

Same Old Story: Strategies to Combat Media Misrepresentations

Who are the people in the media?

The media in this case is news media. The people who work on news media are television, print, and internet reporters.

The media tell stories about things that are happening. These stories have a powerful effect on people, especially when the same story is repeated many times.

The Media and Disability: Problems

Wrong information

This can mean just making false statements.

For example: “Is (some factor) to blame for autism? New study shows correlation between [x] and autism!” People often believe things that are said over and over on the news. However, this headline makes readers assume that [x] really causes autism. Correlation between two things just means that they are present at the same time, or when one increases, so does the other. This doesn’t mean one is the cause of the other.



Stereotypes

The media often plays on stereotypes of autism. Autistic people are often shown as broken and emotionless. The common media story is that autism is an awful disease, and everyone with it should be pitied.



Stigma

Media and stereotypes feed into each other. The stories in the media confirm society’s views. However, people’s perceptions of autism are changed by what they see in the media. Autism is seen as harmful and shameful, and the media can partly be blamed.



The Consequences

These stories have powerful consequences. For example, in 2012, an Autism Speaks executive said on video that she had thought about driving off the George Washington Bridge with her daughter in the car, because of her daughter's autism. In 2014, Oregonian Jillian McCabe threw her autistic six-year-old son London McCabe off a bridge and admitted to being inspired by Alison Singer.



Even when people don't directly cite these stories, they seeps into culture. People form their opinions and take their actions based on prejudices.

Causes of the problems

Ignorance

Members of the media were exposed to stories from the media before they became reporters. They continue to be during their careers. It is hard to break out of old habits. Many media workers simply are not educated correctly on disability issues.



Ableism

Sometimes even better education is not enough. When people are given corrections and true facts by disabled people, they may ignore the truth, because of biases against the disabled.



Common stories told about disability

Violence

Disabled people are often portrayed as violent, such as Adam Lanza, who committed mass murder at Newtown Elementary School. Statistically, disabled and people with mental illness are more likely to be victims of violence, but these stories say we are violent because of our disabilities.

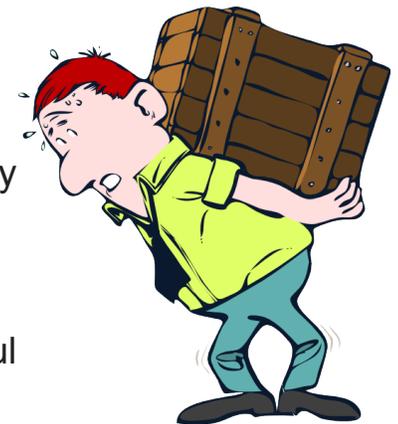


Two narratives formed after the Newtown shooting. One said guns were too easily accessed, and that lack of gun control and societal factors led to the shooting. The other blamed Lanza's mental health disability.

Because the media blamed mental illness for the shooting, a Pennsylvania state representative proposed a bill that would have taken rights and independence away from mentally ill people. Stories like these can cause serious violence against disabled people. In this case, the violence was almost even coded into a law.

Burdens

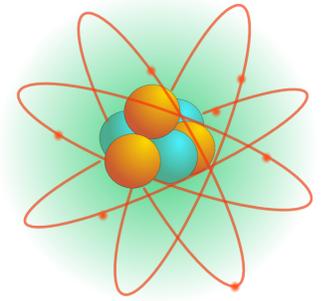
According to the media, disabled people put a financial and emotional strain on society and the people around them. In September 2013, Kelli Stapleton, a mother of an autistic teenaged girl, Issy Stapleton, tried to kill Issy and then herself by locking them in a van with active gas grills. Both survived, and Kelli Stapleton was arrested for attempted murder. However, Issy Stapleton was often blamed for her mother's violence. A common story said that Issy and people like her are too stressful to deal with and make their caregivers snap. Disabled activists, including members of ASAN, campaigned heavily for Kelli Stapleton's prosecution on the charge of attempted murder.



Result: To the relief of activists, Kelli Stapleton was sentenced to 10-22 years in prison in September 2014. This means that the media will find it harder to excuse parents for harming their disabled children.

Science

Reporters also often write on scientific research on autism. A very common theme is the rising number of autism diagnoses, with the conclusion that an epidemic is forming. However, autism is just being counted better in the population. Scientists are finding out more about how autistic minds actually work differently from allistic minds all the time. But “epidemic” stories make autistic people out to be a plague. Terms like this, as well as “health crisis,” have bad connotations. They make the public call for a “cure” for autistic people to make them “normal.”



Result: People know more about autism, but they might be getting bad information. This leads them to hate and fear autistic people.

Combating the Myths and Misrepresentations

'Dos' and 'Do Nots' When Responding

- **Do not** directly say “no.” People have a tendency to forget the word “not.” So “autism is not tragic” becomes “autism is tragic” in people’s minds.
- **Do** provide the whole story—people are more likely to believe a false story than an incomplete story. Next to the true full story, people will see the holes in the false story.
- **Do** provide credible sources. **Do** show that opposing sources are not credible. People will believe any study shown on its own. However, thankfully, they will also believe a study with a bigger sample size and one from a trusted organization (major university, government institute) rather than a small, questionably sourced one.
- **Do** provide graphics if possible. Visual information is easy to remember.
- **Do** include numbers.



When directly speaking to an audience:

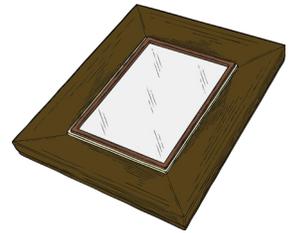
Correct Information

- Calmly state the accurate information.
- Eventually, a fully sourced and accurate story will win out over an alarmist false story.



Reframe Their Questions

- Answer questions without directly using the word “no.”
- If someone refers to autism as a “tragedy,” for example, do not just say “It is not a tragedy.” Instead, lead with “Autism is a natural part of human diversity, just like differences in religion or culture.” In this example, you can expose ableism as a form of bigotry while not making contrarian statements.



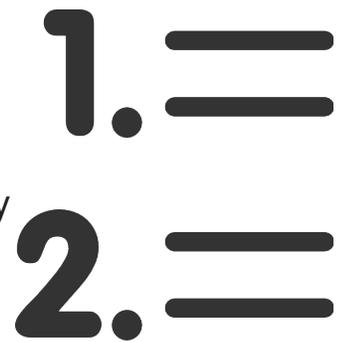
Decide Your Responses in Advance

- When you are writing an article, post, or response to, try to think about what questions people are going to ask based on the myths and stereotypes.
- Sometimes these discussions, especially if happening in real time, can become hectic.
- If you are in person, it is okay to ask if you can have more time to come up with an answer.



Keep it Simple

- All people sometimes have short attention spans!
- Overly long and wordy sentences will cause people to stop paying attention, misunderstand you, or even be suspicious that you’re trying to trick them.
- Short and pithy quotes are easily memorable.
- It is easy to communicate heartfelt emotion or witty accuracy in short sentences.
- Make sure your language is accessible.



It Takes Practice

- No one is perfect.
- It takes time to get the hang of dealing with the media.
- It will not work 100% of the time, even for experienced people.
- However, any effort to push better stories about disabilities into the media is good.

