

Dissed and Missed

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Introduction – the dissed and missed minority

It can be argued that when it comes to diversity in the media we have discussed most groups which are discriminated on the sole basis of their status as minorities. We have discussed discrimination of women, discrimination based on ethnic background or based on sexuality. Discussions have been active and a change is apparently possible. At least for a group who can show some kind of normality. But there is still a group whose participation in the media is rarely or even ever discussed. And that is the group of persons with disabilities.

In Sweden, the Swedish Federation of persons with disabilities (HSO) estimate that 20% of the total population carry some sort of disability (HSO, 2008). And to what proportions do disabled people appear in the Swedish media? Do they amount to 20%? The simple answer is No! According to several studies (Ghersetti, 2007; Ljuslinder, 2002) persons with disabilities appear in a few pro mille (!) of the total broadcasted time. Also, not only is this group excluded from the public sphere, the representations of disabilities tend to be highly stereotypical and patronizing.

In fact, when Marina Ghersetti(2007) performed a study of Swedish she found that during prime time broadcasting hours, the time disabled persons appeared was limited to a mere 0,7 ‰. Karin Ljuslinder, who dissertated on the subject, found that the stereotypical presentations were a foundation to how persons with disabilities were presented.

What do we mean by disability and handicap?

It might be a good idea to define what we mean with disability at this point. Within the context of this paper I will use the definition from the World Health Organisation (2002).

A Disability – is an impairment of physiological, psychological or anatomical nature caused by disease or injury.

Handicap – appears between society and the disabled when the disabled meets substantial difficulties in daily life.

As obvious from these definitions, a handicap is seen more as a social construct rather than a physical problem.

Stereotypical representations of a minority – the process

According to Karin Ljuslinder (2002), representations of disability rely heavily on stereotypes portraying disabled as a group with common attributes rather than as individuals with distinct characteristics. Instead, representations of disabled persons tend to focus on the disability in itself as the foremost

attribute of the person. Ljuslinder found four stereotypes which can be described as follows:

The hero –

When a disabled person performs tasks which wouldn't be considered anything out of the ordinary for a non-disabled person, the portrayal tend to focus upon the heroic aspects of these tasks. When the task is performed by a disabled, the simple task is often elevated to an accomplishment. The word *despite* tend to be very common within these stereotypes. Someone is able to work as an engineer, despite his disability. Someone might be a pilot despite his mobility impairment. Another might be able to be an actor despite his/her Down's syndrome. At times when a disabled person reaches high attractive positions within society, positions which are attractive even for non-disabled persons, the feat is treated as an even more heroic accomplishment. Within the narrative impairment becomes an obstacle, which requires heroism to overcome, even though the disability is not at all connected to the position the persons hold. Another feature within these stereotypes is the disabled's struggle for a "normal life", such as being an active athlete, to have social relations and a daily job. These quite common aspects of everyday life become idealized and tend to be considered extraordinary for the disabled.

The victim

Another common stereotype is the story which focuses on the dependency of others; when the disabled is forced to depend on the help of close relatives or the welfare of the society. The portrayal circles around how a person is carrying the burden of an impairment. The disabled lacks control of his/her life and forces to rely on the support of others. Also, often the story focuses on wrongdoings against the disabled. How taxi chauffeurs steal their change, or social service doesn't give the disabled the support they are entitled to. The disabled is portrayed as passive and helpless.

The infant

This is a portrayal which gives the picture of the disabled as an immature and ignorant child. Often this stereotype takes the form in which the reporter asks the disabled more or less irrelevant questions. Or even worse, the reporters don't ask questions directed to the disabled at all, instead choosing to talk over the disabled's head as if he/she wasn't even there. Often the questions are addressed to an assistant or a relative who answers for the disabled.

The bad guy

This stereotype is mostly common within Anglo-American fiction, where the bad guy is equipped with one or two more or less exotic disabilities. Even so, there are other examples. For example, in Sweden when a series of crimes were conducted by schizophrenic and mentally unstable people, insanity in itself was portrayed as something inherently dangerous.

What is the common ground between these stereotypes? They single out the disabled person as a deviant from a norm. They all focus on the deviance a disability cause. Often disabled are portrayed in the form of their disability. A strong tendency is to somehow work the disability into the story around the person, even when this is completely irrelevant to the issue in question. This causes the effect that the media image of disabled is a picture of a passive and

weak person who *is* his or her disability, that is, the disabled is reduced to a disability. There is a difference between portraying a disabled athlete and an athlete with a disability. Perhaps this is merely semantics but the question at hand is what the primary issue is? Is a person newsworthy because he/she is an athlete or because he/she is disabled? I would argue that the process of singling out the minority by comparing them to a norm and then accentuate the differences between the minority and majority is not different from the process of sorting out any other minority. The disabled are constructed as the other as opposed to the normal part of the population who are equipped with fully functional bodies. The healthy, non-disabled body becomes the marker of normality.

