

**Media Representation of Disability Issues in
Context of the Rights of Persons with
Disabilities (PWD) Act, 2016: A Study Based in
Gujarat**

SYNOPSIS

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Brief Introduction and Premise

According to the 2011 Census, India had 2.68 crore persons or 2.21% of the population who were identified as having one or more disabilities. Later estimates by National Statistical Office (NSO) in 2018 also put the figure in the same range¹ while indicating that the level of literacy (52.2%) and labour force participation (23.8%) was lower than the average population.

One of the reasons for the phenomenon is a perception of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) in society, which is often shaped by popular media and media discourse. According to the UN's Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), media can be a vital instrument in raising awareness and battling stigma and misinformation. It can be a powerful force to change societal misconceptions and present persons with disabilities as individuals that are a part of human diversity.²

The present study aims to understand the media representation of PwDs by mainstream media – specifically print media – in Gujarat in the context of The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPwD Act), 2016.

While 2015 saw the introduction of *Sugamya Bharat* (Accessible India) campaign, the next year witnessed passing of the RPwD Act, creating a watershed moment for the disability sector in India – instead of eight disabilities, the purview included 21 and expanding the scope, making it a right instead of charity to demand equal opportunity and participation for PwDs.

The present study aims to understand coverage of disability issues before, during, and after the law was introduced. The design included a scheme to see disability from the media perspective, media from the PwD perspective, and bridging them with expert opinion and perspective.

Media's role is important as it is 'a core way to encounter disability and a key way in which it is shaped and governed in society.' Social forces change media, but in return, media powerfully influences society, especially in the realm of disability (Ellis & Goggin, 2015).

Definition of Disability and Persons with Disabilities

Disability is termed as an 'umbrella term covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions' by the World Health Organization (WHO). 'An impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an

¹ <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1593253>

² <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/resources/disability-and-the-media.html>

individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations,' mentioned the definition.³

Article 1 of The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) considers those with 'long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments' as PwDs which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.⁴ European Union has adopted the same definition.⁵

Models of Disability

The medical model of disability, where the 'defect is within an individual' remained the dominant discourse for a long time. As Olkin (2001) points out, it is seen as abnormal and pathological. The goals of intervention are the cure, amelioration of the physical condition to the greatest extent possible, and rehabilitation (i.e., the adjustment of the person with the disability to the condition and the environment). The model implies that the PwDs are different from the 'normal' persons.

The moral and religious model of disability indicates disability to be a 'curse, one often associated with the attribution of shame onto an individual or family' (Niemann, 2005).

By the late 1960s, across the globe, disability activists raised their voices. The core demand was the right to equal participation as they contested their incarceration in institutions and highlighted the discrimination they faced in their daily lives (Sabatello, 2018). It was during this time that Disability Studies emerged as a separate academic discipline.

Social Model of Disability developed in aftermath of various such campaigns where the focus was on finding societal change as a meaningful solution instead of individual adjustments and rehabilitation as it is the society that restricts their entry into mainstream activities (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 2010).

International movements and laws in India

In 1976, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution to mark the year 1981 as the International Year of Disabled Persons with the focal theme 'full participation and equality' to encourage rehabilitation of 450 million persons having some form of physical or mental

³ <https://www.who.int/topics/disabilities/en/>

⁴ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-1-purpose.html>

⁵ http://www.era-comm.eu/UNCRPD/e_learning/B/definition.html

impairment (Mehta, 1983). The US introduced The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, whereas several other countries either introduced acts or amended existing ones. In India, The Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995, was in effect till the new act replaced it in 2016.

Ahead of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) by the UN in 2006, the theme of International Day of Disabled Persons in 2004 was ‘Nothing about Us, Without Us’⁶ became a rallying cry across the globe.

In 2006, the UN introduced the Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)⁷ as ‘the first comprehensive human rights treaty of the 21st century.’ The convention came into force in May 2008 and influenced the laws and policies of many countries including India.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations also included disability in five of 17 goals.

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 was enacted on December 28, 2016, and came into force on April 19, 2017. The Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment (MoSJ&E) oversees the implementation of the Act along with The National Trust for the Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities Act, 1999, and Rehabilitation Council of India Act, 1992.

