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## **The Place of News Media Analysis within Canadian Disability Studies**

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### **Abstract**

This paper advocates for increased news media analysis within the disability studies field. Using a media research project about Canadian news media coverage of disability, this paper explores the shifting nature of recent disability coverage within Canadian newspapers between 2009 and 2010. As a group of researchers in Canada and the USA, who have undertaken numerous content analyses of news media representations of disability, we argue that a paradigm shift is taking place in which some traditional news media representations of people with disabilities are now being framed through a disability rights lens. This paper's analysis is based on data collected by the Toronto-based Disability Rights Promotion International (DRPI). The project investigates Canadian news coverage of disability issues through Joseph Gusfield's theory of societal "ownership" of a public problem, which in this case means discrimination against and societal barriers for people with disabilities become identified problems that need to be solved within Canadian society.

### **Keywords**

*News coverage, disability, Canada, media studies, disability rights*

### **Acknowledgments**

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## **The Place of News Media Analysis within Canadian Disability Studies**

### **Introduction**

In the past, many disability studies scholars paid little attention to traditional news media representations of disability found in newspapers, with most of the analyses done by media scholars or those from the special education field (Clogston, 1990, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c, 1993; Yoshida, Wasilewski, & Friedman, 1990; Auslander & Gold, 1999; Gold & Auslander, 1999; Wilkinson & McGill, 2009). Many scholars seem to believe that critiquing news representations is a “lost cause” because journalists can be biased, and news stories have the potential to spread stigma regarding people with disabilities (Hehir, 2002; Weeber, 1999; Goffman, 1963). Other scholars have focused on disability representations in film (Chivers & Marcotic, 2010; Ellis, 2006; Smit & Enns, 2001), art (Siebers, 2011; Millett-Gallant, 2010), public display/freak shows (Garland Thomson, 1996; Bogdan, 1990), photography (Hevey, 1992) or new media (Goggin & Newell, 2003). As a group of researchers in Canada and the USA, we have undertaken numerous content analyses of news media representations of disability. Through our work, we have detected a paradigm shift in which traditional news media representations of people with disabilities are now being framed through a disability rights lens. Data collected by the Toronto-based Disability Rights Promotion International (DRPI) allowed us to investigate the shifting nature of disability coverage within Canadian newspapers between 2009 and 2010.

Several disability-related events made news in Canada between 2009 and 2010 such as the prominent news coverage of the Winter Paralympics hosted in Vancouver as well as Canada’s ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Council of Canadians with Disabilities, 2010). These events highlighted disability

within Canadian media, and by pushing more disability information into the public sphere, disability rights in Canada begins to fit with Joseph Gusfield's theory of societal "ownership" of the public problem (Gusfield's term) of discrimination against people with disabilities (1981). Gusfield's theory creates a framework for analyzing how a social problem such as improving civil rights for people with disabilities becomes an identified problem within a society. In his idea of the ownership of public problems, it is understood that all groups do not have the same power, influence, and authority to define social problems. A group must truly own a problem to push it into the public sphere (Gusfield, 1981). For example, Canada began to "own" the problem of disability discrimination in the 1970s when disability was introduced in federal and provincial human rights legislation and cross-disability organizations began to develop. In 1982, after much lobbying over an extended period of time, Canada enacted the Charter of Rights and Freedoms which provided a Constitutional protection of equality that included people with disabilities (Prince, 2009). By no means does this suggest that the problem of disability discrimination has been solved, or that negative portrayals of disability do not still appear very frequently in Canadian news. Yet our research shows that a different form of rights-based disability awareness has evolved in Canadian news media. In this article, we hope to argue that Canadians can respond to this momentum with further diligence in monitoring, analyzing, and critiquing news media representations of disability.

### **Why Study Media Content about Disability?**

Many disability organizations worldwide have long recognized the inaccurate and misrepresentative news media coverage. For example, the US National Council on Disability (2003) reported that the media continue to convey many myths and misconceptions about the US disability rights legislation, the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). North American

newspaper narratives have a history of ignoring, devaluing or misrepresenting disability issues (Haller, 2010). These news narratives reflect the ableism that embedded within most societies (Davis, 1999). Ableism represented within media content perpetuates a societal meta-narrative in which people with disabilities are presented as inferior to nondisabled people. Ableist news coverage presents people with disabilities as “defective” or as having a worthless status (Phillips, 1990).

