

# Toward a More Balanced Representation of Disability? A Content Analysis of Disability Coverage in the Flemish Print Media

Tina Goethals, Dimitri Mortelmans and Geert Van Hove

Volume 24, Number 1, April 2018

Représentations sociales et handicap : regards croisés sur le sens commun du handicap  
Social Representations and Disability: Perspectives on the Common Sense Notions of Disability

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1086208ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1086208ar>

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Publisher(s)

Réseau International sur le Processus de Production du Handicap

ISSN

1499-5549 (print)

2562-6574 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Goethals, T., Mortelmans, D. & Van Hove, G. (2018). Toward a More Balanced Representation of Disability? A Content Analysis of Disability Coverage in the Flemish Print Media. *Développement Humain, Handicap et Changement Social / Human Development, Disability, and Social Change*, 24(1), 109–120.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1086208ar>

Article abstract

Although the relations between media coverage and the public are complex, the media has a powerful influence on the way 'disability' as a phenomenon is perceived and on the process of attitude formation. Hence, it is important to document the depiction of people with disabilities and the myths and stereotypes perpetuated by media portrayals of persons with disabilities. This paper reports on a quantitative examination of the extent and nature of the coverage of people with disabilities in the print media in Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of Belgium. Seven newspapers and 16 magazines between January 2003 and December 2012 were content-analysed. Key findings include a sorely limited coverage, or even total lack of representation, in certain media sources. The study also discovered interesting correlations between gender, age and type of magazine on the one hand, and the type of disability on the other. Analysis also revealed that print media focuses on certain disabilities. In addition, the results showed that, looking over the ten-year time span, some events have more influence than others on the evolution of the quantity of coverage. The paper concludes with a discussion of these findings and their implications, from the perspective of disability studies and with reference to Cooley's concept of the looking glass self. It is argued that media representation of disability reflects certain broader ideologies and socio-political processes shaped by basic exclusionary social frames. Yet, the media do more than hold up a mirror to basic mindsets and frames. As the media functions as mechanisms for strengthening and entrenching the social order, they transmit hegemonic conceptions and play a significant role in the ongoing construction of disability discourses.

## Toward a More Balanced Representation of Disability? A Content Analysis of Disability Coverage in the Flemish Print Media

TINA GOETHALS<sup>1</sup>, DIMITRI MORTELMANS<sup>2</sup> AND GEERT VAN HOVE<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Centre for Disability Studies and Inclusive Education, Department of Special Education, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Ghent University, Belgium

<sup>2</sup> Centre for Longitudinal and Life Course Studies, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, University of Antwerp, Belgium

Article original • Original Article



**Abstract:** Although the relations between media coverage and the public are complex, the media has a powerful influence on the way 'disability' as a phenomenon is perceived and on the process of attitude formation. Hence, it is important to document the depiction of people with disabilities and the myths and stereotypes perpetuated by media portrayals of persons with disabilities. This paper reports on a quantitative examination of the extent and nature of the coverage of people with disabilities in the print media in Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of Belgium. Seven newspapers and 16 magazines between January 2003 and December 2012 were content-analysed. Key findings include a sorely limited coverage, or even total lack of representation, in certain media sources. The study also discovered interesting correlations between gender, age and type of magazine on the one hand, and the type of disability on the other. Analysis also revealed that print media focuses on certain disabilities. In addition, the results showed that, looking over the ten-year time span, some events have more influence than others on the evolution of the quantity of coverage. The paper concludes with a discussion of these findings and their implications, from the perspective of disability studies and with reference to Cooley's concept of the looking glass self. It is argued that media representation of disability reflects certain broader ideologies and socio-political processes shaped by basic exclusionary social frames. Yet, the media do more than hold up a mirror to basic mind-sets and frames. As the media functions as mechanisms for strengthening and entrenching the social order, they transmit hegemonic conceptions and play a significant role in the on-going construction of disability discourses.

