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Disabled People and The Media: the way Disability is Presented in The Printed-Press: Some Findings and Suggestions

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Özürlüler ve Medya: Özürlülüğün Yazılı Basında Sunumu Bazı Tespitler ve Öneriler

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Abstract

This study focuses on the relationship of the issue of disability that has become increasingly ever more important in recent years in Turkey to the media. This study reveals, in the media in general and in the Printed-Press in specific, the main headings of the existing sensitivities and some statistical figures. The principle assertion of this current study is this; the dominant image in the mass media regarding the disabled is that they lead an unsuccessful and a tragic life. In addition, the way to lead a normal life is to have a superhuman power and capacity. Just at this point, the notion of “the media language” becomes all the more important. Thanks to this language, the images of either a hero or a victim regarding the disabled in the media and/or printed-press are illustrated.

Keywords: Disabled people, media, printed-press, language of media, Turkey

Özet

Bu çalışma, Türkiye’de, oldukça yakın bir tarihten itibaren önem kazanan özürlülük konusunun medya ile ilişkisine odaklanmaktadır. Bu çalışmada, genelde medya özelde ise; yazılı basın ekseninde, özürlülere yönelik mevcut hassasiyetler -konu başlıklarıyla ve bazı rakamsal değerler bazında- ortaya konulmaktadır. Anılan çalışmanın temel iddiası şudur: Kitle iletişim araçlarındaki baskın görüntü, özürlülerin başarısız ve trajik bir hayat sürdükleri yönündedir. Ayrıca normal bir hayat sürdürmenin yolu ise; insan-üstü bir güç ve yeteneğe sahip olmaktan geçmektedir. Bu noktada, “medya dili” kavramı büyük önem taşımakta ve bu dil aracılığıyla medyada ve/veya yazılı basında, özürlülerle ilgili ya kahraman ya da kurban imgesi resmedilmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Özürlüler, medya, yazılı basın, medya dili, Türkiye

Introduction

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. 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. Mindful of its ever-expanding nature and role in shaping society's views of itself, we have to consider the way in which media communicates images of *disadvantaged groups; minority groups; marginalized groups* (Lagadien, 1997) and in this instance one such group is the estimated 13% of disabled people in Turkey (DİE, 2002; Özgökçeler, 2012).

Disability has been represented in art for thousands of years, and the study and teaching of those representations of disability in historical context has the potential to raise awareness and understanding of disability as a cultural issue. This increased awareness may help place disability in the continuum of *diversity* issues, rather than being frequently ignored. The *representation of disabled people* in literature and mass media and printed-press has been *varied* and often *negative*. Inappropriate portrayals have engendered attitudes ranging from feelings of pity or revulsion to expectations of superhuman powers of intellect or insight. When disability is represented artistically, it can be based on *stereotypes*, on imagination, on personal experience as a disabled people, or on the experiences of friends, family members, or caregivers with disabilities (Jaeger & Bowman, 2002). We would like to examine the current status of disabled people in general by looking at the following key social, psychological, economic, medical issues and disability. We will also look at *how the media can be instrumental in either perpetuating the situation or in redressing it in Turkey*.

The Portrayal of Disabled People in The Media

Accounts of disability in media are often informed only by medical and psychological perspectives, if they are informed at all (Ware, 2002). News stories related to disability usually focus on medical or technological innovations that will neutralize disabilities (Longmore, 2003). The problems with news media coverage of disability led disability rights activists to avoid courting media coverage when the Americans with Disabilities Act [ADA] was being passed to prevent coverage that was unhelpful or negative (Shapiro, 1994). *News media representations of disability* tend to (Lacheen, 2000):

Focus on the lawsuits and whether people actually have disabilities; emphasize cases where the claim lacks merit or the person has an “undeserving” disability; perpetuate the myth that if it is a common condition, it should not be considered a disability; portray disability rights laws as a problem; view all disability issues in terms of “fairness” rather than “civil rights”

As a whole, news representations tend to be *negative* toward persons with disabilities. By placing most of the emphasis on representing disability as a legal and social problem that makes life more difficult for others or on representing disabled people as being undeserving, the news media coverage of disability mainly serves to make life more difficult for disabled people. These most common representations also reveal a *lack of awareness* about disabled people and the issues they face. Such representations could be more balanced with further research and consultation with national and international disability organizations, local disability organizations, and disabled individuals themselves (Jaeger & Bowman, 2002).

