GETTING IT RIGHT
REPORTING ON DISABILITY IN THE PHILIPPINES
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Headquartered in San Francisco, The Asia Foundation works through a network of offices in 18 Asian countries and in Washington, DC. Working with public and private partners, the Foundation receives funding from a diverse group of bilateral and multilateral development agencies, foundations, corporations, and individuals.

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GETTING IT RIGHT

REPORTING ON
DISABILITY IN
THE PHILIPPINES

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Australian Aid
The Asia Foundation
FULLY ABLE NATION
VERA Files
Truth is our business
Foreword

The release of Getting it Right: Reporting on Disability in the Philippines comes at an opportune time, as the Australian Government has just launched the Development for All 2015-2020: Strategy for strengthening disability-inclusive development in Australia’s aid. This new strategy aims to improve the quality of life for people with disabilities by reducing poverty and improving equality in all areas of public life, particularly access to public services, education, and employment. Through our aid program, we aim to empower and enhance the participation of people with disabilities, and for them to be duly recognized as equal contributors, leaders, and decision makers.

As Ambassador to the Philippines, I am honored to have met Filipinos living with disability. I celebrate their successes and those of other people who have overcome barriers to be change-makers, to be leaders in their fields. And while much has been done in improving the lives of people with disabilities over recent years, their full inclusion in the Philippines’ democratic and development processes remains a challenge. This is why Australia has been fully supportive of the initiatives of the multi-sector program Fully Abled Nation (FAN).

FAN has been instrumental in forging and nurturing strong partnerships among disabled people’s organizations, national government agencies, civil society organizations, private sector representatives, local governments, and other advocates. A critical part of FAN’s advocacy is increasing awareness of the rights of people with disabilities. The media has played a critical role in this process by influencing public perception, stimulating discourse, critical thinking and community participation. Through reporting and special programming, media not only promote awareness, but can also prompt collective action in support of the rights of people with disabilities.

This guidebook is a very important resource not only for media practitioners, but for everyone who believes in inclusive development. On behalf of the Australian Government, I wish to congratulate and thank VERA Files and other FAN partners in developing this important publication.

BILL TWEDDELL
Australian Ambassador to the Philippines
Foreword

The Asia Foundation takes pride in being involved in this important publication, *Getting it Right: Reporting on Disability in the Philippines*—another innovative project of the Fully Abled Nation (FAN).

We in the development community have witnessed how the campaign towards disability-inclusive elections has gained traction over the past years. FAN has been part of this campaign since 2011, together with its partners from government, civil society organizations, disabled people’s organizations (DPOs), private sector, local governments, and people with disabilities (PWD) advocates.

Part of the success of the campaign can be attributed to a growing interest in disability issues over the years, spurred by media coverage. A lack of awareness of the rights, conditions, and struggles of disabled people can lead to their exclusion from many arenas of life. From our work with media in the Philippines, the Foundation recognizes the power that rests on media—the power to shape views and opinions and to push for important advocacies that can impact the country’s development.

It is our hope that this publication will help promote proper reportage of disability issues and coverage of people with disabilities, especially in the lead-up to the 2016 national and local elections. Ultimately, we hope that *Getting it Right* can further raise awareness and push the envelope for empowerment and participation of people with disabilities in the democratic process as part of their right to be fully involved in the life of the country.

The Asia Foundation congratulates VERA Files for coming up with this media guide. Also, we would like to acknowledge our important partner in this initiative—the Australian Embassy in Manila for its continuing support to the Fully Abled Nation project and its commitment to disability-inclusive development.

Finally, we recognize our FAN partners and the people with disabilities themselves whose lives, we hope, are touched by the Fully Abled Nation project!

**STEVEN ROOD, Ph.D.**

Country Representative

*The Asia Foundation*
FIRST, a confession.

The reason we decided to publish *Getting it Right: Reporting on Disability in the Philippines* is we had often gotten it wrong when reporting on disability in the past.

We have learned from those mistakes.

Since 2012 we have churned out more than 200 stories in multiple formats as an offshoot of our involvement with Fully Abled Nation (FAN), an initiative that seeks to make Philippine elections in particular and Philippine society in general disability inclusive.

Our writing coaches are among the best.

We devoured reporting guides put out by fellow journalists in other countries who have made disability journalism their business.

We have had Filipinos with disabilities and disability advocates no less—many of them FAN partners like us—guiding us on how to do a better job of reporting on disability.

Our discovery: We can adjust our writing to craft disability-sensitive stories without sacrificing the long-revered standards of our profession.

*Getting it Right: Reporting on Disability in the Philippines* encapsulates the lessons we hope will be as valuable to fellow journalists as they are to us.

Meanwhile, our journey as disability journalists continues.

**YVONNE T. CHUA**

*Editor*

*VERA Files*
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Disability and the Media in the Philippines

By Artha Kira Paredes
This Tahanang Walang Hagdanan shop sells products made by persons with disabilities. The crafts are also available on their online store http://tahanangwalanghagdanan.shopinas.com/.

MARIO IGNACIO IV
On November 9, 1985, the *Philippines Daily Express* ran a feature on Jean Gonzales, a mother looking for other mothers who had children with autism.

“At the time, I thought I was the only mother with a child with autism,” she said.

“What’s wrong with Tommy?” documented Gonzales’ quest for help for her son Magiting whose condition Filipino doctors then could not properly diagnose. The journey had taken her to New York.

The story drew mixed reactions from readers, both positive and negative. But from this pool she would find 50 mothers who, like her, had children with autism. Eleven of them would become the core members of the Foundation for Autistic Children and Adults in the Philippines formed in 1989. The organization is now the Autism Society Philippines (ASP), which has monumentally grown with nearly 10,000 members and 63 chapters all over the country.

To this day, Gonzales is grateful to the media for publishing her story. “I cannot forget it because it opened (the awareness of) a lot of people,” she said of the story.

Many stories about disabilities have since come out. Organizations for persons with disabilities (PWDs) like the ASP have also flourished. The result: An openness to discuss disability issues
and an increasing frequency of stories about disabilities and PWDs.

But not all disability stories have become springboards of positive outcome such as Gonzales’. Like other issues brought out in the media, the impact varies, depending on angling, treatment, facts and public perception. Media’s interpretation of disability issues, meanwhile, is greatly influenced by the platform and program the stories appear in: print, broadcast or online; text, photo, audio or video; news and current affairs, soap operas, fantaseryes, films, documentaries or ads.

Alas, on more than one occasion, media accounts of PWDs have been erroneous and even bordered on the ridiculous, oft borne out of the practitioners’ lack of knowledge and understanding of disabilities. The August 2013 episode of an ABS-CBN program featuring three brothers in Nueva Ecija it called taong unggoy (monkey people) is a good example.

The program “Hiwaga”—“Mystery” in English—got a doctor to explain that their skulls and brains were smaller than normal, which could have hampered development. But instead of seeking out a medical specialist to elaborate on the condition, the network chose to go to a psychic to ask if the condition was a curse conjured up by their mother’s former boyfriend.

This was a clear case of dumbing down than edifying the audience.

With PWDs claiming their right to become an integral part of society, members of the media cannot afford to make such mistakes. To them falls the responsibility to educate themselves about disabilities to ensure their reportage is correct, sensitive and inclusive.

The basics: Definitions

What is a disability? Who are people with disabilities?

The legal definition of these terms is found in the 1992 Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities or Republic Act 7277.
Under the law, disability is a “physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more psychological, physiological or anatomical function of an individual or activities of such individual; a record of such an impairment or being regarded as having such an impairment.”

A PWD, on the other hand, is a “person suffering from restriction or different abilities, as a result of a mental, physical or sensory impairment, to perform an activity in a manner or within the range considered normal for human being.”

The Magna Carta focuses on the medical condition and how it can restrict a person’s role and function in society. This is what’s meant by the medical model of disability. In fact, when applying for a PWD ID, which is provided under Philippine law, the applicant must submit a clinical abstract signed by a licensed medical doctor.

The Philippine definition differs from how the United Nations views disabilities and persons that have them.


“Disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others,” it said.

By deduction, PWDs “have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on equal basis with others.”

The U.N. convention uses the social model. The focus is not on the limitation, but on how society can better respond to the needs of PWDs. Disability is thus a human rights issue. Emphasis is on mainstreaming disability, recognizing the diversity of PWDs.
promoting accessibility, empowerment and equality, and ensuring and acknowledging the contribution of PWDs to society.

The U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights demonstrates the human rights approach by converting the question “What is wrong with PWDs?” to “What is wrong with society?” It said external conditions need to be changed for PWDs to enjoy their full rights.

Although the country is a signatory of the UNCRPD, the Magna Carta for PWDs has yet to be amended to adopt the social model.

Classifying disability

The World Health Organization (WHO) considers PWDs as the largest minority globally. They number nearly a billion and comprise 15 percent of the world population.

In the Philippines, the 2010 national census counted 1,442,586 Filipinos with disabilities, or 1.57 percent of 92.1 million population. Calabarzon (Region IV-A), Metro Manila and Central Luzon had the biggest tally of PWDs, and the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) the smallest.

Of the 1.4 million Filipinos with disabilities, males slightly outnumbered females at 50.9 percent. But as women live longer than men in the country, there were more female than male PWDs who were 65 or older. The ratio was 10 to seven.

One in five Filipinos with disabilities fell into the 5 to 19 age groups: 95,998 from 5 to 9 years old, 103,146 from 10 to 14 and 100,079 from 15 to 19.

The data the National Statistics Office (NSO) has made public so far do not break down PWDs by types of disability. The 2000 census, however, identified 37 percent of the 942,098 PWDs with low vision, 8 percent with partial blindness and 7 percent with mental illness. Low
vision and partial blindness were also most common in 1995, followed by deafness.

The Philippines uses no standard classification for the types of disabilities. The Magna Carta for PWDs does not classify disabilities but only specifies provisions for those with visual, hearing, speech and orthopedic impairments, mental retardation and those who have multi-handicap. What has happened is that government agencies that work with persons with disabilities have come up with their own classifications.

In 2011, the Commission on Elections (Comelec) issued Resolution 9220 listing five types of disabilities for the special registration and the supplemental forms to help it determine the kind of assistance voters with disabilities would need. These are physical, hearing, speech, visual and nonmanifest such as autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

The Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) put together the following classification based on the result of its household targeting survey: hearing, visual, orthopedic, multiple disabilities, mental and other disabilities.

The Department of Education (DepEd) has twice as many categories of PWDs in public elementary and high schools. Students are classified as having learning disability, hearing impairment, visual impairment, intellectual disability/mental retardation and behavioral problem. Also in the DepEd’s list are students with orthopedical/physical impairment, autism, speech defect, chronic illness and cerebral palsy.

Although the types might seem encompassing, a number of local governments do not consider certain circumstances as disabilities such as having cancer of the esophagus, the chronic neuromuscular disease myasthenia gravis, epilepsy and diabetes, as well as being a
recipient of a kidney transplant. As well, some drug stores refuse to honor PWD cards that only state “chronic illness” and require that the disability be specified before giving the mandated discounts.

The National Council on Disability Affairs (NCDA), the government agency that formulates policies and coordinates activities concerning disability, announced in 2014 it was drafting with the Department of Health (DOH) guidelines for classifying disabilities as basis for issuing PWD IDs.

The NCDA and DOH were considering the following: physical/orthopedic disability, visual impairment, hearing impairment, speech impairment, intellectual disability and psychosocial disability that includes ADHD, bipolar disorder, long-term recurring depression, nervous breakdown, epilepsy, schizophrenia and other long-term recurring mental or behavioral problems.

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<th>Disability Classification</th>
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The NCDA’s move to specify mental illnesses under psychosocial disability apparently stems from the lack of laws that pertain to these illnesses.

In a paper assessing laws affecting Filipinos with disabilities, Naomi Therese F. Corpuz of the University of the Philippines College of Law found the Constitution, Magna Carta for PWDs and Batas Pambansa 344 or the Accessibility Law were crafted without much consideration for those with mental illnesses.

“There is no single mental health legislation but only mental health policies” such as DOH administrative orders and the PWD Magna Carta that the paper said are “not even specific to mental disabilities.”

Certain conditions are accepted as disabilities in other countries but are not recognized at all in the Philippines.

For example, the University of Kansas’ Guidelines for Reporting and Writing about PWDs counts chronic fatigue syndrome (people experiencing at least six months of fatigue) and multiple chemical sensitivities (heightened reaction to certain chemicals such as pesticides) among the disabilities.

The guidelines also considers persons of short stature (those who have dwarfism and are not taller than 4 feet 10 inches or 1.47 meters) as PWDs.
Other countries adopt the framework developed by the WHO in classifying and measuring disabilities, especially during their national census. Following is the Washington Group Short Set of Questions:

- Do you have difficulty seeing, even if wearing glasses?
- Do you have difficulty hearing, even if using a hearing aid?
- Do you have difficulty walking or climbing steps?
- Do you have difficulty remembering or concentrating?
- Do you have difficulty with self-care, such as washing all over or dressing?
- Using your usual (customary) language, do you have difficulty communicating (for example, understanding or being understood by others)?

**Rights holders**

Personal preferences of PWDs may sometimes confuse reporters, especially for newsrooms that lack clear guidelines on covering disability.

When in doubt about how to write about PWDs, best keep in mind their basic rights. Their rights are covered by the 1987 Philippine Constitution, the Magna Carta for PWDs and the UNCRPD, among other legal instruments.
### Rights of PWDs under the Philippine Constitution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article V, Suffrage</th>
<th>Section 2: Congress shall also design a procedure for the disabled and illiterates to vote without the assistance of other persons.</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| Article XIII, Social Justice and Human Rights | Section 11: There shall be priority for the needs of the underprivileged, sick, elderly, disabled, women and children.  
Section 13: The State shall establish a special agency for disabled persons, for their rehabilitation, self-development, and self-reliance, and their integration into the mainstream of society. |
| Article XIV, Education, Science and Technology, Arts, Culture and Sports | Section 2: The state shall provide adult citizens, the disabled, and out-of-school youth with training in civics, vocational efficiency and other skills. |

A number of laws and executive orders address disabilities, but the PWD Magna Carta or R.A. 7277 spells out in detail their rights and privileges. Sadly, two Social Weather Stations (SWS) surveys conducted December 2011 and July 2013, found that more than half of PWDs had almost no knowledge of the Magna Carta. Only 7 percent answered they had “extensive” knowledge of it.

The Magna Carta protects PWDs from employment and transportation discrimination and discrimination on the use of public accommodation and services. R.A. 9422, which amended the Magna Carta, grants PWDs a 20 percent discount on a range of goods and services, from medicine, medical and dental services, to transportation, hotel and restaurant bills and admission fees to cinemas and similar establishments.
## Rights and privileges of PWDs under the Magna Carta for PWDs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter I, Employment</th>
<th>Sections 5–10. PWDs have a right to employment: equal opportunity for employment, sheltered employment, apprenticeship, incentives for employers, vocational rehabilitation and vocational guidance and counseling.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter II, Education</td>
<td>Sections 12–17. PWDs are entitled to access to quality education, financial assistance for those who are deserving, special education (SPED), vocational or technical and other training programs and nonformal education. State universities and colleges may also include SPED in their curriculum and develop materials for PWD students “if viable and needed.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chapter III, Health</td>
<td>Sections 18–20. A national health program, rehabilitation centers and health services should be in place for PWDs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chapter IV, Auxiliary Social Services</td>
<td>Section 21. The State is mandated to provide marginalized persons with the auxiliary services “that will restore their social functioning and participation in community affairs.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chapter V, Telecommunications</td>
<td>Sections 22–24. TV stations and telephone companies are encouraged to cater to the needs of the deaf people while some PWD materials are free of postal charges.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chapter VI, Accessibility</td>
<td>Sections 25–27. BP 344 provides the nitty-gritty of accessibility from how wide a door should be to the length of ramps, but the Magna Carta also requires a barrier-free environment that promotes mobility and accessible transport facilities through a subsidized fare.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter VII, Political and Civil Rights</td>
<td>Sections 29–31. PWDs are allowed assistors of their choice during elections. They also have the right to assembly and the right to form organizations or associations.</td>
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As one of the more than a hundred countries that signed the UNCRPD, the Philippines acknowledges the rights of PWDs stipulated in the convention. The rights are embodied in the following articles of the convention:

- Right to life
- Protection and safety from situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies
- Equal recognition before the law
- Access to justice
- Liberty and security
- Freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment
- Freedom from exploitation, violence and abuse
- Protection of the integrity of the person
- Liberty of movement and nationality
- Living independently and being included in the community
- Personal mobility
- Freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information
- Respect for privacy
- Respect for home and family
- Right to education
- Right to health
- Habilitation and rehabilitation
- Right to work and employment
- Adequate standard of living and social protection
- Participation in political and public life
- Participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and support
Despite increasing legal protection, the nongovernmental Philippine Coalition on the UNCRPD, expressed grave concern over the human rights situation among Filipinos with disabilities. Its 2013 report to the U.N. said:

"Describing the overall situation of human rights reveals violations of civil, political, cultural and economic rights as undeniable realities in the lives of many persons with disabilities. These violations of specific rights on participation, language and culture, education, work, personal mobility, liberty of movement, independent living, adequate standard of living, social protection, integrity and protection against violence, and access to justice are unrelentingly experienced in the home, school, the workplace, with mass media, in trial courts, places of recreation and leisure, and other spaces. Exclusion and discriminatory practices have been so rampant and have existed for such a long time that it has covered the entire sector with a shroud of invisibility which has to date been very difficult to overcome."

The findings of SWS from its 2011 and 2013 surveys confirm continuing discrimination against Filipinos with disabilities. They show the number of PWDs experiencing discrimination rising from 48 percent in 2011 to 53 percent in 2013. Those with hearing or speech disability were the worst off, followed by those with visual impairment and by those with orthopedic impairment.
Experience of discrimination because of one’s disability, by type of disability (December 2011 and July 2013)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
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<th>July 2013 Experienced</th>
<th>July 2013 Did not experience</th>
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<td>Visual</td>
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The role of the media

“Nothing about us without us.”

The media would do well to always remember the UNCRPD slogan to ensure they do a good job of reporting on PWDs. The slogan is a reminder that the media, like the rest of society, ought to be inclusive.

Two articles in the UNCRPD directly address the media.

The first requires signatories to the convention to “encourage all organs of the media” to portray PWDs in a way that would promote, protect and ensure their full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms, and would promote respect for their dignity.

Upholding the freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information PWDs are entitled to, the convention also calls on countries to, among others, “encourage the mass media, including providers of information through the Internet, to make their services accessible to persons with disabilities.”
Several provisions in the Magna Carta for PWDs also bear a direct impact on the media.

The chapter on telecommunications in R.A. 7277 urges television stations to provide a sign language inset or subtitles in at least one newscast program a day and special programs covering events of national significance.

R.A. 9422 prohibits ridicule and vilification, both verbal and nonverbal, against PWDs which can make them lose their self-esteem. Public ridicule is “making fun or contemptuous imitating or making mockery... in writing, or in words, or in action” of PWDs because of their impairment.

The law identifies two forms of vilifying PWDs: One, uttering slanderous and abusive statements against them. Two, an activity in public which incites hatred toward serious contempt for, or severe ridicule of PWDs.

