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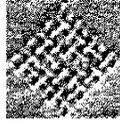
Seeking Space Shaping Aesthetics

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Disability Framing in a Caribbean University Newspaper



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Introduction

Increasing and showcasing diversity in higher education has become a point of emphasis. One way that universities do this is by focusing on initiatives related to disabled students. A growing number of students with disabilities are enrolling in universities. They comprise about 11% of the student body in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics), and according to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (2017) the number of students with a known disability in 2015-16 rose by 56% over the figures for 2010-11.

Consequently, it is no surprise that concepts related to accessibility and inclusion of students with disabilities appear in The University of the West Indies' (The UWI) latest strategic plan, *The UWI Triple A Strategy 2017-2022: Revitalizing the Caribbean*. The first "A" of the triple-A strategy stands for "access"—a key term in disability advocacy. Two of the core values listed in the current strategic plan also relate to disabled students: diversity and student centeredness. On page 9 of the document, one finds the list of The UWI's core values with their corresponding definitions, in which diversity is defined as follows:

The UWI will foster a culture and work/study environment that is open and welcoming to different ideas and perspectives, acknowledges and values diversity, is *inclusive* of and affirms the dignity of *all persons* regardless of race, socio-economic status, age, sex, gender identity and expression, *physical and mental ability*, sexual orientation, family or marital status, national origin, language, political or religious persuasion, *health status*, and other characteristics that make its constituents unique (The UWI 9 emphasis added).

The university's focus on student means that, "The UWI will ensure that its policies, governance and daily operations are geared towards the delivery of an exceptional teaching and learning experience for *all students*" (The UWI 9 emphasis added).

One of the ways that The UWI supports diversity and student centeredness is through The Student Life and Development Department (SLDD), which lists two primary services on its web site, one of which is: "Providing and ensuring equal access (infrastructure/academic) to all

students who enter the University system with a disability” (<https://sta.uwi.edu/slidd/>). This service is vital because, as Grasgreen (2014) notes, “Students with disabilities say the ignorance of faculty and staff members makes it difficult to get the help they need—and in some cases, makes them less willing to disclose their condition” (n.p.).

Disability activism has also not been absent on The UWI campus. Dr. Jean Antoine-Dunne, founded The UWI Network and Outreach for Disability Education and Sensitisation (NODES) in 2014 with members from three faculties on campus. The group sponsored a regional conference in April 2015, “Towards Social Integration: Rights, Roles, Recognition for Persons with Disabilities.”

In light of The UWI’s emphasis on inclusivity, accessibility and diversity, the work of SLDD and NODES, and the well-established need to recruit and retain students with disabilities, it seems reasonable to expect that one would find topics related to disability featured in The UWI’s flagship publication *UWI Today*, a monthly publication produced by The UWI Marketing and Communications office. The newsletter is printed and distributed by the Trinidad and Tobago *Guardian* newspaper as an insert in the first Sunday of the month up to 11 months annually.

This article reports on how disability features within the archived issues of *UWI Today* since its inception in 2008 to the October 2017 issue.

Literature Review

Only one article appears through a search of EBSCOhost’s Academic Search Complete and Communication and Mass Media Complete for the search string “Caribbean” and “Disability” and “Media” in the abstract or author-supplied abstract, but it turns out that the article is irrelevant because the term “media” refers to the medical term, “acute otitis media” and has nothing to do with communication media (Sinha et al 305). A search for the terms “Caribbean” and “disability” paired with “newspaper” also returned no relevant results. Therefore, it appears that not a single study has been published in an academic journal related to how newspapers in the Caribbean cover disability.

Published articles related to disability and the Caribbean are largely limited to medical journals (Freire, 2012; Bissessar & Maharajh, 2013; Kaomongkolgit, Tantanapornkul, Jittapiromsak, Ngamwannagul, & Sriaroon, 2016). A few noteworthy examples exist outside of the medical field (O’Toole, 2002; Gayle & Palmer, 2005; Sunal & Mutua, 2012; Bain, 2016). However, none considers how disability is represented in a Caribbean newspaper. Another unique aspect of this study is that it focuses on a campus newspaper. A perusal of Academic Search Complete and Communication and Mass Media Complete databases yield no results for a study that

examines the theme of disability in a university-based newspaper. The search strings Disability + University/Campus/Student + Newspaper/Publication/Media yield no relevant results.¹