Canadian disability studies scholar Tanya Titchkosky (2007) illuminates how media texts reveal dominant Western narratives about embodiment and people with disabilities. In Ellis’ (2009) study of Australian television’s profiles of athletes with disabilities, she reports “the media has an integral role in both reflecting and reinforcing social disablement and imagining people with disability as a vulnerable group” (p. 25). Ellis (2009) argues, as does this article, that “disability theorists must explore the nuances of the representation of disability in the media rather than condemn it” (2009, p. 29). This article encourages more disability studies scholars to analyze news media texts from a variety of perspectives.

Studying the content of the news media allows disability studies to understand newspaper norms in representing people with disabilities and their concerns. In addition, news media research helps assess the perceived societal status of people with disabilities and whether there are changes in the social culture around disability. Many societal barriers still exist for people with disabilities such as limited interpersonal interactions between disabled and nondisabled people. Therefore, the general public gets much of their information about disability issues from news media as opposed to people with disabilities (Makas, 1988; Makas, 1993; Haller, 2010).

Studying news media content allows for an assessment of how newspapers represent disability through their inclusion of specific sources, language, and images (McQuail, 1989). Mass communication researchers have long known they can delineate characteristics of a particular culture by investigating the content of its mass media (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). "The basic assumption is that both changes and regularities in media content reliably reflect or report some feature of the social reality of the moment. . . The purpose of the cultural indicator analysis is often to test propositions about effects from media on society over time, but it is also a method for the study of social change in its own right and for the comparison of different national societies and cultures" (McQuail, 1989, p. 178).

Western societies, in particular, have become mass-mediated cultures in which their citizens understand the world around them through personal experience and mass media information. As news media content researchers Shoemaker and Reese (1996) explain: "If we assume that the media provide most of the 'reality' that people know outside their own personal experience, then studying media content surely helps us assess what reality it is that they consume" (p. 28).

Journalists construct, by selecting the content and frame of the news, reality for those who read, watch, or listen to their stories. However, these media frames are imbued with cultural meanings. Janowitz (1968) explains that the content of the mass media can provide two contrasting indicators of social culture: "The contents of the mass media are a reflection of the social organization and value system of the society or group interest involved. Simultaneously, the contents of the mass media are purposive elements of social change, agents for modifying the goals and values of social groups" (p. 648). Voakes et al. (1996) in a study of diversity content in the news also found that news audiences receive information about diversity issues directly

from news content. “The content is what activates, motivates, interests, and involves its mass audience” (p. 593).

The ability of the news media to create public awareness and characterize social issues fits with McCombs and Shaw's theory of agenda setting (1972). McCombs and Shaw (1993) have revealed that the media not only tell audiences *what* to think but *how* to think about certain issues. Therefore, McCombs and Shaw (1992) say how news is framed is relevant to agenda setting. "Both the selection of topics for the news agenda and the selection of frames for stories about those topics are powerful agenda setting roles and awesome ethical responsibilities" ( p. 813). Soroka (2002a, 2002b) confirms through a content analysis of Canadian media that Canada's news media also revealed agenda-setting effects. In news media and disability research, how disability is presented can potentially sway public opinion around disability issues and cultural representations of people with disabilities.

### **How Are Disability Media Stories Sourced and Written?**

As media scholar Gitlin (1980) says, “The mass media are, to say the least, a significant social force in the forming and delimiting of public assumptions, attitudes, and moods - of ideology, in short” (p. 9). The sourcing of stories plays a significant role in presenting an ideology to an audience via news content. As Gusfield (1981) explains, one way to understand the culture of public problems, which includes the lack of civil rights for people with disabilities, is evaluating mass media content. News media help construct the "perceived reality" of a public problem. In the early stages of the disability rights movements in North America, journalists had to develop news sources within the disability community (Shapiro, 1993a, 1993b).

Mass communication research on news sources illustrates that the traditional news media of newspapers and TV prefer government and other elite sources with powerful status. Research by Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien (1980) explains that the power elite often help inform the media reporting on conflict and the media would then perpetuate the power elite perspective through the news. Olien, Tichenor, and Donohue (1989) again confirm that the media lean toward the status quo and the "mainstream" when covering public protests. The study found that the media are often watchdogs on behalf of mainstream groups. "Media report social movements as a rule in the guise of watchdogs, while actually performing as 'guard dogs' for the mainstream interests" (Olien, Tichenor, & Donohue, 1989, p. 24). In addition, because most journalists do not actually see the original event of a news story, they are left to construct it from the accounts of authoritative sources. They also learn from the norms of journalism and their particular newsrooms what stories get play, what sources are used, and what representations are chosen (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1987).

