National Center on Disability and Journalism

How the media cover disabilities

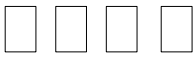
Jennifer LaFleur, UC Berkeley,

National Center for Disability and Journalism

1

What I'll cover

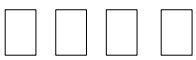
- Teach journalism at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism
- Previously was an investigative editor at several nonprofit newsrooms: Center for Public Integrity, Reveal, ProPublica
- Started covering disability issues because so few people were reporting those stories



2

What I'll cover

- National Center for Disability and Journalism
- Disability journalism
- Best practices
- Resources



3

National Center for Disability and Journalism

- Founded in 1998 by Suzanne Levine in San Francisco to improve and increase disability coverage
- Moved to Arizona State University's Cronkite School in 2008
- Launched contest, style guide, fellowships and trainings



4

Why stories are important

- More than **25%** of the US population has a disability.
- But ableism —stereotypes and harmful narratives about disability — are still rampant.
- Lots of opportunities for reporting on disability issues.
- For many years, coverage was limited.
- Now there are more stories addressing policies/systems.
- But understanding systems is complicated.

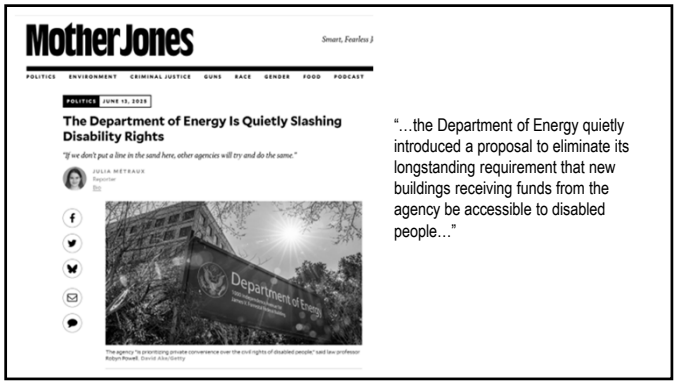
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Disability stories exist on nearly every "beat"

- Public policy
- Environment
- Education
- Transportation
- Housing
- Health care
- Entertainment

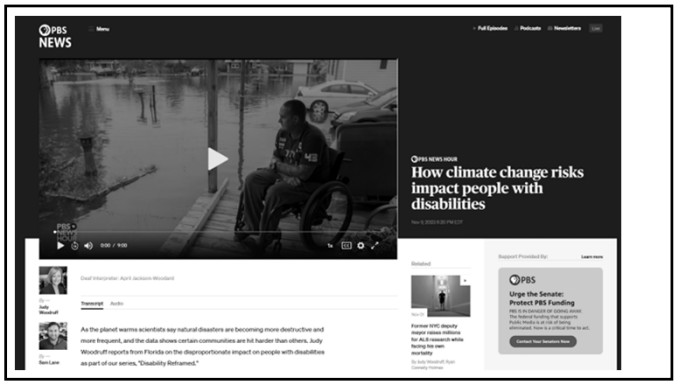


6



"…the Department of Energy quietly introduced a proposal to eliminate its longstanding requirement that new buildings receiving funds from the agency be accessible to disabled people…"

7



8



9

Transportation

Flying Blind, Kelechukwu Ogu





Critics call buses unreliable for those with disabilities

Bi-State's failure to provide reliable buses overloads van service for riders

10

BuzzFeed News
REPORTING TO YOU

The Private Equity Giant KKR Bought Hundreds Of Homes For People With Disabilities. Some Vulnerable Residents Suffered Abuse And Neglect.



11



An NPR investigation of SSI — a program run by the Social Security Administration — found that many disabled people get caught by this "marriage penalty," a left-over rule from decades ago when government policies didn't account for disabled people finding love and getting married.