**Keywords:** disability, representation, media, intersections, content-analysis

**Résumé :** Même si les relations entre la couverture médiatique et le public sont complexes, la presse a une forte influence non seulement sur la façon dont « le handicap » est perçu en tant que tel, mais également sur le processus de développement des comportements. Par conséquent, il importe de documenter la façon dont sont décrites les personnes en situation de handicap ainsi que les mythes et stéréotypes les concernant et comment ceux-ci sont perpétrés par les médias. Cet article présente une analyse quantitative de l'étendue et du caractère de la couverture médiatique concernant les personnes en situation de handicap dans la presse écrite en Flandres, la partie néerlandophone de la Belgique. Les articles de sept quotidiens et de seize magazines datant de janvier 2003 à décembre 2012 ont été soumis à une analyse de leurs contenus. Les résultats principaux soulignent une couverture particulièrement limitée ou même inexistante dans certains médias. L'étude montre une corrélation intéressante entre le genre, l'âge et le type de magazine d'un côté et le type de handicap de l'autre. L'analyse indique également que la presse écrite se concentre sur certains types de handicap. De plus, les résultats montrent que - sur une période de dix ans - certains événements ont davantage d'influence que d'autres sur l'évolution du nombre de sujets couverts. En conclusion, l'article discute ces résultats ainsi que leurs répercussions sur la base de la perspective des études sur le handicap et en se référant au concept de Cooley du « looking glass self ». On y fait valoir que la représentation médiatique du handicap reflète une gamme plus large d'idéologies et de processus socio-politiques façonnés par des discours d'exclusion de base. Pourtant, les médias ne présentent pas seulement un miroir des mentalités et des façons de penser de base. Vu que les médias fonctionnent comme des mécanismes renforçant et ancrant l'ordre social, ils transmettent des conceptions hégémoniques et jouent un rôle significatif dans la discussion sur le handicap en construction permanente.

**Mots-clés :** handicap, représentation, média, intersections, analyse de contenu

## Introduction

**T**he mass media is a useful source of information about current and historical norms and values, public opinions and attitudes on disability. The content itself especially reflects dominant discourses about disability. This is not to say that media content is a mirror image of the realities of disability identities in the social world. The world we inhabit is a world of representation, and constructions of disability have no essential, fixed or true meaning against which coverage and distortion can be measured (Hall, 1997). In line with the intersectional framework, we believe that disability constitutes as sites of fluid construction and creativity rather than determination. Opposed to the great binary aggregate abled/disabled, reality is far more complex and the social world cannot be neatly divided into binary categories (Jacob, Köbsell, & Wollrad, 2010; Raab, 2007). Hence, the media do not just represent the reality that exists *out there*, nor do they simply reproduce or distribute knowledge: they are active producers of knowledge and construct and constitute the very core of our social existence (Kunz & Fleras, 1998) and dominant discourses on disability.

The mass media play a major role not only in reflecting generally held public attitudes and perceptions on disability, but also in shaping them (Auslander & Gold, 1999; Mutz & Soss, 1997). There are, of course, a number of factors other than press coverage that can influence public opinion on a subject such as disability, ranging from personal experience to historical and political views. Media studies suggest a complex relationship between coverage and the public, but there are evident correlations between increased coverage and growing public priorities (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McLeod, Becker, & Byrnes, 1974). The media not only provide information but also help to create or reinforce ideas about disability and what it means to be human. As Auslander and Gold (1999) state, the media have an influential role in 'news gatekeeping'. Besides, "the amount of media coverage an issue receives is related to the importance placed on that issue

by individuals in society, regardless of any measure of the issue's objective importance" (p. 421). Moreover, Siperstein (2003) points out that the public's perception of capabilities of people with a disability have a major influence on their ideas on education and work for people with a disability, and more generally, on the public's perceptions on inclusion and participation in society. Consequently, a correct media representation contributes to the ways in which people think about inclusion.

Taking into account this nuanced and complex view on disability, media and the public, and in line with the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which gives explicit attention to the correct representation of people with a disability in the media, we want to introduce this first baseline measure study, as the first of a two part study. The second study will examine the portrayals of people with disabilities by means of a framing analysis.