Research Question Statement

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 changed the way the state and central governments – and society at large – view disabilities and persons with disabilities (PwDs) by shifting the focus of activities from charity to rights. The Act also makes provisions for inclusivity and equal opportunities.

However, legal provisions alone would not automatically change the societal approach. Mainstream media plays a vital role in this regard through the portrayal of PwDs and their issues. The study intends to understand two aspects of the media portrayal of PwDs – how media looked at disability issues before and after the Act, and how PwDs look at media for representation of their issues. The study proposes to investigate a change in coverage of/approach towards disability-related issues in mainstream media in the state of Gujarat after

⁶ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/international-day-of-persons-with-disabilities-3-december/international-day-of-disabled-persons-2004-nothing-about-us-without-us.html>

⁷ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>

the Act is implemented, to record changes in terms used for PwDs and perception of PwDs about their representation by media.

Brief Review of Literature

The review of literature (ROL) was carried out to understand the studies conducted in the same field and find the research gap. The ROL categories included mass media/ communication theories dealing with media framing and representation of social issues, disability and media, and major thesis/ papers/ studies in the field of media representation of disability.

Media theories

McCombs & Shaw (1972) set out to explain how media shapes public opinion – and that took shape of *agenda setting theory* of mass communication. The fundamental idea the duo presented was, the mainstream media creates a public agenda by focusing its attention on certain issues while ignoring others.

Goonasekera (1992) defined news as a social construction of reality. He mentioned that the news should not be viewed in terms of the abstract and absolute ideal of what news should be – such as objectivity, fairness, and neutrality, but as ‘a social construction of everyday occurrences viewed in the light of cultures' priorities, preferences, concerns, sensitivities and (negotiated) in an invisible but powerful undercurrent of attitudes, values, and norms.’

While over the years theorists have defined roles of media, the social responsibility theory – developed in the light of the Commission of Freedom of Press or Hutchins Commission in the US – defined ‘responsibility’ as both being accountable and being in charge for the description. The commission insisted that the news media have an obligation to society rather than promoting the interests of the government or pursuing private prerogatives to publish and make profit (Christians, 2014).

Media and Disability

The disabled identity exists as a mutually exclusive identity from all other identities because the cultural and media discourses on disability are influenced by the personal tragedy principle or by images of the super-cripple or the emotionally stunted (Oliver, 1990).

Disability imagery is often impairment-focused, wherein impairment is portrayed as the cause of disability, and which is, therefore, ignorant of any social constraints imposed by a non-disabled society (Darke, 1999). Whilst certain assumptions, myths, or superstitions about

disabled people are constantly formed and reformed as part of the mainstream culture they are subsequently reproduced by the media (Ross, 1997).

The cultural archetype of a person with disability as ‘deviant’ or ‘faulty’ is ingrained in society, and depiction of disabilities by mainstream media, including TV and cinema, further propagates the view (Nagchoudhuri and Juvva, 2016). Disability laws don’t garner much media attention, as the target social group is traditionally marginalized (Burns & Haller, 2015).

Selected Studies on Media and Disability

Representation of Disabled people in Print Media in India | Santosh Kumar Biswal (2015)

The study analysed coverage of disability issues in Hyderabad editions of The Hindu and The Times of India for 2013 with 47 and 42 articles respectively. Coverage was mostly on city pages, and a minuscule number on editorial/ opinion pages. Focus of the coverage was on physical disabilities and mental health issues. The coverage focused largely on urban areas. The language used was sympathetic and not empathetic.

Construction of disability in an ableist Indian media: Framing difference, facilitating inclusion | Nooka Raju Bendukurthi (2015)

The study analysed coverage of Eenadu (Telugu) and The Hindu (English) newspapers’ content for 2012. A total of 205 stories were selected. The study found seven major themes including goodwill-building, economism, medical model, a modern freak show, dynamics within discrimination, statism, and anti-statism. The language was found to be disability-first. Corporeal (visible) disabilities got more coverage and technical aspects were often missing in reporting.

