

# Recommended Guidelines on Language and Terminology – PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

A Manual for News Professionals

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Canadian Association of Broadcasters  
L'Association canadienne des radiodiffuseurs

RTNDA  ACDIRT  
Radio-Television News Directors Association of Canada  
Association Canadienne des Directeurs de l'Information Radio-Télévision

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*NB—Appendix can be detached for ease of reference*

# INTRODUCTION

This manual presents a series of recommended guidelines for broadcasters for the use of language and terminology when referencing persons with disabilities in broadcast news. It has been developed on the basis of previous research conducted on behalf of Canada's private broadcasters by the Canadian Association of Broadcasters and in consultation with the Canadian disability community and Canadian news broadcasters.

This manual is not intended for use as an industry code, nor as a set of binding rules for broadcasters. Rather, it has been designed to familiarize broadcast news professionals with the terminology that is preferred by the Canadian disability community. It is not intended for use with other programming categories such as comedy or drama.

While we have endeavoured to be as comprehensive as possible, the Canadian Association of Broadcasters and RTNDA Canada, The Association of Electronic Journalists recognize that these recommended guidelines may not necessarily apply in all situations, and that the language and terminology as presented continues to evolve and is subject to change over time.

An enclosed glossary provides a list of recommended terminology and references; while the terminology applied will be guided in some instances by the context of the stories or events covered, our goal is to address the key concern of the Canadian disability community by eliminating inappropriate language from news broadcasts produced and presented by our members.

In 2005, the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB) commissioned a research study on *The Presence, Portrayal and Participation of Persons with Disabilities in Television Programming*. The study was part of a broader action plan designed by the CAB's Joint Societal Issues Committee to advance the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the industry, and address issues of portrayal in programming.

The study included interviews with over 50 representatives from Canada's disability community, who brought forward their perspectives about the way in which persons with disabilities are portrayed in Canadian dramatic and news programming.

As a key finding of the study, it was determined that

*Negative and stereotypical portrayals of persons with disabilities continue in both dramatic and news programming...Issues of portrayal in news programming are viewed as more critical than in dramatic programming, owing in part to the perceived use of inappropriate or insensitive language referencing persons with disabilities in news coverage.*

In short, this research found that news programming – however inadvertently and unintentionally – can perpetuate stereotypes and myths about persons with disabilities. As noted by those persons with disabilities who were interviewed for the research project:

**'Given the small numbers of persons with disabilities on-screen, it is important that portrayals are fair, accurate and complete.'**

**'Only the exceptional stories or people (with disabilities) are the focus.'**

**'We don't want to be amazing. We want to be normal.'**

**'The focus should not be me. It's the issue that should be portrayed.'**

# OUR GOAL

Canada's private broadcasters are committed to bringing greater diversity to the broadcasting system, both on-screen and behind the scenes. This research provided a tremendous level of learning and exposure to the concerns of Canadians with disabilities, laying a foundation for partnership and action going forward.

To address this specific concern, the CAB in partnership with RTNDA Canada, The Association of Electronic Journalists (RTNDA Canada) has created this booklet for news broadcasting professionals – in radio as well as television – as a guide to language and terminology that is preferred when referencing persons with disabilities.

News broadcasting is a powerful part of Canada's media, and it is a fundamental principle that all news subjects be treated equitably and with dignity and respect. By following the recommendations included in this guide, broadcast news professionals will be taking practical steps to eliminate barriers and stereotyping encountered by persons with disabilities.

In addition, news professionals will also be taking steps to advance the inclusion of persons with disabilities in Canadian society.

The **Canadian Association of Broadcasters** is the national voice of Canada's private broadcasters, representing the vast majority of Canadian programming services, including private radio and television stations, networks, and specialty, pay and pay-per-view services.

**RTNDA Canada, The Association of Electronic Journalists** is the voice of electronic journalists in Canada. It is made up of more than 400 news directors, reporters, producers, educators, students and industry associates across the country. Our goal is to foster the very best in Radio, Television and New Media.