Acknowledging that the media reflect and influence public opinion, the United Nations in 2010 encouraged collecting information through the media to “help monitor society’s attitudes toward persons with disabilities.” But it also stressed the need to watch the media to see if they have been adhering to the convention

**Media portrayal of PWDs**

Philippine media organizations have at one time or another reported on PWDs. What they offer is a garden variety of stories of disabilities.

The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (PDI), the country’s leading paper, has had its ups and downs in portraying disability. In April 2008, it featured photographs by a young man with autism spectrum disorder. Ian, as the PDI called this novice photographer, had a “natural eye for composition and detail.”

But in 2012, PDI would run a set of unflattering photos of Demetrio
Vicente, a stroke survivor with speech impairment and partial paralysis who took the witness stand in the impeachment trial of then Chief Justice Renato Corona. The four photos on the front page highlighted the effects of two strokes on his face.

PDI’s article on Ian, “Beauty is in eye of autistic youth,” helped readers understand how someone with autism could take photos depicting symmetry and order. It gave a glimpse into how someone with autism saw pulchritude. But the photos of Vicente drew the outrage of netizens who called the daily’s portrayal “insensitive,” “foul” and “mean,” and forced it to issue an apology.

The practice of linking an unknown disability to superstition has long permeated Philippine society. And it doesn’t help when the media also purvey that same wrong information. In such types of stories, getting the side of an expert to give a scientific explanation could help inform and educate the audience.

TV viewers, for example, would have been enlightened about the condition of the Nueva Ecija siblings if they were featured in a news documentary instead of a show about mysteries. Consulting a rare diseases expert could have shown viewers why three of five brothers had the condition.

But the taong-unggoy story is not the first or only of such stories in the media. For example, the X-linked Dystonia Parkinsonism (XDP), which originated in Panay, is believed to have propagated the myth of aswang, a creature that preys on pregnant women.

Theodore Alvarez Tan in his autobiography The Chrysanthemum Paper said the aswang was associated with the condition because “when a person has a fit, he salivates and spins like a top, extends his tongue, much like being possessed by demons.” Tan, who has XDP, said people who had XDP only came out at night when most were already home because of shame and embarrassment.

As such, conditions that are unknown already create confusion;
airing them on national television without providing proper context only reinforces stereotypes about people with these conditions and disabilities.

Even well-intentioned programs can end up promoting stereotypes. PWD stories are regular fare in GMA Kapuso foundation news segments, which show recipients of the station’s charitable works such as donations of wheelchairs or relief goods and minor medical procedures. The network would tell stories of how family members and friends support and sacrifice for PWDs.

While there is nothing wrong with what GMA Kapuso is doing, the problem is that when media practitioners cover disability stories, some PWDs or their organizations have come to expect that they and their media outfits should extend tangible forms of assistance. Unintentionally, the segment has contributed to the dole-out mentality of some persons with disabilities.

It is, of course, to the credit of the Philippine media that they have become an important monitor of violence and abuse against Filipinos with disabilities.

“There are no comprehensive State mechanisms for the reporting of violence and abuse. In fact, in many instances, it is only through news on television and radio, in print, or electronic format that information regarding persons with disabilities’ abuse within their family or community are made known,” the Philippine Coalition on the UNCRPD said in its 2013 report.

But the coalition has come across problems in the reportage.

“In some TV documentaries, episodes on gender-based violence of women victims have purposively or inadvertently divulged personal information or even their identity. The exploitation involves not only the individuals but also the disabled persons organizations (DPOs) or NGOs who support and advocate for them,” it said.

The coalition also criticized reality TV shows featuring domestic
violence involving women with disabilities. “In the guise of being ‘popular legal education,’ such episodes clearly use women with disabilities for entertainment purposes and the increase of broadcast station ratings,” it said.

The disability advocates took to task the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board for reprimanding “very few (if any)” TV stations or producers for their treatment of women with disabilities.

Despite the telecommunications provision in the Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities, it lamented that neither government nor private TV stations have institutionalized accessibility such as sign language interpreting in their programs.

The coalition raised the need for government to issue guidelines on and monitor sensitivity and appropriate handling in media releases, broadcasts and other public programs on documentaries, features or other involvement of persons with disabilities in media.

**Specialized reporting on disability**

In the United States, the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the Arizona State University runs the National Center on Disability and Journalism (NCDJ), which provides “support and guidance for journalists as they cover” disability issues.

Its site ncdj.org is a resource for practitioners and educators alike. It offers a user-friendly stylebook, interview and editing pointers as well as features different blogs that discuss the different aspects of disabilities from parenting and assistive technology to how PWDs are represented in the media.

“NCDJ does not advocate a particular point of view (and is) concerned with the journalistic principles of accuracy, fairness and diversity in news coverage,” it said.

The Philippines has no counterpart of the NCDJ, but attempts to
improve media coverage of disabilities were started in 2012 through the Fully Abled Nation (FAN) program of the Australian Aid and The Asia Foundation.

The nonprofit VERA Files, a project partner of FAN, created a microsite for stories and resource materials on disabilities such as laws, studies and international conventions. It has also trained community journalists nationwide and specialized in covering PWDs. Its goal: To portray PWDs as rights holders.

Because specializing in PWD reportage is new, the challenges VERA Files has faced range from finding a good handle on disability stories to screening text and images to ensure they are inclusive and PWD-sensitive. These have required editors to draft elaborate instructions on how to go about stories, especially in the initial months.

Slipups are inevitable, though, the word “suffer”—hated by majority of PWDs—being among the most common to get past editors during crunch time such as the 2013 midterm elections.
In the 2013 elections, Bayan Mo, iPatrol Mo, the citizen journalism arm of ABS-CBN, also became a project partner of FAN and devoted a substantial chunk of airtime to how PWDs voted.

Rappler.com has come up with more PWD stories of late. In the absence of specific in-house guidelines, it is guided by what Voltaire Tupaz, one of its journalists, said it considers as politically correct and sensitive.

**PWDs as storytellers**

Reporting on PWDs is unmapped territory for the Philippine media, but it is a worthwhile effort. PWDs in the media have been paving the way for years now.

The late lawyer Arturo Borjal, who wrote the column “Jaywalker” for the *Philippine Star* and hosted a television public affairs program, lobbied hard for the approval of Magna Carta for PWDs, especially when he served as sectoral representative for PWDs in the House of Representatives from 1990 to 1992. Borjal, who had polio when he was a child, is known as the father of the Magna Carta for PWDs.

Batangas-based radio broadcaster Ronnel del Rio has used his profession to bring PWD issues in his province to the attention of the local government and to the public. He is currently the governor’s advocate on disability concerns.

Del Rio observes an increase in programs for PWDs in Batangas and attributes this to, among others, the power of radio. “Sa Batangas kaya dumami yung program sa PWDs because of radio. Kasi nasusuri namin ang gobyerno na kayo ang unang magsimula, at susunod ang lipunan (Batangas now has more programs for PWDs because of radio. The programs scrutinize the government and tell it to take the lead so society will follow),” he said.
In the United States, Karen Meyer, who is deaf, joined mainstream media and worked for 23 years as a TV reporter specializing in disability reporting for Chicago’s ABC 7. Meyer simultaneously provided voice and sign language. The station provided closed captioning for her segment.

Covering PWDs offers array of stories, but not all can have the same revolutionary effect as the story of Jean Gonzales and her son Magiting. Journalists are sometimes limited by the story’s timeliness, proximity, impact, other news values and standards and deadlines, but the challenge is to find ways to overcome these constraints and offer powerful stories that at the same time accord PWDs the respect and dignity they deserve.


Vera Files. (2015, January 6). Vera Files FGD on Reporting on Disabilities [Transcript].

Screen shot of TV Patrol’s “Boy Half-half,” ABS-CBN’s feature on Antonio Eskelador Jr.
“Sa bayan ng Puro, Albay, nakilala namin ang idol na si Putol, siya ang binatang ipinanganak na walang paa, pero hataw sa sayaw at diskarte sa buhay (In the town of Puro, Albay, we met an idol named Putol, a man born without legs but a hit in dancing and in life).”

Cut to a half-body shot of a young man in a yellow hoodie, black fingerless gloves, and lime green plastic shades, dancing in front of a crowd.

“Lahat napapalingon, namamangha, hindi lang dahil sa kanyang talent, kung hindi dahil na rin sa kanyang kakulangan (Everyone turns to stare, amazed, not only because of his talent, but also because of his deficiency).”

The young man throws himself upside down, with just his gloved hands supporting the rest of his body. Then we see what the “deficiency” is: He has no lower limbs. Instead of legs, a cut-up basketball encases his lower torso.

The two-and-a-half minute video on Antonio Eskelador Jr., or
Jun, aired on the news program “TV Patrol” on February 14, 2014 as a teaser for “Rated K,” a magazine show hosted by Korina Sanchez, one of TV Patrol’s anchors who had interviewed Eskelador.

A doctor explains that Eskelador has Amelia, a rare birth defect characterized by the absence of the upper limbs (arms, forearms or hands) or lower limbs (thighs, legs or feet).

Sanchez then asks Eskelador to demonstrate how he gets in and out of the basketball he found when he was 8 years old and has become “a part of his body for the rest of his life.” She calls Eskelador by the names he was and is teased with: “Boy Half-half” and “Putol” (severed).

Sanchez then caps the teaser with the big “but”: Presumably because Eskelador is good at dancing despite having no feet, that makes him a veteran at life too.

**Misrepresenting, stereotyping disability**

The TV Patrol video encapsulates the kind of media coverage that riles persons with disabilities (PWDs). In one stroke, the producers of the segment inadvertently provided a master class on “What not to do when reporting on PWDs.” It is this brand of journalism that disability advocates in the Philippines and elsewhere are trying to break.

“Too often, journalists see disability solely as a medical story or an inspirational feature story,” wrote Beth Haller, an associate professor of journalism at Towson University, on the Society of Professional Journalists’ (SPJ) website. “These misrepresent the disability experience as uniquely tragic or pitiful, instead of a part of everyday life.”

The inspirational “human interest” stories are usually “isolated from any social context.” American journalist and National Center on Disability Journalism (NCDJ) founder Suzanne C. Levine, said in her essay “Reporting on Disability.”
Disability is part of the human condition, according to the World Health Organization.

PHOTO BY MARIO IGNACIO IV
Levine quoted Mary Johnson, editor of cross-disability publication *The Ragged Edge*: “There’s a lot of focusing on the individual people, stories of achievement—overcomer stories is what we call them. Or you’ll see what we’d call plight stories, where it’s about an individual who has some problem.”

In the Philippines, PWD groups are unhappy with inaccurate and poor portrayals of their sector, but they also disagree that they should be portrayed as superheroes just because they can do what people without disabilities can do.

In the case of the TV Patrol video, it painted Eskelador both as a tragic victim of circumstance and a superhero: An overcomer. It portrayed him as a novelty, an object of fascination like some circus animal to gawk at. Worse, Sanchez called Eskelador “Putol” and “Boy Half-half” on national TV even after Eskelador told her these epithets hurt his feelings.

Indeed, one can argue that the feature on Eskelador violated two provisions of the Kapisanan ng mga Brodkaster ng Pilipinas’ (KBP) Broadcast Code on PWDs: Article 22 on discrimination, which said a person’s physical disability “shall not be used in a way that would embarrass, denigrate or ridicule him,” and Article 23, which said a person with physical disability “shall be treated with respect and shall not be humiliated or embarrassed due to their disability.”

In a focus group discussion on media coverage of disability issues, representatives of the disability sector did not mince words, criticizing broadcast media’s penchant for sensationalism and insensitivity.

Ronnel del Rio, a blind radio announcer and a media practitioner for 20 years, called Rated K’s teaser a “failure” devoid of any redeeming value.

He said the story might have intended to inspire society but created instead a bad impression of and for persons with disabilities. "So okay na pala yung bola yung gamitin nung bata buong buhay (So now it’s okay for the young man to just use the ball for the rest of his
life)? That is a very bad message,” he said.

Jean Gonzales, founder of the Philippine Association of Citizens with Developmental and Learning Disabilities and a mother of a person with autism, said the segment merely showed Eskelador’s condition. “Are (these reports) really helping the sector? Are they really helping us?” she asked.

Had it been done right, Sanchez’s report could have been an opportunity to benefit the sector, said Celia Garcia from DeafBlind Support Philippines. “Dapat na pangunahing objective sa mga ganyang feature story ay ano ang damdamin ng tao at paano mai-improve hindi yung kondisyon ng tao kundi yung persepsyon ng lipunan about the condition (The primary objective of feature stories like this should be to take into account the person’s feelings and how to improve not only the person’s condition but society’s perception about the condition).”

The sentiments of Filipino disability advocates echo what Johnson has said about mainstream media’s coverage of disability issues: “When we do see stories about disability issues, they’re often not put in any larger context of the disability rights movement, so they’re always like a single story, and it’s almost as if the reporter doesn’t know that there is a disability rights movement, or history, or context.”

**Faulty reporting widespread**

To be fair, the problem is not unique to ABS-CBN. A group of journalism majors from the University of the Philippines (UP) College of Mass Communication collected samples of good and bad practices of reporting on PWDs in the Philippine news media.

A cursory glance at the headlines shows that Philippine media have a long way to go in acquiring the right mindset about persons with disabilities and, at the very least, need a disability sensitivity training.
Media focus on the individual PWD, with overcomer or plight stories.
PHOTO BY MARIO IGNACIO IV
The headlines used terms that were not PWD sensitive and went against style guides on disability reporting. Examples are “polio-stricken,” “mentally retarded” and “differently abled.”

Stories like the feature on Eskelador violated the ethical dictum to minimize harm or, as the SPJ Code of Ethics said, to “treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect.” Some were devoid of “compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage.”

But more problematic is the way the stories were told. The UP students found a June 2013 showbiz news from the tabloid Remate with the headline, “Ngongo at may kapansanan na nga, gumagawa pa rin ng kamalasaduhan (Person with cleft palate and disability still does atrocious act).”

The news account was about a man with cleft palate who supposedly defrauded a movie producer for P180,000. The writer then offered a commentary on the PWD in question: “Sus ginoo! May kapansanan na nga nagagawa pa niyang gumawa ng kamalasaduhan at pang-aagrabyado sa kanyang kapwa (My goodness! This person already has a disability and yet he has the gall to abuse and do other people wrong).”

In another report gathered by the UP students, this time from GMA News Online, a man with post-polio syndrome was arrested for the rape of his partner’s 13-year-old niece. The report quoted the deputy chief of police: “Pinagkatiwala nga dahil yung suspek natin may kapansanan, polio, yung isang paa niya. Kaya hindi nila inaasahan na magagawa niya yun (They entrusted the victim to the suspect because the suspect has a disability, polio, on his one leg. That’s why they didn’t imagine that he would do this).”
## Examples of problematic reporting on disability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Headline</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Publication</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Binawalan sa mall nagwala, pulis patay (Man banned from mall goes berserk, kills cop)</td>
<td>February 5, 2015</td>
<td>Abante</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dalagang mentally retarded, dinedo ng tiyo, ginawang parausan, binuntsis pa... (Mentally retarded woman killed by uncle, was used for sexual relief, impregnated)</td>
<td>January 24, 2015</td>
<td>Pilipino Star Ngayon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polio-stricken man in Pangasinan arrested for rape of minor</td>
<td>October 28, 2014</td>
<td>GMA News Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differently abled athlete aims for the gold</td>
<td>October 11, 2014</td>
<td>Inquirer.net</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy “half-half” on Rated K</td>
<td>February 14, 2014</td>
<td>ABS-CBN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dalagang may sayad, nagbigtis sa Malabon (Loony teen girl hangs self in Malabon)</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Remate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lalakeng lumpo, inatake ng alagang baboy sa pagdyingle; bayag sinakmal (Crippled man attacked by reared pig while urinating; balls bitten)</td>
<td>April 29, 2013</td>
<td>Bombo Radyo Philippines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 triathletes rise above pain, obstacles, disability</td>
<td>July 8, 2012</td>
<td>Inquirer.net</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lumpong lolo, nangmolestya ng paslit (Crippled grandpa molests child)</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Remate</td>
</tr>
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Source: Students from J196: Reporting on Persons with Disabilities class, University of the Philippines (2015)
Doing PWDs a disservice

Reports like these, disability activists argue, only reinforce long-held stereotypes and misrepresentation of PWDs. "Media images and stories influence thinking and establish social norms," said the U.S.-based Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund.

As early as the 1940s, the U.S. Commission on Freedom of the Press had already cautioned against a reckless, unthinking media. “People make decisions in large part in terms of favorable or unfavorable images. They relate fact and opinion to stereotypes ... When the images they portray fail to present the social group truly, they tend to pervert judgment,” it said.

If the press is to fulfill its role in a democracy, it has to “help generate social empathy.” That is the reason the commission said a free and responsible press must “give a comprehensive picture of constituents groups in society, avoiding stereotypes.” People, it said, should be “exposed to the inner truth of the life of a particular group, (so) they will gradually build up respect for and understanding of it.”

The experience of PWDs in the Philippines with the government illustrates how media images and stories can spill over to policymaking and influence judgment.

No thanks to the media, the government perceives the disability sector as “unruly,” Del Rio said, and maintains this attitude toward PWDs: “Kapag magulo ang PWDs, huwag mo bigyan ng serbisyo. Parang hindi kami pwedeng magtalo-talo (When the PWDs are not ‘behaved,’ don’t give them services. It’s as if we are not allowed to argue).”

Yet he noted that the government continues to attend to the needs of other sectors that cause trouble such as the Moro and communist rebels. “Kami rin pwede dapat mag-away away at mag-disagree sa gobyerno (Even we are entitled to quarrel among ourselves and disagree with the government),” Del Rio said.
Monitoring the media

When it crafted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006, the United Nations acknowledged the crucial role the media can play in helping “foster respect for the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities,” “combat stereotypes and prejudices” and “promote awareness of the capabilities of persons with disabilities.” It thus made special mention of the need to encourage the media to adhere to the convention.

Have the media lived up to these expectations? In 2010, The U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights drew up the Guidelines for Assessing Media Adherence to the Convention on the Rights of PWDs. The checklist poses nine questions:

- Do the media report on persons with disabilities?
- If so, which media do that, in which sections of their products?
- Are persons with disabilities portrayed as victims or rights-holders?
- Do the media represent the point of view of persons with disabilities?
- Are language and images appropriate?
- Does the media’s message reinforce or counter stereotypes?
- Has there been a change in media reporting on persons with disabilities over time? If so, in which way (for example, more or less reporting, different approach)? Which factors contributed to the change?
- Is it an accurate representation of real life?
- Are the media accessible to persons with disabilities?
Local guidelines lacking

The U.N. guidelines are helpful to Philippine journalists because their newsrooms have yet to lay down ethical guidelines specific to disability reporting and have yet to adopt a disability style guide.

While the KBP’s Broadcast Code has two disability-specific provisions, the Journalists’ Code of Ethics approved in 1988 by the National Press Club and the Philippine Press Club hasn’t any. Journalists are not to ridicule, cast aspersions on or degrade a person by reason of sex, creed, religious belief, political conviction, cultural and ethnic origin. Disability is nowhere on the list.

In GMA News and Public Affairs’ Ethics and Editorial Manual, the closest that could pass for a guideline on PWD reporting is found in its “Identifying Individuals” section. One provision said, “We may show children who are sick or who have disabilities as long as we obtain the consent of their parents or guardian.”