The Representation of People with Disabilities in an Official Newspaper in China: A Longitudinal Study of the *People’s Daily* From 2003 to 2013 | Wen Ye & Geri Alunit Zeldes (2020)

Out of 6,422 articles and images with keywords ‘canji’ (disabled) and canjiren (people with disabilities) published in China’s leading newspaper ‘People’s Daily’ published between 2003 and 2013, 788 were chosen for analysis. Out of the total, 16.5% of articles were classified as hard news. The ‘super cripp’ model/ representation was most prominent with 26.9% of articles using it.

Media Framing of Disability: A Content Analysis of the Daily Nation Newspaper in Kenya | Mauryne Abwao (2019)

Analysis of disability-related coverage in Kenyan newspaper The Daily Nation for years 2016 and 2017 was carried out where 341 articles were found with the keyword ‘disability.’ About 54% of the articles fell under traditional representation such as stigmatization, social pathology, and supercrip frames. About 37.5% of the articles used progressive frames including cultural pluralism, civil rights, educative and legal frames.

Labelling versus the US disability community identity: A study of shifting cultural language | Beth Haller, Bruce Dorries, Jessica Rahn (2006)

Content analysis of The Washington Post and The New York Times for October and November of three years 1990, 1995, and 2000 was conducted. In all 550 articles were found with keywords related to disability. The motive of the study was to ascertain the impact of Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). It was found that use of ‘handicapped’ got reduced with the word replaced by disability. Newspapers also started using ‘people-first’ terminology instead of ‘disability-first.’

Newspaper Portrayal of Persons with Disabilities Over a Decade | Adrienne Gilbert, Marilyn I. MacCauley, and Bryan J.A. Smale (1997)

Content analysis of The Globe and Mail in Canada was carried out from 1980 to 1990 to include the International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981 and the UN Decade of Disabled Persons from 1983 to 1992. With keywords related to disability, 513 articles were chosen. Almost two-thirds of the articles appeared in two upper quadrants, but only 7.6% of the articles appeared on front page. Two-thirds of the articles focused on local stories, and 28.7% had photographs. The number of articles about disabilities increased gradually from 26 in 1982 to 74 in 1990.

The Coverage of Persons with Disabilities in American Newspapers | Clayton E Keller, Daniel P Hallahan, E Paula Crawley & Barbara Blandford (1990)

A total of 12 major newspapers across the US were selected to assess the coverage of disability issues for the year 1987. Out of 428 articles with a mention of disabilities, 216 were about individuals, whereas the rest were about disability groups of families of PwDs. About 63% had disability as the prime focus of the article, whereas 51% were ‘soft news’ or feature. Physical disability got the most coverage at 27%, followed by mental disabilities at 13%. About 48%

referenced disability as having a negative impact on a person with 78% using terminology such as ‘victim of’ or ‘suffered from.’

Media reports on disability: a binational comparison of types and causes of disability as reported in major newspapers | Gail Auslander and Nora Gold (1999)

Three newspapers each of Canada and Israel (The Globe, The Toronto Star, and The Toronto Sun from Canada and Ha’aertz, Ma’ariv, and Kol Ha’ir from Israel) were chosen in prestige paper, popular daily paper and weekend paper categories for the period of January to March 1998. A total of 427 articles were analysed on the extent of coverage, prominent disability model, placement, type of article, etc. It was found that the majority (68%) were news articles that referred to specific disabilities even as physical disabilities were found to be more prominent. Half of the articles focused on disabilities from diseases and congenital problems. Majority of articles (67%) focused on the traditional model of disability.

Salient points emerging from Review of Literature and Research Gap

- The news media creates pictures of the world outside in the recipient’s head and is a major force in shaping opinions and creating or strengthening stereotypes. Media not only tells its audience what to think about but how to think about certain issues.
- In the context of disability sector, international news coverage is often influenced by the movements for equality and rights in countries like the US and the UK. The disability rights activists protested stereotypical coverage of persons with disabilities under ‘traditional’ models such as medical and social pathological on one end of the spectrum and ‘supercrip’ on the other.
- Over the years, the major media organizations have started paying attention to the terminology to describe persons with disabilities - where handicapped/ crippled/invalid/retarded are replaced by more acceptable terminology such as hearing and speech impaired, wheelchair user, etc.
- Studies on the media representation of disabilities and persons with disabilities showed that the majority of the coverage still follows medical model, employs a sympathetic tone, and gives the coverage of disability issues in its features sections instead of focusing on issue-based reporting and including the disability issues on its ‘hard news’ section.