Disability framing in newspapers

To put this study in context, we must consider research on media framing of disability in global newspapers. While most studies of disability representations in the media have been situated in the US (Haller, 2010) and Great Britain (Briant, Watson, & Philo, 2013; McEnhill, & Byrne, 2014), a few studies have been published that relate to other geographical contexts, including: Australia (Fraser & Llewellyn, 2015), Canada (Maika & Danylchuk, 2016), China (Tang & Bie, 2016), Columbia (Gutiérrez-Coba, Salgado-Cardona, García Perdomo, & Guzmán-Rossini, 2017), India (Martin, 2008), Ireland (O Malley-Keighran & Coleman, 2014), Lithuania (Zalkauskaite, 2012), Malaysia (Cheong, Khoo, & Razman, 2016), New Zealand (Wardell, Fitzgerald, Legge, & Clift, 2014), Portugal (Cunha & Pinto, 2014), Russia (Oreshkina & Lester, 2013), South Korea (Chang & Crossman, 2009), Taiwan (Chen, Hsu, Shu, & Fetzer, 2012), Turkey (Ayvazoglu, 2015), and Ukraine (Phillips, 2012). Others compare newspapers in two or more countries, for example between the US and Great Britain (Haller & Ralph, 2001), Canada and Israel (Auslander & Gold, 1999a, 1999b), France and Germany (Schantz & Gilbert, 2001), England, France, Germany, and Spain (de Léséleuc, Pappous, & Marcellini, 2010), the United States, the UK, Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and Singapore (Jones & Smith, 2007), and China, Italy, New Zealand, South Africa, and the United States (Buysse & Borchering, 2010). None, however, examines the subject in the Caribbean.

Much analysis is devoted to the way newspapers represent disabled athletes. Smith and Thomas (2005) examined British newspaper coverage of the inclusion of elite athletes with disabilities in the 2002 Manchester Commonwealth Games. Tanner, Green and Burns (2011) looked at media coverage of the 2010 Special Olympics, and many scholars have examined newspaper coverage of the Paralympic Games (Beacom, French, & Kindall, 2016; Cheong, Khoo, & Razman, 2016; Maika & Danylchuk, 2016). A few studies have focused on the intersectionality of gender and disability pertaining to coverage of the Paralympics, demonstrating that female disabled athletes face even greater marginalization (Buysse, Borchering, 2010; de Léséleuc, Pappous & Marcellini, 2010).

Beacom, French, and Kendall's (2016) comparison of coverage of the 2012 and 2014 Paralympic Games in two prominent UK newspapers, concludes,

For the most part, media coverage continues to medicalize the presentation of disability, objectify the person with the disability, and sensationalize through

¹ The nearest comparison is Easton's (1998) study of a late 19th-early 20th century newspaper *The Silent Worker*, formerly known as *Deaf Mute Times*, which was a national newspaper for, by and about the deaf published by the The New Jersey School for the Deaf in 9-10 issues annually.

the use of backstories that promote a narrative of the disabled person's triumph over adversity...[and]... the print media still prominently use an array of stereotypical representations of athletes with disabilities (57).

Persisting stigmatization

Early media and disability studies examined how media portrayals of people with disabilities were problematic and how such portrayals promoted negative public perceptions. Citing Barnes and Mercer (2003), Beacom, French and Kendall (2016) reported that "studies have shown a general tendency across mainstream broadcast and print media to depict people with disabilities in a limited range of stereotypical roles with narratives focusing on charity, fund-raising health, and personal-tragedy stories" (45). Zhang and Haller (2013) assessed the opinions of people with disabilities related to how they see their social group represented in the media. Their findings are that "people with disabilities believed that mass media, in general, frame people with disabilities as supercrips, disadvantaged, or ill victims" (329). Haller's (2000) research also demonstrates that wheelchair users have been the primary symbol and voice of disability in newspaper frames.

