**Reporting on disability - top ten tips for journalists**

We know journalists consider it important to fairly represent people in the stories they produce.

To help you interview, write and represent disabled people, particularly disabled women, here is a handy guide, based on:

* Conversations we have had with disabled women
* Guidance from other organisations that deal with issues to do with disability
* NUJ guidance

Our Embolden project, ran in 2017/18 sought to challenge negative attitudes and create positive images of disabled women and girls. Through the project we learnt that disabled women are often ignored within the gender equality debate and disability movement. Learnings from this project have also contributed to this guide.

We include general reporting tips, including the language we recommend journalists use to ensure people are treated with respect and dignity.

We also include interviewing tips as you may need to make some tweaks to your usual methods. We're keen for journalists to speak directly to disabled people, so more people hear their experiences and opinions first-hand. Disabled women remain under-represented in many areas of our society including within media reporting, we would like to see this changed. It is important to see a wider range of people represented in stories and involved in public life.

Finally, we share guidance on how you use images to represent the people and stories you are reporting on.

Reporting

1. **Understand the Social Model of disability**

The Social Model makes the important distinction between ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’. An individual with an impairment is disabled by the barriers that exist in wider society, not by the impairment itself. Societal barriers stem from how society is organised and includes lack of access to buildings, transport, education and employment and negative attitudes. These factors exclude, and disable, people.

[www.disabilitywales.org/social-model](http://www.disabilitywales.org/social-model) for more information.

When reporting on disability, you have the opportunity to reframe the narrative - shift the focus off an individual’s impairment and instead shine a light on how disabled people are treated and excluded by society.

1. **Get to know the person and understand their story, as told by them**

Disabled people are not a homogenous group. We are individuals with intersectional identities, who want different things in life and need different levels of support. Emphasise people, not labels.\*\* Imagine how insulting it might feel if someone says hello to your guide dog before they speak to you, or if they focus only on your wheelchair, talk down to you, or ask questions about nothing but your impairment.

It is not necessary to know or understand different types of impairment or long-term health conditions, though if you work regularly with a particular group you may wish to inform yourself.

It is much more important to know and understand the sorts of things that get in the way and prevent disabled people from participating in everyday life. These barriers include everything from inaccessible buildings, websites and people’s attitudes or assumptions. \*\*\* Disabled people who experience these barriers are best placed to explain these issues and the impact it has on their lives.

**3. Don’t just produce inspirational stories**

“Disability is never that crucial that it should create tear-jerking human interest stories about incurable diseases, congenital impairments or severe injury.” \*\*

We may admire super-achievers but portraying disabled people as ‘super cripples’ raises false expectations that all disabled people could achieve this level if they tried hard enough. Seek to frame disabled people in a positive way, recognise achievements and demonstrate the contributions disabled people make to society.

Also raise issues that affect the quality of life for people, like access to public transport, housing, healthcare, employment opportunities and discrimination.

There may very well be a disability related angle on another story, such as pay gaps and glass ceilings, yet disability is so often overlooked. **Seek to make disability issues visible** as we do for gender, race and other equality issues.

**4. Don’t scapegoat**

As with all reporting, balance is everything.

“The media has a responsibility to make sure that disabled people are not scapegoats for current economic ills. Therefore articles on state benefits and disability allowances should investigate all sides of the story and not make generalised claims about "benefit cheats" or "disability fraud". There are people who try to cheat the system in all sorts of ways, but a quick reference to UK Government statistics, for example, will reveal that benefits paid to disabled people tend to have the lowest rates of fraud.” \*\*

An odd dichotomy plagues coverage of disability - disabled people are either inspirations or the scourge of society. Actually, we are all just people who want to have the same freedoms, choice and independence as any other person.

It is unfair for disabled people to be subject to public scrutiny for trying to get on with their lives and yet the state which strips away disabled people’s rights under the guise of austerity doesn’t experience the same level of judgement.

**5. Be precise with your language**

Mistakes are sometimes made with terminology, where the words used demean or misrepresent the experience of disabled people. Avoid pity or language that paints disabled people as helpless or ‘sufferers’. Do not use emotional descriptors such as ‘unfortunate’, ‘tragic’ and so forth.

If you emphasise people, not labels, it is incorrect to use nouns to describe people - such as ‘an epileptic’, or ‘a diabetic’. \*\*

We should aim to state ability not limitations, for example: ‘uses a wheelchair/braces’, ‘walks with aids’, rather than ‘confined to a wheelchair’, or ‘wheelchair-bound’.