NPR interviewed dozens of people who rely on SSI but, as a result, say they are stuck because of the program's treatment of those who marry.

www.npr.org/2024/06/18/g-s1-4991/social-security-ssi-marriage-penalty

12


PROPUBLICA
Graphics & Data
Newsletters
About
Nursing Homes Get Old for Many With Disabilities
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ST. LOUIS — Melody Plog never thought she would be trying to move out of a nursing home.
She lived in a St. Louis apartment for 19 years and worked as an accountant until two years ago, when she lost her job. Plog, who has multiple sclerosis, couldn't find new work. When her

13


KQED
'I'd Be Left Alone': Medicaid Cuts Put Disabled Patients' In-Home Care at Risk
After Congress approved roughly $1 trillion in Medicaid cuts over the next decade, California advocates are worried about the future of home-based care covered by Medi-Cal.

14


EDUCATION
Trump administration reverses stance on integration of people with disabilities
OCTOBER 1, 2026 · 5:00 AM ET
HEARD ON ALL THINGS CONSIDERED
Jonaki Mehta
4-Minute Listen
PLAYLIST
TRANSCRIPT
DISABILITY RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS
Hundreds of disability advocates gathered in New York in 2025 to protest cuts to Medicaid and demand the enforcement of disability rights protections.

15

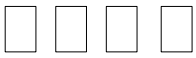
Common misconceptions

- People with disabilities can't speak for themselves.
- Disability is a weakness.
- Disability is a super power.
- Disability is something people want to or need to overcome.
- Accessibility and accommodations are special favors or need to be earned.
- Facilities/programs/websites don't have to be accessible.
- The views/positions of the disability community are the same.

16

NCDJ Style Guide

- Developed to provide consistent guidance on disability language
- In consultation with journalists and disability community
- Regularly updated
- Translated into multiple languages
- Comparison to other style guides with disagreements noted



17

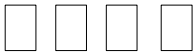
Language choices

- Refer to the disability only when it's relevant to the story.
- Use accurate language, referring to a specific diagnosis when possible.
- Use neutral language, avoiding implications that disability is inherently bad ("has" vs. "suffers from") .
- If it is relevant to the story, ask the person how they would like their disability to be characterized.
- Avoid "special needs" because the needs for accommodations are not special treatments or favors.

18

Language choices

- Person-first language puts the person before their disability ("people with disabilities;" "children with Down syndrome").
- Identity-first language puts the disability at the center ("disabled people;" "autistic students").
- If you're not sure what language to use, ask.



19

Confined to a wheelchair or wheelchair-bound

- Describe a person only in relationship to a piece of equipment.
- They are misleading, as wheelchairs can liberate people, allowing them to move about.
- They are inaccurate, as people who use wheelchairs are not permanently confined in them, but transfer to sleep, sit in chairs, drive cars, etc.

20

Style guide

Mental illness is an umbrella term for many different conditions that affect how individuals act, think, feel or perceive the world. The most common forms of mental illness are **anxiety disorders**, **mood disorders**, and **schizophrenia disorders**.

NCDJ Recommendation: Refer to an individual's mental illness only when it is relevant to the story and the diagnosis comes from a proper source. **Whenever possible, specify the specific illness a person has rather than mental illness in general.**

AP style: The stylebook cautions against describing an individual as mentally ill unless clearly pertinent to a story and the diagnosis is properly sourced. **Specific disorders should be used and the source of the diagnosis identified whenever possible.**