This first media study is conducted to establish a baseline of disability portrayals in Flemish print media through a quantitative content analysis of magazines and newspapers. During ten years (2003-2012), the portrayals of people with disabilities by seven Flemish newspapers and 16 Flemish magazines were systematically analysed, examining how the media represented people with disabilities. In the work presented here, this study seeks to obtain a baseline measure of disability, gender and age distribution across the different sources of current print media. Because media character portrayals and demographics of people with a disability may influence the public's perceptions of social reality (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994; Shrum, 1999), establishing sound baseline measures of media character demographics is a necessary step in conducting research on representation and perceived social reality. As we do not believe in the existence of a single representation, different print media were analysed, ranging from popular to quality press and from targeted to specific audiences to oriented on specific themes.



Despite the ratification of the UNCRPD in Belgium and the fact that 15% of the population are classified as having a disability (World Report on Disability, 2011), the inclusion and participation of people with a disability in Flanders is among the lowest in Europe (FRA, 2010; Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2014). As mentioned, a series of factors are assumed to play part in the process of inclusion, however, there is a lack of research into how people with a disability are culturally represented in the Flemish media. The existing content analytical work done on Flemish media has focussed on the representation of social minority groups other than people with disabilities, or solely on the depiction of people with a disability in the television news (Vissers & Hooghe, 2010). A clear underrepresentation and an emphasis on people with physical disabilities were two of the main findings of this last study. Although these studies are important steps in examining media content, there is still much left to discover, including a more basic study of representation. This study here represented was designed to fill this gap and seeks to examine a baseline measure of disability, gender and age distribution in the depiction of persons with disabilities in the print media.

## Methodology

This study examined articles on disabilities and people with disabilities published in seven newspapers and sixteen magazines in Flanders, Belgium, over a ten-year time span between 2003 and 2012. All of the issues for this period were surveyed, including each section and article. Data from the newspapers were gathered through Gopress, an electronic news archive that contains all the articles of Flemish newspapers. Because the other media chosen was not included in this online archive, we conducted a manual search in the magazines, collected from the Belgian legal deposit. Although there is a legal requirement that copies of publications need to be submitted to this repository, a small number of copies were missing.

Articles were accepted into the study sample if they included a reference to disability in general, or to a specific disability or chronic illness

which incurs disabilities. The selected articles could relate to a broad range of disabilities and conditions which lead to disability, from any cause and at all levels of severity. That reference could appear anywhere in the article: in the headline, text or accompanying image.

Articles were then examined as to the extent of coverage and by the way they related to the year of publication, the demographics and the type of medium (popular newspapers, lifestyle magazines, celebrity and gossip magazines, news and opinion magazines, age-oriented magazines, quality newspapers, other). The coded demographics included gender (men, women, mixed), age (child, adolescent, adult and mixed) and type of disability (non-categorical, acquired -, multiple -, auditory -, intellectual -, physical -, visual impairment, chronic health conditions, autism, behavioural problems, learning problems). Two coders were trained to code the data independently and compare and discuss discrepancies.

Since some periodicals were published daily, some weekly and some monthly or as a quarterly, all study results are weighted in such a way that the data are defined on the same scale. Instead of each article contributing equally to the final result, articles from weekly and monthly magazines contribute more than articles from daily newspapers.

## Results

The reading of the seven newspapers and 16 magazines of the period 2003-2012 yielded 14,529 articles containing some mention of disability. The overall amount of articles in these ten years was not countable within this study.

With regard to the evolution of media coverage across time, Table 1 shows that a relatively continual stock of messages including disability can be distinguished in this ten-year time span. The years 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2011 illustrate this constant undercurrent, with a percentage of about 9.5%. This does not mean that disability is fairly represented in the media; this number only shows the percentage of found articles in those years over the total amount of articles

containing mentions of disability in the period 2003-2012. The years 2007 (12.68%) and 2003 (12%) are characterised by the largest number of representations of disability, with a 3% increase compared to the undercurrent. This can be explained by the attention on the European Year of People with Disabilities in 2003, the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by the United Nations at the end of the year 2006 and the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All in 2007. These augmentations fade out relatively quickly. The amount of articles in the years 2009 (10.91%) and 2010 (10.27%) also slightly increased, possibly influenced by the Belgian ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on July 2, 2009. Again, this can be considered as a short-term effect because we see a decrease in representation over the last years of the ten-year time span. In 2012, the representation declines strongly below the undercurrent (7.61%). Despite the influence of events on a political level, other events such as the Special Olympics or Paralympics do not seem to affect the amount of messages in a year.