Having identified the media and its power to shape and influence our thinking and as a result our decision making, we would like us now to look at some examples of how these images and words we see, read and hear influence our attitude towards one another. The negative attitudes are irrational, not logic or reason and they are based mainly on supersti-

tions that have existed since time began. Our attitudes are created, re-inforced and perpetuated by what we *hear, read* and *see* in the media (Lagadien, 1997).

- ***Visual Media***

As it stands, *visual media*, including TV and film, negates the existence of disabled people, by virtue of its portrayal. Especially, disabled women do not buy products, fall in love or have careers. The sight of a disabled person thus becomes unusual and unusual sights are stared at often leaving disabled people feeling like *outcasts* in society. For example, “*have you ever seen disabled women buy detergents, give a child medicine or engage in any activities of daily living in advertising and commercials?*” We think not!

- ***The Language of Disability in Print Press/Media***

Upon examining the use of language in relation to disabled people in the print and electronic press / media we will discover the effect it has on society and how this impacts on the lives of disabled people. With the Internet and the electronic media, fast communication with the general public through the written word reaches extensive numbers of people. This means that the media is once again in a *powerful position* to shape attitudes and beliefs towards disabled people. With certain words and phrases, we are inclined towards certain action and behaviour towards a particular group of people¹. The media also likes to describe disabled people as extra-ordinary by using phrases such as “*achieved in spite of being paralyzed/deaf/blind*” or “*despite his/her amputated leg*”. In fact, the disabled person being described here only did what had to be done in

¹ For example, if we say that a person who uses a wheelchair is “wheelchair bound” or “confined to a wheelchair”, non-disabled people feel that they cannot socialize [action] with that person as he/she will restrict their own movement. But, the fact of the matter is that a wheelchair is a liberating device not a binding / confining device! If we say that a person who is physically disabled is “physically challenged”, we imply that barriers - because barriers challenge- are good and that they exist to build a disabled person's character. Society will then make no effort to remove barriers [behaviour].

much the same way, as any non-disabled person would have. Again, the media portrays disabled people as deserving of their circumstances by using words such as “victim”, “afflicted” or “inflicted”. These words also *sensationalize* disability and should be avoided. It is this type of word usage that make disabled people have the feelings of guilt and shame I mentioned earlier and feel that they have sinned and deserve the punishment (Allan, 2011: 22).

The Effect of Negative Images and Language

...on society

Being constantly fed a diet of *negative* images and language by the media results in a society that believes that disabled people are eternally sick and belong in hospital or an institution of some kind. This is true by evidence of the negligible numbers of disabled people we see interacting with non-disabled people in places of employment, in our schools, in our sports and social clubs, even in our places of worship. In this we can see that the potential of disabled people to achieve and succeed is not acknowledged by society because we have been socialised into believing that anything less than “normal” is useless. And this might be true, again by evidence, for, if we look around us in our communities and try to identify disabled people who have realised their potential, we will find that they are few and far between (Lagadien, 1997).

...on disabled people

The reason that disabled people are not integrated into the activities of non-disabled people is because, like non-disabled people, we also are fed a constant diet of negative images and language by the media. Behavioural scientists will tell us that if you tell a person long enough that

they are a certain way, or should behave in a particular manner, they will be just that².

