



Interviewing disabled experts

a guide for newsrooms
and journalists

October 2020



Introduction

Media Trust is a charity that works in partnership with the media and creative industry to give charities, under-represented communities and young people a stronger voice, through training and access to free resources and matching them with communications volunteers. Find out more at www.mediatrust.org.

We are currently working on a project to increase the representation of disabled people in the media. Disabled people make up 20% of the population, however it's rare to see disabled people featured in media interviews. And when you do, they're almost always only talking about disability issues.

As part of our 'Reframing Disability' initiatives, Media Trust is looking at ways to support experts across a range of different fields, who also happen to be disabled, to take part in media interviews on TV or radio.



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Break out of your bubble

When you're working on a story and need an expert contributor, who do you contact? Most likely someone from your trusty contact list. Time is tight, your deadline is fast approaching and you needed someone yesterday.

Although, when was the last time you broke out of your bubble of usual suspects and looked for someone different?

Instead of asking the same people to contribute to your story, what if you could get someone different to contribute? Someone who is disabled, for example. Not only would you get a different perspective, you would be helping to change the narrative on disability.



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Let's reframe 'disability'

For too long disabled people have been viewed as the subjects of pity or charity, or as having something “wrong” with them that needs curing or fixing. Thankfully, that’s changing.

Over the past 30 years or so, a new perspective has emerged known as the “social model”. This model reframes people as being disabled by the barriers they face in society, as well as their environment, and not by their disability. Or, more accurately, their impairment or condition.

For example:

- ▶ A wheelchair user is disabled by a set of stairs.
- ▶ A blind person is disabled by a website that isn't compatible with their screen reader.
- ▶ An autistic person is disabled by someone expecting them to maintain eye contact whilst conversing.

It's important to be mindful that not all disabilities are visible and that some people don't describe themselves as being disabled, even though by definition they are.



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Think more broadly than wheelchairs and white sticks



Say the word “disability” to most people and they’ll think of wheelchairs. This is not surprising given that the sign for disability is a person in a wheelchair. Some may think about blind people, or deaf people, having seen sign-language interpreters on TV.



But what about people who are:

- ▶ Neurodivergent (autistic, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia).
- ▶ Of short stature, or with different limbs, or missing limbs.
- ▶ Facially disfigured or have a speech impairment.
- ▶ Living with long-term physical or chronic health conditions.



Disability is as varied as people are, and is rarely something you have or not. Disability is a spectrum.



For example:

- ▶ A deaf person might have some hearing.
- ▶ A wheelchair user might have some ambulatory ability.
- ▶ A person with dyslexia might be severely or mildly dyslexic.



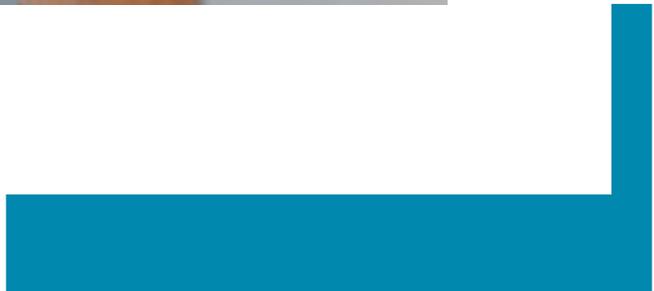


There are two important facts to note about disability:

1. People often have multiple disabilities. For example someone with cerebral palsy could have impaired speech, mobility and manual dexterity.
2. 83% of disabled people were not born with their disability. Instead they acquired it through their life by illness or accident. And that can happen to anybody.



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Mind your language



You know how important language is when it comes to creating a narrative and shaping opinions. So, here are some points about disability that should be in the editorial guidelines of every news organisation:



▶ Don't use "the disabled", "the blind", etc. "The" dehumanises and objectifies people. Instead use "disabled people", "blind people", "people with sight loss", etc.



▶ It's "non-disabled" not "able bodied". Disability isn't about ability but rather about societal and environmental barriers. Many disabled people have very able bodies.



▶ "Disabled people" is preferred to "people with disabilities". This is true in the UK because it reinforces the social model, but differences of opinion exist. When describing an individual listen to how they refer to themselves and use the same language they do.

▶ Someone isn't "an epileptic"; they "have epilepsy". Don't label people by their disability.

▶ Disabled people don't "suffer" from their disability. They live with it, and they are not "vulnerable" just because they are disabled. Don't use language that evokes pity and is disempowering.

▶ But don't get hung up on language. Don't let worrying about language discourage you from talking to disabled people. The vast majority have heard it all before, won't be affronted and if they have concerns, they'll explain their preferences.



Confident conversations



Even though 1 in 5 people you meet will have a disability, there is still a lot of awkwardness around what to say or do when meeting a disabled person. So here are some simple pointers for your interviews:



- ▶ Don't talk about their disability unless you need to check their access needs, or their disability is directly relevant to your story. If, however, they raise their disability in conversation, don't brush past it. It's their choice to talk about it and it might help them feel more comfortable.
- ▶ Don't ask personal questions. Steer well clear of asking things like how they came to be disabled, or whether they can have sex.
- ▶ Don't make assumptions. Never assume to know what a disabled person can or cannot do, or what barriers they face.
- ▶ Don't finish their sentences. This particularly applies to people with stammers or other speech impairments. Likewise, never address a disabled person's support worker or interpreter instead of the disabled person.
- ▶ Don't worry about using everyday language. Trying to avoid everyday language, such as "see you later" to a blind person makes for a very stilted conversation. As long as the language is not demeaning, disempowering or hurtful, it's OK.
- ▶ Don't be afraid of getting it wrong. It's human to err and we all make mistakes in what we might say or do. Be sensitive to the moment. If in doubt just ask, if needed apologise, then move on.



