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The Media And Disabled Persons In Singapore

By

Mike G Gray
Until recently the media in Singapore has, in general, taken the view that items on disabled people are not newsworthy. The increase in stories on issues affecting disabled people has arisen due to activities of the 'Advisory Council on the Disabled' which was formed on 25 February 1988 and on 11 February 1989 reported its recommendations. The work of the Advisory Council and its Committees was extensively covered by the media. As a result of this increased exposure, more and more issues are being raised from disabled people and their caregivers. This can be seen from the significant increase in letters on disabled issues in the Forum Page of the Straits Times.

The increased awareness of the problems affecting disabled people is welcomed. It is, however, unfortunate that little attention has been given to the Public Education aspect. In fact much reporting is negative in nature as it emphasizes the problems of disabled people without recognising their potential and achievements. The media can be expected to play a major role in the implementation of programme for the disabled in Singapore. There is, however, a need for improvement in the way that issues on disabled people are reported and also to the type of issues that are reported. The paper will look into how this may be done.

Role of the Media

The objectives for disabled services in Singapore is an infrastructure that will enable disabled persons to develop their physical, mental and social capabilities to the fullest extent that their disabilities permit and to enable them to be integrated into the community. There are three main areas where the media can contribute to these objectives and they are

- Public Education
- Information on Services for disabled people and their families
- Publicity on methods of prevention of disability.

Public Education

The most important role that the media can play is in public education. Disabled people carry a stigma. They are often perceived by the public to be an economic liability and incapable of managing their own lives. In the extreme they are considered as 'freaks' that should be kept away from the general public.

As stated in the report of the Advisory Council on the Disabled 'Resettlement of disabled people in society cannot be achieved through rehabilitation measures alone. More than any other factor, it depends on the way that able-bodied citizens perceive and react to their disabled counterparts. Many wrongly believe that disabled people are economically unproductive and a burden to society. If this misconception is not overcome, all the recommendations of the Advisory Council, even if implemented, will be of limited benefit. The stereotype of a disabled person as a handicap must be corrected. He should be regarded as an individual possessing positive attributes, and given the right opportunities and considerations, he can become an asset to the community.'
Public education and awareness programmes should be aimed by the media at both the general public and the specific groups which are directly involved with disabled people. All have a role to play. In the next few paragraphs some of these are discussed in more detail.

The main group that need increased awareness is the general public. It is important to dispel the notion that disabled people are sick. Disabled people are not sick it is just that a part or parts of their bodies do not function normally. A major part of the population do not know the difference between say a psychiatric case and intellectually disabled or cerebral palsy. They are often under the mistaken impression that an intellectually disabled person or some one with cerebral palsy is dangerous. Little realising that a person with cerebral palsy usually has the full mental facilities but the body does not function normally and that an intellectually disabled person is not dangerous but it is just that the brain is not fully developed. These types of misconceptions need to be corrected if the integration of disabled people into schools and HDB estates can be achieved.

The general public also needs to be informed as to how to deal with disabled people without feeling awkward or making the disabled person feel awkward. There is a tendency at present for the general public to stare at disabled people.

Employers need to be made more aware of the employability of disabled people. Public education and awareness programmes highlighting the work potential and abilities of disabled people should be held on a continual basis. Employees need to be better informed and also to accept that in some cases the inclusion of a disabled person in their work group may result in lower productivity.

Government officers must help in cutting through the bureaucratic barriers that disabled people sometime encounter. There is a need for a better understanding of disabled people by this group. The tendency to shrug off matters as a welfare matter, rather than dealing with them, must be avoided.

The schools can play a significant role in the change of social attitudes towards disabled people if the curriculum includes through moral education and by example that disabled people are also of value. Furthermore the exchange visits between regular schools and special schools should be increased.

The final group that needs public education are the parents of disabled persons and the disabled persons themselves. The parents need to be encouraged to bring their children into the public rather than being ashamed of them and to take advantage of the programmes available to them. Disabled people themselves need to is encouraged to achieve their best.

The difficulty with the above public education programmes is passing the message to the relevant group. The media would be a unique and powerful influence on individuals and so can provide a significant role.
Information on services to disabled people and their families

The media can play a significant role in providing information on services available for disabled people to disabled people and to their families. At present there is no complete listing of disabled people in Singapore. This means that direct contact whether it be by mail or telephone or house visits is not possible. In fact the Central Registry of Disabled People only consists of about 12,000 disabled people, whereas the actual number in Singapore is likely to be many times greater. The only effective way, therefore, to reach out to disabled people is by its media.