- Studies highlighted that few stories made it to the front page of mainstream newspapers. The terminology used by the media was found to be cliched and was mostly disability-first instead of person-first.
- Some studies highlighted that persons with disabilities were shown as liability, prone to danger, or victims. Fewer articles had a person with disability as the primary source, and often they are not quoted in the articles.

Thus, the research gap could be identified as

- Lack of India-based study focusing on media coverage of the disability sector of both English and vernacular language
- Impact of external factors such as legal framework on media coverage of disability
- Perception of persons with disabilities about media coverage on disability and how they get news related to the sector
- Study on factors impacting media coverage of disability and ways to improve it

Rationale of the Research, Research Objectives and Research

Questions

Considering the findings of Review of Literature and research gap, the study looks at the impact of campaigns such as Sugamya Bharat (Accessible India), the change in legal framework through the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, and introduction of terminology such as *Divyang* on the coverage of mainstream media in India. The study also aims at understanding the perception of persons with disabilities (PwDs) on media coverage and use of terminology.

Research Objectives

1. To document and quantify print media coverage of the disability sector for the years 2015, 2016, and 2017 in Gujarat
2. To assess the difference between pre-Act and post-Act (RPwD Act) coverage of disability issues in Gujarat
3. To get response from the PwDs and other stakeholders on the depiction of PwD in mainstream media
4. To understand why and how the PwDs consume media including the use of new technology

5. To identify key issues related to the representation of disability sector and PwD in mainstream media

Research Questions

1. Is there any change in coverage of disability issues by mainstream media in Gujarat after the implementation of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016?

2. How PwDs look at media coverage of disability issues? Do factors such as education and disability impact their perception of media coverage? Has technology changed the way PwDs consume media?

3. What are the factors that determine coverage of disability-related issues in media? Are there ways to improve it?

Research Methodology

The present study falls into the category of qualitative descriptive research. Goal of the descriptive research is to describe a phenomenon and its characteristics (Nassaji, 2015). The method focuses on ‘what’ rather than ‘how’ or ‘why’ of a social phenomenon. Thus, observation and survey tools are used to gather data which is analysed using ‘frequencies, percentages, averages, or other statistical analyses to determine relationships’ (Gall, Gall & Borg, 1996).

For the three primary objectives of the study - documenting and examining media coverage pre- and post-the Rights of PwD Act, 2016; understanding consumption and perception of media coverage among PwDs in Gujarat; and identifying key issues related to the representation of disability sector, three methods of content analysis, questionnaire survey and in-depth interview were employed respectively.

Content Analysis

Content analysis is any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying special characteristics of messages (Holsti, 1969). In the context of this study, two prominent newspapers – The Times of India (English) and Divya Bhaskar (Gujarati) – with the highest circulation in Gujarat in their respective languages were chosen based on Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) 2018.

The years 2015, 2016 and 2017 were chosen to assess before during and after coverage in context of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPwD) Act, 2016. The period was also

important as December 2015 saw introduction of Sugamya Bharat (Accessible India) campaign and PM Narendra Modi urged people to use ‘Divyang’ for persons with disabilities.

The tool used for this research was document analysis. Bowen (2009) defines document analysis as, ‘a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents – both printed and electronic material... Like other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge. Documents contain text (words) and images that have been recorded without a researcher’s intervention.’

Keywords such as ‘Disabled,’ ‘Differently-abled,’ ‘Blind,’ ‘Deaf,’ ‘Divyang,’ ‘Wheelchair-user,’ ‘Para athlete,’ etc. describing a person with disabilities were searched in the headlines and text of the articles in both English and Gujarati manually through access of the archives of the newspapers.

In all, over 300 articles in Divya Bhaskar and over 500 articles in The Times of India matched the keywords. Out of the total, those that used disability terms for non-disability topics were removed and others were analysed on parameters such as word length, position on the page, byline, picture, quoted in the story, disability mentioned, etc.

Questionnaire survey

Questionnaire surveys are a technique for gathering statistical information about the attributes, attitudes, or actions of a population by a structured set of questions. While questionnaire is a tool for primary data collection, survey indicates the process of collecting, analysing and interpreting data gathered from a large number of respondents.