Finding and engaging disabled experts



So, you're open to the idea of using disabled experts rather than someone from your regular pool of contributors. Where do you find them?



Your first port of call should be your organisation's database of expert contributors. If you don't have one, or it doesn't contain any disabled contributors, ask your current list of contact organisations about the diversity of their spokespeople and if they have anyone who identifies as disabled.

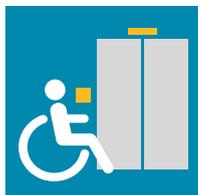


If you have time, and are willing to cast your net wider, contact Disability Rights UK, a member of the Disability Charities Consortium, and ask if they can help source an expert in the field you are searching.

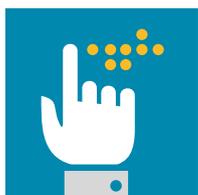


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Remove barriers by making adjustments



Disabled people are disabled by barriers, so removing those barriers will make them less disabled. Think of it as levelling the playing field.



The adjustments you might need to make for a disabled contributor are usually very straightforward. They will most likely tell you what adjustments they need when you arrange the interview but if they don't, just ask.



What might be needed?

- ▶ Alternative format documents, such as Large Print, Braille, audio.
- ▶ Communication preferences, such as communicating via text, chat or email rather than the phone.
- ▶ Captions for video conferencing.
- ▶ Travel support, such as a taxi that can accommodate a wheelchair. They may also benefit from meet-and-greet at the entrance or at the taxi drop-off point.
- ▶ Human support, such as a sign-language interpreter.
- ▶ Keep people informed pre- and post-interview about their interview, for example if it will no longer be aired or has been significantly cut down.
- ▶ Some people may benefit from follow-up from the producer to check in that the interviewee enjoyed the interview and has not faced any problems from the exposure (e.g. social media backlash).
- ▶ If someone uses a service animal such as a guide dog, ensure that nobody touches or disturbs the dog while it is working.





How do I go about making the adjustments?

In most cases, making adjustments is straightforward. It will just be a matter of being flexible and changing the way you do something, just like you would do for anyone that has a different style of communication or working.



If you're not sure how to make an adjustment, discuss it with your disabled contributor - they're the expert in their own situation.



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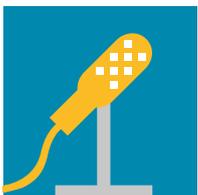


Helping disabled spokespeople shine in media appearances



The most important question you can ask is:

Question: “Is there anything I can do to help you be your best in this media appearance?”

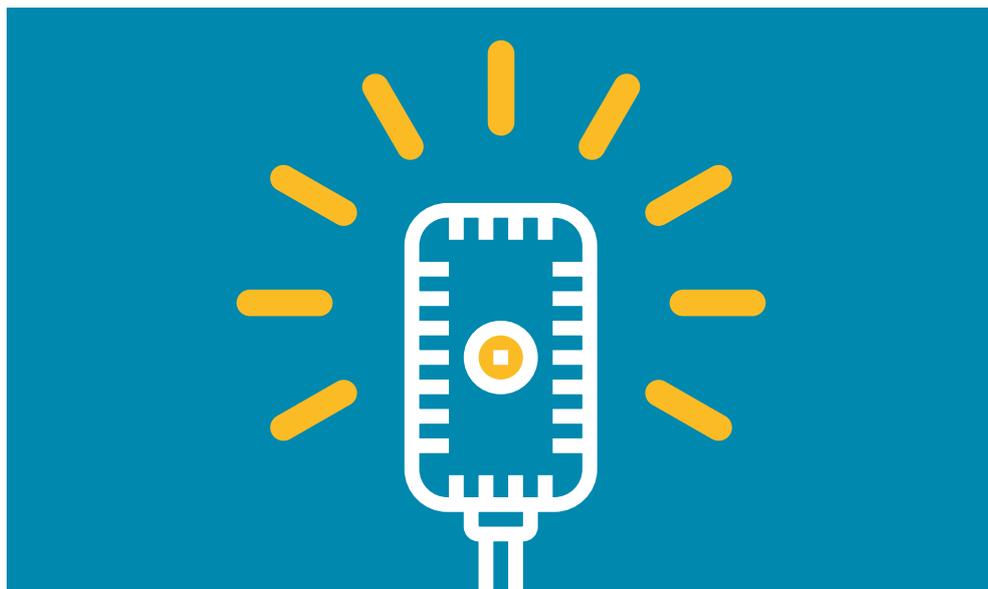


Make sure you plan ahead, and discuss with them the best way to approach their contribution. For example, do they need briefing materials sent in advance or in a particular format.



If they haven't had an opportunity to do media training, make sure they have an opportunity to rehearse and practice their contribution so you and they are comfortable with it.

Bear in mind sensitivities that might arise if the disabled person needs to speak about their lived experience of disability, which might be at odds with organisations that they support or vice versa... ensure it's a safe space for them to contribute.



About the author

Graeme K Whippy MBE is a consultant who helps employers be brilliant at employing disabled people. He has worked with a variety of organisations in the public, private and third sector including Channel 4, Ofcom and RNIB.



Contact us

We hope you've found this guide helpful and informative. We're keen to encourage as many people as possible to get involved in our work and increase the visibility of disabled people in the media.

If you want to know more about the 'Reframing Disability' project, or would like to talk to us about media interview training, please email trainingandevents@mediatrust.org or get in touch via our [online form](#).





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