

The demise of American newspapers has been fully documented, and the reasons are far more complicated and numerous than we care to admit. But over my 40-plus-year career as a newspaper journalist, the chief reason subscribers told me they canceled their paper was this: readers rarely saw stories in any section that reflected their lives.

As a wheelchair user who labored in newsrooms as a writer, editor and, embarrassingly, assignment editor, I was rarely successful convincing other editors to assign stories relevant to the local disability community. Nor could I get my reporters to write much beyond the “inspiration” model.

People with disabilities make up at least 19 percent of the U.S. population and that number will likely grow as even more baby boomers retire and face the life-altering health challenges that come with aging. That’s also an impressive number of news consumers.

Still, many reporters think stories about disability are too hard to research (the inspirational/“good” news story being the exception); or they fear they’ll say something that offends an interview subject who has a disability; or, they’ll get the medical jargon wrong.

It’s a myth that pursuing stories about disability are harder than any other topic. All serious coverage requires researching, reporting, interviewing, and reporting even more. So, let’s shatter some of the myths that inhibit serious coverage of disability issues by all forms of media.

First, understand who falls under the definition of disabled:

A person with a disability is generally defined as someone who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more "major life activities" -- such as working, self-care, walking, seeing or hearing -- has a record of such an impairment or is regarded as having such an impairment.

Reporters can ease their fear of interviewing by following the basics learned in journalism class. Conduct the interview in a place that's convenient for you and your subject. Ask if there's any special arrangement that needs to be made (a site with no steps or a sign-language interpreter).

Be open, honest and not afraid to ask the obvious, which is preferable to ignoring something that might affect the quality of the interview or embarrass someone.

Focus on the person you’re interviewing, not on his or her disability. Speak directly to your subject, not to his or her companion or interpreter. When talking to someone with a hearing loss, face him or her, don't cover your mouth and don’t shout.

Ask before giving assistance. Wait for the answer before doing anything (such as pushing the wheelchair that the interview subject is using; grabbing the arm of a person who is blind;

removing someone's walker or crutches after they are seated; assuming you should open a door.

When meeting an interview subject with a visual disability, identify yourself verbally. If he or she has a service animal or guide dog, don't praise, pet or talk to the animal because that may distract from its duties of protecting its owner.

A wheelchair, or other assistive device, is part of a person's personal space. Don't lean on or touch the wheelchair, unless the person gives permission.

The words a journalist uses can either reinforce stereotypes or help correct them. Consider these guidelines and refer to the NCDJ style guide for more specifics.

- Avoid emotionally charged (and inaccurate) words, such as *suffers from*, *afflicted with* and *victim*.
- Emphasize the person, not the disability. For example, use *man with epilepsy*, not *epileptic*, *woman with diabetes*, not *diabetic*.
- Avoid generic labels like *the deaf* or *the blind*. Instead, use *people who are deaf*, or *children who are blind*.
- Don't use condescending euphemisms or "cute" terms like *handicapable*, *mentally different*, or *physically challenged*.
- Never use *cripple* when referring to a person. And don't use *confined to a wheelchair*. Instead, use *person with a disability* or *person who uses a wheelchair*.
- Beware the word *special*. It's too often used to imply *separate*, such as *special buses for the disabled* or *special bathrooms*. Even more important: avoid referring to people and children with disabilities as *special* because that can be condescending.
- *Non-disabled* is the appropriate term for people without disabilities, not *normal*, *healthy* or *whole*.

As for sourcing, talk to people with disabilities. Sure, that seems obvious, but you'd be surprised how often reporters talk to those who "speak for" people with disabilities -- doctors, teachers, researchers and bureaucrats -- but never to those at the center of the story or who is knowledgeable on the subject.

One final point: Perhaps the most degrading myth is that people with disabilities can't speak for ourselves. Whether working for print, broadcast or digital news outlets, it's my belief that journalists can change that misperception.

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*Earlier version of this essay published April 2006 on the Poynter Institute web site*