The tool was used in this study to determine the perception of persons with disabilities or their immediate relatives (parents) on media representation of PwDs. Due to Covid-19 pandemic, both online questionnaires and offline questionnaires were prepared in English and Gujarati.

The questionnaire – containing multiple choice questions and Likert scale – was validated statistically and was tested with a pilot survey at the Blind People’s Association in Ahmedabad. It was designed to assess the perception of respondents on media coverage, terminology used, their frequency of media consumption and usage of new media among others.

Four major NGOs working in the sector of disabilities were chosen including Blind People’s Association (BPA), Apang Manav Mandal (AMM), BM Institute of Mental Health, and School for Deaf-Mutes Society for the purposive sampling of offline respondents. Moreover, other

NGOs were encouraged to disseminate the questionnaire among students and their parents who were not present for online respondents.

For the survey, Ahmedabad city was chosen due to presence of major NGOs in disability sector. Based on Census 2011 data, Gujarat had 10,92,302 PwDs and Ahmedabad district (including city) had 1,84,302, or about 17% of the state's population with disability. For 95% confidence level at 5% margin of error the minimum sample size required was 384. A total of 492 forms – online and offline – were collected. After eliminating incomplete or irrelevant responses, 431 were chosen for the final analysis.

The responses were tabulated with help of Microsoft Excel and then were analysed using SPSS. Some of the tests conducted on the data included t-test and ANOVA.

In-Depth Interviews

The semi-structured interviews were conducted after basic data collection and analysis for both the content analysis and questionnaire survey. The semi-structured interviews are 'generally organised around a set of predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions emerging from the dialogue between interviewer and interviewees... The individual in-depth interview allows the interviewer to delve deeply into social and personal matters.' (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

The experts were presented with the basic findings and were asked to provide their perspectives on how the results could be interpreted. The exercise was carried out to bridge the two methods and derive cohesive recommendations and insights based on outcomes.

In all, 16 persons were interviewed – four each in Journalists, NGO heads, Educators/ Subject experts, and Achievers categories.

While the experts from where the questionnaire surveys were conducted and content analysis were carried out were included for a more comprehensive understanding of the issue, an attempt was made to broaden the perspective for other respondents – apart from print media, TV journalists were included, whereas an independent scholar on disability, a representative of an organization working with multiple disabilities (deafblindness), a representative of an international organization and an NRI were also included.

Three 'achievers' were the National Award for persons with disabilities winners between 2013 and 2017 from Ahmedabad, corresponding with the time of the study, whereas one of the achievers was a Paralympian and CWG bronze medal winner.

The responses were coded for analysis and deriving the common themes.

Major Findings and Recommendations

While some section of the analysis is still to be completed, the primary results indicate a positive trend for the coverage of topics related to PwDs, while pointing at newer avenues for the PwDs to get the news related to the disability sector gaining currency over the conventional ones.

Coverage of Disability Issues in Newspapers

Compared to 2015, the coverage in Divya Bhaskar in 2017 was 9.5% higher. The year 2016 saw the highest number of articles related to disability in both Divya Bhaskar and The Times of India. The spike could be attributed to the articles related to 2016 Paralympics in Rio De Janeiro.

Main newspaper covered the majority of the stories in both newspapers – 20 to 30% of the stories in Divya Bhaskar got published in ‘City Bhaskar’ supplement. Majority of the stories were 100 to 300 words in length, and less than 10% of stories were above 300 words. Majority of the stories (70%) carried pictures, but majority of the stories (75%) did not carry reporters’ bylines. Often, nobody was directly quoted in the stories, whereas in about 20% of the stories PwDs were quoted. The share of stories with quotes was relatively higher in The Times of India.

The majority of the stories were found to be positive in tone, but the Medical Model of Disability – where the disability is considered to be an individual’s problem and a corporeal issue that needs to be changed – was found to be most prominent across the years. In The Times of India, several articles used disability language for non-disability issues. For example, one headline to describe the illegal chopping of trees in Rajkot was ‘RMC turns blind eye to rampant chopping of trees’ (February 24, 2017).