These organizational and cultural norms within journalism have implications for the news coverage of disability issues. Media and disability researcher, John Clogston (1990, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c, 1993), reveals how in the past, the media generally reported disability through a medical or welfare lens. Joseph Shapiro (1993), who wrote a seminal book on the US disability rights movement, reports that disability lobbyists for the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) made little use of the media because they thought the media would perpetuate stereotypes and hinder public understanding of disability rights (1993).

In stories about the ADA, the infiltration of the U.S. business sources into ADA stories may have re-cast a stereotype of people with disabilities in U.S. cultural narratives: that people with disabilities cost society money (Haller, 1996). The voice of the business community



reflects the paradigm of capitalism in the United States, and journalists often reflect this ideology. As Gans (1980) argues, US news media embodies a belief in the goodness of a free market economy. In a more critical approach, Dines (1992) calls the US media "capitalism's pitchmen" because of the conservative nature of the sources they use. Her content analysis of the "voices" on US network news concludes that the white, male, conservatives' voice is more often presented over the Left perspective.

Haller's research (1996) found that a "balanced" style of sourcing of North American journalism might actually weaken the "disability side" of the story. On the one hand, the news media's reliance on federal government sources worked in the favor of the disability rights perspective within ADA stories because it was the same as the federal government perspective. Disability activists and lobbyists wrote the majority of the federal legislation. On the other hand, in their adversarial role, journalists did challenge the federal government's side of the story by going to business and local government sources. Fearing the financial ramifications of the ADA, the business and local government supplied information to the media with an alternative frame for the Act -- that the ADA would be costly (Haller, 1996). When reporters are constructing news stories, their aim is to be fair so they attempt to include perspectives from all parties involved in the story. In the ADA stories, this meant that complaints from business sources about costs were given equal space to those disability advocates talking about the need for US society to become fully accessible to people with disabilities.

One of the more influential news categories is sports and several studies have illustrated how media coverage of disability athletics educates nondisabled people about the lives of disabled people. Events including the Paralympics and the rising prominence of disabled athletes in local communities have become more influential. Ellis (2009) says Australian TV's interviews

with Paralympians “reek of the super cripple aesthetic,” but even with that aesthetic, TV profiles also make clear the experiences disabled athletes have in fighting to be included in sports. Those TV stories teach the nondisabled audiences about the ableism disabled athletes have encountered in their lives and sports careers.

A study of the Sydney Paralympics in 2000 found that British media conveyed the achievements of Paralympic athletes through the medical model by detailing a person’s disability and comparing them to nondisabled athletes (Thomas & Smith, 2003). But the researchers also found that British media coverage “emphasized the sporting achievement of athletes with disabilities by comparing them to Olympic athletes and by deemphasizing disability” (Thomas & Smith, 2003). Thomas and Smith (2003) say extensive media coverage of the Paralympics may increase the public’s understanding of the games and disability sports, while continuing to reinforce negative stereotypes about disability. This was a similar finding to a study of an American TV network’s coverage of the Atlanta Paralympics (Schell & Duncan, 1999).

Other researchers mention the prevalence of the “supercrip” or heroic narrative in news coverage of the Paralympics (Schantz & Gilbert, 2001). However, this is not unexpected given that much sports news is typically about “superhuman” feats of sporting prowess. Ethnographer Ronald Berger explains that the supercrip image is complex, and he questions whether this image always goes against the interests of the disability community. Berger (2008) interviewed elite wheelchair basketball players and others associated with the team and argues for “a more nuanced view of dedicated disabled athletes as offering both a disempowering and an empowering experience for people with disabilities” (p. 648). Zhang and Haller’s international survey of people with disabilities’ media use (2010) found that the more people with disabilities

believe the media present them as supercrips, the more positive attitudes they have about themselves.