Other recent studies reveal stigmatization and stereotypes persist in press coverage of autism (Holton, Farrell, & Fudge, 2014; Tang & Bie, 2016), intellectual disabilities (Renwick, 2016) and disability welfare recipients (Briant, Watson, & Philo, 2013; McEnhill & Bryne, 2014). They also show the lack of coverage when it comes to Paralympic versus Olympic athletes (Buysse & Borcharding, 2010), the under-representation of the lived experiences of people with disabilities in the stories pertaining to them (O'Malley-Keighran & Coleman, 2014) and the pejorative use of disability terms to frame one's opponent in the press (Wrenn et al., 2015). Goodley (2011) points out another continuing threat to persons with disability through newspaper frames: the fact that disability-related articles are often written by nondisabled journalists, which increases the risk of objectification through the use of third-person language.

A misinformed public

Harris (2002) observes that "many people have no contact with disabled people [and] so gain their knowledge of disability from mass media" (144), a point echoed by Beth Haller (2010), an eminent who states that "most nondisabled people still learn about disability issues through the media, rather than through interactions with people with disabilities" (preface). Not only do people continue to learn about disability mostly through the media, but also this information is "shaped by dominant societal beliefs about disability that come from the power of the dominant able-bodied culture, which defines and classifies disability" (Haller preface). Quinlan and Bates (2009) state the obvious problem here, "If most people learn about disability from the media, and if those messages are filled with simplifying stereotypes and inaccurate information, it

should not be surprising that many people will hold mis- or under-informed opinions about people with disabilities.”

Methods

The problem I address here relates to representations of disability in the Caribbean and in particular, in *UWI Today*. To do so I performed an advanced Google search of the comprehensive online archives. All 97 issues, from the inaugural April 2008 issue to the October 2017 issue, totaling 1,756 pages of text, were searched for any of the following keywords: accessible, accessibility, autism, blind, deaf, disabled, disabilities, disability, handicap, handicapped, hearing impairment, hearing impaired, inclusive, inclusivity, mental health, NODES, Paralympic, Paralympian, physically challenged, special needs, Special Olympics, visually impaired, and visual impairment. I performed this search on multiple occasions throughout the duration of the research and identified 140 contexts in which any of the terms occurred. Some search hits were irrelevant; for example, the terms 'inclusive' and 'accessible' were often used in contexts unrelated to disability, and three contexts were in online-only articles and therefore excluded.

When duplicate and irrelevant returns are removed, a total of 112 contexts in 55 issues remain for analysis. Of these 112 contexts, eight were occasions in which the terms “blind,” “deaf,” or “handicap” appear as metaphors and do not refer to an actual disability. The final sample for analysis is 104 contexts containing 130 units of analysis across 53 issues: 1 unit in 1 issue in 2008, 11 units in 5 issues in 2009, 11 units in 4 issues in 2010, 3 units in 1 issue in 2011, 24 units in 9 issues in 2012, 22 units in 9 issues in 2013, 9 units in 5 issues in 2014, 18 units in 9 issues in 2015, 23 units in 7 issues in 2016, and 8 units in 3 issues thus far through October 2017.

For this study, a unit of analysis was the clearly defined larger context within the issue, i.e., the feature article, news story, announcement or ad in the paper within which the search term occurred. I treat images that represent disability within the context as their own units of analysis. Consequently, this study includes 106 text-based units of analysis (including 25 front-page headlines) and 24 images.

Findings

Over the 10-year history of the *UWI Today*, a disability-related theme has occurred in 54.6% of the issues at a rate of 13.6 times annually ($SD = 6.7$) spread across an average of 5.3 issues ($SD = 3.1$) or an average of about 2.5 disability contexts in each of just over half of the issues. Based on counting potential units of analysis on each page in two randomly selected issues, an average of 6.5 units of analysis per page was calculated. This amounts to a total of 11,414 units for all 97 issues. Having identified 130 units related to disability, this suggests a disability-related context occurs at a rate of 1.1%. Since inception, the *UWI Today* has averaged 18 pages per issue ($SD =$

4). Entering the page number for the occurrence of each of the units of analysis shows that a disability-related theme occurs on average at page 11.5 (SD = 5.2). Thumbnail headlines at the bottom of the front page directing readers to stories inside the issue and announcements on the back page calendar of events are treated as outliers and not calculated into the average page placement.

Disability on the front page

Disability has appeared on the front cover as the lead cover story only twice: October 2016 and September 2017. Both cover stories focused on UWI student and Paralympic athlete Nyoshia Cain's winning of medals at international competitions. Articles that contain a disability context are featured in the bottom row of front page leads 23 times. As previously stated, a disability context occurs in 53 of 97 issues. In two of the issues (March 2015 and April 2016), however, the context occurs only on the last page's calendar of events, which is a standard section that is never featured as a headline. Removing these two issues from the sample results in a disability context being featured in a headline in 25 out of the 51 issues as the lead cover story or as one of the leads featured at the bottom of the front page. In other words, disability appears in just over half of the total issues and about half the time given prominence on the front page.

