merrick was humiliated in the fairground more than a century ago; disabled people are unmoving put on exhibit in so-called 'freak shows'. One more example is an ad in national Sunday newspaper – The People, 20 January 1992, a volume of medical curiosities. If, read you will read it. According to the volume you will see it and you will be fascinated by 24 easy to follow medical explanation and biographical which accompanies the 'Freaks of Nature. This type of exhibition of disabled people presents the fascination of impairment.

**E. DISABLED PERSON AS SUPER HANDICAP** – in this stereotype media show the disabled people as such they have some extraordinary powers than non -disabled people. It is like portrayal of black people having super qualities to receive respect from the white people. Black people depict as they have wonderful sense of rhythm or exceptional athlete. With

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<sup>23</sup> Beth Haller, 'Media and Disability Resources' (2010) < <http://www.media-disability.net/>> accessed 15 August, 2012

<sup>24</sup> C.Williams, 'Attitudes and Perceptions of Persons with Physical Disabilities and their Affects on Interpersonal Communication' (1994) < <http://chrissheridan.com/essays/communication/dispercepcomm.html>> accessed 15 August, 2014

<sup>25</sup> *Supra* note 24, at p.8



the case of disability, it is portrayed that they have assigned super human almost magical abilities. For example blind people are portrayed as visionaries with sixth sense or extremely sensitive hearing. And disabled individual, especially children are praised excessively for ordinary achievements. The work done by non- disabled men easily and if the same work is done by disabled individual people will praise it excessively. As disabled people cannot do the work what non-disable do. These things make them isolated from the society as they are not treated equal to the other section of society. Sometime media portray them as below from the other and sometime show that these people are extraordinary with some special powers. There are many award winning films on super cripple type of stereotype one is 'My left foot',<sup>26</sup> found on the disabled writer Christy Brown in which he overcomes both impairment and working class life, to grow nationally commended as an artist, writer and poet. But this role was played by an able bodied actor. Media does not have the policy to recruit disabled students for the acting profession, again discrimination by media. One more movie 'The children of lesser good', a film about the relationship of deaf woman and non-disabled teacher of deaf people- had experience of impairment portrayed.<sup>27</sup> Although the movie was on deaf people and about deaf community but they does not use the sign which can be accessible to them. This means the movie was only accessible to hearing audience. Finally, by emphasising the extra ordinary achievement of disabled individual like Christy brown. Hence non- disabled people will look them as super cripple notwithstanding of the disabled community as a entire and the gap will stay as wider as yet.

**F. THE DISABLED PERSON AS AN OBJECTIVE OF RIDICULE** – Smiling at disability is not latest, disabled people have been resource of enjoyment for non -disabled people for era. In seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Elizabeth joke book was full of jokes about the people with every type of impairment, that time they were a classic form of amusement for the able persons. These things we can see in circuses in which 'dwarfs' present the atmosphere where they make the people laugh and people make fun of them. They have to become the object of fun for earning money. For disabled people earning money is not the easy task. Nowadays the ridicule of disabled people is a main feature of lots of comedy movies and TV shows. The negative implication of disabled people like this type of violence should not be underestimated. It seriously weakening the opportunities they have to be taken from the non-disabled society and other it has the capacity to low their confidence and esteem. This is the case with the parents of disabled children they are aware how their children feel when people make fun of them.

**G. THE DISABLED PERSON AS THEIR HAVE WORST AND ONLY RIVAL** – sometimes the media portrays that disabled individual are their own enemy. They hate them because of what they are and how they are. They feel sorry for themselves. Media portray them as self-pettier who can overcome their difficulties if they think positively and rise to the challenge.

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<sup>26</sup> *Supra* note 23, at p.8

<sup>27</sup> Max, 'Disability in Film' (2013) <https://mubi.com/lists/disability-in-film> accessed 15 August, 2014