### **How Can Disability News Be Systematically Monitored?**

This article, in encouraging more disability studies analysis of news, continues and expands (through data base analysis) the media content analysis and places it within the broader context of disability rights monitoring. The data analyzed here looks at the way in which media monitoring fits in the broader holistic monitoring work carried out by Disability Rights Promotion International (DRPI), based at York University in Toronto. DRPI was established as an international collaborative project in 2000 to monitor the human rights of people with disabilities using a comprehensive, sustainable international system - the monitoring process itself “provides a voice to marginalized people; enhances public awareness by documenting abuses and violations of rights; reinforces a collective identity among persons with disabilities; and supports efforts to achieve social justice” (DRPI website, 2011). In its holistic monitoring work, DRPI brings together three focus areas in order to provide a fuller picture on the implementation of rights for persons with disabilities: individual experiences monitoring (gathering information on the lived experiences of people with disabilities); public awareness monitoring (examining media coverage of disability); and systemic monitoring (examining the effectiveness of legislation in protecting disability rights).

DRPI includes monitoring media as a way of understanding how media imagery and the news coverage of disability affect public attitudes about the human rights of people with disabilities. “The media have a powerful influence on the way disability is perceived and on the attitudes of the public towards people with disabilities. It is important to document myths and

stereotypes perpetuated by media portrayals of persons with disabilities and also highlight effective reporting of disability issues” (DRPI website, 2011). The development of the media monitoring component represents a concerted effort of Canadian and international researchers, as well as media experts and disability activists from various countries and institutions. Their intent is to develop a systematic and replicable means of evaluating how the news media covers topics concerning disability issues and disability rights in any given country or region. [1](#)

### **What Kinds of Disability Content Can Be Found in Canadian Newspapers?**

The findings in this article came from DRPI’s analysis of news content about disability topics in the Canadian news media (DRPI, 2012; Laing, 2010). [2](#) The sample selected for the analysis came from a representative group of leading Canadian newspapers: *The Vancouver Sun*, the *Calgary Herald*, *The Star-Phoenix*, the *Ottawa Citizen*, the *National Post*, *The Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Star*, the *Toronto Sun* and *The Montreal Gazette*. A sample period of one year was chosen from 1 July 2009 to 30 June 2010. The sample was obtained using a Boolean search of the Nexis news archive database using a core search string on the terms related specifically to disabilities (N=3066). Coverage was measured using two criteria: a) simple number of mentions, and b) an estimated audience reach that scaled the prominence of mentions of a disability topic with the number of people reached by the news outlet based on circulation. The study looked at some of the mainstream newspapers generating coverage about disability issues in Canada, the types of disabilities portrayed, and most importantly, whether the item, in its commentary about a disability topic, touched on one of the rights identified by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities-CRPD (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2011).

The findings from the DRPI data showed some variance in the amount of attention devoted to disability topics within Canadian newspapers. The country's largest daily by circulation, *The Toronto Star*, stood out in devoting the most news items to disability topics – 480 – over the 12-month sample period. It is surmised that *The Toronto Star* has more disability coverage for several reasons. Since the mid-1990s, the newspaper has published a bi-weekly disabilities column by Helen Henderson, a former Living section reporter at *The Star* who has multiple sclerosis. *The Star* also has a reporter with quadriplegia, Barbara Turnbull, who contributes both disability-related stories and general Living section stories to the newspaper. This means that the newspaper's editors possibly become aware of disability news and receive story idea input through these disabled journalists (Jones, 2010). Secondly, the editorial policy of *The Star* is based on the “Atkinson principles” set by publisher Joseph E. Atkinson. Those policies state that the newspaper should further social, economic and political reforms and, in particular, tackle issues of injustice (*Toronto Star*, 2008).

After *The Toronto Star* were a second tier of newspapers publishing approximately 400 items annually – including the *Ottawa Citizen* at 413, *The Vancouver Sun* at 409, the *Calgary Herald* at 396 and *The Globe and Mail* at 387. A third-tier published fewer than 300 items a piece. This tier included the tabloid *Toronto Sun*, which published the least number of stories at 215, along with the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* (222 items) and the *National Post* and *Montreal Gazette* (272 items). The results suggest that the ownership of the newspaper, including its format and style, play some role in the variance in coverage (e.g. the Quebecor-owned tabloid *Toronto Sun* publishing the fewest items, while the TorStar-owned and larger daily broadsheet publishing the most).

