

Ableism, inaccessibility prevail in field of journalism

Despite strides in other aspects of diversity, journalism perpetuates ableism, must make space for disabled reporters

by Elise Fjelstad
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Editor's Note: This story uses person-first language ("people with disabilities") and identity-first language ("disabled people") interchangeably. Please note that people may prefer either term or different terms.

With newsrooms across the country improving their diversity efforts, an identity group being left behind in many journalistic inclusion initiatives is disabled people.

Ableism — discrimination toward people with disabilities and general preference toward abled minds and bodies — operates on the idea that there are certain spaces in which disability simply ought not to exist. Despite federal protections, people with disabilities continue to face de facto exclusion from activities and jobs due to physical and ideological barriers.

I have been a student journalist for five years now, starting as a staff writer at my high school paper and eventually working my way up to a section editor at one of the top independent collegiate newspapers in the country. Even my limited experience in a sheltered environment has me concerned for the ableism awaiting disabled journalists who enter the professional realm.

I love what I do, and my fellow staff have been the greatest people to work with, but the field needs a lot of improvement — not just in accessibility, but in overall attitudes and expectations toward both journalists and the disabled people they report on.

Journalism is naturally a fast-paced environment and inevitably needs sharp and inquisitive minds who can keep up with the 24-hour news cycle. But this can unintentionally create an inaccessible and exclusionary work environment when it doesn't necessarily need to be. It pushes out bodies and minds who can produce quality work but may take physically or mentally longer to do it.

Though we can't escape the urgency of the news, effective and thorough coverage does take time. Due to my disability, it takes longer for me to type, so writing articles typically takes longer. Yet, as a reporter and associate editor, I still published articles that had a one-day turnaround and even put out breaking news with little edits from superiors.

As pursuers of truth, good journalists should question the world around them. Instead of accepting the inaccessibility of journalism, we should be closely examining the covertly ableist ideas about who is "cut out" for journalism.

Thus, in addition to the important task of addressing white supremacy and misogyny prevalent in journalism, higher-ups in the field have the responsibility to remedy the ableism and inaccessibility that also persist to make space for disabled journalists.

Having more disabled reporters and editors would reduce the ableist narratives that continue

to plague journalistic stories about disability. One example is the continual use of inspiration porn or showing ordinary things as extraordinary just because a disabled person is doing them.

Even the basic language non-disabled journalists use to describe disabled people perpetuates negative stereotypes. Rather than stating a disability neutrally, it is often stated that a person "suffers from" a disability. The term "wheelchair-bound" is a commonly used but

I had the opportunity to write a feature article about disability at the University of Wisconsin. I purposely wrote the feature as a direct opposition to the dominant disability tropes, appearing in mainstream news media, discussing active resistance and organizing by people with disabilities instead of the usual tendency to only highlight passive struggles.

After being published, I received only positive feedback from members of the disability

is. I would answer hesitantly, stressing that my medical diagnosis isn't what I strongly identify with when it comes to my own disabled experience, and it doesn't provide specific information about my experience either.

Many in the community are trying to move away from medicalization and towards the social model of disability. In this spirit, I wrote a 2,500-word story about disability without asking any of my sources for their medical diagnosis. A few people stated it unprompted, but this way I avoided making anyone uncomfortable by medicalizing their experience if that wasn't how they identified.

In another instance, my friend had a journalism student interview her and ask for photos where her disability was apparent despite my friend pointing out that her disability is constant, so she is disabled in any photo she is in.

Anti-ableist journalistic practices — such as demedicalization and recognizing that disability doesn't have or need to look a certain way — can increase trust between disabled people and journalists, allowing for more authentic portrayals of experiences.

Journalistic practices must be informed by those most impacted. This means listening to people in the community being covered and making publications less hostile to reporters with disabilities, who have a unique situational vantage point.

This goal can be achieved by starting with everyday improvements. This includes basic physical access like adjustable desks and lighting and planning for future infrastructure that incorporates such features.

Our very own office at The Badger Herald is on the second floor and doesn't have its own elevator. This indicates that our forefathers when picking a space did not anticipate anyone with a mobility disability being a part of the staff.

But access doesn't start and end with basic physical wheelchair access. It also includes broadening our minds as to how we can shape journalistic practices that are structurally and attitudinally inclusive.

People need an environment where they don't have to fight for basic access and feel comfortable sharing access needs. While there are disabled journalists already clearing a path, the burden shouldn't lay only upon them.

Though all professional fields should be working toward accessibility and anti-ableism, journalism has a particular responsibility to do so. Since we often serve as the link between various communities and the larger general public, we should always be striving for better. I don't have all the answers, but from my experience, I know that diversity is our strength — and diversity includes disability.

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The environment surrounding journalism can be inaccessible and exclusionary.

loaded descriptor with connotations about what using a wheelchair means for someone's life — namely, entrapment when mobility aids actually often mean freedom.

I witnessed firsthand how coming from the perspective of disabled people improved our paper's coverage of the community. Last year,

community, who thanked me, and non-disabled people who said they learned a lot. It wasn't only the angle, but also my practices while reporting that allowed this article to have the impact it did.

As someone who has been interviewed for stories about disability experiences, the first question I would be asked is what my diagnosis