Prevention of Disability

In many cases the disability can be prevented and measures include

- genetic counselling and termination of pregnancies to reduce congenital diseases
- early immunisation against communicable diseases
- health education to encourage better nutrition, hygiene and physical fitness, and discourage addiction and habituation
- measures to prevent or minimise accidents at work, on the road, at home or during recreation

Services for the above are reasonably well developed in Singapore. Many people, however, do not use these services. The media can play a major role in the publicity of prevention programmes.
HOW TO PRESENT DISABLED PEOPLE POSITIVELY

Some guidelines, based on the 1982 Recommendation of a United Nations Seminar on how to present disabled people positively in media presentation, are as follows:

1. Natural situations should be used, for instance depict disabled people at home, work, school or leisure. In this way the general public will be able to associate disabled people with their natural settings with a consequential improvement in perception that disabled people are somehow different.

2. It is necessary to acknowledge the natural curiosity and occasional awkwardness that may develop in social situations involving disabled and non-disabled individuals. Where appropriate, provide positive examples in which such curiosity is satisfied and in which awkwardness is lessened. In the main this would be by public education programmes for instance, 'what to do when meeting a blind person' or to explain that someone with cerebral palsy usually has full mental facilities but has difficulty in expressing what he wants to. The message is try not to treat disabled people specially and do not be afraid of them.

3. Include disabled people as part of the general population in media products in addition to those in where their story is the primary focus. For instance parts could be written into the television serials for disabled people in showing them integrated into the community. The exposure so obtained would help to break down the fears sometime held by the public as to integration of disabled people into the community and also give hope to the disabled people themselves in that they can in many cases integrate and interact with non disabled people.

4. Avoid presenting people as dependant or pitiful. Given the opportunities disabled people can often help themselves, and in many cases would rather do so. As regards exploiting the pity aspect, fund raisers must avoid playing on the pity for disabled people to raise funds. To do so will only act to permeate the belief that disabled people are only an object of pity and cannot achieve anything.

5. Other stereotypes to be avoided include presenting disabled people as inherently saintly or asexual. For instance encouragement can be given to a disabled person without heaping exaggerated praise on them as if they were children. As regards sexuality and romance, the stereotyped image on a disabled person is often presented with contempt. In a culture that places so much emphasis on the 'look' or attractiveness, disabled persons may be and often are, wrongly perceived as dangerous or sexually deviant or unable to have a sexual life either emotionally or physically.

6. Avoid presenting disabled people as being gratuitously dangerous or unequally endowed with a special skill due to a disability. Over the centuries the mass media, in whatever form existed at the time, has tended to paint a distorted image of disabled people, which is still carried forward in superstitions or films, shows and literature, which often portray monster people or other such bad 'hats', with disabilities, attacking people.
7. Consider carefully words used to describe or characterize disabled people. Recognise and avoid phrases that may demean them (e.g. blind as a bat, deaf and dumb, confined to wheelchairs, afflicted with disabilities).

Some alternative are

AFFLICTED WITH - say "The person has .."
CRIPPLE/CRIPPLED/THE CRIPPLED - say "The person with a disability or "individual with a disability"
INFLECTED - say "caused by"
AN INVALID - say "The person who has a disability resulting from or caused by .."
RESTRICTED TO/CONFIRMED TO - say e.g. "uses a wheelchair" or "walks with crutches"
VICTIM OF - say "person who has ...", "person who experienced .." or "person with .."
WHEELCHAIR BOUND - say "uses a wheelchair"
THE RETARDED - say "person who is intellectually disabled" or "person who is retarded"

8. Portray people with disabilities is the same multidimensional fashion as others. For instance people with intellectual disability can also complete an education or people with disabilities can enjoy music just like everybody else.

9. Present the achievements and difficulties of people with disabilities in ways that do not over emphasise the impairment or exaggerate or emotionalize the situation. For example, in news stories and documentary reports, the fact of a person's disability should be only reported when it is directly relevant.