**TABLE 1. THE WEIGHTED DISTRIBUTION OF ARTICLES BY THE YEAR**

Year	Percent (%)
2003	12.00
2004	9.52
2005	9.58
2006	9.75
2007	12.68
2008	8.34
2009	10.91
2010	10.27
2011	9.35
2012	7.61
Total	100.00

As shown in Table 2, far more articles about disability are published in the popular press, with popular newspapers (35.01%) the highest, followed by lifestyle magazines (27.27%), and

celebrity and gossip magazines (15.95%). The popular press covers a much larger amount of articles about disability (78.23%) than all the other media types combined. Strikingly, only 4.87% of the articles on disability came from quality newspapers. Even the celebrity and gossip magazines score higher (15.95%) than the quality newspapers and news and opinion magazines combined (12.66%).

**TABLE 2. THE WEIGHTED DISTRIBUTION OF ARTICLES BY THE TYPE OF MEDIUM FOR THE PERIOD 2003-2012**

Type of medium	Percent (%)
Popular newspapers	35.01
Lifestyle magazines	27.27
Celebrity and gossip magazines	15.95
News and opinion magazines	7.79
Age-oriented magazines	6.78
Quality newspapers	4.87
Other	2.32

In line with expectations, the majority of the articles focussed on adults with a disability (70.6%), more than twice the proportion of articles that focussed on children, adolescents or a mix of ages (Table 3). Only in the teen celebrity magazine ('Joepie'), do we see more adolescents than adults with a disability, which seems logical as this magazine mostly targets teenage customers. Remarkably, in some cases children and/or adolescents with a disability remain out of sight, even in children and youth magazines. Also, in news and opinion magazines, children are strongly underrepresented. When we found articles on children with a disability, most of the time they were published in newspapers instead of (weekly or monthly) magazines. The articles on children referred mostly to general disabilities and on individuals with intellectual disabilities, autism, behavioural problems and learning problems, which concerns the created connection between children on the one hand, and learning and education on the other hand. Considering



all these facts, the overall focus on adults with a disability in the print media is extremely manifest.

Concerning gender, Table 3 shows us a slight emphasis on male representation (47.94%) compared to the amount of women with a disability in the print media (42.89%). Noteworthy is that articles about physical impairments involve more men, while news about chronic health conditions includes more women. In some newspapers and magazines, there is a strong and unbalanced focus on men with disabilities (like in 'De Tijd', 'P-Magazine', 'Glam\*It', 'Flair'). In two of the cases, this was expected because this media focuses on a male audience or is economically oriented. In other – mostly female orientated – media we found slightly more women with disabilities than men (like in 'Joepie', 'Story', 'Goed Gevoel', 'Libelle', 'Dag Allemaal', 'Klap').

**TABLE 3. THE WEIGHTED DISTRIBUTION OF ARTICLES BY AGE AND GENDER FOR THE PERIOD 2003-2012**

Variable	Percent (%)
<b>Age:</b>	
Child	16.11
Adolescent	8.29
Adult	70.60
Mixed	5.01
<b>Gender:</b>	
Men	47.94
Women	42.89
Mixed	9.18

In most cases, articles are non-categorical, focussing on general disabilities and not on specific identified groups or individuals with disabilities. As expected, these general announcements are peculiar in newspapers, as newspapers intend to bring general information to the public and keep people well-informed on important events. When concerning the most frequently depicted disability, most prevalent, by far, were articles that dealt with physical

impairments (28.8%). The popular male magazine 'P-magazine' leads this physical oriented tendency. The second most frequent depicted disabilities were intellectual disabilities (22.4%) and chronic health conditions (19.3%). Remarkable is that articles focussing on people with intellectual disabilities appear almost only in newspapers. Auditory impairments, autism, visual impairments, behavioural and learning problems are clearly underrepresented in our sample (under 9%). Articles on behavioural problems are more common in lifestyle magazines, while articles on visual impairments can be found mostly in the only religious magazine ('Kerk en Leven') we analysed. Across time, no meaningful trends concerning types of disability in the media can be observed.