How is Disability Portrayed in the Printed-Press? The Results of a Study

Inclusion London commissioned the *Glasgow Media Group* and the *Strathclyde Centre for Disability Research* to carry out a study to analyze changes in the way the media are reporting disability and how it has impacted on public attitudes towards disabled people. In carrying out the study they compared and contrasted media coverage of disability in five papers in 2010-11 with a similar period in 2004-5 and ran a series of focus groups. The study had three main aims (*Inclusion London*, 2011: 6): *To examine how the media are covering disability and to document changes in this coverage; to examine how this is impacting on public attitudes to disabled people; to consider the impact that any trends identified in the research may have on the lives of disabled people: for example, in affecting attitudes to disabled people or support for or opposition to cuts in benefits accessed by disabled people.*

And the study found (*Inclusion London*, 2011: 4-5):

✓ There has been a significant increase in the reporting of disability in the print media with 713 disability related articles in 2004-5 compared to 1015 in a comparable period in 2010-11. This increase has been accompanied by a shift in the way that disability is being reported and there is now increased politicisation of media coverage of disability in 2010-11 compared to 2004-5;

✓ There has been a reduction in the proportion of articles which describe disabled people in sympathetic and deserving terms, and stories

² In a nutshell, the labelling of disabled people through negative media makes them indulge in self-pity, act sickly and poverty-stricken and wait on mercy gifts of charity from some well-meaning Samaritan. This can be no good for the mental, physical or spiritual well-being of any person.

that document the 'real life' experiences of living as a disabled person have also decreased. Some impairment groups are particularly less likely to receive sympathetic treatment: people with mental health conditions and other 'hidden' impairments were more likely to be presented as 'undeserving'.

✓ Articles focusing on disability benefit and fraud increased from 2.8% in 2005/5 to 6.1% in 2010/11. When the focus groups were asked to describe a typical story in the newspapers on disability benefit fraud was the most popular theme mentioned.

✓ These articles are impacting on people's views and perceptions of disability related benefits. The focus groups all claimed that levels of fraud were much higher than they are in reality, with some suggesting that up to 70% of claimants were fraudulent. Participants justified these claims by reference to articles they had read in newspapers.

✓ This strength of fraud as a tabloid theme conflicts with the reality of levels of incapacity benefit fraud and focuses public perceptions of responsibility for Incapacity Benefit levels on claimants rather than problems in lack of labour market demand, economic policies or discrimination.

✓ There has been an increase in the number of articles documenting the claimed 'burden' that disabled people are alleged to place on the economy—with some articles even blaming the recession itself on incapacity benefit claimants;

✓ Articles that explore the political and socioeconomic context of disability are rare as are articles that explore the impact that the proposed cuts will have on disabled people. There was a decrease in references to discrimination against disabled people or other contextualising issues;

✓ There has been a significantly increased use of pejorative language to describe disabled people, including suggestions that life on incapacity benefit had become a 'Lifestyle Choice'. The use of terms such as 'scrounger', 'cheat' and 'skiver' was found in 18% of tabloid articles in

2010/11 compared to 12% in 2004/5. There were 54 occurrences of these words in 2004/5 compared to 142 in 2010/11. These changes reinforced the idea of disabled claimants as ‘undeserving’.

✓ Disabled people are feeling threatened by the changes in the way disability is being reported and by the proposed changes to their benefits and their benefit entitlements. These two are combining and reinforcing each other.

The study presented as a summary above is one of the important studies in which how the disabled people are portrayed in the media and updated knowledge/data are presented. The present study is likely to be a new horizon or a model for the studies done in this field (including those to be done in Turkey).

The way Disability is Portrayed in the Media: an Analysis in the Context of Turkey