When trying to change the portrayal of the disabled it is therefore an important choice to use a social kind of definition of disability because the process and the social exclusion could be considered the same for every minority group. Therefore we choose to talk about disability, not as an individual problem but as a civic problem. Exclusion from the public sphere or society based on lack of certain bodily functions is simply not acceptable. But still, the portrayal of disability is much coloured by prejudice and, sadly, ignorance.

Since the portrayal of disability has not yet become clouded by political correctness and stands as good examples of the worst case of single-minded discrimination of minorities, it is a good place to start a discussion on how to change the portrayal of minorities by looking at the most prolific examples. It is also a good point to start a discussion and start testing new methods against discrimination.

The Project – a means for a change

During the year 2007 a project was initiated by the national Swedish Television (SVT), the umbrella organisation for disabled persons in Sweden and the Department for Media and Communication Studies at Lund University to try to change the portrayal of persons with disabilities in the Swedish Media Landscape. This paper is based on the experiences drawn from that project.

The project consisted of constructing a monitoring tool for counting heads and actions of participants with disabilities in Swedish programs. The tool would not only count heads or bodies with a disability, but also measure in what context and in what functions disabled participated in the program. During a pilot study in the fall of 2007, the staff from three different programs, a weekly cultural news show, a daily regional news show and a daily children's show respectively, worked with the tool to evaluate it and evaluate the working process of doing quantitative measures on their own programs. The different program were chosen because their different working conditions and different day to day procedures. Still the tool was tested on a roughly equal amount of broadcast time. The main purpose was not however to gather results from monitorings, but rather evaluate the tool and the working process.

The tool – measuring the story

A tool based on two main sets of quantitative variables was constructed for the project. One part gathered information from the text, including hard data such as date, channel, genre and so forth. The second part was based on an actor-perspective. Every single disabled participant in the text got coded as an actor within the text. Then questions were asked on the different actors' role in the text. A set of variables consisting among others of age, gender and function within the text, was used. There were also variables designed to capture to what degree of activity the disabled actor performed. How active or passive were the disabled actors within the text? Finally, the stereotypes of Karin Ljuslinder's were added to the set. These stereotypes were used on both the story and the persons appearing therein.

The tool was developed with the preconception that the editorial staff would be able to actually perform the coding themselves. This has several implications. First we have to settle with the fact that people make different interpretations of a certain text. As such we have to accept a less purist view of methodology. Also, there is the implication that the editors, often with a background in journalism themselves, will not be able to attain the necessary distance to critically reflect upon their own material.

Why Measure?

When it comes to journalistic work, there is a well-known fact that journalism is a craft that sits within the walls of the news room. Journalists often tend to reflect on their role in society, but rarely when it comes to a specific job or a specific story (Ekström & Nohrstedt, 1996). Instead, when working on a story, the journalistic instinct kicks in. Often they tend to use similar structuring of the story, or use a common dramaturgy.

Often journalists who join a new editorial staff find themselves socialized into an environment and a strong professional identity (van Ginneken, 1998; Kärreman, 1996). Suddenly they have developed a dramaturgy, a way of working and a voice which is highly influenced by the nature of the colleagues, the nature of the editors and the station.

We should not however jump to the conclusion that it is maliciousness that causes this representation. We should rather seek the answer elsewhere. Presentations of disabled are often coloured by ignorance and unconscious assumptions. The combination of a highly socialised voice of the newsroom and the individual journalist's well-learned structuring often sums up to the comment: "It was nothing out of the ordinary. A simple job!" (Ekström & Nohrstedt, 1996)

This comment often occurs because the journalist hasn't reflected on his role in society when it concerns certain groups. Or rather, journalists haven't reflected upon the fact that a certain presentation will create an image of a certain kind. How can you write upon a certain subject? How do you approach a person in a wheelchair? How do you approach someone who is out of the ordinary? Many journalists have little or no experience of interacting with disabled. That's nothing different from many journalists' relation to other minorities. In fact, in

this aspect journalists do not differ from the population as a whole. Because of ignorance we tend to talk down to people in wheelchairs, in the literal sense that we don't lower ourselves to the disabled's level. Or rather the person in the wheelchair is forced to look up to the journalist. Perhaps the journalist talks to a relative or an aide instead of approaching the person in the wheelchair directly.

This needs to be overcome. The answer is simply to train the journalists and the editors to be ready to approach the minority. We need to point to our shortcomings and our own assumptions. And to actually point to the presentation and representation of disability is a good way to start.

In this aspect the idea of a measuring tool approaches the idea of a balanced scorecard of Kaplan and Norton (1999). It draws upon the idea to manage an organisation or a business by using quantitative numbers. Within business administration research and organisation studies the use of quantitative numbers is not an uncommon way to go about changes in procedures and processes. Since the 1990s, when the idea of the balanced scorecard was first introduced, the idea of change through measuring has been active. Balanced Scorecard can be used as an alternative means to simply focus on monetary values, in business administration (Olve, Roy & Wetter, 1997). Instead one looks to other values which might not be seen within the organization. Let us then consider the advantages of a constant measuring for internal use. When an editorial board on a frequent basis evaluates the work, not only in the amount of heads but also in the way that minorities are portrayed, and keep an open environment for discussions and reflection we can see an opening for change. When one actually has numbers to work with, it will be more difficult to assume that there is a representation that draws either way.