Most front page leads reference research articles (N = 8), adapted sport (N =7), and campus news (N =7); one lead is about an upcoming event, while two others reported on a completed event. A clear connection between the front page lead headline and disability is present six times. Three times the phrase "mental health" appears related to research articles written by Professor Hutchinson in 2012. Again in 2012 a headline includes the event title "Walk for Sight" with the image of people participating in the charity walk holding up a sign. Twice in 2015 a lead centers on the NODES conference; one has the headline of "Focus on disability," and another gives the section title as "Disabilities."

Disability themes within UWI Today

The most common theme comes as no surprise given the fact that *UWI Today* primarily covers programs, events and research taking place on and through the campus. The most prevalent theme is Disability as Research/Academic Subject. This theme appears 32 times and includes articles and news items that are framed within a section title of "Research," report on academic conferences or forums on the topic of disability, announce a course or lecture on a disability topic, or demonstrate faculty or students applying their research in a disability subject area. Among the many noteworthy examples are the paper's coverage of the 2016 NODES Towards Social Integration" conference, a story about a UWI student partnering with a local NGO and his engineering lecturer to develop an image processing app to help blind people identify paper currency, and a UWI PhD student whose dissertation focused on "Sign Language Used in the Caribbean.

A second prominent theme, noted 23 times, is also to be expected: Inclusive Education. I identified a text with this theme if it references The UWI's Student Life and Development Department for the services provided to students with disabilities, or if it touches on the need for better support services or technologies for students with disabilities, how students are using them where they exist, or how some students may have "special needs." A good example in this regard is Editor Vaneisa's Baksh's 2017 feature article on Dr. Priya Kissoon's research on school dropouts. This research, of course, interacts with the theme of disability because learning disabilities—both diagnosed and undiagnosed—are determined to be a contributing factor in school dropouts. Baksh summarizes the research as an attempt "to move the national conversation towards crafting a more inclusive education system that strengthens and supports those at risk of dropping out, so that one day we can close the cracks these students fall through" (Baksh 20).

Both of the above themes are positive, progressive themes that can potentially promote advocacy and equality. A third prominent theme, however, falls under the category of negative or traditional representation, that of the connection between disability and social costs through deviant behavior (crime, violence, substance abuse) or financial costs (welfare, disability claims paid by business). This theme is identified in 17 contexts mostly associated with the topic of mental health. In some cases, the theme is clearly positioned in the article title, such as "The Burden of Illness" or "Picking up the Tab: What a Virus Costs." Although a clear connection between mental health and social ills is frequently noted, Dr. Hutchinson acknowledges

One of the greatest challenges is to diminish the associations between mental illness and sexual perversion on one hand and mental illness and violence on the other. The real message here is that untreated mental health problems can lead to both of these, but more open and accessible mental health treatment would likely improve the social fabric in a way that would naturally lead to a reduction in these socially inappropriate behaviours (Hutchinson 11).

Ironically, using phrases like "mental health problems," and discussing social ills related to mental health in contexts where the focus is not on the lack of resources contribute to such stereotypes. An example of this problem appears in an April 2013 article, in which a UWI professor contributes a piece on ethics and morality. He quotes a well-known Christian author and alludes to the fact that homosexuality was once considered a manifestation of mental illness. He then cites an opinion of two scholars that homosexuality was declassified as a mental disorder "not because of new scientific findings, but in response to external political pressure and political manoeuvring within the Association. Politics has replaced science!" (Arjoon 13). He then brings up the topic of same-sex marriage and cites a scholar who bemoans the support for it within academe and adds, "Apart from measurement limitations, one needs a large amount of data to come to any meaningful scientific conclusion. The data simply does not exist. Science has replaced common sense!" The reader is led to infer that homosexuality is in fact a

mental disorder and the desire to be married to the same sex is a further example of the social deviancy that mental disorders cause. The article's author longs for the return of the "common sense" stereotype. Would that this article had been framed under the section heading of "Campus Opinion" rather than "Campus News."