**Discussion**

*- Lack of representation*

A first striking finding from this study is the **solely limited coverage, or even total lack of representation**, of certain persons with disabilities in some Flemish print media sources. For example, children and/or adolescents with a disability remain out of sight in certain children and youth magazines. For the young readership of these magazines, children and/or adolescents with a disability are virtually non-existent. Even though the Flemish government has pointed to the importance of the correct representation of people with a disability in the media and despite the substantial difference with the number of children and/or adolescents with a disability in the real world population, this group remains close to being invisible.

This finding mirrors the reality that **children with and without disabilities share few or even no collective activities**, notwithstanding Belgium agreed to develop a more inclusive system with the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability (2006). Flanders in Belgium still has an extensive network of segregated services and special schools for children with a disability (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2014). In this dual educational system, there are very few opportunities and support for chil-



dren with special needs in the mainstream educational system and society. With the highest percentage of students in segregated special schools in the European Union, Flanders has opted more than other countries for segregated settings in education: 5.2% of the total student population attends special education (NESSE, 2012). This tradition of exclusion in education is also visible in our manner of representing children with disabilities in the media.

These findings on the lack of coverage of people with a disability in the media endorse previous international works (Donaldson, 1981; Henderson & Heinz-Knowles, 2003; Saito & Ishiyama, 2005) and reflect that people with disabilities continue to be strongly underrepresented in the media, which adds to the notion that people with disabilities are not fully part of society. This clear underrepresentation falsely implies that people without disabilities are the standard and impedes the struggle of people with a disability for position in social space.

#### *- Evolution of coverage*

When examining what influences the quantity of disability coverage in the print media, it can be stated that, looking over the long-term span from 2003-2012, **political events might have a clear influence, based on the bigger amount of articles and the date of publication**. In particular, this concerns the adopting and ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the European Year of People with Disabilities. Unfortunately, these effects are short-term as the amount of articles on disability recede the year following the event, despite the persistent number of human rights abuses and discrimination towards people with a disability in Flanders (Belgian Disability Forum, 2014; Hardonk et al., 2013). Looking at other big events that could possibly have an influence on the quantity of coverage of disability in the print media, such as the Paralympics or Special Olympics, no clear connection can be observed. This finding can be connected to earlier research claiming that the coverage of the Paralympics and Paralympians is minimal (Tynedal & Wolbring, 2013; Schantz & Gilbert, 2001) and reflects the

invisibility of people with a disability more generally in our media.

#### *- Disability coverage*

What strongly determines the representation of certain groups of persons with disabilities is the degree of **visibility**. Print media rarely depict people with certain disabilities, focussing instead on people with **physical, intellectual and chronic health conditions**. This might be a result of the inherent nature of print media as the medium requires visual images. For example, auditory impairments, autism, visual impairments, behavioural and learning problems are regarded as relatively difficult to portray. In contrast, people with physical, intellectual or chronic health conditions are much easier to depict and dramatise (cf. Haller & Ralph, 2001; Saito & Ishiyama, 2010). The emphasis on people with physical impairments confirms earlier studies (Auslander & Gold, 1999; Haller & Ralph, 2001; Saito & Ishiyama, 2005), which is not surprising in light of the importance of images in print journalism. Besides, since no clear evolution can be observed in the quantity of articles of certain groups of persons with disabilities over time, it can be presumed that categorical **lobby groups** have no clear influence on the amount of articles in the print media concerning the group of people they represent.