The GMA manual also has scattered provisions on covering those with mental illness. Examples are: “We conceal the identities of the mentally ill who show signs of abuse, even if they are adults” and “For the purpose of locating them and/or guardians, we can show the faces of...mentally ill adults.”

ABS-CBN’s code of ethics lumps “mentally incompetent” individuals with minors in its general guidelines on interviewing and videotaping children, and naming them in case they are involved in crimes. It requires reporters to get the guardian’s permission if a person is not mentally competent enough to give consent for an interview.

PDI’s Manual on Editorial Operations refers to disabilities only once, and it’s for editorial cartoons: “Do not make fun of disabled people.”

An equally stern reminder, this time on “delicate topics,” does not refer to PWDs but may very well apply to them. Addressed to PDI
columnists, the warning reads, “Delicate topics, particularly those dealing with religion, race and minority groups, should be handled with great prudence and care. The columnists should always be aware of the dangers of bigotry. In no case shall they criticize or ridicule another person on the basis of his or her religious beliefs, race, sexual preferences etc.”

Given the dearth of guidelines on reporting on disability, media practitioners would indeed do well to candidly answer the nine questions suggested in the U.N. guidelines to determine if they have been doing a good or bad job of reporting on persons with disabilities.

**Media diversity**

Disability reporting is the same as any other kind of reporting and, at the same time, different.

While the general ethical guidelines that apply to all news coverage must be observed, disability journalists must also be mindful that reporting on disability carries with it its own unique set of ethical issues.

The important thing is to find the balance between the two, and, as disability activists say, give PWDs “the opportunity to be equal and the right to be different.”

For decades, the media have been urged again and again to be fully representative of the communities they serve. In short, to be diverse and inclusive of the various groups that make up society. As the world’s largest minority group, persons with disabilities have every right to demand media diversity.

Media diversity is writ into many codes of ethics such as the SPJ Code of Ethics. The SPJ’s directive: “Boldly tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience, even when it is unpopular to do so.” Journalists should seek sources whose voices they seldom hear, it said.
Those who survive to old age will experience increasing difficulties in functioning, according to the World Health Organization.

PHOTO BY MARIO IGNACIO IV
The following diversity checklist for journalists drafted by the SPJ applies to covering all minority groups, including PWDs.

- Have I covered the story with sensitivity, accuracy, fairness and balance to all of the people involved?
- What are the likely consequences of publishing or broadcasting the story? Who will be hurt and who will be helped?
- Have I sought a diversity of sources for this story?
- Am I seeking true diversity or using “tokenism” by allowing one minority person to represent a community or a point of view?
- Am I flexible about the possibility that the focus of the story may change when different sources are included?
- Am I being realistic? Are there some stories that can’t be diversified?
- Have I developed a meaningful list of minority sources who can bring perspective and expertise into the mainstream of daily news coverage?
- Have I spent time in minority communities and with residents to find out what people are thinking and to learn more about lifestyles, perspectives, customs?
- If I am writing about achievements, am I writing about them on their own merits rather than as stereotype-breakers?
- As I seek diversity, am I being true to my other goals as a journalist?
- Will I be able to clearly and honestly explain, not rationalize, my decision to anyone who challenges it?

Besides avoiding stereotypes, the checklist serves as a constant reminder to the media that PWDs are by themselves “experts” who can provide context and perspective to stories about disability. But the reality is, PWDs are rarely considered or approached as experts by the media. One consequence: The media don’t benefit fully from their
expertise. Another consequence: The media could end up accentuating the negative rather than the positive about the disability sector when PWDs and their organizations fail to get their version of events across.

Here are other things to remember when doing a disability story:

**Persons with disabilities are human beings**

This may come as a surprise given the kind of disability stories often seen in the media, but persons with disabilities are human beings too. Yes, like you and me. Or more precisely, exactly you and me.

According to the *World Report on Disability* by the World Health Organization (WHO), “Disability is part of the human condition. Almost everyone will be temporarily or permanently impaired at some point in life, and those who survive to old age will experience increasing difficulties in functioning.”

“The first thing to remember,” according to a reporter’s handout prepared by the Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities “is that people with disabilities are ordinary individuals with ordinary needs, feelings and goals, who also happen to have a disability.”

Because they are ordinary human beings like you and me, reporters “need to apply the same skills (they) use in any interview to obtain information for a news story or feature.”

**Shun and shatter stereotypes**

PWDs are human beings: Diverse, flawed, and subject to the same follies that all of humanity experience. They are neither superheroes nor tragic villains that exist for everyone’s entertainment nor inspiration.

The SPJ Code of Ethics said, “Avoid stereotyping by…disability, physical appearance…” and the disability reporter would do well to heed this advice. It would help if journalists examine how their values and experiences may shape their reporting, the SPJ said.
The media must veer away from the common portrayal of PWDs as superheroes who emerge victorious by overcoming their disability.

An “inspirational human interest story in which the person with the disability ‘overcomes’ the ‘plight’ of their condition” belongs to “outdated methods” of media reporting, according to “A Reporter’s Guide: Reporting About People with Disabilities” of the West Virginia Developmental Disabilities Council.

Similarly, stories that portray PWDs as objects of pity and tragic victims of circumstance must also be avoided. PWD stories are not only one or the other; the superhero/tragic villain dichotomy is a media creation and does not give justice to the myriad struggles that PWDs face.

Between stories of achievements and those that cast PWDs as pitiful subjects or villains, disabled people’s organizations (DPOs) say they prefer the inspirational ones.

Persons with disabilities are human beings first

PWDs are more than their disability. They are human beings first before their disability. The language used in disability reporting is crucial in reinforcing long held stereotypes or shattering them (More about unacceptable language in the chapter “The Right Language”).

The NCDJ prescribes a set of guidelines for disability reporting. Like, “When describing an individual, do not reference his or her disability unless it is clearly pertinent to a story. If it is pertinent, it is best to use language that refers to the person first and the disability second.”

Not all stories with PWDs need to be about disability. The writer of the Remate report, for example, said, by way of personal commentary, that the reason the 67-year-old wheelchair user raped a minor was because of his disability:
“Dahil sa tagal ng kanyang pagkakatali sa kanyang wheelchair ay hinanap-hanap ng isang 67-anyos na lolo ang sarap ng pakikipagtalik kaya hindi nito napigil ang pagnanasa na molestahin ang isang paslit (Because he has been stuck in a wheelchair for so long, a 67-year-old grandpa craved for the pleasures of sex. That’s why he couldn’t help himself from molesting a child).”

In this story, while the disability was part of the narrative, the reporter unnecessarily used it to sensationalize, and in the process vilifying PWDs, consistent with the evil villain stereotype.

Know the history, context

The Philippines has a vigilant disability sector, and its continuing struggles to fight for disability rights have borne fruit in the form of laws and policies.

PWD stories need not be about the individuals who have medical conditions that need to be fixed nor about sob stories that elicit pity and stir up emotions for the sake of network ratings or “shareability” in social networks. Disability stories must be put in context, to show the bigger picture.

To put the Philippine disability movement in context, the country is the first in Southeast Asia, and the 23rd country in the world, to sign and ratify the UNCRPD. It is also the first in the region to have a Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities.

Knowing the history of the disability movement would give depth to PWD reporting. It would help the media move away from portraying PWDs as victims or charity cases to right-holders, deserving of respect and dignity as any other human being.

The Eskelador story, disability advocates say, could have been turned into an occasion to raise awareness about the lack of government support and societal infrastructure for people with mobility disability.
It could have mentioned that as early as 1983, more than two decades before the UNCRPD, the Philippines already had an Accessibility Law that sought to address issues that people like Eskelador face in their everyday life.

Or, as Ma. Ludivina Grace Ilagan of the Cerebral Palsied Association of the Philippines pointed out during the FGD, the show could have informed the public of the options available to Eskelador and consequently, to PWDs in a similar situation.

“Masyado niyang sinensationalize yung bola. Parang ginawa niya na yung solusyon e. Hindi na siya naghanap ng iba (Sanchez sensationalized the ball too much. She turned it into a solution. She didn’t look for anything else),” Ilagan said.

### Be sensitive

You would think that this goes without saying, but it bears repeating: Be sensitive, not just in the language used when reporting about disabilities, but how you approach the person and the story.

Remember that most PWDs have special needs and these needs vary depending on the disability. The journalist must adjust to these needs and not the other way around. When doing an interview with a PWD, make sure to ask the person if they need specific accommodations (*More tips for journalists in the chapter “Interacting with Persons with Disabilities”*).

Being sensitive is not limited to how journalists treat the person but, more important, how they treat the story. For this, the journalist must bear in mind the SPJ ethical guide’s section on minimizing harm: “Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect.”
To minimize harm, the SPJ requires journalists to:

- Balance the public’s need for information against potential harm or discomfort.
- Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance or undue intrusiveness.
- Show compassion for those who may be affected by news coverage. Use heightened sensitivity when dealing with juveniles, victims of sex crimes, and sources or subjects who are inexperienced or unable to give consent.
- Consider cultural differences in approach and treatment.
- Recognize that legal access to information differs from an ethical justification to publish or broadcast.
- Realize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than public figures and others who seek power, influence or attention. Weigh the consequences of publishing or broadcasting personal information.
- Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity, even if others do.
- Consider the long-term implications of the extended reach and permanence of publication. Provide updated and more complete information as appropriate.
Tipping the scale

Despite leaps in disability advocacy, the PWD sector remains one of the most vulnerable sectors in any society. While it is not the job of journalists to champion anything other than the truth, media are a powerful tool to tip the scale toward “getting things right,” even more so in disability reporting where it seems that the media have been doing it wrong.

The UNCRPD encourages us to change our mindset about disability: PWDs are not disabled; it is not his or her body that disables, but the lack of societal support and infrastructure. PWDs are not broken. Society is. When we know what is broken, we know what to fix.

An enlightened disability reporting is crucial in disseminating that message. When more people hear the correct message, more people could act on it.
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GETTING IT RIGHT


Remate.ph. (2013). Ngongo at may kapansanan na nga, gumagawa pa rin ng

1 The presentation was put together by Journalism majors Camille Aquinaldo, Froilan Victor Bacungan Jr., Ronn Joshua Bautista, April Anne Benjamin, Grazielle Chua, Jhesset Thrina Enano, Maria Feona Imperial, John Nelvin Lucero, Yvette Morales, Verlie Retulin, Krixia Zhiennelle Subingsubing, Kiersnerr Gerwin Tacadena and Danica Uy.
VERA Files. (2015, January 6). VERA Files FGD on Reporting on Disabilities [Transcript].
Crafting Stories on Disability

By Avigail Olarte
PWD must be able to easily access voting sites and be provided assistance when they vote.

PHOTO BY MARIO IGNACIO IV
Magiting, angelic and guileless, is in his thirties. He greets you with a firm handshake and a crisp, precise one-liner: “I am Magiting Gonzales. My friends call me Ting.”

Magiting is “Tommy,” the child with autism in the trailblazing story on disabilities “What’s wrong with Tommy?” the now defunct Philippines Daily Express published in 1985 (See the chapter “Disability and the Media in the Philippines”).

On the editors’ advice, Magiting’s identity was concealed for his protection. It was uncommon then for newsrooms to write about people with disabilities, especially children like Magiting, and the paper was unsure of how readers would react once his story got out.

Three decades later, we know that the story did not only do Magiting, but also the disability sector and society a lot of good.

Magiting still finds himself in the news from time to time. He powerlifts, and in 2011 made his parents and country proud by winning three gold medals at the Special Olympics World Summer Games in Athens, Greece where 7,500 athletes from 185 countries with intellectual disability competed.

Magiting’s mother Jean thanks the media for the increasing attention on persons with disabilities. But the media, she said, should help get the attention children like hers deserve. “Of all the people with
disabilities, the children are the most neglected, and we really have to pay attention,” she said.

Jean Gonzales’ organization, the Philippine Association for Citizens with Developmental and Learning Disabilities (PACDLD), estimates that there are about four million Filipino children and youth with disabilities, and only 2 percent go to school and 1 percent properly diagnosed.
“For a long time, Filipinos with disabilities have suffered from discrimination. Their economic, social and political rights have not been recognized and their access to educational opportunities and government services has been limited,” said Maribel Buenaobra of The Asia Foundation (TAF), which has for years been mobilizing public support for disability-inclusive elections and special education through the Australia Aid-funded program Fully Abled Nation (FAN).

Even with Republic Act 7277, or the 1992 Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities, PWDs are still not guaranteed the right to employment, health and education, among others. “There are still significant barriers that keep them from fully participating in society... Often, they face a life that is segregated and debased, and many live in isolation and insecurity,” Buenaobra said.

In the Philippines, the glaring lack of public awareness is but one of the many barriers. In newsrooms, PWD stories are most likely to be aired or printed only during the annual nationwide observance of the National Disability Prevention and Rehabilitation Week every July 17 to 23. The event is designed to raise awareness about the rights, needs and outstanding contributions of PWDs to society. But this attention easily fizzles out, ending swiftly as soon as the week is out. (See the list of issuances from the Office of the President for other PWD-related celebrations)

In an informal survey among PWD leaders, VERA Files found that the lack of access to basic services such as education, healthcare and employment is the kind of story that should be prominently written about. While stories about achievements and unusual talents tend to be inspiring, stories on the absence and inaccessibility of services—and, more important, why—have greater impact.

And if the media are to function as the true mirror of society, guarding and holding sacred their responsibility to influence public behavior—unblighted by biases—is key to promoting awareness and
eliminating the stinging stigma surrounding people with disabilities.

Crafting compelling stories that are properly angled, complete with context, and supported with voices from the communities put a human face to the struggle and rediscovery of a long-forgotten sector of society.

Faces of silence: Women and children

Studies show that women with disabilities experience “exclusion on account of both their gender and disability.”

As the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) said in the Incheon Strategy to “Make the Right Real” for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific, “girls and women with disabilities face multiple forms of discrimination and abuse.”

Girls and women are more vulnerable to violence and exploitation and risks such as unwanted pregnancy, maternal and infant death, and HIV infection. The risk doubles when a woman or a child is with disability, especially among people with intellectual disability, or among those who have difficulty hearing and speaking, and in some cases who are deaf and blind.

In the Philippines, from 65 to 70 percent of boys and girls who are deaf were being molested, a nationwide survey of the Philippine Deaf Resource Center (PDRC) in 2005 found. Of the 60 deaf respondents in Manila and Cebu, one of three women had been raped. The cases happened half the time in the victim’s home, perpetrated mostly by neighbors and family members, according to the survey.

An abs-cbnnews.com story highlighted the experience of Anica and Diane (not their real names), both born deaf and sexually abused by relatives and traffickers. Unable to communicate, and fearing retaliation from their families, they chose to keep silent, at first.

When their cases reached the courts, they had to go through the
harrowing experience of dealing with insensitive authorities and tedious court proceedings. With no one to properly communicate with and represent them, the cases have barely progressed, and the perpetrators remain at large.

In dealing with stories like these, Liwanag Caldito of Support and Empower Abused Deaf Children (SEADC) and the Filipino Deaf Women’s Health and Crisis Center, nongovernment organizations the reporter talked to, help provide perspective and context to a largely underreported issue. As experts, local or international NGOs also help identify key people to contact in communities, which is essential in finding case studies to humanize the storytelling of public policy issue.

The story also offered solutions, referring to two House bills that seek to provide interpreters in court and in the media in a bid to empower the most vulnerable sector of all of the country’s PWDs.

The bills rest on the strength of the Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities. Other laws protecting women and children with disabilities include R.A. 10534, the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act of 2012. The law ensures the delivery of top reproductive health care services for PWDs, starting with providing easy access to clinics and hospitals, health education on family planning, and raising awareness and addressing misconceptions on the sexual and reproductive health needs and rights of persons with disabilities.

A publication of the World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Promoting Sexual and Reproductive Health for Persons with Disabilities, said worldwide, women with disabilities are also subjected to forced marriage, domestic violence, other forms of physical and emotional violence and sexual abuse. They, too, face social isolation and poverty.
What journalists should remember

- Disability is everyone’s business.
- Persons with disabilities are not necessarily sick.
- Persons with disabilities have sex too.
- Access means more than ramps.
- Persons with disabilities want the same things in life that everyone wants.
- For persons with disabilities, prejudice can be the biggest barrier.
- Everywhere and always, persons with disabilities are entitled to self-determination, privacy, respect and dignity.
- It is best and usually easy to mainstream services that accommodate persons with disabilities.
- Persons with disabilities are a crucial constituency in all programs.
- Programs best suit persons with disabilities when persons with disabilities help to design them. “Nothing about us without us” is a key principle.

Source: WHO and UNFPA

On the fringes

Community broadcaster Ronnel del Rio hogs the airwaves, hounds wrongdoers and erring politicians, with flair and precision. No punch is thrown in blindly, a skill he instinctually developed growing up with visual disability.

For the past 20 years, “DJ Ron” has been the “darling of Southern Luzon.” A sector champion, he is the only Filipino chosen by the UNESCAP as a promoter of the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons
with Disabilities 2013-2022 and a vanguard for the implementation of the Incheon Strategy to Make the Right Real for Persons with Disabilities.

In his radio program in Batangas, Del Rio tackles concerns of PWDs and helps eliminate the stigma that they are unable to help themselves. “Sa probinsya...kapag ikaw ay may kapansanan, ikaw ay salanta (In the province, if you have disability, you’re considered a cripple),” he said.

Del Rio believes making the issues of PWDs more mainstream is key in helping secure the services the government must be giving to the sector, antipoverty measures among them.

He is proposing a project with a giant TV network to start a weekly program led by him and the Punlaka Regional Institute for Special People. The program will tackle, among others, the biggest issue of the week, such as the conditional cash transfer program of the Aquino administration.

“His administration spent P21 billion to allegedly help the poor to survive. However, they forgot to include the PWD sector, especially those situated in the rural areas of the country,” Del Rio said of the controversial antipoverty measure.

Persons with disabilities are the country’s poorest of the poor, many of them uneducated, unable to get a job, and dependent on others to survive.

In a 2012 study, “Identifying Disability Issues Related to Poverty Reduction,” the Foundation for International Training revealed that while poverty is a major concern of the Philippine government, with varied poverty reduction programs being implemented, these measures have “shown little impact” to improve the situation of the poor and people with disabilities.

“Mainstream poverty reduction programs of the government do not necessarily address the needs of persons with disability, the
majority of whom live the proverbial ‘hand-to-mouth’ existence,” it said. The lack of data on just how many PWDs there are excludes them from access to the most basic of services.

Journalists keen on antipoverty measures should study R.A. 8425 or Social Reform and Poverty Alleviation Act that was enacted during the Ramos administration. The law calls for the institutionalization of the Social Reform Agenda (SRA), a set of guidelines for poverty alleviation for all sectors, PWDs including. The SRA has been adopted by successive administrations, including under Aquino.

But the study showed that the Comprehensive and Integrated Delivery of Basic Social Services, which is under the SRA and known to be government’s main pro-poor program for the most disadvantaged sectors, “has yet to show its impact in addressing the minimum basic needs of persons with disability vis-à-vis efforts devoted to meet the needs of so-called disadvantaged families and communities nationwide.”

“Despite efforts to equalize opportunities and improve their lot, persons with disabilities in the country continue to suffer exclusion… The link between poverty and disability goes two ways: Not only does disability add to the risk of poverty, but conditions of poverty add to the risk of disability,” it concluded.