The perception of the disabled people as “different” and “abnormal” has impacted the way they are portrayed in the mass media and led to the emergence of certain stereotypes. These stereotypes are undoubtedly the result of various myths that the society has developed for the disabled people over the years. However, the fact that these stereotypes are highlighted and emphasized directly or indirectly plays an intensifying role in negative behavior. The dominant image in the mass media is the image that disabled people lead an unsuccessful and a “tragic” life, and that the only way to maintain a “normal” life is to have a superhuman power and capacity. Based on these convictions, two basic ways of images emerge: “Victim” or “hero”. The image of victim portrays those people who are *tragic, needy and miserable*; the image of hero portrays those people who are *cheerful, successful and charitable*. It is possible to classify these frequently mentioned stereotypes about the disabled people in the mass media as in the following (Barnes, 1992: 22-23): *The*

disabled as poor and miserable people; The disabled as an object of violence; The disabled as ominous and sinful people; The disabled as a subject booster or a decoration object; The disabled as people with super abilities; The disabled as an object of mockery; The disabled as people who are self-pitying and one own worst enemy; The disabled as a burden for themselves; The disabled who are sexually abnormal; The disabled who are incompetent in contributing to the societal life; and the disabled as normal people.

The media is a very powerful tool that reinforces *stereotypes* and *prejudices*, or that educates the society to understand the disabled people and promote positive behavior. When the disabled people are portrayed positively on TV, on radio, in newspapers and journals, there occurs an important opportunity to convert negative attitudes into positive ones. The way disability is handled in the media is of a great importance. It is because, as it is commonly asserted, the media has a great power. Due to the ever growing mass media tools, it has become a lot quicker and easier to enlighten the public, forge public opinion and inform the public of social activities.

To ensure the coordination of disabled people, to provide them with various assistance within the available limits, to create employment for them, to provide assistance with their health treatments and to help them out with their economic, social, psychological, cultural, health and legal problems, to guide them into rehabilitation should be considered amongst the duties of firstly the state and then of the relevant institutions and the media. In order to solve the existing problems of disabled people, to get the public to become more sensitive about the disabled people in terms of meeting their basic needs and leading their lives more normally, to get the entrepreneurs to establish and open new facilities to meet the needs of disabled people, the mass media can also be utilized again.

The problems experienced by the disabled people in this day and age are generally brought forward due to the sad events that happen to them. However, in order for policies aimed at solving the problems of

disabled people to be generated, it is of great importance that the problems of disabled people are handled without any emotional blackmail. Disabled people may be in a difficult position, but this does not require them to be portrayed as failures. It will be more convenient to be inclined towards those measures that will improve their standards of living rather than emphasizing their disability. It is more important than anything else to make the public, publishers and every sector of society aware of these issues. The mass media tools play a crucial role in achieving this.

Some Media-Oriented Legal Regulations

In addition to the legal regulations in Turkey, there exist some protective and preventive legal regulations in the legislation from the mass media tools to TV and radio. In this connection, the article 4 titled "Broadcasting Principles" of the numbered 3984 Law regarding the Foundation and Broadcasting of Radio and Television starts with the clause asserting that "broadcasting of radio, television and data is to be carried out within the framework of a public service concept in accordance with the rule of law, general principles of the constitution, fundamental rights and freedoms, national security and general ethical rules", and it is clearly stated in this clause that radio and TV broadcasting should be based on "*the concept of public service*".

In the section (d) of the same article, it is adjudicated that in the broadcasts of radio, TV and data, "no person is to be condemned and humiliated because of their language, race, color, gender, political ideas, philosophical conviction, religion, religious sect"; in the section (s) that all the elements of the program services are *respectful to human dignity and fundamental human rights*; in the section (u) that no violence, injustice or discrimination is encouraged against woman, *the helpless* and young children.

There are some parallel provisions with the relevant Law in the article 5 of the Regulations regarding the Basis and Procedures of TV and Radio Broadcasting titled “Broadcasting Principles”. In this connection, it is stated in the close 8 of the section (r) that “the technique of subtitles can be used in delivering the verbal information and dialogues in the programs aimed at the hearing impaired people; in the section (u), that no discrimination, physical or psychological violence is encouraged against woman, the helpless and young children. (...) It is adjudicated that *sensitivities regarding the physical and mental disabilities of people should be taken into account in broadcastings and special care should be given to the fact that new regulations (sign language, subtitling) be passed in order for the disabled people to watch the programs easily*. These provisions aim at getting the authorities to pay attention to the sensitivities of the disabled people and to help them watch television without difficulty.