**Table 1:** Canadian newspapers and number of stories

<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>Number of stories</b>
<i>Toronto Star</i>	480
<i>Ottawa Citizen</i>	413
<i>Vancouver Sun</i>	409
<i>Calgary Herald</i>	396
<i>Globe and Mail</i>	387
<i>National Post</i>	272
<i>Montreal Gazette</i>	272
<i>Saskatoon Star-Phoenix</i>	222
<i>Toronto Sun</i>	215

There was also notable variance in the level of coverage of disability topics within the seven Postmedia newspapers surveyed, even taking into account the higher-than-average coverage resulting from the 2010 Paralympic Winter Games in the *Vancouver Sun*. The 10th Paralympic Winter Games held in Vancouver in mid-March 2010 was a notable event during the sample period that affected coverage of disability topics in Canada. In total, items referring to the Paralympic Winter Games comprised 12% of the news items sampled and 11% of total estimated audience reach.

Excluding the Paralympic Games, there was no particular story that garnered specific attention or which produced a spike in the estimated audience exposed to a disability topic. The largest peak in coverage occurred in mid-February 2010 primarily from several rights-related topics, including the Barlagne case (a family denied permission to immigrate to Canada when it

was found that the family had lied about the condition of their disabled teenage daughter), the ruling against Air Canada by the Canadian Transportation Agency (demanding that the airline provide an environment safe for people with peanut allergies), as well as general non-rights reports, particularly on efforts to treat Haitian citizens (specifically those who became disabled following the January 2010 earthquake).

**Table 2.** Coverage of mental health disabilities  
(Forms of mental illness represented 28% of the sample.)

<b>Specific Mental Health Disability</b>	<b>Percentage of the coverage*</b>
Depression	32%
Addiction	30%
Schizophrenia	16%
Post-traumatic stress disorder	8%

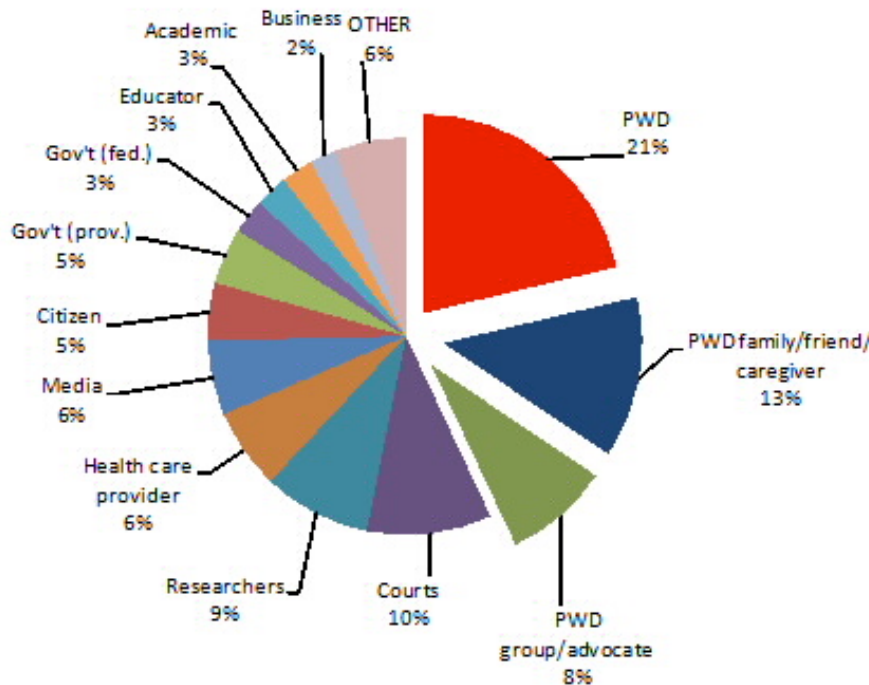
\* Note: Amounts do not add up to 100% because these are most often-cited within the category of mental health disabilities.

In this study, excluding coverage of the Paralympic Games, no particular media outlet paid specific attention to one type of disability significantly more than another. Having noted that, coverage of mental health disabilities was somewhat disproportionately higher in *The Globe and Mail* (38% of total exposure) following that newspaper's particular attention to dementia and depression in a series of feature articles during the sample period. As a share of total volume, cognitive disabilities tended to represent a higher share of coverage in the *National Post* (18%) and *The Montreal Gazette* (19%), with *The Gazette* devoting more coverage to the topic of

autism than other newspapers surveyed. Overall, the breakdown of coverage by type of disability was very similar among the newspapers analyzed.