Problems and experiences

To introduce another task in an already slimmed and tight organisation is always difficult. During the project we encountered concerns from the editorial staffs on basically three different levels. First, what would these measurements be used for? And second, does this mean that we will have to change our approach to our work? Third, how much time will the coding actually take? The third question was the one which was most easily resolved since this was merely a matter of organisation and resource allocation. When the monitoring was done, everyone agreed that it was easier and less time-consuming than thought at first.

The other questions however, means that you have to be exceptionally clear why these monitorings are important. They should be regarded as internal means of seeing how a certain group of minorities are portrayed. They should be used as a check-list when the journalists are going on the job. How does this reporting portray this minority group? In the best of worlds, the monitoring will make the reporter ask "How do I want my story to be coded in the measuring tool?"

An important aspect of a strong professional identity is the journalistic adversarial role (van Ginneken, 1998; Furhoff, 1986). Reporters are the watchers of the power. And as such have a strong sense of independence within

the professional identity. The notion that news should never be mixed with views is certainly strong within the editorial boards. There is also a natural suspicion to power, and academics, who will tell the reporters how and what stories they should cover. The sense of the free press is often something inherently strong within these media workers (Bertrand, 2000) Therefore, it is not difficult to understand the underlying connotations in the question “Does this mean we should change our program to meet a quota?”

Some people involved in the project expressed the concern that they in the end would be forced to include a certain amount of women, a certain amount of people from outside Europe, a certain amount of HBT-persons and then finally a certain amount of disabled. And they asked “Now where do we find these female gay disabled persons who come from a non-European country?”

Of course does not the introduction of a quantitative measuring tool mean that the editors and reporters automatically need to change what stories they are covering to meet a quota. That would be absurd! Instead a tool of this character should be the ground for reflection and discussion of *how* minorities are portrayed instead of simply counting heads. But this is also why it is important to identify which variables are more central to others.

Aside from the important aspect that the reasons for coding must be clear, it is also important to consider which variables are the most central. Coding is important but there is always a variable more important than others. Nor is it so that monitoring will automatically bring change. Instead it should be a foundation for discussions which eventually will lead to change.

To bring about a successful introduction of a monitoring tool of this kind, it is imperative that the monitoring is brought about through the whole of the organisation. A good and clear vision of what the changes should lead to will be needed for the organisation to reach that goal (Klein, 1996). Without it, the monitoring will result in nothing. A vision and clear cut goals are needed to stimulate the discussions necessary to bring about the change in representations of the minority.

A conclusion - A strategy for the future

When talking about minorities and representation of minorities, disability is an excellent example to discuss how to change journalistic working processes and methods. The disabled are a group often portrayed as weak or passive, often because they tend to be seen as a group with certain common characteristics. Instead the disabled should be seen as individuals with a disability. The same way that there is a difference between a female CEO and a CEO who is female.

For a broad and frequent measuring of the programs, with consideration to not just disability but minorities as a whole, it is vital that the broadcasting company is interested and clear in the communication to the journalistic staffs within the following three aspects.

* What do we measure?

* Why do measure?

* How do we measure?

Within SVT, the national public service television broadcaster, several regional news programs have begun to count heads in regard to gender and ethnical background. This is however not enough. It doesn't matter if there are ten women or persons from non-European countries if they are portrayed according to common stereotypes. In that case it would perhaps be better not to show them at all! The answer to the question what we do measure is thus: We don't monitor primarily appearance, but representation!

Why do we measure? The question may be quite obvious to an outsider, but to the hardworking staffs of editorials introducing a monitoring tool will in all likelihood be seen as yet another time-stealing task. Therefore it is absolutely imperative to be clear and open about how results will be used. It is also important not to place the editors in a defensive position. Point out that this is an opportunity to evolve and refine the programs they are making. Instead of just thinking they do a great job, they can now see the positive presentations they make as well as get an indication on how to improve presentations even further. The measuring tool can actually be used as a check list before hand on how they wish the program to be seen and coded.

The final question: How do we measure is not something I have discussed as much in this paper. I haven't focused on the specific variables used within the tool, nor the specifics upon who should be the responsible part for doing the coding since this is something that should be evaluated on every specific editorial board. The prime issue I have wanted to address is the somewhat provocative idea that internal monitorings are a good way to work with media representations. Also I want to bring up the notion that a news room may have a different set of norms and rules of conduct, but is still an organisation which may be changed. For a strategy to be successful however, it is crucial that sufficient resources are added to the measuring. It is important to remember that the greater costs do not stem from the development of a measuring tool. Rather, the cost stems from the use of it. The big costs will be education of staff and trimming of the tool and also, time for discussions and reflections on the output from the editorials.

Otherwise the ignorance of journalists will be the sole reason for the exclusion of a big part of the population. And that is simply not acceptable in a modern society.

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