#### *- Looking Glass Self*

In line with other important findings of this research, such as the higher prevalence of found articles in the popular press, the interesting correlations between gender, age and type of magazine on the one hand, and the type of disability on the other, we can interpret the media as a **Looking Glass Self**. This concept was coined by Cooley in 1902, pointing out how our self-image is shaped by society. The Looking Glass Self has been the dominant metaphor in sociology for the development of self-conception. Cooley argued that our self-concepts are formed as reflections of the responses and evaluations of others in our environment. Interpreting our findings, we can argue that media can also be compared to a Looking Glass, shaped by assumptions in so-



ciety and reflecting underlying societal opinions and traditional power relations. Nevertheless, a right balance must be found between the idea of the media using intentional media strategies and the idea of the media mirroring societal assumptions. Without wanting a unilateral focus on media as a reflection of society, but as well as being an influence on it, and without forgetting the impact of social and citizen media, the concept of the Looking Glass gives us the possibility to interpret some findings on a more abstract theoretical level.

#### - Type of medium

First, an important and remarkable finding of this study is that far more articles about people with disabilities come from the **popular press**. In quality newspapers and news and opinion magazines, a great lack of coverage of people with a disability and disability related themes is detected.

The higher prevalence of messages about people with disabilities in the popular media indicates in a painful way that **people with disabilities are positioned more in the lower educated target audience of these media**, which reflects powerful underlying societal relations and distributions. In particular, the finding reveals the poignant looking glass of the educational barriers that persons with a disability have and their limited connection with the social world of higher educated people. These limited educational opportunities and disparities in education for people with a disability have been ongoing for generations (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2014; World Health Organization, 2011).

Moreover, this result is striking as quality media attempts to be diverse and politically correct, reporting on social exclusion and diversity, whilst concerning disability, they fail to cover an adequate representation of it.

The higher amount of articles about people with disabilities in the popular media can be explained by the fact that popular media, in particular, cover more local and personal information and news. People's lived stories and

individual accounts of experience are mainly provisioned in popular journalism, as these media emphasise the particular and personal experiences of individuals at the expense of relating those particularities to more general institutional and structural processes (Sparks & Tulloch, 2000). Although today some shifts in thinking about disability can be tracked, **disability remains peripheral** to the larger political agenda. This can be illustrated by the sidelined and unclear position of disability in the Flemish Government's policy documents (Gatz, 2014; Homans, 2014). Disability is often seen as a matter of a singular personal experience, not relevant to the social and political debate. Recently, disability is increasingly being addressed within a broader human rights context, also in the media, for example by the reporting on the waiting lists for support for people with disabilities. However, disability is situated more within the local agenda than within a larger discourse in respect of human rights. Hence, disability is mainly covered in local popular media, as it is unfortunately not yet embedded in a broadened political discourse on disability in terms of rights and inclusion. The media misses the bigger picture on disability, which is in line with reporting on more general social issues in quality press.

In addition, disability coverage in popular press can be explained by the general prevailing **melodramatic framework** of this media, because of its emphasis on human drama, emotions, scandal and personalities. Their concern is to bring news and reach the public by using and evoking emotions, and people with disabilities can be qualified as perfectly fitting this frame. This eliciting of emotions in portraying characters with a disability in the media is in line with findings in qualitative research (Haller, 2010; Ellis & Goggin, 2015) where the following dominant stereotypes are detected: the supercrip, the victim, the maladjusted burden, and the evil threat (Nelson, 1996), which add up to a spectacle of otherness, and evoke emotions of pity or admiration (cf. Hayes & Black, 2003).



### - Gender

Second, another surprising result is that **media about physical impairments involve more men, while reports about chronic health conditions include more women**. These findings can be associated with underlying gender ideologies of men and women regarding dual breadwinner roles, prescribing earning for men and homemaking for women. This gendered approach leads to the notion that men belong to the public and woman to the private sphere. Femininity is often perceived as belonging to the private realm, so women's disabilities are represented more as internal and individual and less visible. Meanwhile, according to this breadwinner model and private/public dichotomy, men act more within the public realm and move freely between the public and the private realm. The association between masculinity and the public is demonstrated in the exteriorisation, where the bodily difference is not a private but a public and visible matter. These norms about gender are reproduced regularly throughout the media. Pompper (2010), for example, found that masculine portrayals often emphasise health and fitness. Hence, reporting by the media on people with disabilities, even if sympathetic, seems to be shaped by the fundamental exclusionary social frames that build on the dichotomous understanding of masculine/external/public/political versus feminine/internal/private/apolitical.