A fourth common theme is Adapted Physical Activity for people with disabilities. This theme was observed 16 times. Most of the occurrences were related to news stories on the UWI SPEC's annual half-marathon, which mentioned that categories and prizes exist for wheelchair users and those who are "physically challenged," and in some years also for "Special Olympics." In December 2010, "Commonwealth Games 2010 Paralympic athlete Shanntol Ince" is listed as among the competitors. In addition to articles on the half-marathon, a feature article on SPEC Director David Benjamin highlights his support for Special Olympics. Dr. Hutchinson's June 2015 modified conference paper includes an anecdote about Paralympic and Olympic champion Oscar Pistorious. A July 2016 article showcases a guest lecturer from Canada whose research emphasized the connection between physical activity and mental health. The last four occurrences of the theme happen in two front-page covers and related feature stories of Paralympian Nyoshia Cain.

Unexpected Results

One surprise was the minimal appearance of a Charity theme. Charity was noted only five times in contexts reporting on students doing volunteer work related to autism and to various charity benefit events such as an art exhibit, golf tournament, and the aforementioned Walk for Sight. Another surprise was the near-absence of themes related to Pity, Inspiration, or to Overcoming Disability (i.e., to living a "normal" life in spite of disability). These themes were present, but each was rare. The Pity theme is noticed in contexts such as when disability is viewed as loss of something desirable, as in Williams' March 2014 article that juxtaposes "grace, speed, strength, fluidity and skill" with post-injury "loss of mobility and flexibility, and depending on the degree of injury, disability and possible termination of a sporting career" (10). Pity is also evoked when disabled people are labeled as victims, as in Rolston's June 2015 article referring to them as victims of sexual abuse, and Teelucksingh's November 2016 article that groups together "victims of war, troubled souls, the oppressed and the physically and mentally challenged" (15).

The theme that disability inspires was not explicitly evident, but it can be inferred from the "Campus Hero" article title of the September 2016 feature on Nyoshia Cain. Inspiration is often implied in the Overcoming theme, which was noted three times. In a February 2012 article framed with the lead headline of "Achiever" and titled "The Boy Who Wouldn't Take Basket," a student named Anil Waithe refuses to accept the assessment of his teachers at a school for the blind that he would have to learn how to weave baskets if he wanted to be able to support himself. Instead, he overcomes his disability by learning computer programming at the UWI. The other two Overcoming themes come from published excerpts from distinguished

commencement addresses. In December 2014, Chancellor George Alleyne references the work of SLDD, then dubbed ASDLU, and how he had met “some disabled students” and said they had “firm determination” and called them “strong people.” In November 2016, the Chancellor provides a more clear example of the Overcoming theme by referring to graduating student Jameel Sahadth, who, “in spite of his mental health problems and problems of maintaining his GPA . . . graduated with an upper second-class degree” (12).

For further consideration

A number of other themes were coded and still need to be analyzed, and other explorations of disability related to this study need to be done. One, the need remains to analyze the language used to report disability. Anecdotally, I observed person-first and identity-first language, but further research could determine if any patterns or preferences are observable and also whether any ableist language is used. Moreover, researchers may wish to catalog specific disability types or diagnoses mentioned, as well as when the name of a person with a disability is given as opposed to the use of third-person language. It would also be worth noting if any articles about disability have been written by people with disabilities. Finally, a full analysis of the disability model from which articles are framed remains necessary. Anecdotally, it appears that most affirm the social model, but I observed the medical model in multiple contexts as well.

Conclusion

Although studies from around the world indicate that disability continues to be marginalized and stigmatized in newspapers, this does not seem to be the case in the Caribbean university newspaper *UWI Today*. The editorial board does not shy away from covering stories related to disability, especially those related to campus news about the intersection of disability and academic research or the classroom. One could question why in nearly 100 issues only two cover stories have ever been written related to disability, and both on the same Paralympic athlete, but nearly one-fourth of the issues do link to a story that involves a disability theme in the front page bottom row of headlines. If we judge the coverage to be light, then the fault lies with the academic community in not creating enough newsworthy events related to disability, providing more ideas for disability-related feature stories, or contacting The UWI’s Marketing & Communications Office with announcements about events relevant to disability. Dr. Jean Antoine-Dunne serves as a notable exception in relation to the NODES conference she helped to organize.

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