Lifting the sector out of the poverty rut involves huge funds. In a 2014 forum of the Philippine Coalition on the UNCRPD on Government Spending for Persons with Disabilities, experts examined the national budget and public resources available for programs benefiting PWDs.

The results showed that in 2011, the total appropriations of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), Department of Health (DOH), Department of Education (DepEd) and the policymaking agency National Council on Disability Affairs (NCDA) for disability-specific programs made up only 0.1 percent of the national budget appropriations, and only 0.02 percent of the Gross
Domestic Product.

This, they said, was a clear violation of Presidential Proclamation 24, which starting in 2012 mandates national government offices and local governments to set aside not less than 1 percent of their annual budget for PWD-related programs. They also found out that there was no proper evaluation, monitoring or proper reporting of the 1 percent budget allocation.

The 2013 CRPD Compliant Budget Advocacy project supported by the Australian government recommended efficient data gathering and reporting of spending of public resources, and making these transparent and accessible to persons with disabilities.

For Del Rio, his public affairs program has had a huge impact in spreading information and getting the help PWDs need. Cities and towns in his region such as Calamba, San Pascual and Lipa have begun allocating 1 percent of their budget to PWDs.

“They’re learning because of our constant advocacy,” the broadcaster said. He believes that being a PWD himself makes him a better media practitioner as he is sensitive and aware of the sector’s plight.

**Costs on society if PWDs are not helped**

- Direct costs related to treatment
- Direct costs to those responsible for providing care
- Opportunity costs or lost income by both the person with disability and his/her caregiver

*Source: Foundation for International Training*
Aiming for baseline

The Magna Carta for PWDs tasks the DOH to keep a database of PWDs in coordination with the NCDA, DSWD, Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) and local government units.

The DOH is required to collect relevant and internationally comparable disability data. The data would be used to issue IDs for PWDs and for policy interventions to ensure the delivery of services to PWDs. It is important to disaggregate data by disability status for the Philippine Registry for Persons with Disability to be effective and fully operational.

Such data will be used for implementing community-based rehabilitation programs for PWDs, as mandated by Executive Order 437 in 2005. The goal of the measure is to enable local governments to adopt ordinances and allocate budgets.

One of the key measures to ensure an accurate set of data is through the creation of Persons with Disability Affairs Office (PDAO) in every province, city and town. Under R.A. 10070, which amended the Magna Carta for PWDs, assigning an office or appointing a focal person for PWD concerns in fourth-, fifth- and sixth-class towns will result in policies with inputs from the sector. But only a few local government units have complied with the law. In 2013, only seven out of 80 provinces, 49 out of 143 cities, and 40 out of 1,491 towns had PDAOs.

Following up on the implementation of the law in local governments alone is a rich source of stories for community papers, and how such offices and appointments tend to be abused for political gain.
Follow the data

PDAOs are mandated to:

- Acquire PWD data from other local government agencies to avoid duplication of efforts
- Deploy survey and registration forms for households (for example, door-to-door survey or PWD assemblies)
- Share the PWD database with the local health office, which is tasked to verify accuracy and completeness and issue a certification
- Issue PWD ID to certified PWDs

Source: Union of Local Authorities of the Philippines

When disaster strikes

Living five kilometers away from the restive Mount Bulusan, residents of Guruyan, Sorsogon are well trained for disaster. Barangay captain Roger Guel, interviewed by the Handicap International in 2014, said in communities that are always at risk, it is important to identify where the PWDs, the senior citizens and the children are.

In the Handicap International’s study, “Good Practices from South and South-East Asia in Disability Inclusive Disaster Risk Management,” communities like Guruyan are taught to implement disaster risk reduction measures.

In this particular village where many are with hearing impairment, Guel, through the Handicap International, learned to adopt a unique early warning system: the use of flags. When disaster is about to strike, the first warning (five bell rings/blue flag raised in the village hall) means to be on alert, the second (10 bell rings/yellow flag) means villagers prepare to evacuate, and the third warning
(continuous bell ringing/red flag) signals “evacuate now.” Villagers are also assigned to warn PWDs in case they do not spot the flags.

“While natural disasters affect a large number of individuals, PWDs tend to be more affected than others during such situations and often face bigger challenges in order to cope with the situation and survive,” the Handicap International said.

When at risk, especially during natural disasters, humanitarian crises and armed conflicts, PWDs should be included in policies on disaster risk reduction and management, experts say. It could range from how to issue public service announcements and making them language accessible by persons to making exits and shelters barrier-free.

Should disaster strike, journalists should be aware that under R.A.10121, the Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act of 2010 or the DRRM Act, Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Councils can be found at the regional, provincial, municipal and barangay levels. Every town or city must have a Local Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office that coordinates efforts during emergencies.

Under the law, PWDs are referred to as “Vulnerable and Marginalized Groups,” who face higher exposure to disaster risk and poverty. Right after disaster strikes, PWDs must be looked after and attended to right away. But if there are no existing data as to who or where they are, reaching them could be difficult.

In Tacloban, after being hit in 2013 by supertyphoon “Yolanda,” one of the strongest in history, records of 500 PWDs stored in steel cabinets were washed away by the storm surge. With no list, the city social welfare office has yet to reconstruct its records a year after the deadly disaster. In any disaster area, the number of PWDs predictably shoots up. But without a paper trail to begin with, local government workers are tossed back to where they began: knocking on doors, from one house to the next.
Developing an early warning system for PWDs

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Impairments/Disabilities</th>
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<td>Posters written with large characters and color contrast</td>
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<td>Hearing Impairment</td>
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<td>Announcements</td>
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Source: Handicap International

After tropical storm “Sendong” left hundreds dead in 2012, the Handicap International surveyed families in Cagayan De Oro and Iligan cities to assess access to relief services of persons with disabilities, among others.

Of the 166 respondents, 69 percent said they had to evacuate on their own. Only 14 percent reported being rescued and evacuated by authorities. And while food and clothing were provided, at least one household with a PWD needed an assistive device. The results further showed that “none of the surveyed households, with or without a PWD, received assistance for their specific needs.”

A survey conducted by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) among PWDs revealed that four in every five respondents “said they would be unable to evacuate immediately if a disaster strikes” and 6 percent said they would not be able to evacuate at all. This makes achieving the country’s zero-casualty goal during disasters all the more challenging.
Factors that may make PWDs more vulnerable in emergencies

- PWDs are particularly affected by changes in terrain resulting from disaster because of limited physical accessibility, the loss or lack of mobility aids, or the lack of appropriate assistance.
- PWDs may be deprived of rescue and evacuation services, relief access, safe location and adequate shelter, water and sanitation, and other services. PWDs tend to be missed by emergency registration systems.
- PWDs may not be aware of what is happening, and therefore not comprehend the situation and its consequences.
- PWDs may misinterpret the situation, and communication difficulties make PWDs more vulnerable in disaster situations.
- PWDs may be separated from their families or caregivers who serve as their support system.
- Emotional distress and trauma caused by a disaster may have long-term consequences on PWDs.

Source: Handicap International

When journalists are looking for stories, the key questions NGOs ask for their risk and resource mapping can be a useful guide. Among the questions include:
- What types of facilities/staff are there for PWDs?
- What types of specialized services are available (orthopedic hospital, rehabilitation center, hearing aid providers, eye hospital, psychosocial support services)?
- Are there any local disabled people’s organizations (DPOs) or NGOs working on disability?
■ Are relief services, shelters, water and sanitation facilities and other basic needs accessible to PWDs?
■ Are there specific evacuation measures for PWDs?
■ Are action plans made PWD-friendly (such as warning signals, accessible evacuation vehicles/boats)?
■ Are there income-generating activities, vocational training opportunities or other livelihood activities available for PWDs post-disaster?

But the list does not end there. Persons with disabilities, the Handicap International said, are also susceptible to physical, sexual and emotional abuse when in shelters and camps. Trafficking is a grave concern as well, although news reports show rarely do they involve PWDs. Security and safety in camps should be routinely checked and dialogues must be held to help PWDs work through their trauma and fears.

Setting up new shelters should also be PWD-inclusive, as the universal standard design of accessibility should be adopted, from having wide doors, building ramps, installing handrails to making accessible water and sanitation sources.

“The needs of PWDs have to be considered before, during, and after disaster and interventions. All interventions should be implemented using a rights-based approach, as all community members should enjoy the same rights,” the independent aid organization said.

**Displaced, dispossessed by conflicts**

The Women’s Refugee Commission estimates that as many as 7.7 million of the world’s 51 million people displaced by conflict have disabilities. They are forcibly displaced because of persecution, conflict and human rights violations.
“People with disabilities are among the most hidden and neglected of all displaced people. Often, refugees with disabilities are more isolated following their displacement than when they were in their home communities,” states in its 2014 report, “Disability Inclusion: Translating Policy into Practice in Humanitarian Action.”

Those who are at risk, the report said, are mainly children with disabilities whose chances of continuing their education are reduced. Adolescents with disabilities face gender-based violence such as rape and trafficking, and those with intellectual and mental disabilities are at most risk, more likely to be victims of sexual violence.

The proposed Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL), the government’s most recent attempt to forge peace in Mindanao, ensures the protection of PWDs.

Lawyer Raissa Jajurie of the Bangsamoro Transition Commission (BTC) said the article on basic rights in the proposed law provides that the Bangsamoro government guarantee the rights of its citizens “to equal opportunity and nondiscrimination in social and economic activity and the public service, regardless of class, creed, disability, gender and ethnicity.”

The Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) has consistently posted the highest poverty rates in the country. The conflict in the south has resulted in the deaths of thousands and displacement of millions of people since war was waged in the 1970s.

**PWDs and accessibility**

Lawyer Jessica Magbanua was born with the spinal disorder spina bifida and clubfeet and uses a wheelchair. A court reporter at the Commission on Elections (Comelec) in the 1980s and now a state solicitor, she is also the board secretary of AKAP-Pinoy, a federation of organizations of and for PWDs in the Philippines.
Magbanua was once featured by a TV station showing her forced to get up from her wheelchair and struggling to climb the stairs to a courtroom on the upper floor. The video story, she said, proved that government offices are not just accessible despite existing laws that mandate it.

The disability sector has been advocating for the strict compliance of the Accessibility Law or the Batas Pambansa 344, as mandated by the Magna Carta for PWDs.

Other accessibility policies for PWDs also include R.A. 10366, the law that ensures voting precincts are accessible to voters with disabilities. Another law, R.A. 9442, requires express lanes in all commercial and government establishments and priority access to government-mandated assistance projects, including scholarship and livelihood opportunities.

“Out of 1,200 local government agencies screened nationwide, only 40 passed the criteria set for the minimum requirement for accessibility law,” the NCDA said.

During the 2013 midterm elections, VERA Files found many polling centers lacking “substantial compliance” with accessibility laws such as Comelec Resolution 9485, which mandates all polling centers to assign precincts with registered PWD voters to the ground floor, and Batas Pambansa 344, which requires the presence of ramps, parking spaces and dropoff points, nonskid floors, signage and toilets with ample space for PWDs, especially for wheelchair users.

Poll watchdog Legal Network for Truthful Elections (Lente) said that only 82,000 or 23 percent of the 362,113 registered voters with disabilities were able to vote on election day. The lack of PWD-friendly facilities in polling centers led to voter disenfranchisement, it said.

In a separate 2014 accessibility audit, the Upholding Life and Nature (Ulan) group found that it was not so much how the classrooms were built but how PWDs would get to the school where they were supposed to vote.
In Bohol, for instance, Ulan said while nearly all the voting centers were located in single-story school buildings, the island province and its uneven topography proved too difficult for PWDs to reach voting centers. And even in a first-class town in Northern Samar, schools were “practically inaccessible.”

Many polling places also had no assistance available for voters with hearing and speech impairments. A whopping 77 percent of polling centers had no sign language interpreters on site, according to Ulan.

The Asia Foundation, supported by the Australian government, has been raising awareness of the rights of persons with disabilities and mobilizing public support for their rights since 2002. In 2011, through Fully Abled Nation, it launched a project with the Comelec and a number of nongovernmental organizations and DPOs to promote the participation of PWDs in elections.

In a number of focus group discussions among various stakeholders and a post-elections survey run by the Social Weather Stations (SWS) for Fully Abled Nation, “poor communication, limited access to polling places, the lack of an assistant or aide, and restrictions from family members” emerged as the top reasons PWDs were unable to vote in 2013 and past elections.

Ardie Dawal, assistant managing editor of the tabloid Abante, has tried to raise the issue of poor accessibility not only of polling centers but also of footbridges in Metro Manila. She has written editorials about it.

Dawal, however, said stories on PWDs often do not land on the front page, as they do not titillate and sell. None of Abante’s 18 reporters is assigned to cover the PWD sector. PWDs are written about when there’s abuse involved, or worse, if they are murdered or killed in a road accident. Newsrooms should show support for other PWD stories and determine how to make PWD issues interesting to their readers, Dawal said.
Accessibility terms

- **Accessibility**: the ability to reach, understand or approach something or someone. It refers to what the law requires for compliance.

- **Universal design**: a process that increases usability, safety, health and social participation through design and operation of environments.

- **Public accommodations**: buildings open to and provided for the public, whether publicly owned (such as courts, hospitals and schools) or privately owned (such as shops, restaurants and sports stadia) as well as public roads.

- **Transportation**: vehicles, stations, public transportation systems, infrastructure and pedestrian environments.

- **Communication**: languages, text displays, Braille, tactile communication, large print and accessible multimedia as well as written, audio, plain-language, human-reader and augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, including accessible information and communication technology. These formats, modes and means of communication may be physical but are increasingly electronic.

Source: WHO

HIV and other risks

In 2014, Bibo Lee Perey wrote a letter of plea to then Health Secretary Enrique Ona on behalf of the Pinoy Deaf Rainbow, an organization of deaf LGBTs in the Philippines. He said HIV cases were on the rise and were likely to increase in the coming years. Most cases involved
men who have sex with men and transgender people. Because of inadequate HIV services, gays, bisexuals, men, and transgender people would be vulnerable to the epidemic.

“Our exclusion has many layers: We are stigmatized and discriminated because of our disability, our sexual orientation and our gender identity,” Perey said.

Under Article 25 of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, PWDs, he wrote, should be afforded by the State the following:

- The same range, quality and standard of free or affordable health care and programs as provided to other persons, including in the area of sexual and reproductive health and population-based public health programs
- Health services specifically because of their disabilities, including early identification and intervention as appropriate, and services designed to minimize and prevent further disabilities, including among children and older persons
- Care of the same quality, including on the basis of free and informed consent by, among others, raising awareness of the human rights, dignity, autonomy and needs of persons with disabilities through training and the promulgation of ethical standards for public and private health care

Perey also asked the DOH to “include in the guidelines for HIV testing the possibility of deaf client signing a waiver form to allow a sign language interpreter, with the client indicating informed consent for the presence of the interpreter during voluntary HIV testing and counseling and the interpreter bound to maintain confidentiality.” The DOH, he said, has yet to reply to his organization’s call for HIV-friendly services.

PWDs face inadequate access to healthcare worldwide. The WHO said poor healthcare or rehabilitation services are among the
top challenges of a PWD. It defines health as “a state of physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”

“Many people with disabilities experience worse socioeconomic outcomes than people without disabilities: They experience higher rates of poverty, lower employment rates, and have less education. They also have unequal access to health care services and therefore have unmet health care needs,” the WHO said.

In its World Health Survey, affordability remains the top reason people with disabilities do not receive the health care they need. Worldwide, universal healthcare coverage is rare and immediate access to healthcare services is not ensured.

In the Philippines, the Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities requires the DOH to institute a national health program for PWDs, establish medical rehabilitation centers in provincial hospitals and make essential health services available to them at affordable cost.

The DOH said it has established community-based rehabilitation programs and has upgraded DOH hospital facilities to include rehabilitation and allied medical services for PWDs. Journalists could start investigating the implementation of the law and if community-based health services are available and if hospitals offer affordable rates.

The Philippine Health Insurance Corp. (PhilHealth) also requires separate monitoring. President Benigno Aquino III signed into law a bill ensuring PhilHealth coverage to all Filipinos, including indigents and PWDs.

R.A. 10606, or the National Health Insurance Act of 2013, amends R.A. 7875 or the National Health Insurance Act of 1995. This new law mandates that healthcare needs of the underprivileged, the elderly and PWDs be prioritized.
**PWD health conditions and needs**

- **Primary health condition.** A primary health condition is the possible starting point for impairment, an activity limitation or participation restriction. Examples include depression, arthritis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, ischemic heart disease, cerebral palsy, bipolar disorder, glaucoma, cerebrovascular disease and Down syndrome.

- **Secondary conditions.** A secondary condition is an additional condition that presupposes the existence of a primary condition. Examples include pressure ulcers, urinary tract infections and depression.

- **Co-morbid conditions.** A co-morbid condition is an additional condition independent of and unrelated to the primary condition. The detection and treatment of co-morbid conditions are often not well managed for people with disabilities and can later have an adverse affect on their health. Examples of co-morbid conditions include cancer or hypertension for a person with an intellectual impairment.

- **General health care needs.** General health needs include health promotion, preventive care (immunization, general health screening), treatment of acute and chronic illness, and appropriate referral for more specialized needs where required. Access to primary health care is particularly important.

- **Specialist health care needs.** Some people with disabilities may have a greater need for specialist health care than the general population. Some people with disabilities may have multiple health conditions and assessment and treatment in these instances can be quite complex.

Source: WHO
Stories on children with disabilities often focus on how they cope with their disability. TV networks feature these children needing help and seek donations for them. Rarely do journalists look into services that could save these children from having disabilities, and if the government is properly providing for them.

Upon giving birth, mothers are encouraged to have their babies undergo newborn screening (NBS) to detect disorders at an early age. Without blood tests, it is difficult to diagnose disorders by relying on physical exams alone.

PACDLID said 90,931 babies of nearly five million babies screened from 1996 to 2013 in the Philippines were confirmed to have disorders. It is estimated that some 33,000 of the 1.7 million babies born each year may be saved from mental impairment and death by identifying early that the baby requires medication or treatment or medical interventions.

Newborn screening was fully integrated in the country’s health delivery system with the passage of R.A. 9288 or the Newborn Screening Act of 2004.

While many babies may appear normal at birth, parents must look for signs of developmental delays, and must be closely monitored from birth to five years. Delays can lead to intellectual disability, autism, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), among others.

Without a list of red flags for delays in a child’s growth, a mother would not know if she should be concerned that at two months her baby is unable to smile, or if at three years of age, her son could not hold a crayon to draw a circle with. Or that a single line across the palm of the hand, known as the palmar crease common among children with Down syndrome, could actually signify a lifetime of isolation for her child.
Journalists should be able to spot policy gaps and, as sources of information relay, to a mother that a barangay clinic must be able to provide a newborn screening test, which could lessen the risk for some medical conditions.

**Safe in school**

Celina Sakiwat, 17, was born with Down syndrome. At the Special Education (SPED) school in La Trinidad, Benguet, where she’s been going to for the past five years, Sakiwat has learned how to accomplish basic house chores and make bead jewelry.

Awareness of Down syndrome in the country remains low. Sakiwat’s parents discovered too late why their child was lagging in class, and it took a neighbor to point them to the SPED school where they could get help. Regular classes proved to be difficult for the teenager as she was bullied and would often come home crying.