### - Matter-antimatter

Third, noticeable is the finding that articles on people with **physical impairments** are most common in magazines where **physical beauty** is the main emphasis, while articles about **behavioural problems** are most present in **lifestyle magazines** where behaviour and lifestyle predominate. The first emphasises sexuality and the importance of physical attractiveness, setting unrealistic ideals for the body and making direct statements about beauty. The latter contains articles about health, fashion, decorating, food, and well-being, covering ways to improve and get more out of your life.

The distribution of articles on physical impairments and behavioural problems has a visible connection with the core topics of the magazines they are represented in. The scientific metaphor of matter-antimatter can be used to clarify this distribution. This concept suggests that for every particle of matter created, an 'antiparticle' exists with opposite charge. They are defined as polar opposites and serve as mirror images of the particles that make up everything in our everyday world. Where images of the body present idealised versions of beauty, representations of individuals with physical differences are more present. Where discourses surrounding 'the good life/the good mother/the good partner' are framed and discussed in magazines as if they are monoliths shared by the whole community, more articles about behavioural problems are depicted. The media continuously demarcate between the norm and the deviant, between the 'acceptable' matter and the 'unacceptable' antimatter, the *dis* and the *able*, as opposites, and as the antithesis of one another. By establishing clear boundaries between the able-bodied and those who deviate from the norm, the image of the ideal able-bodied person becomes illuminated and reinforced. This distribution mirrors traditional disembodied experiences and dominant constructions of norms that "necessarily hierarchizes and ranks the two polarized terms so that one becomes the privileged term and the other is suppressed subordinates, negative counterpart" (Grosz, 1994, p. 3). By over-presenting normative selves as the only way to live and by creating a visible distance between the (dis)abled, the status of what it means to be a human is constantly defined. Since we live in a culture that constantly defines this dominant image normalcy, the presence of disability urges us to think about conceptions of the human (Kittay & Carlson, 2010). At the same time the status of human is frequently denied in the lives of people with disabilities. As Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2014) argue, becoming dis/human is a response to the ambivalent state we find ourselves in relation to the human: disability recognises the norm whilst simultaneously troubles, reshapes and re-fashions ideas about the human that we might have taken for granted. Dis/ability's disruptive potential urges



us to think again about normativity and the condition of the human.

Beside the matter-antimatter metaphor, the eroticisation of the disabled body (Garland-Thomson, 1997) can also be a possible reason for the depiction of people with a physical disability in beauty-oriented magazines.

Beside this distribution of articles on physical impairments and behavioural problems, articles on **visual impairments** are found mostly in the only **religious** magazine included in this research. This cannot be connected by the matter-antimatter metaphor, but can serve a more practical interpretation as most of the Flemish organisations for people with visual disabilities are situated in the Catholic pillar and Catholicism has had a tight grip for a long time on supporting people with visual disabilities. Visual impairment also has a rich Christian iconographic connotation: from a historical point of view, the blind beggar and the blind prophet or seer – famous for his clairvoyance – are major archetypes for people with a disability. Eventually, a more pragmatic editorial reason may also be the case (e.g. a journalist with a disability or family member with a disability, etc.), although the editorial office objects this argument.

#### - *Children with disabilities*

Finally, as opposed to adults, the articles on **children** with disabilities mostly refer to general disabilities, **intellectual disabilities, autism, behavioural problems and learning problems**. Children with disabilities get a peculiar status in the media and are related to other types of disabilities than adults. First, it can be claimed that there is a link between children on the one hand, and on learning and education on the other. This result reveals the dominant looking glass on educational beliefs, where children's academic performance is emphasised (Marcon, 1993). A distinguishing characteristic of education today is the emphasis on outcomes and qualification (Biesta, 2011). It is believed that the extent to which children achieve their educational goals determines the achievement in other domains and is mirror of

the success of their future life. The increasing amount of pressure that parents, teachers and society are putting on young children as little emperors to succeed academically is very influential on our educational mindset and is visible in the media.

