Media Professionals Asked to 'Look Beyond the Obvious' When Covering Disability Community

University Communications
October 2019

When telling stories about people with disabilities, it is important that media avoid common pitfalls, such as objectifying them in inspirational articles or describing their disabilities when they aren't relevant, University communicators learned during a workshop presented last week by the National Center on Disability and Journalism.

One in 4 Arizona adults report that they have an intellectual or physical disability, said Erica McFadden, executive director of the Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council. According to a survey conducted by the council, fewer than half of Arizona adults with disabilities said that they speak up for themselves "all the time."

"We want to start a movement around passion, purpose and being mindful" when it comes to producing content about the disability community and its members, said Nicole Koester, program manager for the National Center on Disability and Journalism, in her opening remarks.

The half-day workshop, titled Disability Inclusion and Awareness Training, was presented by the National Center on Disability and Journalism. The center, based at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University, provides resources to journalists covering people with disabilities.

Among the takeaways were:

Is disability relevant to the story? or is it there to 'inspire' readers?

Susan LoTempio, a National Center on Disability and Journalism advisory board member and retired newspaper reporter and editor, urged attendees to "look beyond the obvious" when covering stories that include people with disabilities, and to ask questions that positively impact the discussion about the disability community.

That means being particularly careful to avoid stories that could be considered "inspiration porn"? stories about disabled people that portray their disabilities as something they overcome in an inspirational or courageous way. Amanda Kraus, executive director of the University of Arizona Disability Resource Center and assistant vice president for campus life, who led a presentation with LoTempio, defined the term another way: The objectification of disabled people for the benefit of nondisabled people.

LoTempio and Kraus provided some guiding questions that media professionals and communicators should ask when preparing content that involves people with disabilities. They include:
• If disability were omitted, would the story still be newsworthy?
• Does the representation of disability reinforce negative stereotypes?
• Is the representation consistent with how other communities are represented?
• Does the story advance the way the public thinks about the disability experience?
• Does the story frame accessibility as an individual or systemic issue?

Ask questions to get it right

Amy Silverman, a Phoenix-based journalist and a National Center on Disability and Journalism advisory board member, explained the importance of the language used in stories about people with disabilities.

"We need to recognize that language has history and power and meaning, and that it changes over time and that we need to include that in our education process for ourselves and for other people as well," she said.

Provided a person's disability is relevant to the story, the best way to describe it accurately, Silverman said, is to ask them how it should be described.

Even if asking the question seems awkward, it "is beyond important," she said.

If a person is unable to answer for themselves, Silverman said, asking a close family member or an expert or reaching out to the National Center on Disability and Journalism are other options. The center's style guide, which has dozens of entries on disability-related terms, also is a resource.

Use people-first language

Another best practice ? using people-first language ? puts the person before the disability, the presenters said. To illustrate this, Silverman referred to her own 16-year-old daughter, Sophie, who has Down syndrome.

"Sophie is not a 'Down syndrome girl,' or a 'Down syndrome child,' or a 'Down syndrome person,'" she said. "She is a person with Down syndrome. She's a person first, and then you identify her with her disability."

There are some exceptions to this rule, Silverman said, emphasizing that it's important to always ask how someone wishes to be described.

Silverman also advised being wary of medical terminology, which she said can become bastardized. Describing someone as being in a "vegetative state," for example, may be a medical diagnosis, but can still be offensive, she noted.

"We're not vegetables. We're people," McFadden said earlier in the workshop.

Making content inclusive

Two presenters from the Disability Resource Center ? Barbie Lopez, a digital accessibility consultant, and Dawn Hunziker, a senior information technology accessibility consultant ? covered ways to ensure content in all formats is inclusive and accessible to as many as possible. That includes text, photos, videos and websites.
Their advice included:

**Ensure good color contrast.** Some people who have low or limited vision may struggle to read content on websites when the contrast between the text and background is low. More information, and links to websites that can help check color contrast, are available on the University Information Technology Services' IT Accessibility website [8].

**Include captions with videos.** The University has several vendors [9] that can caption videos, but units can also work with others. Auto-generated captions should be edited for accuracy. If captions can't be inserted into a video, consider making a transcript of the video available for those who request it.

**HyperlInk the relevant text.** Instead of hyperlinking the words "click here" or "more," it's better to hyperlink informative phrases or the name or title of the content the link will lead to. This form of labeling is helpful to people using screen readers.

**Adhere to the correct HTML heading order.** Screen reader users typically navigate unfamiliar webpages using headings.

**Include alternative text for images.** On websites, use HTML image tags or alternative text fields to briefly describe what is depicted in an image. Screen readers will read these descriptions to users.

**Include flyer text in emails.** When attaching a flyer to an email, it's helpful to also copy and paste the text from the flyer into the body of the email. This ensures the text can be read by screen readers.

More information about creating inclusive content can be found in this LQP story [10].

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