# WHAT YOU WILL FIND IN THE BOOKLET

The booklet was developed with the input of 13 organizations representing a cross-section of persons with disabilities in Canada – all of which were consulted as part of the CAB's 2005 research study.

Apart from providing a guide to recommended terminology – including a pullout section for easy reference – this booklet provides additional, important information about Canadians with disabilities, including suggested ways of approaching news stories as well as a few tips about communicating directly with people with disabilities.

## PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN CANADA

A 'disability' is defined as a functional limitation or restriction of an individual's ability to perform an activity. The most recently available information indicates that there are over five million Canadians with disabilities – approximately 15 percent of the population – and over three million Canadians are caregivers to a family member or friend with a disability (*Disability in Canada: A 2001 Profile*, HRSDC, 2001).

That's a significant number of Canadians, and growing larger as our population ages.

And Canadians with disabilities are like any other Canadian of any other diverse background that tunes into news programming to not only find out about the events of the day in their community and their world, but to see and hear themselves as well.

# SOME GENERAL GUIDELINES ON USING LANGUAGE AND TERMINOLOGY

The words ‘disabled’ or ‘handicapped’ are adjectives that are used to describe a particular condition or environmental barrier. Since people are not conditions, terms like ‘the disabled’ or ‘the handicapped’ should be avoided. Instead, using the term, ‘persons with disabilities’ is recommended.

**The simple rule of thumb: it’s *people first*.**

**The *person* comes first. The *disability* comes second.**

So a hypothetical news story that opens with,

*‘The rights of the disabled became the focal point of a parliamentary committee today...’*

becomes...

*‘The rights of persons with disabilities became the focal point of a parliamentary committee today...’*

Similarly, these guidelines suggest avoiding references to persons with disabilities that patronize, pity, victimize or insult. These include terms such as ‘suffers from’, ‘was stricken with’, ‘is confined to’ or ‘is afflicted with’ that tend to label persons with disabilities as in pain, ill or having a condition requiring constant medical assistance.

In fact, this is usually *not* the case.

Our hypothetical news story that might continue with,

*‘The committee heard from three blind witnesses, one confined to a wheelchair and one suffering from cerebral palsy...’*

becomes...

*‘The committee heard from three witnesses who are blind, one person who uses a wheelchair and one person with cerebral palsy...’*

Or more simply,

*‘The committee heard from a number of persons with disabilities...’*

Of course, this illustration of the appropriate use of terminology rests on the assumption that identifying *and* referencing individuals and their disabilities is relevant to the news event.

In many cases, referencing a disability in a news story may not be relevant – where identifying a disability as a characteristic of a person would have the same relevance as reporting that a person had dark skin or brown eyes.

The questions that a journalist might ask when writing or reporting a story that involves a person with a disability are:

- ◆ ‘Is the person identified first?’
- ◆ ‘Does the story allow for inclusion of the person into society, or does it somehow separate the person from the rest of society?’
- ◆ ‘Is including a reference to the person’s disability relevant to the story?’

At the same time, not all disabilities are *visible*. There is a vast array of *invisible* disabilities as well, whether mental health disabilities, intellectual disabilities or learning disabilities.

The same rules of thumb apply:

*‘The learning disabled and mentally ill also appeared before the committee to state their concerns...’*

becomes...

*‘People with learning disabilities and mental health disabilities also appeared before the committee to state their concerns...’*

As a substitute for ‘persons’ with disabilities – which is the commonly accepted generalized term – ‘people’ with disabilities or ‘individuals’ with disabilities can also be used. In the case of a story or news feature about specific occupations, skills or other identifier, then using a more specific term or personal reference is also encouraged, e.g. ‘employees’ with disabilities, ‘athletes’ with disabilities, etc.