This research also evaluated the presence of people with disabilities in Canadian newspapers from two perspectives: 1) from the perspective of voice: that is, whether a person with a disability was at least cited or quoted in the news item, and more broadly, or 2) from the perspective of *source*: whether a person with a disability was the primary source of information generating the news item. This study found that a person with a disability was the primary source of information in 21% of total coverage, measured by audience reach. Again, using a person with a disability as a source tended to be higher in news outlets such as *The Toronto Star*.

**Figure 1.** Percentage share of total estimated audience exposed to a newspaper item concerning disability issues by source of coverage, between 1 July 2009 and 30 June 2010. Survey of nine Canadian newspapers. N=3066





These findings mirror a similar trend observed by Haller (2010), which found that approximately a third of US news stories about disability included sources with disabilities. It is important that people with disabilities are used as sources for news stories. The absence of that perspective not only disconnects the reader from the subject of the story, but can lead to false interpretations and silence the perspectives of people with disabilities within the media.

Unfortunately, even with the voice of people with disabilities in news stories, this does not preclude a strong media influence through gatekeeping, issue selection and framing devices that could negatively affect how disability issues are portrayed. Nonetheless, part of any change in journalistic portrayals and practices about disability would require at a minimum greater participation of people with disabilities in providing their own account about a news topic. This finding does give reason for some optimism about future Canadian news coverage of disability.

This study found that disability was framed from four distinct perspectives in Canadian newspapers. These include the medical perspective, the heroic perspective (also known as “supercrip”), the charity perspective (or the white knight syndrome, characterized by the good person coming forward and saving those in need, DRPI, 2012), and the rights perspective. The first perspective frames disability as arising out of a medical condition. These types of stories focus on an individual’s physiological or psychological condition as explained through medicine or medical knowledge (Clogston, 1990). Within the second perspective, disability is framed as a heroic or superhuman event. Emphasis is placed on individual resilience, and a person’s ability to “overcome” a disability (Barnes, 1992; Clogston, 1990; Oliver, 1999). The third perspective characterizes disability within a charitable context in which individuals in news stories are portrayed as victims who need to be helped or as objects of pity (Higgins, 1992). Fourth, stories from the rights perspective focus on the social, political and economic conditions that impact

disability (Rioux 2010, 2003). These types of stories place at the forefront the larger structural conditions that create disabling barriers for people with disabilities.

The first three perspectives; medical, heroic/supercrip and charity are more traditional and stigmatizing approaches found in many media stories. Even though journalists do focus on disability in these stories, they do not address the complexity of disability and the barriers encountered by people with disabilities. The last perspective, focused on human rights, is the emerging theoretical and political direction found in the international and national disability rights movements and in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (2011). This perspective is beginning to emerge in some Canadian news stories.

The rights perspective provides a holistic and inclusive news lens to analyze issues faced by people with disabilities. The first three perspectives place emphasis on the individual person with a disability, with less attention to the complex structures of society and their impact on the lives and capabilities of people with disabilities. A rights perspective looks at the broader picture -- the social, employment, architectural, educational, attitudinal, communication, and legal barriers that need to be addressed in order for any society to provide an inclusive environment for people with disabilities (DRPI website, Human right perspective, 2011). Although some stories can frame a story using a medical, heroic, or charitable perspective without being stigmatizing, news stories about disability present a much more inclusive frame when they discuss the larger structural issues that compromise the rights of disabled people.

The presence of these four perspectives varied between the four thematic areas found in the Canadian newspaper articles: 1. health and rehabilitation; 2. sport, culture and recreation; 3.

accessibility, access to justice, standard of living, independent living, and education; 4. right to life, freedom from torture and abuse. Stories written specifically about disability rights were found throughout all four themes; however, the majority of the stories with a predominant rights perspective, or that included a rights point of view, were found in issues related to the access and freedom themes.

Not unexpectedly, stories related to health and rehabilitation, mostly portrayed disability from a medical perspective; the stories in the second theme, sport, culture and recreation, were often portrayed from a heroic/overcoming perspective. Stories written from a medical perspective typically focused on new or emerging medications, treatments, research, and funding opportunities. An example of such a story is from *The Vancouver Sun*, “Breakthrough could take guesswork out of psychiatric drugs; Personalized treatments may be only months away; Toronto researchers predict” (Nguyen, 2009). The story discusses how DNA testing will help determine how the bodies of people with mental disabilities manage medications. Although this story highlights potentially helpful attributes of medications, its emphasizes medical advancement over the impact on individuals’ lives or on the systemic implications for the rights of persons with disabilities.