Here’s a round-up of what to say and what to avoid:

**Do say             Don’t say**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Disabled person  Non-disabled person  Person of short stature, person of restricted growth  D/deaf people/hearing impaired  Partially-sighted people or blind people or people with a visual impairment  People with a speech impairment  Wheelchair user  Learning difficulty  Brain injury | The disabled, handicapped, crippled, people with disabilities  Able-bodied person, normal person  Midget, dwarf  The deaf, deaf as a post  The blind or the visually impaired    Mute or dumb  Wheelchair-bound or confined  Retarded, backwards, slow, mentally handicapped  Brain damage |

Interviewing

**6. Make sure the interview environment is comfortable**

So not too noisy, accessible and free from distraction.\* Your interviewee should have all they need to be able to understand what you’re asking, check with them that they are comfortable and ready.

Ask your interviewee if they have any **access requirements** in order to participate in an interview. Don’t make assumptions about what people do or don’t need. If you don’t know how to book an interpreter or make a document accessible, ask the person you are interviewing.

Remember, disabled people can be experts on topics other than disability!

**7. If the person you are interviewing is with a personal assistant, interpreter or support worker, make sure you talk and listen to the disabled person directly.**

However, you may need to ask the support worker for help if you don’t understand something. Don’t assume that anyone accompanying a disabled person is a PA or carer.

If you are not sure that the person you are interviewing has understood your question, try saying it in a different way or giving some examples of what you mean.

If you do not understand the person you are interviewing, don’t be embarrassed. Ask them to explain what they mean in a different way.

Disability Wales can put you in touch with a range of disabled people who can discuss many topics. Many of our contacts will have received some media training and have experience speaking on radio, TV and other media.

Visual representation

**8. Show disabled people as participants in society.**

So frequently, images accompany an article on disability that do not accurately reflect the copy or the tone of the article.

Stay away from depressing looking, tragic stock images of a person in a wheelchair looking forlorn. These reinforce negative stereotypes about how life must be for disabled people. In fairness, many disabled people are struggling but that isn’t due to their impairment, it is due to a society that marginalises us. Avoid images that blame our impairment for the challenges we face.

Show disabled people as people, because we are. Portraying disabled people interacting with non-disabled people in social and work environments helps break down barriers.\*\* Try to reflect the fact that many impairments are not visible, an image of a person in a wheelchair may not be appropriate depending on the content of the article. Images of people using British Sign Language could also be considered.

Unless an article is about technological aids don’t use an image of a hearing aid, wheelchair or other object to represent disabled people.

You can also look to include images that feature disabled people to accompany an article that isn’t directly about disability. The same issues that affect other people will also impact on disabled people, it breaks down barriers for us to be visible in day to day life.

**9. Use, or be inspired by, our bank of images, case studies and videos**

Our Embolden Ambassadors are disabled women and girls from across Wales who have challenged stereotypes, created change and achieved success. Each Ambassador has experience of working with the media to share their stories and views on wider disability issues.

In addition to our Embolden Ambassadors and resources we also have a wider list of contacts across a range of policy areas, including Welsh speakers.

Images can be accessed on the Disability Wales Flickr: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/163514668@N08/>

Videos can be access on Disability Wales YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/DisabilityWales>

Case studies are on our website, Flickr and by contacting us directly:

<http://www.disabilitywales.org/>

[info@disabilitywales.org](mailto:info@disabilitywales.org)

**10. Contact Disabled People’s Organisations for comment**

Disabled People’s Organisations are organisations of disabled people. They are run and led by people who have a lived experience of disability and who advocate the social model of disability. There is a difference between a disability-led organisation and an organisation for disabled people which is usually run by non-disabled people.

Resources and bibliography

[Mind - how to report on mental health](https://www.mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/minds-media-office/how-to-report-on-mental-health/)

[Samaritans - reporting on suicide](https://www.samaritans.org/media-centre/media-guidelines-reporting-suicide/supplementary-factsheets)

[How to talk about Autism](http://www.autism.org.uk/get-involved/media-centre/how-to-talk.aspx)

[\* From Mencap’s ‘A journalist's guide to learning disability](https://www.mencap.org.uk/media-centre/journalists-guide-learning-disability)’

[\*\* From the NUJ’s ‘Disability Handbook](https://www.nuj.org.uk/documents/disability-handbook-2012/disability-handbook-2012.pdf)’

[\*\*\* From English Federation of Disability Sport’s ‘Access for all: inclusive communications’](http://www.efds.co.uk/assets/000/000/227/EFDS_Inclusive_comms_FINAL_MAY_2014_original.pdf?1462551381)