But in every case, it’s... *People first.*

# APPROACHING STORIES INVOLVING PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

The CAB's research study also found that the reporting of stories involving persons with disabilities tends to focus on human interest angles rather than on issues of concern to the disability community, such as transportation and economic barriers.

In addition, this focus on the human interest element of a story involving a person with a disability often translates into stories about an individual 'heroically overcoming' a disability or achieving a goal 'against all odds' of having a disability.

Our news story about the parliamentary committee would continue,

*'A heated debate broke out when a witness – one who has overcome incredible obstacles of blindness and physical impairment to obtain a law degree and advocate on behalf of the disabled...'*

becomes...

*'A heated debate broke out between a witness and a Member of Parliament about the right of persons with disabilities to accessible transportation. As a legal advocate for the disability community, the witness...'*

In effect, altering the approach to this story effectively shifts the attention from the disability, to the issue. While portraying persons with disabilities through the lens of heroism or tragedy can be tempting, this approach tends to exclude or marginalize persons with disabilities – because it is the disability that is made to stand out, rather than the other attributes of the person.

At the same time, the inclusion of persons with disabilities can be advanced by asking for their views on topical stories of the day, whether politics, the economy, the environment, world affairs or other topics.

One reason for the low presence of persons with disabilities in news programming – whether as subject matter experts interviewed for their knowledge or as part of the general public – is because we're often uncertain about how to communicate with an individual who has a disability.

# SOME SIMPLE GUIDELINES FOR INTERVIEWING PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

As a general rule: relax. Using simple everyday terms like, 'Good to hear from you' or 'See you later' that might be used in conversation with a person who is deaf or a person who is blind, are fine and not a cause for discomfort.

When talking with a person with a disability, speak directly to the person – not to an interpreter or companion who may be present.

Offer to shake hands when introduced; people with limited use of limbs or artificial limbs shake hands as well.

Offer assistance to a person with a disability if you feel it's appropriate, but wait until the offer is accepted before actually assisting the person. Don't just push a wheelchair or touch a person in some way without asking first. Don't assume help is needed; ask first.

An interview subject with a disability may require additional time to reply, offer comment or ask questions. Be patient and considerate if this is the case; don't finish sentences or complete thoughts. If a person has difficulty speaking, ask for clarification if the subject says something you did not understand.

Interview a person with a disability as you would any other person, without patronizing or other inappropriate terms. If the person is a wheelchair user, simply ask if he or she would prefer that you sit. Avoid sensationalism, pity or placing the person on a pedestal.

Focus on the story and the issue at hand. If the story is about a disability issue, and the interview subject has a disability, then asking about personal experience with the issue may be entirely relevant. But question the relevance of disability-related comments first if this is not the focus of the story.

If a news story about disability include references to ‘persons without disabilities’, then this terminology or the term ‘able-bodied’ should be used rather than the term ‘normal’. This is because ‘normal’ can inadvertently reference people with disabilities as ‘abnormal’ – which is considered an offensive term.

If you have an interview with a person with a disability coming up and are uncertain or uncomfortable about appropriate language and behaviour, contact an organization that represents the interests of those with disabilities. They have qualified staff and/or website information that can assist you with your questions and concerns.

*‘Study participants agree that building communication/outreach between broadcasters and the disability community is a key starting point for a broadcaster toolkit.’*

American Psychological Association. *Removing Bias in Language*  
[www.apastyle.org](http://www.apastyle.org)

Canadian Association of Broadcasters. *The Presence, Portrayal and Participation of Persons with Disabilities in Television Programming*  
[http://www.cab-act.ca/english/research/05/sub\\_sep1605\\_research.htm](http://www.cab-act.ca/english/research/05/sub_sep1605_research.htm)

Human Resources and Social Development Canada. *Disability in Canada: A 2001 Profile; A Way with Words and Images: Suggestions for the Portrayal of Persons with Disabilities 2003* [www.hrsdc.gc.ca](http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca)