As with stories about the Paralympics, sports, culture and recreation stories often portrayed a person with a disability as heroic or as a “supercrip.” An example of this perspective is from *The Ottawa Citizen* in a story about a man who became quadriplegic in high school but went on to marry, have kids, earn two university degrees, coach softball, and write poetry (Duffy, 2009, August 1). The underlying narrative is that, even with a disability, a person can overcome extreme barriers and achieve exceptional success in life. Stories written from this

perspective highlight one individual's ability and good fortune, but fail to acknowledge the social structures that create disabling barriers for all people with disabilities.

The charity perspective was often found in stories focused upon sport, culture, and recreation, such as stories about special camps for children with disabilities. These stories portray people with disabilities as "victims" of their disability or as recipients of charity and pity. An example of such a story comes from *The Ottawa Citizen*, "Magical day at Disney has kids flying high" (Thaw, 2009). This story highlights a volunteer organization that makes trips to Disney World possible for children with disabilities. The story is characterized by an individual focus on a volunteer group and the story of individual experiences. This article, and others like it, does not discuss the role charity groups play in filling the gaps created by social, political, and economical injustices experienced by people with disabilities.

An example of a Canadian newspaper story written from a rights perspective comes from the media coverage of the justice system and jurisprudence related to access to justice for people with disabilities. A story in *The Ottawa Citizen*, reports on a Federal Court ruling about a human rights case involving accessibility that is currently being appealed. The story features the voice of a person with a disability and his opinion of the accommodations that were proposed by the city of Ottawa:

Ottawa activist [BB], who has been fighting for equal access to the York Street Steps since August 1999, doesn't believe the elevator is a reasonable solution. 'We don't want to go someplace down the street,' said Brown, who has used a wheelchair since 1972 when he was disabled in a car crash. The human rights complaint against the NCC is one of dozens [he] has pursued during the past two decades. But it is among the most important, he said, because it deals with access for the disabled at an outdoor, public place (Duffy, 2009, Oct. 13).

This type of article allows the voice of a person with a disability affected by the Federal Court ruling to be heard. It locates the story within a larger context - moving beyond a focus on the individual to allow readers to understand all of the factors involved in creating inclusive communities for people with disabilities. These news stories provide multi-faceted disability information for all readers and create richer and more balanced pictures of how Canadian society can reduce barriers and enhance the human rights of people with disabilities.

This analysis found that the majority of stories in Canadian newspapers in this study were not written from the perspective of the CRPD. Other analyses of news content have found stories similar to these Canadian newspapers and include stories representing people with disabilities with a focus on hardship, overcoming obstacles, individual heroic achievements, medical frontiers, and topics that make the reader “feel good”, as though something is being done for those with disabilities. These types of stories often ignore the greater social stigmas, discrimination, and inequalities that people with disabilities face. Instead of addressing rights violations or injustice, the journalists interpreted disability topics as struggles, cryptic heroic tales, or victimization that are associated with the charitable, medical/individual model of disability. This study found that the rights perspective was included as an afterthought or was absent in Canadian newspaper stories. However, within specific topic areas, especially those targeted by advocates, the rights perspective was highlighted. Topics where rights were emphasized included areas of: health, access to justice, right to live, living standards, or independent living.

Monitoring media provides another way to understand a society’s public attitudes toward disability. It provides a snapshot of the way in which disability is framed and perpetuated. It gives disability studies scholars much information about how Canadian society views people

with disabilities and it provides a measure of whether we are seeing change in society towards the greater exercise of disability rights.

### **What Will Be the Future of Disability News Analysis?**

In terms of future media content for disability studies scholars to analyze, the Internet and social media can offer rich opportunities. Through these new forms of online media, many people with disabilities are now able to tell their own stories directly to online audiences. With this media, the disability community can better create an oppositional frame to traditional ableist news media representations. Having a disability issue highlighted in a front-page story in *The Globe & Mail* or *Toronto Star* is still a goal for many disability advocates, but if that's not possible, disability organizations can let hundreds or thousands of people know disability news through social media, blogs, YouTube, and websites. The disability magazine, *New Mobility*, reports that "social networking can, in many cases, propel [disabled] people into additional civic involvement when attending every meeting or demonstration is unrealistic" (Dobbs, 2009, para 46).