Coverage Of Disabled People In The Printed-Press In Turkey

There is unfortunately no updated information about the coverage of disabled people in the Printed-Press in Turkey. It is because the notion of disability in scientific sense is a newly developing concept and an academic field. Nonetheless, in addition to being a new field, it is possible to say that this new field has started to be taken more seriously in its relation to sociology, history, religion, psychology, social services, media and other similar fields. In this sense, the report regarding “*the Coverage of Disabled People in the Printed-Press*” commissioned by the General Directorate of Disabled and Aged Services and the Department of Statistics is very important.

The primary objective of this report is to reveal the main topic titles and statistical values of the sensitivities aimed at disabled people in the Printed-Press in Turkey. The report in question was prepared based on the data emerged in the research carried out in the years between 2003, 2004 and 2005 and the first six months of the 2006. The subject titles were

determined while scanning the news in general and the high number of news categorized as “other” is *significant enough to be easily noticed*. In this connection, the fact that most of the news about disabled people are of magazine-oriented/individual and that they are newsworthy because they are about disabled people show that public at large view the disabled people differently from the rest of the society (<http://www.ozurluveyasli.gov.tr/tr/>, 11.04.2012).

The results of the study reveal that distribution of the number of news about the disabled people by years in the Printed-Press has the tendency of linear increase. In this sense, the subject title of “social activities, culture and art” has turned out to be *the subject title with highest coverage in the Printed-Press*. While this is followed by the subject title “the negativities the disabled people are exposed”, the news with least coverage in the Printed-Press has turned out to be the subjects of “discrimination and exploitation”. The following table contains detailed information about these issues: (<http://www.ozurluveyasli.gov.tr/tr/>, 11.04. 2012).

Table 1: The Number of News about the Disabled People in the Printed-Press between 2003–2006

SEUBJECT OF THE NEWS	2003 FIRST 6 MONTHS	2003 LAST 6 MONTHS	2004 FIRST 6 MONTHS	2004 LAST 6 MONTHS	2005 FIRST 6 MONTHS	2005 LAST 6 MONTHS	2006 FIRST 6 MONTHS	TOTAL
<i>Discrimination</i>	0	2	0	8	0	16	2	28
<i>Successful Disabled</i>	4	41	66	155	55	86	60	467
<i>Services run by the Municipalities</i>	1	12	20	60	72	124	52	341
<i>Advances in Science and Technology</i>	0	18	30	31	29	28	35	171
<i>Works run by the State</i>	3	48	26	98	79	195	62	511
<i>Education</i>	1	20	30	82	81	148	114	476
<i>Employment</i>	4	16	9	29	56	109	55	278
<i>Exploitation</i>	0	9	3	11	2	17	2	44
<i>Columnists and Comments</i>	0	27	50	63	92	143	99	474
<i>News about the Disabled</i>	2	14	71	104	37	63	31	322

<i>People's Families</i>								
<i>The Disabled Day and Special Weeks</i>	0	64	27	16	36	83	19	245
<i>Negativities experienced by the Disabled</i>	7	51	44	125	133	286	120	766
<i>Social Activities-Culture-Art</i>	8	62	61	430	235	346	180	1.322
<i>News about Sports Activities</i>	6	28	61	173	82	185	216	751
<i>Advances in Medical Field, Health</i>	1	66	160	54	53	108	171	613
<i>Projects and Services planned to be Implemented</i>	1	6	15	46	59	43	20	190
<i>Legal Regulations</i>	0	17	17	35	63	83	34	249
<i>Other</i>	2	18	49	32	88	103	43	335
TOTAL	40	519	739	1.552	1.252	2.166	1.315	7.583

Based on this, while the number of news about disability in 3,5 years since 2003 is 7583, majority of them (2166 news) seem to have been covered in the last 6 months of the year 2006. In the first 6 months of 2003, on the other hand, there seems to be very few number of news (40 news) about disability in the Printed-Press. However, staring with the last 6 months of 2003, there seems to be *an increase* in the number of news about disabled people in the Printed-Press. Another noticeable detail of Table 1 is that the last 6-month periods of years seem to be on the increase.