*VERA Files* reported that children like Sakiwat could stay in school until it is able to accommodate them. But as it is, the SPED school is low on budget. Her teachers are hoping she could move on to higher learning, earn some credits with the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) and land a job one day.

While special education has been in existence in the Philippines for over a hundred years, PWDs in the Philippines have lower educational attainment and employment than people without disabilities.

Journalists writing about children with disabilities should bear in mind that “educating PWDs is the most important step for their integration into mainstream life.”

Under Batas Pambansa 232 or the Education Act of 1982, special education is defined as the “education of persons who are physically, mentally, emotionally, socially or culturally different from the so-called ‘normal’ individuals that they require modification of school
practices/services to develop them to their maximum capacity.”

The DepEd designed SPED to meet the needs of children with special needs whom it defines as those that are gifted or talented, those with visual, hearing, orthopedic or speech impairment, or those that have mental retardation, learning disability, behavior problems, autism or chronic health problems.

A study by Social Watch Philippines, however, shows that out of 609 poor towns, only 99 have SPED centers for grade school and 53 for high school.

How SPED schools are able to sustain their operations, on top of hiring teachers who specialize on special education, should lead to stories with implications on policymaking. Sakiwat’s school survives on half a million pesos as budget a year. Students pay P500 during enrollment.

Journalists should likewise look into children with disabilities and mainstreaming them into education system. This model, the WHO said, “assumes that all the children can be educated regardless of the setting or adaptations required.” Or that “all children with disabilities should be educated in regular classrooms with age-appropriate peers,” an approach that requires the whole school system to change.

At minimum, schools should be able to identify and remove barriers to provide “reasonable accommodation.”

**Hired then fired**

*VERA Files* once featured a group of blind massage therapists from Zamboanga City who took a 500-kilometer journey to Cagayan de Oro to undergo licensing exams. The DOH was at the time calling for the full enforcement of Administrative Order No. 2010-0034, which imposes a blanket licensing requirement for all massage therapists.

Protests from the PWD sector ensued. The administrative order, it
Barriers to education for children with disabilities

- **Physical access to school buildings.** Those with physical disabilities are likely to face difficulties in travelling to school if, for example, the roads and bridges are unsuitable for wheelchair use and the distances are too great. Even if it is possible to reach the school, there may be problems of stairs, narrow doorways, inappropriate seating or inaccessible toilet facilities.

- **Assigning labels.** Children with disabilities are often categorized according to their health condition to determine their eligibility for special education and other types of support services. But assigning labels to children in education systems can have negative effects including stigmatization, peer rejection, lower self-esteem, lower expectations and limited opportunities.

- **Attitudinal barriers.** Negative attitudes are a major obstacle to the education of disabled children. In some cultures, people with disabilities are seen as a form of divine punishment or as carriers of bad fortune. The attitudes of teachers, school administrators, other children and even family members affect the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools.

- **Bullying and abuse.** Violence against students with disabilities—by teachers, other staff and fellow students—is common. Students with disabilities often become the targets of violent acts including physical threats and abuse, verbal abuse and social isolation. The fear of bullying can be as great an issue for children with disabilities as actual bullying.

Source: WHO
charged, violated the law and caused harm to PWDs on the profession as their only source of income.

Days after the story was published in VERA Files and major news sites, the DOH decided to defer the implementation of the licensing order until December 2017. Ronnel del Rio, president of the Philippine Chamber of Massage Industry for the Visually Impaired, said the suspension was proof that no proper consultation was conducted before the DOH issued the administrative order.

In a 2013 study on employment of PWDs, the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) found that about half of the PWDs in the country were employed, mostly as farmers or fishermen, laborers and unskilled workers.

"Despite the efforts of the government in promoting anti-discriminatory practices in the area of employment and providing various employment-related programs and services for PWDs, it seems that employment for this segment of the population still needs improvement," the PIDS said.

The Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities ensures equal opportunities for suitable employment to PWDs, yet unemployment among them remains high. And if they secure a job, they are ranked among the lowest paid.

The law requires government offices such as the DSWD, DOH and DepEd to reserve 5 percent of all their casual, emergency and contractual positions for PWDs. An amended law in 2013, R.A. 10524, requires all government offices to reserve at least 1 percent of its workforce for PWDs. Another measure, Executive Order 417, mandates the government to shoulder at least 10 percent of the procurement needs of PWD entrepreneurs.

The PIDS said Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs) are crucial in getting PWDs jobs and urged the government to collaborate with these organizations to disseminate information and provide jobs for
PWDs. It also emphasized education as a “critical factor in gaining employment.”

In January 2015, a member of the House of Representatives filed a bill to address the “remarkable income disparity” among PWDs on the basis of their education and sex.

Rep. Estrellita Suansing of Nueva Ecija cited studies showing that “a substantial number of PWDs have very low monetary income with low level of education.” Her proposed Accessible Education Act would allow PWDs to study in state universities and colleges and help them secure jobs later.

### Indicators for measuring the work status of PWDs

- **Unemployment rate** is the number of unemployed people expressed as a percentage of the labor force;
- **Employment rate** is the share of the working age population which works for pay;
- **Labor force participation rate** is the proportion of the adult population which is economically active, whether employed or unemployed;
- **Employment ratio** is the ratio of the employment rate of people with disabilities compared to the employment rate of the general population.

Source: WHO
The lack of job opportunities for PWDs is not so easily addressed, though. Jean Gonzales’ son, Magiting, for example, had been working for the National Youth Commission for years. The commissioners promised him a permanent post, but when his contract ended in March 2015, he was let go. But Gonzales said the NYC is helping Magiting secure a job as a library aide either at the Quezon City Hall or the National Children’s Hospital.

“That’s an issue we would like to use for all people with disabilities, that they should have the security of tenure when employed,” Gonzales said.

Gonzales and other sector advocates see the media as a platform to help PWDs like her son. “I just want them to let people know that the sector can do things that anybody is capable of doing,” she said.

Other sector leaders are just as optimistic and hopeful about the media.

“Media is very important in the education of Filipinos (on PWD matters). And when that happens...we will realize a culture of inclusion,” the Noordhoff Craniofacial Foundation Philippines said.
References


Interacting with Persons with Disabilities

By Jake Soriano
Emerito Rojas talks to VERA Files reporter Artha Kira Paredes.
PHOTO BY MARIO IGNACIO IV
A television journalist once asked engineer Emerito Rojas, a tobacco control advocate and cancer of the larynx survivor, to bare on camera the hole in his throat.

Rojas, who also represents the disability sector in the National Anti-Poverty Commission (NAPC), was taken aback by the journalist’s insistence on showing what he described as a “very personal part of the body.”

“At talagang yun ang hinighlight nila (And they highlighted the hole in the report),” he said.

But looking back to this encounter with the media, Rojas said he no longer minds what happened. “No regrets kasi kung kailangan ko ipakita yung isang bagay na makakatulong sa mas marami, then yun talaga ang dapat gawin (I don’t regret assenting to the request. If I need to show to the public something that would help a lot of people, then I’d do it),” he said.

Many elements in Rojas’ story show how interactions between journalists and persons with disabilities (PWDs) can be filled with uncertainties and challenges.

In going for maximum impact by wanting to feature the hole in Rojas’ throat, the journalist set aside sensitivity to the feelings of the source, and in the process caused unintentional distress.

To the journalist’s credit, consent was sought but probably not in a
way completely acceptable to Rojas at first.

Interacting well with PWDs is not just a moral obligation for any journalist but is a standard of good journalism.

Around 1.4 million Filipinos have some form of disability, according to the 2010 national census. These numbers suggest that disability is present in all sectors and segments of society.

In recent years, the international thrust toward the inclusion of PWDs in society has become more pronounced. New conventions and protocols are being produced and agreed on by international bodies and countries, resulting in new laws being churned out by governments.

At the same time, advocates and civil society groups in the Philippines and elsewhere have been actively pushing for reforms in the fields of suffrage, infrastructure accessibility, health and education, among others. They are organizing more training and other activities to achieve these goals.

To be sure, issues that concern and affect the disability sector provide fruitful and attractive stories for journalists, from straight news to features to in-depth investigations (See the chapter “Crafting Disability Stories”). But to successfully produce these stories, journalists must have meaningful interactions first with PWDs as subjects and resources.

But even the most skillful journalists are bound to encounter challenges in reporting on disability. The sector encompasses a wide spectrum of individuals; not all may have the patience of Rojas or his opportunity for introspection.

In mapping the best approaches to interacting with PWDs, it is useful to begin with what the Poynter Institute, a U.S.-based journalism training center, calls “the heart of journalism”: the interview.
Not just any interview

Retired American journalist Tim McGuire certainly knows a thing or two about reporting on disability.

The former editor of the *Minnesota Star Tribune* teaches journalism at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the Arizona State University. He sits on the board of the university’s National Center on Disability and Journalism (NCDJ), which supports journalists covering disability. More than that, he has written a memoir about his personal experience raising a son with Down syndrome.

In a webinar on disability reporting, McGuire was asked for interviewing tips and he answered, "Do not lead the witness. Do not bully. Do not berate."

"I think I just named rules that would stand for any interview," he added.

The face-to-face interview is, maybe for all journalists, the most common way to interact with sources, including PWDs. The good news is, PWDs in the Philippines are approachable and easy to reach online especially on social media. They are also engaged in issues they are involved in and have different groups, especially on Facebook.

A lot of articles on the Web, like known American journalist Chip Scanlan’s “How journalists can become better interviewers,” provide detailed tips for journalists in improving their interview skills.
The following apply to any interview and are useful in interacting with PWDs face-to-face:

- **Prior research.** Always preparing before the time of the interview helps journalists craft better questions and know their sources better. Initial research also eliminates unnecessary questions whose answers can already be found elsewhere.

- **Open-ended questions.** These are questions that begin with “How?” “What?” “Where?” “When?” or “Why?” and encourage conversation between journalist and interviewee. They produce abundant information, in contrast with closed-ended questions which are commonly answerable by “Yes” or “No.” Closed-ended questions limit or stop the conversation altogether.

- **Listening.** The interview is a venue for a journalist to actually hear and learn about another person tell a story.

- **Empathy.** Trying to understand how sources feel by putting oneself in their shoes shows genuine care for other people, instead of the reports one can get from their stories.

- **Alertness.** Skillful interviewers are always on the lookout for and are able to spot rich details during the interview. They are able to use quotes that both reveal the character of the source and drive the story forward.

- **Guidelines and boundaries.** Sometimes, issues and disagreements arise between journalist and source when the rules of the interview are not made very clear to the latter. These include misunderstandings on comments that are attributable versus off-the-record remarks. Journalists are responsible for making the rules clear to sources before the interview starts.
■ **Recording.** Transcribing interviews is not only for accuracy. Journalists can learn a lot from revisiting and reviewing previous interactions with sources.

Email and social media have in recent times also become interview platforms for journalists. The same rules apply, with the following added guides on etiquette:

■ **Introduction.** For journalists, this goes beyond just initiating an email, a Facebook message or an SMS conversation with one’s name and media outfit. For first-time interactions, a proper introduction is also about how the journalist came to know of the source. More important, it includes giving sources an idea of the story and how their responses would add information or insights to it.

■ **Follow-up questions.** A long email with lots of questions can overwhelm an interviewee. Poynter’s Sandeep Junnarkar suggests that no more than four or five specific and targeted questions should be asked in an email. And like face-to-face interactions, follow-ups are important for unclear responses.

■ **Closing.** After exchanging messages online or through the phone, a note of thanks from the journalist helps close the thread.

Are these enough for journalists to know when reporting about disability? Is interacting with PWDs like any other interview?

To fully answer these, we would have to remember the broad definition of disability as it is adapted internationally (A fuller discussion of this is in the chapter “Disability and the Media in the Philippines”).

The United Nations views disability as a social problem, a “result of the interaction between an inaccessible environment and a person,
rather than an inherent attribute of an individual.” This means that disability is more than just medical conditions or impairments as such, but the barriers these create for PWDs in their interactions with society.

These barriers are what make interacting with PWDs subject to different rules and procedures than any other interviews. There are major differences, and McGuire mentions an important one in the webinar, using the example of his son.

“I would want somebody with him,” he said. “There would have to be some guidance.”

His example touches on a crucial issue that applies to a wide section of people with disabilities, and which journalists reporting on the sector should know about.

This is what is called informed consent.

**Informed consent**

Like McGuire, Filipino parent and advocate Celia Garcia would tell you she wants somebody with her daughter during interviews.

“She was not born blind. She only became (blind) when she was three,” Garcia said of her daughter, who communicates with her through tactile sign language. "Nagsa-sign language siya sa kamay ko. Ako nagsa-sign din sa kamay niya (She signs on my hand, and I do the same on her hand)."

The barrier in interaction is obvious, but for Garcia there is something more.

“Very important yung confidentiality. Kailangan may permiso from the tao mismo bago mo ilahad yung impormasyon about him o sasabihin niya (Confidentiality is important for us. One needs consent before making public information about a person with disability),” she said.
Garcia is invoking what is called the need for informed consent from sources, a standard in journalism, especially when vulnerable people are concerned.

In the Philippines, the word “vulnerable” to describe persons or groups has become familiar in such contexts as social welfare, disasters and human rights. The poor are almost always defined as vulnerable. So are children, pregnant women and internally displaced persons.

The World Health Organization (WHO) considers persons or groups with reduced capabilities to cope with and recover from the impacts of an external event as vulnerable. Under this definition, PWDs are counted among the vulnerable.

Informing them and their families of the potential impact of the information they share with journalists is, therefore, an ethical and professional concern for anyone reporting on disability.

Meredith Levine of the Canadian Association of Journalists (CAJ) offers a good discussion of informed consent by noting the potential harm caused by disclosure of personal information.

In the practice of journalism, Levine said: “We are focused on publicizing, rather than protecting information. Details of people’s emotional or financial health, or traumatizing experiences, are sought after and valued as content by journalists for precisely the same reasons they are often (but not always) protected by academic researchers and health-care practitioners: the potential impact of publicizing this information.”
How does one ask for informed consent from a PWD source?
The BBC Editorial Guidelines on Working with Vulnerable Contributors offers these tips and suggestions:

- Seriously think about the capacity of the source to give informed consent. Persons with learning or mental disabilities may not be in the position to give their permission to journalists. Those with visual or hearing disabilities may.

- In some instances, it would be helpful to seek the help or judgment of experts. What do those in the medical profession think? Would interacting with vulnerable people be alright, or would it cause harm?

- For PWDs who were judged to be capable of giving informed consent by themselves, journalists should discuss in great detail the potential consequences of the story once it is published or broadcast. They should also record or take note of the conversation.

- Greater responsibility is assigned to journalists who seek informed consent to be able to tell the story of vulnerable persons. This is why they are bound also to assume more responsibility for the welfare and well-being of the source through, among others, reassurance even beyond publication or broadcast.

- Families and friends of PWDs are there to help. Journalists should talk to them as well.

“In working with vulnerable people and featuring them in our content, we have a responsibility to protect them from harm,” the BBC said.

Garcia puts it differently. She believes it is up to PWDs and their families to decide if they want anonymity or to be featured in media.

“Mayroon lang mga taong sensitive sa publicity (There are really
people who do not like the limelight),” she said. “(And) that’s their prerogative.”

Protecting PWDs from potential harm is only one thing journalists must remember in interacting with them. A related consideration in sensitivity involves trauma.

**Covering trauma**

Although there are no exact figures, the WHO considers “significant” the number of disabilities globally that are related to trauma.

“A significant proportion of disabilities are caused by injuries including those which result from traffic crashes, falls, burns, and acts of violence such as child abuse, youth violence, intimate partner violence, and war and conflict,” it said. “Global and regional estimates of the injury-specific causes of disability are lacking. However, estimates from some countries suggest that up to one quarter of disabilities may result from injuries and violence.”

Just as in covering vulnerable groups, sensitivity is a huge requirement for journalists in interacting with persons who have experienced trauma and violence.
The International Journalists’ Network provides the following suggestions and best practices on interviewing victims of trauma, which are very useful for journalists interacting with PWDs who have suffered in conflict, violence or injury:

- Have the interviewee decide on the rules of the interview, including where the meeting will take place or even where they want to sit.
- A journalist’s report will not answer the existential questions of individuals or communities who have experienced something horrible, so it is definitely not helpful to pretend it would.
- Never blame, or frame questions using language that fault the interviewee for what they went through.
- In writing stories about trauma, avoid using details just for shock value. Instead, use quotes responsively.
- Maintain constant communication with sources even after the interview.

Different interviewees, different needs

Asked if he has particular sensitivities when being interviewed by journalists, Antonio Llanes Jr., who has been blind since birth, said in jest, “Sensitivity sa appearance kailangan (They need sensitivity to how I’d appear on camera).”

But, on a serious note, Llanes, who is executive director of the Adaptive Technology for Rehabilitation, Integration and Empowerment of the Visually Impaired (ATRIEV) and has been working in the PWD advocacy sector for 35 years, stressed that every condition is different. And that requires journalists to tailor interviews
to the particular needs of individual PWDs. In doing so, they are best guided by the general principle of inclusion.

Llanes explained how society often deals with PWDs: “Halimbawa, isang may dwarfism ay bumibili ng pagkain sa tindahan. Hindi niya maabot. Binigyan siya ng prostheses sa paa na super tangkad para maabot niya yung counter ng tindahan (For example, someone with dwarfism wants to buy something from a store, but the counter is too high. The person is given long prosthetic legs, so he can reach the counter). It should not be like this. That reflects the medical model.”

Inclusion is part and parcel of the human rights model. “Kung mataas yung counter ng tindahan, e bakit hindi pababaan (How about lowering the high counter, so the person can reach it)?” Llanes said.

The lesson is important for journalists covering disability because they should be sensitive enough to accommodate the needs of PWD sources.

The media can be more inclusive to PWDs by observing guidelines that apply to different types of disabilities.

■ Persons with mobility disabilities

Persons using wheelchairs would have a hard time if the interview were in a venue where the only access to it would require the use of stairs. Restaurants or coffee shops with ramps and elevators are suitable places for meetings with them. Also look for places that have accessible toilets and water coolers and telephones low enough for wheelchair users.

Journalists should also consider transportation options. Will the PWD be arriving in a car or taking public transportation to the venue? If the former, it would work to find out if parking is friendly to PWDs. If the latter, it would be best to ask if a place near bus routes or train stations would make it easier for the source.

Offer to shake hands when meeting the wheelchair user. And when
talking to them, talk at eye level.

Do not pat at the other person’s head or shoulders. It is inappropriate to tinker, play with or lean on wheelchairs or crutches. One must also not assume that someone in a wheelchair immediately needs help to be wheeled around a room or to the location of the interview. Always ask first. If that person needs assistance, they would say so.

Some people who use wheelchairs may wish to transfer themselves to another chair or seat. So keep a cane or crutch within easy reach.

Being overeager to help may end up causing more harm than good. It is also only basic courtesy to respect and not intrude into another’s personal space without the express permission of the other person.

**Persons with visual disabilities**

Journalists should begin conversations with persons who are blind or have low vision with an introduction of themselves for the benefit of the interviewee.

Looking for an interview environment is a major consideration, if the journalist and the source have decided it would be conducted in a place unfamiliar to the source. Ask if the PWD would require information in Braille or if he or she has particular requests that should be accommodated like a companion.