U.S. Department of Labour, Office of Disability Employment Policy. *Communicating With and About People with Disabilities*  
<http://www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/fact/comucate.htm>

United Cerebral Palsy. *Ten Commandments of Etiquette for Communicating with People with Disabilities*  
[http://www.ucp.org/ucp\\_generaldoc.cfm/1/9/6573/6573-6573/190](http://www.ucp.org/ucp_generaldoc.cfm/1/9/6573/6573-6573/190)

## ORGANIZATIONS CONSULTED

Advocates for Sight Impaired Canadians

Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians

Association multi-ethnique pour l'intégration des personnes handicapées

British Columbia Paraplegic Association

Canadian Association of Independent Living Centres

Canadian Hearing Society

Canadian Paraplegic Association

CNIB

Confédération des personnes handicapées du Québec

Learning Disabilities Association of Canada

National Network on Mental Health

People First of Canada

Regroupement des aveugles et ambylopes du Québec

# A GLOSSARY OF RECOMMENDED LANGUAGE AND TERMINOLOGY

In recommending specific language and terminology for use in broadcast news, the Canadian Association of Broadcasters and the RTNDA Canada, The Association of Electronic Journalists note the following:

- 1) Legal terminology and the legal names of groups or associations will be retained in news reporting.
- 2) The context of a news story may determine the choice of language and terminology that is used. For example, some news subjects with disabilities may self-identify in a manner that is different from the language recommended. To respect the preference of the news subject, the terminology used in self-identifying would be applied.
- 3) Reporting of a news story may involve the good faith use of language and terminology based on a story's unique perspective or events. For example, the views and direct quotes of those interviewed for a story would be reported as conveyed by them.

*Please detach the appended glossary for easy reference. Additional copies can be printed by visiting:*

<http://www.cab-acr.ca/english/social/diversity/disabilities.shtm>

# A Glossary of Recommended Language and Terminology – PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

## Not Recommended

## Recommended

Birth defect, deformity/deformed, congenital defect	Person born with a disability
The blind, the visually impaired	Person living with vision loss, person who is blind, person who has a vision impairment
Confined to a wheelchair	Person who uses a wheelchair or wheelchair user
Crippled or lame	Person with a disability or person with a/who has a motion disability; person with a spinal cord injury, etc.
Deaf-mute, deaf and dumb	Culturally-linguistically Deaf people (that is, those who use sign language to communicate) are identified as 'the Deaf' (with an upper-case 'D'). People who do not use sign language are identified as 'the deaf' (with a lower-case 'd'), or 'people who are deaf'.
Hard of hearing or hearing-impaired	Person who is hard of hearing or person with a hearing loss (may use a spoken language such as English or French to communicate)
An epileptic	Person with epilepsy
The handicapped, a handicap	Person with a disability (handicaps are environmental conditions, such as 'this person is 'handicapped' by negative attitudes or lack of accessibility')
Handicapped parking	Accessible parking
Handicapped bathrooms	Accessible bathrooms
Particular references to mental health and well-being such as lunatic, mental patient, mental disease, neurotic, psychotic	Person with a mental health disability, person who has/ person diagnosed with depression/ schizophrenia, etc. Terminology varies between countries; 'insane' and 'insanity' are generally legal terms and reported as such in news programming
Invalid	Person with a disability
Learning disabled, learning disorder	Person with a learning disability or persons with learning disabilities
Mentally retarded, retarded, mental defective, mentally challenged	Person with an intellectual disability; many countries use 'Person with a developmental disability'
Physically challenged	Person with a disability (challenges are environmental conditions)
Suffers from; afflicted by; stricken with, etc.	Person with a disability, person who has (a particular condition)
Victim of (a condition such as multiple sclerosis, a stroke, cerebral palsy)	Person who has (as particular condition) or a person who has had a stroke

Additional copies of this glossary can be printed by visiting: <http://www.cab-acr.ca/english/social/diversity/disabilities.shtm>



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