According to Table 1, there are only 28 news of *discrimination* in 3,5 years. Another subject title of rare news in the media after discrimination is *exploitation* and there are only 44 such news about it. The majority of the news (1322) covered in the Printed-Press in 3,5 years are all about *social activities* for the disabled people. What follows them (766) is the subject title of *the negativities experienced by the disabled people*.

As it was stated above, this Report is not up-to-date since it does not reveal the data of the last five years. Additionally, there is no sufficient information as to which scientific methodology was used to prepare it and which organs in the Printed-Press was used to obtain the statistical

data in question. At this point, there is a need and an urgency to determine the successful implementations of such reports and studies (such as the UK) about the disabled people and similar implementations should be carried out here as well.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has tried to reveal and discuss the general negative attitudes, perceptions, success, social activity groups and similar situations regarding the disabled individuals in the media in general and in the printed-press in specific. In the context of Turkey, even though legal regulations are still in the process of being made, the fact that the worthwhile efforts to make and pass the relevant law has recently started, but unfortunately failed to continue seems to be one of the factors that make it difficult to carry out a thorough analysis.

Moreover, there is a unique case in Turkey in comparison to the other countries in the world. This uniqueness is that it is only the parents of the disabled people that specifically deal with the issue of disability; therefore, the target group is no longer the family of the disabled person and education institutions. However, as it is the case in other countries, the issue concerns the whole society and even whole sections of the society. It is possible to say that it is already high time that an overall effort is needed including individuals as well as institutions.

At this point, in the process of the society constituting a serious and constructive attitude towards the disabled people, there is a mission and a duty on the part of the media organs. In order to generate a more sensitive and informed society about the disability, it is vital that the visual, printed and audio media organs take this issue more seriously. Today, the number of visual, audio and printed news coverage in the media about the disability is still quite limited. However, there is an urgent need for systematical news that will draw the attention of the whole society and delivery regular messages about disability. It is because as it

was emphasized earlier, the issue of disability is the concern of society as a whole individuals and institutions inclusive.

In conclusion, disability is not the problem of individuals but the society as a whole. In this sense, with the media institutions leading the way, it will be beneficial to initiate society-wide efforts, with help and contribution of NGOs, universities, charity organizations, to get all sections of the society to perceive this issue from that perspective. There is no doubt that the new regulations to be made in the legislation will contribute positively to portrayal of disability. In addition, we have some suggestions to make as well about this issue:

1. The very first duty of the media about disabled people is to maintain a careful, sensitive and efficient broadcasting and publishing policy; and the second one is to deliver powerful, systematic and sensitive messages to the public about disability early detection and prevention.
2. It should be amongst the duties and responsibilities of the media, thanks to the mass media tools, to call for help and contribution of the society as a whole, to publish periodical and non-periodicals such as books, bulletins, encyclopedias, journals, brochures and articles aimed at disabled people, to establish research centers, institute, libraries and sports facilities in all branches, to build new roads, parks, public toilets, public telephones, transport vehicles, plans and projects, and new traffic arrangements for the disabled people.
3. Special attention should be paid to the use of language and terminology about the way the disabled people are portrayed in the mass media organs; special care should be taken to keep away from using language that would hurt and worry the already vulnerable people.
4. The success achieved in different branches by the disabled individuals should be highlighted by means of the media without any

exaggeration and by emphasizing the fact that other individuals can also achieve this kind of success.

5. The relationship between disability and the media in Turkey should be re-examined in the light of scientific methods and the successful international studies should be introduced to Turkey.
6. Disabled people should be empowered to monitor the media and devise policies for the regulation thereof. These policies must clearly spell out necessary corrective mechanisms and measures and how it should be implemented.
7. Disabled people should be actively encouraged to study journalism.

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