As an interview environment with a lot of unwanted noise could interfere with communication, journalists should also find out if a place gets packed with people at certain hours. If it does get crowded but only during certain times, would an adjustment of schedule work? Speaking in a normal voice works fine. There is no need to highlight every word when talking to sources with visual disability.

When offering a handshake, inform the other person by saying,
“Shall we shake hands?” When giving a seat, guide the hand of the
source to the back of the seat. But always ask permission first in
offering assistance, such as when there is a need to move around.

Guide dogs are at work, and petting or commenting on them
distracts both animal and its owner. Walking sticks, like wheelchairs,
are not to be played or tinkered with.

Journalists should let the source know if they move. When the
interview is over, they should always inform their sources that they are
leaving.

■ Persons with speech disabilities
It helps to ask of persons with speech disabilities questions that
require short answers. It is also fine to politely ask for clarification,
or if the answer is still not clear, to rephrase or reformulate the
question when interacting with sources who have speech disabilities.

Pretending to understand will help neither the PWD who is at risk of
being misunderstood nor the journalist who risks inaccuracy.

One should never speak for the other person or finish their
sentences for them.

It also helps to use other methods such as the good old-fashioned
pen and paper or letting the source type out his or her answer on a
computer or mobile phone during a face-to-face interview. Following
up through email and social media or doing the entire interview online
is worth considering.

■ Persons with hearing disabilities
In interacting with persons who are deaf or are hard of hearing, the
first thing journalists should do is ask where it would be best for them
to position themselves. They might find they need to stand or sit on
just one side of the source.

Make sure to get the attention of the interviewee first by tapping
the shoulder, raising one’s hand or waving before firing off with questions. Like any interview, journalists shouldn’t start the interview until the source is looking at them.

It also might be necessary to speak slowly and more clearly. It might help, too, to use facial expressions, gestures and body movements to relay the message. But journalists should not exaggerate their gestures or mime.

The face and mouth of the journalist should also be in the light in case one is interviewing a person who can read lips. Distractions like chewing gum or other food should be avoided.

Similar to interacting with persons who have speech disabilities, short questions and sentences are useful in interviewing persons who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Writing questions down to ask for clarifications also helps, as well as trying out other alternatives to face-to-face interviews like SMS, email and social media.

Sign language interpreters are often needed in interviews. Journalists would do well to make prior arrangements and even be prepared to pay their fees. They can ask the source to suggest an interpreter.

If a sign language interpreter is present, the journalist should avoid walking between the interpreter and the source or block their communication.

Journalists, however, must always bear in mind that sign language interpreters or translators are not the subjects of the interview. They should address the source directly.

The National Service Inclusion Project (NSIP) has created several videos on proper etiquette when interacting with PWDs. In one video, a person who is deaf corrects a hearing person when he starts talking with the interpreter instead.

“Many people make the mistake of looking at the interpreter, but I need you to look directly at me,” the deaf person in the video said.
Sign language

Sign language is just as complex as spoken language and, contrary to common misconception, is not simply the representation of the latter through the use of gestures or facial expressions. Sign language is not universal, meaning each country has one or more sign languages. The Ethnologue, a catalogue of languages spoken in 228 countries, counts 138 sign languages in the world. This is important for journalists to know because one person who is deaf does not automatically speak the same language as another deaf person.

Journalists should, therefore, consider the differences among people who are deaf.

“The use of sign and spoken languages doesn’t differ,” says the World Federation of the Deaf. “Both can be used to provide and share information, tell true stories or lies, express poems, tell jokes, discuss scientific and abstract matters as well as have a speech or a lecture.”

In the Philippines, the Department of Education in 2011 declared “Signing Exact English” or SEE as the official language in deaf education and in training special education (SPED) instructors.

SEE is an artificial system, however, and seeks to match or exactly represent English vocabulary and grammar.

A bill pending in Congress seeks to declare Filipino Sign Language (FSL) as the national sign language of the Filipino Deaf and the official language of government in all its transactions with the Deaf.

The bill also mandates the use of FSL in schools, broadcast media and work places.
The clip concludes that this applies to any kind of care attendants or assistors. “It’s fine to say ‘Hi’ to them, but when you’re having a conversation, talk directly to the person,” the NSIP advised.

Visual clarity is important for the interviewee and the interpreter. Consider brightness or darkness of the interview environment and try to find out if deaf persons would be able to recognize what interpreters are signing.

**PWDs requiring assistors**

Depending on the disability, a person might need the help of another person to aid them in communication and other tasks.

In such instances, as in interviewing sources who are deaf through interpreters, journalists should remember that the PWD is still the one providing information and answering questions. All clarifications and follow-up questions should be addressed to them and not the assistors. It will help to gently and diplomatically remind the assistor that the person with disability is the one being interviewed.

Interview equipment such as recorders or cameras should be placed where they do not keep the assistor out of the interviewee’s immediate reach. These should also not block the hands of interpreters or the mouths and faces of anyone in the group.

In cases where contact is necessary, such as attaching microphones under someone’s clothes, make sure a trusted assistor or family member is present.

There are times when journalists worry if the sign language interpreter, companion, care provider or assistor is relaying the correct information to and from the source. The concern is valid. On such occasions, journalists have to test the accuracy of the information using their arsenal of reportorial skills.
Sign language interpreters help facilitate communication between journalists and persons who are deaf or with hearing disabilities. PHOTO BY MARIO IGNACIO IV
Children with disabilities

Extra care should be observed in interviewing and interacting with children who have disabilities. The same rules on informed consent apply, and consent should be sought from parents or guardians of the child with disability before the interview.

Framing interview questions

If a journalist were to interview a person who is blind and seeking employment opportunities, would it be right to ask, “Do you find it difficult to find work because you are blind?”

Or would it be better if the question were something like, “What problems have you encountered in looking for a job?”

The first question highlights disability as if it is all that defines the person being interviewed. It is also a closed-ended question.

The second treats disability as a barrier and leaves room for the source to explain the situation from their own point of view. It is an open-ended question that goes beyond disability by asking about its implications.

To craft better questions to PWD sources, journalists must learn to go beyond the obvious physical attributes (deafness, blindness, crippling condition) into the social aspects of disability (difficulty in communication, barrier to free movement). When preparing questions, it pays for journalists to initially ask themselves, Do the questions focus on the physical impairment instead of the person? If they do, then these are not very good questions like the first example.
Here are more pointers from various media guides on questions for persons with disabilities:

- Ask the person how they feel. Every person is different and can view their disability differently.
- Ask them how they would like their disability to be described.
- Ask straightforward questions, including about a person’s disability if it is central to the story. Don’t assume a person with a disability will be too sensitive to talk about the way they deal with certain tasks in their life.
- If needed, ask short questions that call for short answers, a nod, shake of the head. But stay away from leading questions.
- Focus on the person and on the enjoyment of rights.
- Ask the person’s opinion and perspectives of disability issues.
- It’s important to always respect the source’s answers, and his or her refusal to answer.

- There are occasions when journalists find it awkward when they use common expressions on persons with disabilities. Like, “Walk this way” or “I have to run; I’m late” to someone who can’t walk or run; “Oh, I see,” “I see what you mean,” or “See you later” to someone who can’t see; or “I hear what you’re saying” or “Did you hear about that?” to someone who is deaf. They shouldn’t fret. Many PWDs are used to these expression and won’t mind.
- If one commits a mistake, said the NSIP, apologize and move on. It is not the end of the world.

At the end of the day, questions that are well researched and crafted, and are sensitive to the needs of the source are what get the journalist the story.

“Truly engage,” McGuire advises journalists on what to do when interacting with persons with disabilities, so they will get the sense of what will work, what will not and what will be appropriate.
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Josephine Bayron, a person with undiagnosed mental disability, looks on as a crowd gathers to watch her being filmed for a documentary on PWDs. SCREEN GRAB FROM VERA FILES. ABS-CBN NEWS AND CURRENT AFFAIRS’ AND UNLIMITED PRODUCTIONS INC.’S DOCUMENTARY “SILANG MAY MGA KAPANSANAN”
Write for the ear, shoot for the eye, aim for the heart.

Borrowed from the title of a book by veteran American journalist Al Tompkins, the line captures the most basic, clear-cut, and practical guide—a mantra—for broadcast practitioners on the prowl for compelling television.

The mantra led the production team of Probe, an independent media outfit, to a small hut in the hilly village of San Isidro, one of the remotest communities in the town of Mabini in Bohol province. The team was informed that Mabini, a fourth-class town, was home to an increasing number of persons with disabilities (PWDs).

“When I first saw them, they were inside a hut. The child was lying in a bamboo bed; his mother was crawling,” said Lucille Sodipe, the producer who headed the production team to Mabini. “(The child) was weak. I even carried him. He could not even lift his head; he needed assistance.”

The child, Chris Barrientos, looked like a two-year-old, but his mother, Apolonia, said her son was already five. Theirs is a heartrending story for television.

Chris is quadriplegic, while his mother, Apolonia, is paraplegic. So poor, mother and son have never been to a doctor.

Unlike his mother, Chris was apparently paralyzed from neck down since birth and could not speak. Apolonia contracted fever and had rashes all over her body when she was young. Her parents failed to bring her to a doctor. When the fever subsided, she could no longer walk. From then on, she used her hands and arms to move around.
Over time, Apolonia’s feet atrophied; her hands deformed. In her early thirties, Apolonia was raped and she bore a son—Chris. Mother and son are virtual prisoners in their own hut. They spend their waking hours sitting by the door, waiting for meals from Apolonia’s siblings and relatives.

Apolonia comes from a big family of 14 sisters and brothers. A brother who lives beside her hut, Rufino is also paraplegic.

Not far from the huts of the Barrientoses, the production team chanced upon an equally riveting, moving story of two sisters with psychosocial disability the nature of which no one knew. Like Apolonia and Chris, Lolita and Josephine Bayron have never been diagnosed by a doctor.

The team found the sisters in two huts that seemed more like cages than anything else.

“‘They had only one position—one had her foot locked in a wooden shackle while sitting on a bamboo couch; the other was in a makeshift hut like a dog house, so she would just stay there. It’s more difficult there. We were not allowed to go near (the hut) because she might turn violent. We were told she hit her father and then strangled her own child,’” said Sodipe, referring to Lolita.

Skin and bones, 26-year-old Lolita was lying face down on the ground, one of her feet was also locked in a wooden manacle. She looked dazed.

According to her parents, Lolita gave birth in Cebu, immediately went to work and returned to San Isidro soon after. One day, she went berserk, attacked her father and strangled her two-month-old baby with a chain. She has not uttered a word since then.

Lolita used to stay with elder sister Josephine in the makeshift hut that had no flooring. They had to be separated. There were times when both would turn violent and hurt the other.

Reed-thin and restless, Josephine was transferred to a hut
attached to the house of her parents. One of her feet was also locked in a wooden shackle. The circumstances surrounding her case have disturbing parallels with that of Lolita’s. She went to work in the city and returned to San Isidro after several months, incoherent and out of touch.

Lolita and Josephine have a brother who has also a psychosocial disability. He had been away for three days when the production team arrived in San Isidro. The Bayrons had no idea where to look for him.

**Visual vs nonvisual stories**

The Barrientoses and the Bayrons are perfect case studies as the human face of persons with disabilities. Their stories have all the elements needed by a producer to “write for the ear, shoot for the eye, aim for the heart.” But the task is easier said than done.

Television is an emotional medium, and visuals are its main
source of power. Thus, the oft-repeated reminder to every broadcast journalist: Show, don’t tell.

The primacy of images over the spoken word in broadcast rests on three basic principles of visual communication:

- Humans are visual first, verbal second.
- Good visuals make people feel first and think second. Emotions drive decisions.
- Visuals are the most effective communications vehicle for evoking emotion and getting people to take action.

But not all broadcast stories are visual. Visual stories are those that show action, drama and emotion. Breaking news, disaster, crime and war stories are the visual stories that attract attention—and with it the ratings—because of their energy and movement. Viewers are technically given a front row seat to witness an event happening elsewhere and be part of the action, even if vicariously.

Despite its haunting images of pain and sorrow, the stories of the
Barrientoses and Bayrons belong to the nonvisual category. The focus on their lives revolves around an issue—the plight of PWDs in the Philippines—as opposed to an action-packed incident or event, which the camera literally follows as a matter of course. Action is injected in nonvisual stories through variations in camera shots (close-up, medium shot, long/wide shot,) camera movement (panning, tilting, zooming, using dolly or crane) and other visuals that may include graphics and photographs.

The drama or the most emotional moments of these nonvisual stories are often highlighted through close-up or extreme close-up shots, where viewers come face-to-face with the characters of the narrative and feel their moving stories. They see tears welling in an abused victim’s eyes, joy in a triumphant graduate’s smile, or horror in a frightened child’s face—and share the overwhelming emotion.
Human rights approach

The images of Apolonia and Chris and that of Lolita and Josephine in their miserable environments are strong enough to stand alone and could very well tell a story of misfortune and neglect, among others. But there are limitations to the execution and use of visuals, particularly videos, when dealing with persons with disabilities. One such limitation is the use of the most powerful of all shots—the close-up and extreme close-up.

Close-up shots of the face of a PWD are discouraged because these are deemed intrusive and disrespectful since the emphasis is on the disability or its effects. Such a presentation may expose the subject to mockery and discrimination, not to mention exploitation. This is the human rights approach to the PWD issue.

By all indications, the Filipino public understands or at the very least recognizes the human rights approach.

The Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI) was severely criticized when
it used in its front page (upper fold) a montage of four photos of impeachment trial witness Demetrio Vicente in “unflattering” poses. Vicente had suffered a stroke twice that left him with partial paralysis and speech impairment.

The PDI photos went viral and immediately triggered hostile reactions. Media watchdogs and netizens invariably described the photo montage as “tasteless,” “crass,” “insensitive,” “mean” and “malicious,” among others. One tweet asked what was the intent of the four photos. The Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR) took PDI to task, saying, “The paper violated both the universally accepted ethical principle of humaneness and its own Manual of Style and Usage.”

The Inquirer apologized, saying it was not the paper’s intention to disparage Vicente. But its initial reaction, relayed through Twitter, was “those were the only photos available.” Other news outfits used photos of Vicente taken from different angles, minus signs that the witness had a stroke.

Mainstream media have perpetuated certain PWD stereotypes that represent two extremes. Often PWDs are the victims or helpless objects of pity and sympathy, if not ridicule. He or she is the fragile but patient martyr waiting for redemption. The other stereotype is the hero who is able to overcome physical limitations and succeed at a task that by implication is the preserve of persons without any disability. He or she can also be the villain, whose disability is supposed to be the very reason for his or her bad behavior.

These extreme portrayals are not consistent with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). The convention promotes, protects and ensures the full enjoyment of human rights by and equality under the law of PWDs. The Philippines is a signatory of the international treaty.
Getting consent

In tackling PWDs for broadcast, it is standard procedure to ask for the consent of case studies or interviewees before cameras start rolling. It is the responsibility of producers to provide full disclosure or explanation of the nature of the story and other necessary details in the process of securing consent. The permission, whether verbal or written, is secured from parents, family or the guardian.

Behind this protocol is an all-important principle: respect for the privacy of the subject. Whether it’s a one-minute breaking news, a three-minute feature or a two-hour-long documentary, broadcast practitioners need to make sure that subjects are portrayed accurately and appropriately without invading their privacy and putting them in harm’s way. These ethical considerations, which have a bearing on production details such as what to shoot and what not to shoot, have far reaching implications. The broadcast journalist’s responsibility after all goes beyond the production and airing of the story. He or she is also accountable for the story’s repercussions (The chapter “Ethical Guidelines for Disability Reporting” discusses media accountability in greater detail).

The Probe production team that went to San Isidro did not have any difficulty getting the necessary consent to do the stories of the Barrientoses and Bayrons.

“Maybe because we’re part of media and they were thinking that once the story airs, there might be people who would help them. Maybe they were also excited because somebody reached out to them and their place is really so far. People call them ‘autistic,’” Sodipe said.

Indeed, help came for the Bayron sisters after the feature aired on the ABS-CBN’s program “Krusada.” When a team from VERA Files visited San Isidro in 2013 for the book The Right to Vote, Lolita was no longer staying in the makeshift hut that was described like a doghouse. She lived with Josephine in a hut with two five-square-
meter rooms. Made of nipa and bamboo, the house had bamboo slats for flooring.

“Someone gave them financial assistance when their story aired on ‘Krusada.’ A hut was built for them. When we went there, Lolita was tied to a post while Josephine still had one foot locked in a wooden shackle,” said VERA Files’ Lala Ordenes, one of the writers of The Right to Vote.

The life circumstances of the Bayrons did not change much despite the assistance. Pictures taken during VERA Files’ visit to San Isidro attest to this. A photograph of a half-naked Josephine showed her lying on the floor face down with her left foot pinned to the floor by the improvised wooden shackle. A naked Lolita was tied to a post in the other room, her food and feces scattered all over the place.

Although the Barrientoses and the Bayrons opened and shared details of their private lives freely, the permission they granted to complete strangers with cameras inside their homes could not be considered a green light to shoot or film at will. Consent is never a blank check. There are journalistic rules and ethical principles to abide by.

Demands of video

“Close-ups are a no-no. But how can you tell that story without any close-up? When you describe them with their feet in shackles, what video would you use? You can’t use a wide shot because Lolita was inside a hut,” said Sodipe.

She said the rule on avoiding close-up shots is easier to follow for print and online media, which use mostly still photos. For broadcast, which relies on video, the rule is more honored in the breach.

In visual grammar, a shot is the equivalent of a word. A sequence or series of shots with a clear idea is the equivalent of a sentence.
A complete sequence is composed of a close-up, medium shot and wide shot of a scene. The wide shot, also called establishing shot, shows where the action is taking place and provides context. Medium and close-up shots provide the details of the action. In a sequence without shooting limitations, half of the shots are close-ups and extreme close-ups while the other half is a mix of medium and wide shots.

Two other types of shots—the cutaway and cut-in—add variety and more information to a sequence. The cutaway is a shot of some other action not taking place in the main scene. It can be a shot of the audience in a concert while the singer belting out a song is the main scene. A cut-in is a close-up shot of something visible in the main scene. These shots can shorten a long continuous sequence.

For more variety of shots of a single scene, the camera can also do a pan (left to right or right to left) or tilt (up or down or down or up), or use its lens to zoom in or out of the subject. The camera can also move closer or farther away from the subject for different perspectives. This can also be done using a dolly or a crane.

Because video images are fundamentally flat or one dimensional, including an object in the background or foreground gives viewers a sense of depth or depth of field. Changing the focus of the lens between the nearest and farthest objects in the scene is called rack focus.

As a rule, in television, no shot should last more than 30 seconds, and no scene should last longer than three minutes.

Stories for broadcast need a variety of shots, perspectives and points of view to come up with good sequences. For a smooth edit, where images are put together in a logical sequence, each shot should be related to the others.

The production process makes close coordination between the broadcast journalist and the cameraperson a must. More so in a situation involving PWDs and with little room to move around to capture different angles for a variety of shots.
Taking pictures and video of disability

The adage “a picture is worth a thousand words” is one good reminder that every journalist should keep in mind when taking pictures and video. Visuals transmit a lot of information. It can identify a person, place or an event; document an incident, tell a story or elicit emotions. When images are not clear or not properly executed, their messages are misread. People tend to connect the dots and give their own interpretation of whatever they see.