Second, the specific types of disabilities related to children in the media, in particular intellectual disabilities, behavioural problems and learning problems, are consistent with the classification of special education in Flanders. These three types of disabilities correspond to the largest groups in the Flemish special education system (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2014). In Flanders, diversity is approached by teaching students with disabilities in segregated settings and homogeneous groups. Normalisation and the attainment of the educational standards is emphasised, especially for students with learning problems, intellectual disabilities and behavioural problems. This categorical thinking poses a vivid debate and can be observed in the media.

Third, connections can be made with qualitative research on the experiences of parents of children with disabilities. Although further research is needed, it could be argued that the stories on children with disabilities in the media are examples of experiences of the moral force of social order parents have when going out in public with their children, where 'unusual behaviour' can embarrass or disorientate "normal" members of society and subvert the social norms of acceptable behaviour (Ryan, 2005).

Lastly, concerning the higher representation of children with autism in the media, Stevenson, Harp, and Gernsbacher (2011) argue that when envisioning the disability of autism, a child is more likely portrayed, rather than an adult. According to the authors, autism is predominantly considered a childhood disability. Children with autism have continually been seen as having a condition that is characterised by a broken self, uncontrollability and exceptional talents, that is so non-normative (Sartrett, 2011) it is attractive for media portrayals. Moreover, the infantilising discourse of autism is characterised by dual stereotypes: either un-

controllable, aggressive, or violent children who cause great stress to their families and carers, or unhappy and often unloved and poorly treated children that evoke pity (Jones & Harwood, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

Since the press has, among other factors, an important role in reflecting and shaping public attitudes towards people with disabilities, and since the Flemish print media serves as an important source of information for the public about the society, an underrepresentation or an incorrect representation of people with a disability in the media has major impact on public perceptions and attitudes towards people with disabilities in our society. In Flanders, many people rely on the media as a crucial source of information, beliefs and values. Because of the marginalisation of social minority groups from mainstream society, many people rely almost entirely on the media for their information about people with disabilities. The relationship between the public and these groups is largely filtered through the values, assumptions and perceptions covered in the media.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities emphasises the importance of a correct representation and encourages all organs of the media to portray persons with disabilities in a manner consistent with the purpose of the Convention. Moreover, in 2014, the UN Committee noted with concern “that persons with disabilities in Belgium are portrayed in the media mainly as persons with a disability rather than as citizens who participate fully in society” (CRPD, 2014, p. 3 – no further sources available), and ordered the Belgian media to “take account of diversity in their code of ethical conduct and provide them, and all relevant professionals, with appropriate training and awareness-raising to ensure better representation of persons with disabilities in the media” (p. 3).

Starting from the insight that media coverage is a key element in the process of attitude formation, and from the clear instructions for Belgium based on the UNCRPD framework, the

findings of this study indicate biases and stereotypes in the press that have characterised its coverage till now.

Although this study found a relatively continual stock of messages including disability over the years, which indicates a permanent minimal attention to the issue in the media, a lot of socio-cultural-driven biases are discovered in the media reporting on people with disabilities. Remarkably, this study found a number of significant differences between the types of media studied; sometimes a total lack of representation, but generally, the media content reflected underlying dominant societal ideologies that can be problematic as they promote the status quo, reinforce stereotypical attitudes and obstruct change for people with disabilities. When people with a disability are represented in the media, the messages do not have the potential to play a role in facilitating social change and altering public perceptions consistent with the framework of the UNCRPD. The disability-as-deficit notion (Gabel, 2005) has a central place, which is in line with the Flemish policy of approaching, orienting and classifying people on the basis of their labels. Besides, the studied articles are constituted on ideas of normalcy and perfection, together with binary and hegemonic perceptions on disability and gender. The representations of people with disabilities are often placed opposite to the idealized norm and seem to be shaped by fundamental exclusionary social frames.

This study provided important discoveries about representation in the media and underlying perceptions in relation to disability and intersections with other social categories. Due to the numerous sources analysed and the integral and systematic way in which they were analysed, we could precisely measure the quantity of media coverage. However, the approach does not provide insight in how people with disabilities are represented. A second study will be conducted on the same sample in order to investigate the quality of media representations by means of a framing analysis.



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