- H. THE DISABLED PERSON AS TROUBLE** – this typecast is connected with that disabled people are helpless and cannot do anything without the help of non – disabled society. Media portray them as the burden on the society. As people with physical impairment cannot do their work by own someone has to do their work and they are burden on the society. Everybody in the society thinks like this only. It comes from the concept that disabled people have the different need from the non-disabled and to meet their need is an intolerable drain on society's capital. It fails to be aware of that with suitable support from society disabled people are capable to attain the equal level of autonomy and non-independence as non-disabled.
- I. THE DISABLED PERSON AS SEXUALLY UNCOMMON** – since ancient times it is a common theme in art and literature there is misguided assumption about disable people's sexuality.<sup>28</sup> Moreover the majority of this image is male experiences hardly they criticize about woman. Media portray that they are incapable of sexual activity. People with impairment are sexually as non-disabled. Disabled people are sexually dead and their lives are not worth existing. On the hand the obvious danger this is inaccurate. This is not confined to physical activity.<sup>29</sup>
- J. THE DISABLED PERSONS AS INCOMPETENT OF PARTICIPATING COMPLETELY IN COMMUNITY LIFE** – have you ever seen many disabled person working at one place? No, because we hardly see any disabled individual as part of the workforce there only few disabled person who are employed. They are rarely shown by media as member of the integral part of community as students, as teacher, as a part of the workforce or as parents. We rarely see in films or programmes that disabled person are not shown publicly with other non-disabled person like at the beach, ice-cream parlour, restaurants, movies etc. They are public place and it is not possible that disabled people not go to public place to enjoy their life. But this thing has never portrayed by media. They show that disabled are not part of the society and are excluded from being part of community. The absence of such portrayals feed the belief that disabled people are lower human being who should be isolated and segregated. They remain absence from the mainstream of programme they stand for less than individual and a not whole of all characters portrayed. It is also the case portrayal by media of disabled individual depict in comparison to non-disabled they are at the lower status. Moreover they are less white collar and more likely to be unemployed. The one of the reason of this is patronising behaviour and attitude of non-disabled towards disabled persons. Moreover, disabled people are infrequently seen in non-fictional programmes apart from those dealing with the disability. There are no disabled newsreaders, reporter, weatherman or presenter. Disabled people are barely ever seen on chitchat shows in subject which do not directly relate to disability.<sup>30</sup>

This section dealt about the stereotypes presented in media. The stereotypes were negative. But

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<sup>28</sup> 'Issues for Students with Disabilities' <http://www.accessuvic.ca/student-accessibility-issues8.html> accessed 15 August, 2014

<sup>29</sup> *Id.*

<sup>30</sup> *Supra* note 12, at p.5

it is not the only case. Media is changing its perception. Still media has to work on this problem. Recently the reality show on star plus on June 9, 2012 'Satyamev Jayate'<sup>31</sup>, this day was on persons with disabilities in which the Bollywood actor met with some disabled individual and highlighted the different trouble people with disabilities features and how easily it can be defeat only if culture were a little more thoughtful and conscious of their requirements.<sup>32</sup> Media is changing and society also needs to change to help disabled people. Media should portray positive things about disability and make them feel as non-disabled people. They do have emotions like other. Everything is not bad about them.

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<sup>31</sup> Nirmalya Datta, 'Satyamev Jayate: Enabling our Disabled' (2012)  
<http://www.thehealthsite.com/diseases%20conditions/satyamev-jayate-enabling-our-disabled/> accessed 10 August, 2014

<sup>32</sup> *Id.* <http://www.thehealthsite.com/diseases-%20conditions/satyamev-jayate-enabling-our-disabled/> accessed 10 August, 2014

## 4. CONCLUSION

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The researcher came across the problem faced by disabled people of portraying them in media. Media is beginning to change now but there is need to work on this problem by both media and disabled community. And both have to work and learn from each other. Media should not portray disabled people as 'pitiably and pity', 'super-handicap', 'object of cruelty', 'sinister or wicked', 'sexually uncommon', 'burden', 'objective of ridicule'. These stereotypes can affect disabled individual and can hurt them, lose their confidence and they feel they are isolated from the society. Society also need to understand and support disabled people and not discriminate them. Society and media treat them as non-disabled people neither below them nor above them just as equal to them. In common like other human beings they enjoy the emotions, happiness, depression, anger, etc. and play roles including parents and provider. This variation should be portrayed by media. They should be shown as the part of society not isolated and separated. Media should stop following the stereotype which are portraying wrong message to people and hurting the morale of disabled.

To cope up with the problem of media discrimination media should recruit disabled people in mainstream programmes and the employment of disabled actors to give them a chance to prove themselves. There should be equality training of disabled people.

So media should not portray what are the problems with disabled individual but should what problem they face in the society, what are the social constraint that are not enabling them to be the part of society. And media should represent if some wrong and harm is occurring to them.

There should be rule and policies that will be re-enforced strictly by media. Right now there is Disability Discrimination Act, the Disability Equality Duty, the gathering on the rights of individuals with disabilities & the assembly of Europe's Disabled Persons Action Plan 2006-2015.

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