Local stories (based in Ahmedabad) were the highest in Divya Bhaskar, whereas both local and national stories got prominence in The Times of India. The Times of India was found to have a higher number of photo captions due to a series ‘Every Face Has a Story’ that regularly featured a PwD.

Features or ‘soft stories’ were the most recurring type of articles on disability issues. However, several important judgements both at state and national levels were published prominently by the newspapers.

Confirming some of the earlier studies, the analysis indicated that visible disabilities such as locomotor disabilities and blindness got the maximum coverage. Intellectual and learning disabilities found traction in 2017 in both dailies.

Fewer stories made it to the front page (page 1) of the newspapers, and often the VIP involvement in events related to PwDs got the coverage. Spot reporting was found to be high along with reporting around the special days – International Day of Persons with Disabilities, World Autism Day, Braille Day, Thalassemia Day, etc.

Perception of Persons with Disabilities for Media Coverage on Disability and Media Consumption Patterns

The analysis of responses indicated that PwDs preferred website or news application as the primary source to get news (60%), followed by television (52%) and newspaper (39%). Often, the respondents got the news from more than one source.

As the study took newspapers for content analysis, the question about reading newspapers was asked, and it was found that only 37% reported reading the newspapers daily. A total of 12% of respondents said that they never read a newspaper – the majority of them were persons with visual impairment.

Out of the total respondents, 64% read newspapers in Gujarati, whereas 4% were reading Hindi, 1% English, and 9% languages other than the three. Others were reading newspapers in more than one language.

About 53% or more than half of the respondents said that they were reading newspapers for less than 15 minutes, whereas another 36% were reading them for up to 30 minutes. Thus, in all 89% were reading newspapers for less than 30 minutes.

Consumption of news in media other than newspapers indicated a slightly different pattern with more respondents preferring Hindi or English channels/ websites. Overall, 23% of respondents mentioned spending more than one hour on media daily, whereas 20% spent more than 30 minutes.

Social media (25%) remained the go-to medium to get disability-related news, indicated the results, followed by NGO websites/newsletters (20%), newspapers (18%), and websites of state and central governments (17%).

About 15% of respondents felt that they saw disability-related news very frequently, 26% saw it frequently, 31% occasionally, 23% rarely and 5% said that they never saw disability coverage in mainstream media. About 69% of the respondents said that they primarily saw the disability coverage on special days such as Disability Day, Autism Day, etc.

Close to half (47%) of the respondents felt that 'Divyang' is an appropriate word to describe PwDs, and 61% reported seeing the term used frequently by media since 2015. However, 52% felt that the media still uses words/ terminology that they should not use anymore.

About 48% of respondents said that media is often the only way in which the rest of society interacts with/ gets to know disability, and 55% felt that media representation has a strong impact on how society looks at PwDs.

More than half (51%) of respondents felt that imagery of disability is often about visible/ corporeal disabilities such as blindness, locomotor disabilities, etc. About 41% of the respondents felt that images of disability shown in media are closer to reality.

More than 60% of respondents felt that reporters/ editors should be sensitized about disability issues, a person with disability in the newsroom can help improve representation, and social media has made it easier for them to reach out to a wider audience sans the help of conventional mainstream media.

In terms of analysis of data with statistical tools, Cronbach's Alpha scale was found to be 0.903, which indicated the reliability of the questionnaire.

The highest intensity based on mean and standard deviation was found in questions related to 'Reporters should be sensitized,' 'Social media is easier to take up issues,' 'PwD should be in media,' 'Media focuses on disability on specific days,' and 'Information on social media is more useful' having mean score of more than 3.5.

The t-test indicates that there was no major difference between the attitude of male and female respondents. There was also no major difference in attitude for various age groups of the respondents or education qualifications. But there was a significant difference between PwDs and their relatives when they responded to the representation question - the relatives had a more positive attitude towards media.

The Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) indicated that those who spent more time on media were found to have a more positive attitude towards media.

The nature of disability also impacted the attitude - those with blindness were found to have a relatively negative attitude towards media compared to those with hearing impairment and cerebral palsy/ muscular dystrophy. There was no significant difference between the participants with intellectual disabilities/ autism spectrum disorder (ASD)/ learning disabilities and those with other disabilities. Majority of the respondents in these categories were relatives of the PwDs.