For example, social media allow disability advocates to use vast global networks of "friends" on Facebook or "followers" on Twitter to better promote important issues or events (Haller, 2010, 2011). Canadian technology writer Ladhani says: "Online social activism through social media should not even be compared to the physical act of social activism. Instead, it needs to be considered and evaluated as a vehicle for free speech, information sharing, and online organizing" (2011, p. 57).

As US disability activist Mike Volkman (2009) says, “What we are doing now with Facebook really shows the true potential of what the Internet can do to transform our society. We are seeing changes that rival historically the invention of the printing press” (para 7). With social media, the Internet is truly becoming the “liberating technology” that was promised for people with disabilities (Sussman, 1994).

From a research standpoint, social media is highly accessible for media analysis by disability studies scholars. A growing number of media scholars are addressing the intersection of news, the Internet, social media and blogging (Tremayne, 2007; Papacharissi, 2007; Delwiche, 2005; Gurak et al., 2004; Jenkins & Thorburn, 2003; Regan, 2003; Blood, 2003). A few disability studies scholars have started exploring the social networking transformation of the news media that will better include the voices, writings, and stories of people with disabilities. (At the 2011 Society for Disability studies conference in the US, three papers explored the topic: Gerber, 2011; Haller, 2011; Shpigelman, 2011). Furthermore, the Critical Disability Studies graduate program at York University is seeing students explore these areas of new media in their theses and dissertations.

This article has argued that just as with other oppressed groups worldwide, news media representations can be a site of struggle. For people with disabilities, issues of identity are tied to news media content and language (Linton, 1998). A UK analysis of the media’s supercrip/heroic and tragic representations says, “The (news media’s) focus of over or under achievement means that disabled people can never be who they are, without striving to overcome their impairment/disability” (Disability Planet, 2006, para 33). The UK report explains that the media would be well-served to abandon negative representations of disability in favor of more accurate news

coverage that will influence more helpful social policies and better societal attitudes towards people with disabilities.

The Canadian news media continue to embody some of the negative media models such as portraying disability issues from a medical or charity perspective or presenting people with disabilities as “supercrips.” But the topic of disability rights is emerging in news media coverage and some journalists are including the voices of people with disabilities as sources in their stories. Disability studies researchers can learn much from what changes in news media content tell us about the growing political influence and identity of the disability rights movements in Canada and other Western societies. One indication is that disability rights advocates are becoming more media savvy. For example, Susan Scheer, a former deputy director in New York City Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities, explained that the growth of an educated, professional class of disability rights advocates in the USA means a more sophisticated approach to changing news media coverage of disability issues:

Litigating cases and lobbying elected officials were the traditional techniques that the community used in the past. But now these techniques are used in combination with establishing connections with television, radio, and newspaper reporters and educating them. The language in the news accounts and editorials, although far from perfect, is much improved; for example, ‘wheelchair user’ is finally beginning to replace ‘wheelchair bound.’ Also, stories have more balance, and the result is that the public is beginning to understand disability issues (Fleischer & Zames, 2001, p. 208).

Scheer’s comments reflect an optimism that warrants continuing study of news media content about disability. The goal of DRPI’s media monitoring on five continents is to create these holistic studies about the rights of people with disabilities internationally.

Media and disability scholarship can investigate whether Canadian news media is changing towards a greater emphasis on rights in its news coverage. The hope is that deep within



media practices, changes are percolating. Journalistic shifts are beginning to present people with disabilities and their rights issues in the same way as other social, cultural, and civil rights issues are reported. For example, on topics such as the education of disabled children, the majority of Canadian news coverage (70%) portrayed examples of the right of disabled children to access quality education (DRPI, 2012; Laing, 2010). Haller (2003) also found similar results in a study of general US news coverage of disability issues such as inclusive education, general education, and children with disabilities were some the most covered news topics in a comparison study of 1998 and 2002.

Therefore, studies of news media content help disability studies scholars understand how far media have come and how far they must go to reach a higher level of disability understanding. Media content can tell disability studies scholars about the “paradigm shift” in global efforts to convey disability rights information to the broader public. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2011), this paradigm shift is a move “from viewing persons with disabilities as ‘objects’ of charity, medical treatment, and social protection towards viewing persons with disabilities as ‘subjects’ with rights, who are capable of claiming those rights and making decisions for their lives based on their free and informed consent as well as being active members of society.” Furthermore, news media can be our global mirrors as disability studies scholars investigate this paradigm shift.

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## Endnotes

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