21

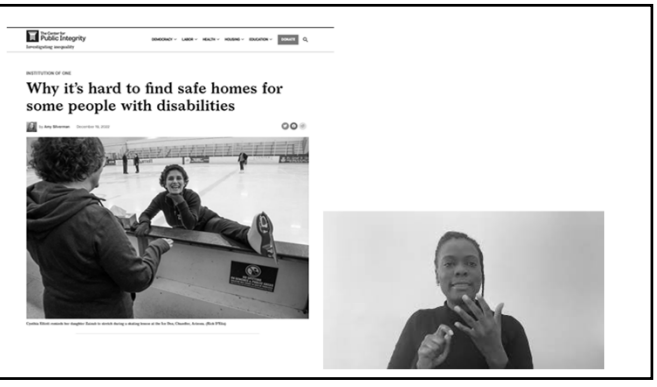
People-centered stories

22

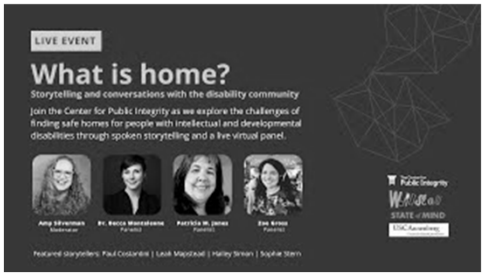
Sourcing

- For years, the disability community was covered without having a voice
- Nothing about us without us.
- Efforts to make stories accessible to disabled audiences; alt txt, plain language, asl
- Mention disability only when relevant to the story

23



24



25



26

ProPublica: Arizona Promised to Help People With Developmental Disabilities. But Some Had to Wait a Long Time. Some Did Not Get Help at All.



27

BuzzFeed News: Some People With Disabilities Were Abused And Neglected After Global Company KKR Took Over More Than 600 Group Homes



Translation done by Sandy Mislow of the Self-Advocacy Association of New York State. She can be reached at: sandy.mislow@gmail.com

28

Data analysis helps us explore systemic issues

- Disability benefits data for adults and children receiving
- Workforce training funding for people with disabilities from the U.S. Department of Labor
- World Bank Disability Data Hub
- U.S. Department of Education, Civil Rights Data Collection
- U.S. Census data

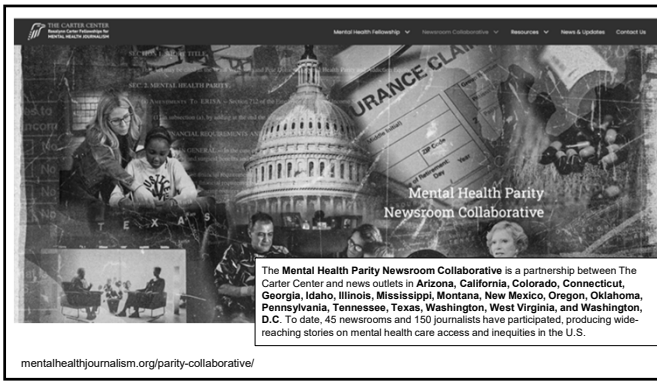
29

Resources

30


Global Investigative Journalism Network
Menu
Donate
Illustration: Alexandra Ramirez for GIJN
Guide to Investigating Disability Issues: Chapter 1 — Understanding Disability
by Emyle Watkins • March 7, 2023
gijn.org

31


THE CARTER CENTER
Mental Health Fellowship
Newsroom Collaborative
Resources
News & Updates
Contact Us
Mental Health Parity Newsroom Collaborative
The Mental Health Parity Newsroom Collaborative is a partnership between The Carter Center and news outlets in Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Mississippi, Montana, New Mexico, Oregon, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Washington, West Virginia, and Washington, D.C. To date, 45 newsrooms and 150 journalists have participated, producing wide-reaching stories on mental health care access and inequities in the U.S.
mentalhealthjournalism.org/parity-collaborative/

32


Media dis&dat
BA Haller's book
Locations of visitors to Media dis&dat
Media & Disability Links
Friday, April 10, 2026
The Global Disability News Network by and for disabled people launches in early 2026
media-dis-n-dat.blogspot.com

33

Key sources

- Disability rights groups. By federal law, every state has an organization that is supposed to protect and advocate for the rights of people with disabilities. Examples: www.disabilityrightsca.org/ and www.equipforequality.org/
- Peer advocates (Example: www.semel.ucla.edu/tarjan/team/kecia-weller)
- Experts in disability studies programs at universities
- People with disabilities

34

Questions?

Link to slides: bit.ly/jaldis26
jlafleur@berkeley.edu

35