10 Information should be provided to the public about prevention and treatment of impairments that lead to a disability, as well as the availability of services for people with disabilities and their families. This can be done through public information campaigns and also can be integrated into general media products.
WHAT TYPE OF MEDIA TO USE?

As discussed previously, public education and information on disability needs to reach out to the whole community. To achieve this, it is necessary to use all forms of media whether it be publications, conferences and seminars, radio and the press, television or other information providing services.

Publications

One of the most useful ways of disseminating information is by specific publications. There are, at present, few publications available. The Singapore Council of Social Services (SCSS) produces 'Rapport'. This, however, covers mainly the SCSS projects and for all areas of social welfare and not just disabled services. Some voluntary welfare organisations produce magazines but these tend to be restricted, in the main, to members. It can be deduced that there is a need, in Singapore, for a publication on the disabled and including public education and news of voluntary welfare organisations serving disabled people, including success stories of individuals. There are two main problems with publications. Firstly, they must be interesting enough to avoid being thrown in the wastepaper basket on receipt and secondly, in identifying to whom to send. Take for instance disabled people and their families. There are only about 12,000 disabled people registered with the Central Registry of Disabled People, whereas there are possibly about 100,000 disabled people in Singapore. It is extremely difficult to locate the other 88,000.

Conferences

Conferences and seminars can help to disseminate information. However, these would normally cover only a small group at a time and would also mostly consist of people who are already committed to servicing the needs of disabled people.

The Press

The press is one of the most powerful forms of the media. Unfortunately, it has to date failed in educating the public on the issues affecting disabled people. Whilst it accepted many more articles concerning issues on the disabled have been featured in the last year, most of them have been of a negative nature. The problem lies partly with the press and partly with those involved with disabled people. The press in that different reporters are often assigned to each story on disabled issues. With limited exposure the reporter has difficulty in getting both the right story and the right slant. As regards those involved with disabled people they are the information providers. There is however no co-ordinated service for the press to rely on. The stories are obtained on an adhoc basis and sometimes not from those who are in a best position to provide the information. The power of the press cannot be underestimated on 22 December 1988 the Straits Times carried a story 'Charity Xmas Gift appeal gets cool response from Singaporeans'. The next day the headline was 'Donations to Gift Box start pouring in'. It would certainly help the situation if the press could publish regularly, at least once a week, an article on the needs and problems of disabled people in the same manner that they do for other issues and perhaps donate some space for public education projects.
Radio and Television

As with the press both radio and television have not catered satisfactorily to the issues of disabled people in Singapore. The S.B.C. T.V. documentary 'A future for Jane' which focussed on the issues of disabled people in Singapore and what was being done was an exception. However, it is hoped that this is not just a one off programme and that others were follow. Many of the issues discussed above concerning the press also apply to the Radio and Television. Television, however, has an additional dimension and that is the visual message. T.V. serials are produced now in Singapore, many of them covering underlying social messages. However, disabled people have been neglected and excluded from being featured in these series. SBC should consider portraying disabled people as part of the normal life activities in Singapore. More documentaries on disabled people are also required. It is important that both types of programme show the fact that many disabled people can live normally with the community.

Other Information Services

All other means of disseminating information should also be used for public education services. This would include the soon to be introduced 'Teleview'. which could be used as an information provider.

What needs to be done?

The first need is for a proper co-ordination of information whether it be public education or news items. This could be achieved by a central clearing house, which would act as coordinator between the organisations serving disabled people and the press. There would be two advantages if this was done. Firstly, the release of information could be planned properly so that relevant material is available to the media and secondly, the impact can be heightened as it will be available to all forms of media at once and not exclusively to one or another.

As regards the media themselves they could be more effective if there was greater specialisation. Far too often the same reporter is not seen twice, with the result that the knowledge and expertise is not established. Members of the media should be encouraged to visit voluntary welfare organisations or better still to be involved in a voluntary capacity with organisations serving disabled people.

It is also would not be a bad idea to encourage short workshops for those members of the media who are involved in reporting on disabled people. This workshops could include both tips on how to report and also topics on public education.

The above are just a few ideas. There is no doubt that the situation of disabled people in Singapore has recently received much attention from the media. It is hoped that the impetus will continue and that the media can be encouraged to promote better the achievements of disabled people and to play a major role in the ultimate integration of disabled people into our community.