The respondents who only read Gujarati newspapers had a relatively negative attitude towards media representation of disability compared to those who got exposed to multiple language newspapers.

In all, 36% of participants showed a positive attitude to media coverage of disability, 30.4% showed neutral and 33.6% negative attitude.

Bridging the Gap

The experts including senior journalists, persons with disabilities, disability scholars and prominent persons with disabilities were presented with the primary results of both the content analysis and questionnaire survey to get their perspective on whether the methods capture the ground realities and how to bridge the gap between the PwDs and mainstream media.

Major points that emerged from the interviews include –

- Creating more opportunities for media to interact: Experts said that media often responds to events or opportunities for interaction, and instead of waiting for media to be proactive, individuals and organizations can create such occasions.
- Divyang remains a contentious term: While several experts felt that it's good to have an umbrella term to describe persons with disabilities to get rid of derogatory remarks, many expressed that mere change in the label has not done any good to the PwD community at large. The attitude change may take much more time with sustained efforts and better assimilation in society.
- Improvement in media coverage since 2015: Experts agreed that the disability sector is getting better and multi-faceted coverage with changes in on-ground realities – the sportspersons with disabilities winning medals, PwDs getting admission in premier educational institutes and landing good jobs, assistive technology making a major impact in lives of the PwDs, and courts taking the issue of disability rights seriously were captured in detail over the three years by mainstream media.

- Law alone can't change the scenario: The experts said that The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 introduced new categories of disabilities such as acid attack victims, blood disorders and neurological disorders among others. But it has not impacted media coverage frequency or tone much. While the law has turned the charity-based approach to a rights-based approach and increased reservation, the law alone has not resulted in improvement of the PwD conditions largely.
- Media persons can be trained in the right representation: The experts said that media persons are covering a wide range of issues, and often they are not aware of the right terminology or pertinent issues related to the disability sector – it's primarily due to periodic change in beats and news organizations and lack of continuous relationship. They suggested short-term courses or sensitization workshops to improve the scenario.
- Technology is a great leveller, and should be leveraged to create equal opportunities: With a majority of the respondents getting their daily news from their mobile devices, the experts said that a major development in assistive technology in all forms has proved to be a great leveller for the PwDs and rest of the population. Now persons with visual impairment can get a description for a social media photograph or a person with speech impairment can type and convert the text into speech to communicate with others. They added that it should be leveraged further to create equal opportunities in employment and societal participation.
- Media creates perception, and right portrayal is crucial for PwDs: The experts said that media plays a major role in creating reality for society, and portrayal in media holds key to forming stereotypes about specific segments of society such as disability. Thus, positive stories and narratives surely impact the acceptance of PwDs and create opportunities for them. It also reduces the stigmatization of relatives.

Conclusion

There was a marked rise in media coverage of disability issues from 2015 to 2017, but The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 had little to do with it. The news articles remained largely positive, but the Medical Model of Disability remained the most prominent way to present news related to the sector where the achievers were described in 'Despite the disability...' fashion and coverage of assistive devices camps by VIPs continued to portray PwDs as those who need assistance and charity. Only a few articles were talking about accessibility despite 'Accessible India' campaign and a small number talked about creating equal opportunities for PwDs through change in infrastructure.

Persons with disabilities have primarily shifted to digital media and social media for their daily news, and their dependence on mainstream media such as newspapers and TV channels has got reduced in the past few years. While the majority accepted the term 'Divyang,' they felt that the media representation is skewed towards visible disabilities, and it can be improved with sensitization of media persons.

Experts said that law amendment alone cannot change the perception or scenario, but held a positive outlook towards gradual improvement in terminology and tone of coverage. They added that better coordination between NGOs and media is required with creating more opportunities for interaction.

Recommendations

The future study can look at disability coverage with a longitudinal approach – the impact of the law can be assessed after a decade, and multiple centres or states can be considered for the same. The impact of media consumption can also be assessed in terms of understanding new media and social media.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

The study takes into consideration three years (2015, 2016, and 2017) for purpose of analysing and understanding the impact of law (The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016) on mainstream media. The primary media analysis is for the publications and media houses based in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. While analysis of the news content includes all disabilities, the questionnaire is limited to those disabilities where the PwDs can answer it themselves or with help of someone else.

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