Captions, in the case of stills, and voiceovers (and natural sound), in the case of videos, are meant to help communicate accurately to viewers what the images are supposed to convey. Both captions and voiceovers must refer to what people see, but go beyond the actual visuals and provide additional information.

Extra care must be exerted in shooting images, more so when dealing with sensitive subjects like PWDs. If journalists are advised to avoid the stereotypes and do away with sensational and negative images, it is because one’s disability in this case does not define a person. People are complex and visuals that build or show character say more about a person than the disability that the lens ordinarily captures. Displaying a naked woman is not the only way to present a bold film.

When taking photographs and videos, composition is key. That is, the arrangement of visual elements within the frame (of the camera’s viewfinder). Here are some useful tips in taking good visuals:

- **Keep it simple.** Eliminate distractions. Clutter within the frame diverts attention away from the primary focus of the visual.
- **Apply the rule of thirds.** This rule divides the frame into nine equally spaced segments through two intersecting horizontal and vertical lines. The important elements of the subject should be placed along the lines, particularly its intersecting points, because these generate the most interest. In a video interview, the eye lines of the subject can be positioned along the top horizontal line of the frame and the interviewee’s face should be on either the left or right vertical line—not in the center.
- Observe balance in the arrangement of shapes, colors and lighting.
- Pay attention to lighting as this can affect the overall quality of the visual.
- Place the camera on the eye level of the interviewee.

**Follow the proper framing.** In an interview, the standard is the medium shot. The head and upper chest of the subject are the focus, with the subject off center to one side or the other to provide talking space. There is a little headroom above the subject. In a video interview, the interviewer sits or stands beside the camera and the interviewee is asked to look at the interviewer, not at the camera. Some interviewees tend to be very animated, which makes it necessary to have an allowance or space for any movement of the interviewee.

- **Go for the correct placing.** Make sure that people are in the scene and that action happens within the frame.

- Use a tripod (or any device) to stabilize the shot. Shaky (video) shots are difficult to watch. For the same reason, “firehosing” or continuous panning is a no-no. When doing a pan, tilt or zoom, first take 10 to 20 seconds of the shot before moving the camera.

- Set white balance of the camera to match the type of light available at the shoot and remove other colorcasts due to different light sources. Outdoor or natural light adds a bluish tinge while indoor light casts a yellow tint to what people see as white.

Shots can be composed in many ways. When shooting PWD images, go for a variety of shots, perspectives and points of view, careful not to linger on unflattering close-ups. Moving closer or farther away from the subject gives a different perspective right way. Placing the PWD in his or her environment can give some background or context to their story.

And in cases where the PWD agrees to be interviewed but refuses to be seen on camera, use an angle that will hide his or her identity, making sure that the subject is still presented in a respectable manner. As in any endeavor, the practitioner must know the rules to know how to break them... and create something new.
Limitations during shoots

In the case of the Bayron sisters, the limitations during the shoot were overwhelming.

A sequence is not complete without a close-up, but the team had to avoid taking close-up shots. There was also very limited movement on the part of the subjects, particularly Lolita, who was inside a small makeshift hut with her foot in a wooden shackle. Her parents warned the cameraman not to get too close because their daughter might become violent.

The shoot involving Josephine was similarly difficult, but there was room to maneuver the camera. Seated on a bamboo pole in a porch-like area in front of her hut, Josephine’s environment gave the cameraman a chance to take different shots.

“Even if she was seated there, we could wait for that chance when she would talk or move from her seat. So we could take and use those shots. You really have to think hard how to execute the shots,” Sodipe said.

She added, “We had a difficult time because we had a few angles, and most of these were just medium and wide shots. The close-up, it should not focus on the disability or the face of the PWD. Because we deliberately cut down on our usual shots, we lacked the required visuals (for editing the piece).”

The rule of thumb during shoots among Probe producers is to take three to five sequences of situationers for every interviewee. Every sequence should have at least 15 different shots. These sequences do not yet include establishing shots and other situationers or B-rolls that give context and add color to the story.

For the 10-minute feature on the Barrientoses and Bayrons, the production team finished the shoot in six hours—three hours each with the two sets of case studies. The limited time was due to the location of
the shoot and the tight production schedule. Mabini was at least three hours away from the capital Tagbilaran City. Going to the community of the Barrientoses and Bayrons in San Isidro involved at least a 30-minute walk.

The limited shooting time and limited shots, particularly close-ups, made editing of the material more difficult. To solve the problem of “incomplete” sequences due to the lack of close-up shots, the editor zoomed in on some of the medium shots. In one of the cuts, the editor used a reverse effect on a video showing Josephine’s hands on the way up instead of down.

Inside the edit room, the lack of videos is a common plaint and major concern of editors.

Shaky shots are a no-no; that is why the use of a tripod is recommended. In cases where cameras are handheld, camerapersons are advised to take a steady shot and pause for four to five seconds for every shot to give editors a natural place to cut.

When panning or titling the camera, several takes of each shot at different speeds must be done for more edit possibilities. Most of the time, camerapersons are advised to move the camera closer to the subject instead of zooming in because it is hard to edit a shot with a zoom.

In general, taking different types of shots and making them a little longer than intended are ideal for editing purposes. But the reality on the ground is not always ideal.

**What’s acceptable, what’s not**

Shooting a story about persons with disabilities is a tough balancing act. It is difficult to highlight PWD achievements without underscoring their disabilities. The much-criticized stereotype portrayal of PWDs as either heroes or objects of sympathy is acceptable to and even appreciated by others in the sector, however.
During a focus group discussion (FGD) for this book, lawyer Jessica Magbanua of the Office of the Solicitor General said she would like people to know about her condition and how she was able to hurdle the challenges.

A wheelchair user, she was born with spina bifida and severe clubfeet. Magbanua won gold medals in the Women’s Wheelchair Table Tennis during the Luzon Paragames in 2005 and the Third Davao City Table Tennis Open in 2006.

Magbanua has been featured in a television program that showed her leaving her wheelchair and slowly dragging herself up a flight of stairs to a court hearing on the upper floor because there was no elevator.

“I really showed them; I went up the stairs. (But the TV program) didn’t show that (I had a difficult time) going up. It showed the steps (that I climbed), my feet (as I was) going up. There was no whole body shot—(only) my hands and my feet, like that, dragging my feet up. The way it was edited, it didn’t show that I had great difficulty climbing the stairs. So those were instances to prove the point that government offices were not accessible to PWDs,” Magbanua said in Filipino.

She said she found the shoot done with taste and sensitivity.

Magbanua, as well as majority of the disability activists who participated in the FGD, similarly appreciated a three-minute segment of the news program “24 Oras” about the distribution of specialized wheelchairs to some PWDs by the Kapuso Foundation. Kapuso Foundation is the socio-civic arm of GMA Network. “24 Oras” is the flagship news program of the television network.

The short report first focused on nine-year-old Arrabela who was diagnosed with osteogenesis imperfecta, a congenital bone disorder also known as brittle bone disease. With deformed feet (shown on video with medium shot), the child dreamed of having a wheelchair she could use going to a “normal” school. Kapuso Foundation granted
her wish and that of three other children like Arrabela who needed wheelchairs that fit their physique. The news feature had the children thanking GMA Kapuso for the wheelchair.

While FGD participants agreed that the feature served as a vehicle to promote the foundation and network’s image, the project itself—that of donating specialized wheelchairs—was laudable.

**Visual recognition**

While visual presentation of PWDs in the country has often followed traditional concepts of disability most viewers have gotten used to, the campaign for “inclusivity” has started to gain ground abroad.

Film festivals and documentaries about persons with disabilities have won praise and awards. “Shooting Beauty,” a documentary following people with cerebral palsy who were given cheap cameras to document their own lives, has won the audience award eight times and best documentary four times in various film festivals.

Hollywood has opened its door to persons with disabilities like actor Chris Burke who has Down syndrome. Lauren Potter, who also has Down syndrome, and Ali Stroker, who is paralyzed from chest down, have starred in the television series “Glee.”

Sundance TV airs the reality show “Push Girls,” which chronicles the day-to-day challenges faced by four paralyzed, wheelchair-using women. Actress Teal Sherer, a paraplegic, stars in the online comedy series “My Gimpy Life,” which she herself created based loosely on her experience as a wheelchair user navigating Hollywood.

Giving attention to a big yet largely ignored market, the advertising world has also opened its doors to PWDs. People with disabilities have modeled for Starbucks, Debenhams, Marks & Spencer, Diesel, Nordstrom, Target, Nike, L’Oreal and Mutual of Obama insurance, among others.
Interestingly, when Target casted a six-year-old boy with Down syndrome as one of the models of its children clothing ad, it was a blog of a father of a special child—not the department store chain—who called attention to the move. He praised Target for not pulling a publicity stunt at the expense of a PWD. Target’s message seemed clear: ‘Twas nothing unusual about hiring a PWD for a modeling job. Nordstrom also tapped the boy for its ad months after.

In the United Kingdom, the campaign for a fashion line of Debenhams that featured a wheelchair user as a model got a positive response. The department store chain decided to do a nationwide promotion instead of its original plan to display the ad in only four of its stores.

Nike has not only designed prosthetic legs, it has also made shoes for prosthetic legs.

In 2013, McDonald’s Philippines launched its “Kuya” ad, which featured two brothers chatting over a McSaver’s breakfast. The 45-second ad had Kuya, the big brother with Down syndrome, advising his brother how to win a lady’s heart with a killer smile. The light conversation flowed freely with Kuya telling his respectful brother that he would treat him next time.

The ad, which implied that McDonald’s is for everyone who eats, was done using mostly medium shots and a smattering of wide and close-up shots. It was more about a PWD’s daily life, nothing about overcoming obstacles or being an object of pity.

Visual recognition of PWDs has slowly paved the way for the inclusion that people with disabilities have been fighting for.

The limitations notwithstanding, there is no dearth of examples in coming up with visual images for PWDs. Creativity is the key.
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The Right Language
By Ellen Tordesillas
Media need to use appropriate language when reporting about disability. PHOTO BY MARIO IGNACIO IV
By today’s standards, these passages would be considered not
disability-friendly and -sensitive. Translators of the Scriptures would
have been asked to use the “People First Language” and current and
appropriate terminology: a person with speech disability, a person
with mobility impairment, a person without limbs, and a person who
has no vision.

Indeed, the language when referring to persons with disabilities
(PWDs) has greatly evolved as the global movement to foster respect
for their rights and dignity and to promote inclusiveness gains ground.
But, then as now, PWDs still endure incorrect and harmful language
that reduces them to symptoms, medical terms or, worse, labels and
negative stereotypes. The media are among the major offenders.

The February 2015 news reports about a woman who managed
to board a South Korea-bound airplane at the Kalibo International
Airport and arrive at the Incheon Airport without a ticket or travel
documents are a good example.

The state-run Philippine News Agency called her “mentally
deranged.” Manila Times said she was “deranged.” Manila Bulletin described her as “mentally challenged.” The three reports used adjectives disability advocates reject, especially “deranged” which implies insanity. When the story first broke, the woman’s condition had not been established.

The Philippine Daily Inquirer reported that the passenger “is believed to be suffering from a mental illness.” The Aklan Forum Journal said she was “suffering from schizophrenia.”

These phrases are likewise problematic. Guidelines on reporting and writing about disabilities discourage the use of the terms “suffers from,” “afflicted with” and “a victim of.” Not only do they border on sensationalism, these terms assume that the person with a disability is suffering or living a reduced quality of life. This may not be the case: A disability does not necessarily cause pain or require medical attention.

The best thing to do? Use neutral language when describing a person who has disability. Just state the facts about the nature of the disability. For example, “She has a mental disability.”

Which is what television station GMA strove to do in a follow-up story after airport officials had declared the state of the woman’s mental health. The passenger was “babaeng may sakit sa pag-iisip (a woman with mental illness).” GMA also used the People First Language.

**Hurtful language**

There are many words and expressions in our daily language that offend PWDs without the speaker or writer probably realizing the hurt he or she is causing.

Take the adjective “dumb” that some use to refer to people who have no speech. It is hurtful because it conveys not only inability to speak but also being ignorant or stupid.
"Maimed" gives the impression of being ugly and disfigured. "Lame," often used to refer to a person unable to walk normally because of an injury or illness affecting the leg or foot, also conveys weakness and unconvincing as in "a lame excuse."

Although acceptable to many persons with visual disability, the use of the word "blind" is an issue for others. Those who dislike being described as "blind" say it connotes deficiencies such as inability to accept reality and unthinking loyalty as in the phrase "blind loyalty."

**Filipino language**

The hurtful impact of inappropriate language is sharper in the local language.

Local tabloids abound with insensitive, attention-grabbing descriptions of persons with disabilities. The chapter "Ethical Guidelines for Disability Reporting" lists a good number of examples such as this headline in *Remate*: "Ngongo at may kapansanan na nga, gumagawa pa rin ng kamalasadan (Person with cleft palate and disability still does atrocious act)"

It doesn’t help that many Filipinos have a penchant for converting a person’s disability into nicknames, like "Menteng bulag (Menteng the blind)" or "Iskong pilay (Isko the cripple)."

Others have this habit of identifying or labeling a person through his or her disability.

"Tinatawag ako noon na ‘Pilay (They would call me ‘Lame).’"

Dennis Ilagan, who has cerebral palsy, said. "Kasi dati pagka naglalakad ako, para akong lasing. Kaya ‘Lasenggerong pilay’ (And because I walked like someone who’s drunk, they would call me "Drunken lame)."

Emerito Rojas, founder and president of the New Vois Association of the Philippines, was given the monicker "Boy Robot" by a comedian
and radio personality. Rojas, whose voice box was removed because of laryngeal cancer, speaks using a handheld electronic device called electrolarynx, which replaces the functions of his vocal cords. The sound he produces is akin to that of a robot.

Ronnel del Rio, who has visual disability, said he and his friends affectionately called one another “bulag (blind)” when they were still at the Philippine National School for the Blind. He had no problem with that, but Del Rio’s father felt differently when friends would tease him because of his disability.

“Huwag mong gaganyanin. Salanta na nga yan, gaganyanin pa (Don’t treat him that way. He’s already damaged, then you treat him that way),” Del Rio recalls how his father would tell off people.

“Salanta”—damaged or battered—wasn’t a pleasant term, but it was how people in Batangas, where Del Rio hails from, would refer to a person with disability.

State lawyer Jessica Magbanua, who was born with spina bifida and severe clubfeet and uses a wheelchair, said some people call her “Ika.” It could be an abbreviation of her name, but it’s also the Filipino word for someone who walks in a twisted way.

Even if some PWDs have come to accept their being called by their disability, it still hurts, especially for members of their family, said Celia Garcia, who has a child who is deaf and blind.

The practice of calling and describing a person by his or her disability is immortalized in the popular folk song “Awit ng Pulubi.” It’s about four beggars in the town of San Roque who one day tried to have fun. “Nagsayaw ang pilay, umawit ang pipi/Nanood ang bulag, nakinig ang bingi,” the song goes. The English translation: “The cripple gaily danced, the mute sang a melody/The blind enjoyed the sight, and the deaf gladly listened.”

A saying in Filipino uses the phrase “singkong duling,” which literally means “cross-eyed five centavos,” to underscore grudgingly
how one didn’t receive anything from a person contrary to expectations: “Wala akong natanggap ni singkong duling (I didn’t get anything, not even a cross-eyed five centavo).” How an eye condition got to be connected with a scrooge is a reflection of the negative attitude toward disability.

If the French author Victor Hugo has his “Hunchback of Notre Dame,” a character depicted as ugly and frightful because of his physical disfigurement, the Philippines’ Pablo S. Gomez has “Kampanerang Kuba,” a comic series that was turned into a soap opera.

Role of language

“Language is important,” said the United Nations in its guide for human rights monitors looking into the implementation of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

When language provides incorrect or negative perceptions about disabilities and contributes to violations of the rights of PWDs, it becomes one of the biggest barriers to their full inclusion in society.

Journalists can help tear down the barrier by using appropriate, consensus-preferred terminology when referring to disabilities. They must strive for accuracy, bearing in mind that words have a precise meaning and are not interchangeable. And yes, words really do make a difference.

“To do so otherwise is substandard journalism,” said the University of Kansas in its Guidelines for Reporting and Writing about People with Disabilities.
People first

For decades, it has been the practice to call a person with a disability a “disabled person” or lump all of them into one category called “the disabled.” This, according to disability advocates, implies that they are the disability rather than what they really are—a person with a disability.

There was also a time when “differently abled” was the buzzword. PWDs no longer appreciate being described as such because they say it has a patronizing connotation and sets them apart from the rest of society, a situation they have been fighting against.

Thus was born People First Language, which places focus on the person, not the disability. “It is a language that recognizes that the individual is what is important, not the disability,” said American disability activist Betsy Southall.

Said Southall: “No one would dare say that someone is ‘cancerous.’ To say that would be to say that they are dangerous and deadly. It is an inaccurate term. Instead, we would say that the individual has cancer. Saying that someone is ‘disabled’ is just as inaccurate. People with disabilities live full, rich and productive lives.”


However, “disabled persons” remains acceptable in certain countries such as the United Kingdom, as seen in its 2010 Equality Act, and even in some U.N. proceedings. Media guidelines from the International Labor Organization, for example, use “people with disabilities” and “disabled people” interchangeably, reflecting accepted usage in different parts of the world.

There are instances, too, when a person with disability himself or herself prefers the use of certain terminology, even if it isn’t in keeping
with the People First Language.

On occasions like this, the U.N. suggests respecting that person’s wishes, unless it can be considered derogatory or undermining dignity. Local disability advocates also say they don’t mind when people, including journalists, make mistakes as long as the terms were used without malice.

The language of the law

Even Philippine laws on PWDs reflect the evolving language, including the failure of some to keep up with the times.

The Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1954, one of the earlier laws on disability, used the terms “handicapped persons” and “disabled persons.”

When it was enacted in 1992, Republic Act 7277 was originally titled “Magna Carta for Disabled Persons.” The title was only changed to “Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities” in 2007 when it was amended through R.A. 9442, a year after the Philippines signed the UNCRPD.

The term “differently abled” first appeared in Philippine law in 1997, the Social Reform and Poverty Alleviation Act. The umbrella organization for PWDs called the Philippine Sports for the Differently Abled (Philspada) was also established that year.

Although the term PWD has been gaining popularity in recent years, participants of a Social Weather Stations (SWS) focus group discussion said some people still prefer to use “differently abled.” Some local ordinances also still use the term. Even the Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act of 2010 used the term “differently abled” to refer to PWDs under the vulnerable and marginalized groups.

The Philippine media have likewise not been quick to adopt
the correct language for PWD. In March 2015, Sen. Paolo Benigno “Bam” Aguirre Aquino IV filed a bill seeking to exempt persons with disabilities from paying the 12 percent value-added tax.

The term “persons with disabilities” was correctly used in the text of the news items about the bill. But the headline of one report read, “Tax break eyed for differently abled.”

Basic principles

Despite the evolving language on disability, certain basic principles remain constant and should serve as guidelines for the media when reporting on disability.

1. **Put the person first, not the disability.** People are not conditions. The disability does not define a person. So, say “person with disability” instead of “disabled person.” It’s “She has a child with autism,” not “She has an autistic child.”

   A table of terms to avoid and how to make them sensitive and “People First” in both English and Filipino has been put together for this chapter with the help of disability style guides and the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino.

2. **Focus on the issue, rather than the disability.** If the disability is not relevant to the story, why even mention it?

3. **Emphasize abilities, not limitations.** “He walks with crutches” is better than lame or crippled.

4. **Don’t sensationalize.** Don’t make persons with disabilities superheroes.

   An ABS-CBN soap opera, “Budoy,” was about a boy who has
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Avoid</th>
<th>Recommended</th>
<th>Translated to Filipino</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autistic</td>
<td>Person with autism</td>
<td>Taong may awtismo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth defects, deformity</td>
<td>Person born with a disability; person with a disability from birth; person with congenital disability</td>
<td>Taong ipinanganak na may kapansanan; taong may kapansanan mula sa pagkasilang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blind; visually impaired</td>
<td>Person who is blind (for complete loss of vision); person with visual disability; person with low vision</td>
<td>Taong hindi makakita; mahina ang paningin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brain damaged</td>
<td>Person with brain injury; person who has sustained a brain injury</td>
<td>Taong may sakit/pinsala sa utak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crazy; insane; mental patient; psycho; nut; unsound mind; demented; manic; neurotic; psychotic; lunatic; schizophrenic</td>
<td>Person with mental disability; person who has schizophrenia; person with psychosocial disability</td>
<td>Taong may kapansanan sa pag-iisip Taong may problema sa pag-iisip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cripple; lame</td>
<td>Person who has difficulty walking; person with a physical disability; person with mobility impairment, person who walks with crutches; person who uses a walker</td>
<td>Taong may kapansanan sa paglakad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf mute</td>
<td>Person who has difficulty hearing and speaking</td>
<td>Taong may kapansanan sa pandinig/pananalita/pagbigkas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf; hearing impaired</td>
<td>Person who is deaf (complete hearing loss); person with hearing disability; hard of hearing (Sign language users are referred to as “the Deaf.”)</td>
<td>Taong hindi makarinig; mahina ang pandinig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabled; differently abled; handicapped</td>
<td>Person with disability</td>
<td>Taong may kapansanan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid</td>
<td>Recommended</td>
<td>Translated to Filipino</td>
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<td>----------------------------</td>
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<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dumb</td>
<td>Person who has speech disability</td>
<td>Taong may problema sa pagsasalita</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dwarf; midget</td>
<td>Person who is not tall; person with short stature; someone with restricted growth or short stature</td>
<td>Taong kulang sa taas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harelip</td>
<td>Person who has a cleft palate</td>
<td>Taong may bingot (cleft palate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyper</td>
<td>Person with ADHD or person with ADD; person with attention deficit or hyperactivity disorder</td>
<td>Taong may ADHD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invalid</td>
<td>Person made weak by injury or illness</td>
<td>Taong pinahina ng karamdaman o kapansanan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mongoloid; mongol</td>
<td>Person with Down Syndrome</td>
<td>Taong may Down Sindrom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able-bodied; normal</td>
<td>Person without disability</td>
<td>Taong walang kapansansan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraplegic</td>
<td>Person who has leg paralysis</td>
<td>Taong paralisado ang paa/binti/kamay/braso/hita</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retarded; slow learner, mentally handicapped, mentally defective, mentally retarded, idiot, imbecile, moron, retard, slow</td>
<td>Person with intellectual disability; person with learning disability; person with developmental disability</td>
<td>Taong may problemang intelektual; taong may kapansanan sa pagkatuto; taong may problema sa pagkatuto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spastic</td>
<td>Person who has muscle spasms, person with cerebral palsy</td>
<td>Taong may palsi/cerebral palsy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stutterer, tongue tied, mute</td>
<td>Person with speech impairment; Person who stutters</td>
<td>Taong may problema sa pananalita</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheelchair bound; confined to a wheelchair; wheelchaired</td>
<td>Person using wheelchair; a wheelchair user</td>
<td>Taong gumagamit ng wheelchair</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
intellectual disability and has been performing poorly in school. One day, he gets hit by a lightning and transforms into a math and spelling bee genius and a kung fu master. Making the story twist more laughable, Budoy is struck by lightning a second time and reverts to what he used to be like.

Portraying PWDs in an unrealistic manner can turn them into freaks.

5. Don’t condescend. Treat PWDs as regular human beings. Being treated as “special” and different makes them more conscious of their disability.

In fact, it may come as a surprise to journalists that PWDs are at ease with the terminology used to describe daily living activities. For example, people who use wheelchairs go for “walks” and people with visual disability “see” what you mean.

“A disability may just mean that some things are done in a different manner, but that doesn’t mean the words used to describe the activity must be different,” said a guidebook prepared by Canada’s Human Resources and Skills Development.

Other do’s and don’ts

■ Always make sure your choice of words is nonjudgmental and non-emotional even as you strive to provide accurate descriptions.

■ Avoid “burden,” “incompetent” and “invalid,” which suggest PWDs are inferior and should be excluded from activities generally available to people without disabilities.

■ Certain Filipino terms shouldn’t ever find their way into a journalist’s copy:

  Abnoy, baliw, sira-ulo, tililing, may sayad for a person with mental disability
Pilantod for a person who walks with a limp
Ngongo for a person with speech disability
Unano for a person with short stature
Baldado for a person debilitated by injury or illness.

- Some have the mistaken notion that the affixing the word “challenged” to the subject makes the negative description acceptable such as “height-challenged” for not-so-tall individuals. The best way is to state the height.

- Be careful when reporting on disabilities that result from an episode with a prior disease. People who had polio and experienced its after effects have “post-polio” syndrome. They are no longer experiencing the disease.

- Refer to a disease associated with a disability only with chronic diseases such as arthritis, Parkinson’s disease or multiple sclerosis.

- Persons with disabilities should never be referred to as “patients” or “cases” unless the story is referring to their relationship with their doctor or in the context of a hospital or clinical setting.

- Never say that a person who is comatose has become “a vegetable” or “gulay” because he is a human being, not a plant. “He is in coma” or “He is unresponsive” is more appropriate.

- Say “a person using a wheelchair” or a “wheelchair user.” A wheelchair is a liberating tool because it allows a person who is unable to walk to be mobile.

- Avoid using the word “defect” or “defective.” It connotes a merchandise. To use it on a person is dehumanizing.

- Using the words “retarded,” “moron” and “imbecile” to refer to someone with developmental disability is mean.

- “Deaf and dumb” and “deaf mute” are derogatory terms that go beyond the matter of hearing and speaking. They imply that the person has low intellectual ability.

- Mute implies that a person who physically cannot speak are
unable to express themselves, which is not true because there are many ways of doing it using other parts of the body.

- Use “seizure,” not “attack,” “spell” or “fit” for a person with epilepsy who is having a seizure.
- “Disability community” is preferred over “disabled community.”
- Avoid the phrase “disabled sport.” Use instead “sport for athletes with disabilities.”
- Instead of “handicapped seating (parking or washrooms)” use the phrase “accessible seating (parking or washrooms).”

**Challenge to journalists**

For journalists, the People First and other guidelines can pose problems. Some are so restrictive that if strictly followed, the article would lose drama and become boring it won’t “hook” the audience, in the process defeating the purpose of promoting the rights of PWDs.

Some terms also go against the conventions of news writing, especially brevity and conciseness, enough to make newsrooms balk.

When this happens, newsrooms should use their best judgment. Not everyone has the same preference, so the best thing to do is to ask. As much as possible, find a compromise that balances professional standards and ethics with the preferences and recommendations of the disability sector.

It also pays to remember the Golden Rule: “Do unto others what others want to do unto you.” If you were a person with disability, how would you want to be called?

In the end, how a journalist portrays a person with disability speaks of his or her values and attitudes as much as the person being written about.
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Vera Files. (2015, January 6). Vera Files FGD on Reporting on Disabilities [Transcript].


Web and Mobile Accessibility

By Jake Soriano
Users who are blind and use screen reader applications will have an idea of the images on a page through text descriptions which their software can read for them. They can easily proceed to the content they want to access by simply clicking the “Skip” key.

Those with visual disabilities like low vision but are not using any assistive software can easily change texts or entire pages to a bigger size using any browser.

Tabs and a combination of keys help those with disabilities in mobility, who may not be able to use a mouse and have to rely on their keyboards for website navigation.

Visitors who are deaf can access videos and audio content on the website because these come with closed captioning, subtitles or transcripts.

Ten other government and 14 nongovernment websites have these and more features, according to the Philippine Web Accessibility Group (PWAG).

When it comes to news websites, Australia’s news.com.au has
similar elements in its pages that make it more accessible to its audience with different disabilities. The BBC has also committed to accessibility and has a detailed list of guidelines and standards on website development incorporating these PWD-friendly highlights.

But Philippine news websites are a different story and still leave room for improvement.

Like most Internet users who are blind, broadcaster and disability activist Ronnel del Rio relies on a screen reader, a program that, as its name suggests, “reads” the content of an online page for him.

“Pag ako nagbubukas, maraming commercial. Napi-pick-up ng (application) ko yung commercial. Hanggang sa mamaya, iba na yung kwentong binabasa (When I open a page, for example, there are too many ads. My screen reader ends up reading these ads, instead of the report itself),” he said.

And so while local news websites are bookmarked on his browser, he rarely reads them. He would rather get his news from foreign news sites instead.

**Defining Web accessibility**

In the offline world, accessibility is most commonly associated with ramps in buildings, working elevators in the MRT, or parking spaces allotted specifically for PWDs.

But accessibility is an issue in the online world, too. There are barriers there as well that need to be addressed, in this instance by newsrooms in the country and their Web masters.

Del Rio mentioned just one concrete example of these online barriers, based on his personal experience, but enough to discourage him from reading Philippine news websites.

The Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) brings together individuals and organizations from around the world to develop strategies.
guidelines and resources to help make the Web accessible to PWDs. It defines Web accessibility as the “means that people with disabilities can use the Web. More specifically, Web accessibility means that people with disabilities can perceive, understand, navigate and interact with the Web, and that they can contribute to the Web.”

Something is accessible when its design is universal.

Applied to news on the Web, this simply means that the most number of people are able to access without “having to do any extra work or jump through any extra hoops,” according to the North Carolina State University.

News websites become accessible when they address the needs of persons with visual, hearing, mobility and cognitive disabilities. Where
there are codes that guide the construction of buildings in the offline world, there are also rules on online codes that have to be implemented to ensure Web-accessible news.

**Web-accessible news**

When the PWAG audits websites for accessibility, its looks for features like the ones the NCDA has which enable persons with disabilities to use sites without hindrances and without having to do much extra work.

These features are called “maturity stage” checkpoints and range from the most basic Web accessibility requirements to the highly technical. Newsrooms would do great by pointing their Web masters to the PWAG website for a list of these important features.

Many of these elements, however, can already be implemented even without a massive design overhaul.
**Page titles**

All website pages must have a title. Title pages are important because they are often the first thing read by screen reader applications. Their presence thus orients users to which particular page they are in.

**Language**

The language used in the contents of a page should always be included in the code. This allows screen readers or other assistive software to read the content properly and not to revert to a default language.

To demonstrate the importance of this feature, a news report written in Filipino without the language identified might cause applications to read it in a default American accent. Should this happen, the content then would not make sense to the user.

**‘Alt’ texts**

Image alternatives, or “alt” texts, are descriptions that come with a website photo, illustration or chart. Screen readers use them to communicate the image to blind persons.

“Alt” values must be present in all images. They should also be able to appropriately convey the purpose of the image.

Journalists writing “alt” texts should make sure these appropriately convey the purpose of the image. For example, the appropriate “alt” text for a Twitter share button image would be “Tweet” or “Share on Twitter” and not “bird.”

“A good rule of thumb to consider is to include what you might relay over the phone,” said the Pennsylvania State University Accessibility and Usability website on writing good “alt” texts.

“Alt” texts must also be concise and ideally be only around 150 characters. Anything longer might be better included in the text of the report.
Labeled forms and errors

Like images, fillable forms like email or comment boxes must also have associated labels. This allows persons using screen readers or using only their keyboards for navigation to understand what the fields are for, and which information these fields require.

Along with properly labeled forms, errors that result from forms that are not properly filled out must also be adequately explained.

Error messages must try to be as specific as possible as to where the mistake is. An example would be when a required field was left blank by the user or when a phone number does not conform to the required format.

Specific guides on how users can fix the error should be provided.

News website administrators should also consider coding forms so that they retain the information that was correctly entered, except for highly sensitive data like bank or card numbers.

This function allows users to only key in the missing information without having to repeat everything.

It is also recommended that error messages appear before the form instead of after, so it is immediately picked up by a screen reader or is readily seen by a user using only the keyboard.

CAPTCHA and alternative anti-spam mechanisms

All websites have to contend with the problem of spam that are automatically generated by computers. Registration and comment fields are usually the targets of these unwanted or malicious content.

A popular solution to this is CAPTCHA, which stands for Completely Automated Public Turing test to Tell Computers and Humans Apart.
Perhaps the most common CAPTCHA is a distorted image of text or characters which users are required to read, input into a box and then submit.

The assumption is that computers cannot read the image, but humans can.

CAPTCHA, however, poses barriers for PWDs. Unlike other images in a page, a CAPTCHA image cannot contain “alt” texts as these would make them readable for computers. They, therefore, become inaccessible for persons using screen readers.

A CAPTCHA variation requires users to identify audio instead of an image, but then hinders access of deaf users.

An alternative to audio and image CAPTCHA would be those that use simple questions or mathematical problems. Instead of copying what an image or audio says, users are prompted to provide an answer to questions like “5+2=” or “What is the capital of the Philippines?”

Rotating CAPTCHA questions helps prevent hackers from automatically predicting answers.

For news websites with light traffic load, a moderator manually approving postings is another alternative.

Anti-spam technologies and filters might also work better than CAPTCHA by detecting strings and key words commonly associated with automated spam messages.

**Skip links**

Links at the top of news website pages that allow users to skip to the main content are an important accessibility feature.

Skip links are useful for persons with screen readers as these allow the application to bypass other page contents and elements such as advertisements and go straight to the report or the article.

They are also helpful for online users with mobility disabilities, particularly those who do not use a mouse but navigate pages by
using the keyboard, usually the tab key. Skip links allow them to immediately go to the main report without having to tab persistently.

- **Descriptive links**
  Text links should be descriptive (for example, “Continue Reading”) or have associated descriptions instead of being just a generic “More.” This way, users with screen readers also get a sense of where the link would take them.

- **Color**
  Persons with low vision or with disabilities in seeing color might not be able to read texts that are set in backgrounds with not enough contrast.
  Although there is no single rule on this, a useful question for journalists, newsroom managers and Web masters to ask in setting the color contrast of their news websites would be, Would the content still be visible to users even without the use of assistive software or devices?
Blinking, strobing and flashing effects

Animation can help enhance visual storytelling and reporting. Blinking, strobing and flashing effects in websites could, however, be very dangerous and even life-threatening for persons with epilepsy. These effects could trigger seizures, and Web accessibility experts discourage their use.

The Utah State University Center for Persons with Disabilities said the following effects in particular should be avoided: Content that flashes more than three times per second; flashing images that are sufficiently large; and images that have bright contrast between flashes.

Some effects, such as optical illusion images, might not cause seizures but could still cause dizziness and nausea, and may render Web experience unpleasant. These should also be avoided.

In cases where the use of these effects is really necessary, a prior warning should be present on the website. Users should also have the option to turn them off.

Keyboard access

Some persons who have disabilities in mobility may only rely on their keyboards for navigating a news website. It is, therefore, very important that keyboard access is enabled and that users can still fully work around pages without having to use a computer mouse.

A list of shortcut keys should also be provided, and these should be adequately explained to users.

Resizable text

The size of Web texts matters for persons with visual difficulties, such as those with low or poor vision. While all text is technically resizable, the contents of a website should be coded in a way that the resize function works on all platforms or browsers.

Resize features should also be coded properly so that when texts
are made larger, they do not get cut out or do not overlap with other elements of a page.

- **Transcripts**

Video and audio content are not accessible to deaf persons. These should, therefore, always be accompanied by transcripts or have captioning features.

  Transcripts could either come in downloadable files or web pages. Captions can either be hardcoded into the video itself or inserted as a feature that could be turned on or off.

- **Summary of features and contact web master**

An entire page or even just a section of a news website should be allotted for a quick summary of its accessibility functions. This lets PWD users be familiar with features that they could use in navigation.

  The basic requirements for Web accessible news discussed above are not exhaustive. News websites could implement all of them and may still end up having accessibility barriers.
This is why the contact details of the web master is also important for PWD users to know, so they can easily report features that are not working or accessibility problems in case they occur.

**Mobile-accessible news**

In recent years, more and more people have been accessing news and news websites through their smartphones and tablets. This makes it necessary for newsrooms to consider not just Web-accessible but also mobile-accessible content.

The Web Accessibility Initiative said PWDs encounter the same barriers in mobile as in Web platforms, and encourages the same solutions for accessibility.

In considering mobile accessibility, the BBC Mobile Accessibility Guidelines said all the content and functions “must work alongside, and not suppress” the native functions of the device.

Journalists and newsrooms developing mobile applications should
make sure that these do not block or interfere with assistive features that are already available in mobile technology.

For example, resizing content is already built-in on a lot of mobile devices and tablets. The pinch-in and pinch-out gestures to zoom texts and other mobile content should, therefore, not be disabled.

Some mobile devices also have “speak text” functionalities. A mobile news application that suppresses features that highlight, select or copy text could interfere with this function.

For audio and video mobile content, the BBC discourages autoplay. Users should be provided the clear option to opt to play the content, pause it or skip it.

Buttons or links that lead to transcripts or equivalent text of audio and video content should appear in a page before the “Play” button or link.

Mobile notifications should be coded, so they are accessible to screen readers.

The BBC also recommends that mobile versions of a report contain a link to the website version, and vice versa.

“Users should not be forced to use a mobile version on mobile and should be given the option to switch between the full and mobile version (if two versions exist),” it said. “Many users with disabilities also prefer the mobile version of a website on desktop and should not be restricted from using it if there is one available.”

**Legal and economic imperatives**

Web- and mobile-accessible content is not just a moral imperative for journalists and news organizations. There are legal, economic and, most important, just plain good journalism aspects to accessibility as well.

As signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), the Philippines is tasked to
“promote access for persons with disabilities to new information and communications technologies and systems, including the Internet.” The convention also requires the country to encourage “mass media, including providers of information through the Internet, to make their services accessible to persons with disabilities.”

And then there is a business case for Web and mobile accessibility. PWDs make up a significant segment of the Philippine population, and news media outfits cannot afford to neglect them, not for business reasons and certainly not for public service ones.

If Del Rio, who sees himself as only moderately computer savvy,
has problems with online media in the country to the point that he visits only foreign ones, then the same could hold true for the rest of the country's PWDs.

Finally, Web- and mobile-accessible news are ultimately a matter of good journalism.

Inclusion has always been the call of PWDs, and reporting on and about the sector should raise awareness both among the general public and PWDs themselves.
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VERA Files. (2015, January 6). VERA Files FGD on Reporting on Disabilities [Transcript].


Getting it Right: Reporting on Disability in the Philippines is a handbook for Filipino journalists on writing stories on disability with a rights-based approach. The handbook draws from the experience of VERA Files in reporting on disability issues.