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PRINCIPLES OF ETHICAL COMMUNICATION ABOUT PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

ABSTRACT

Ethical communication about persons with disabilities is based on their dignity, rights, and individuality. Communication about persons with disabilities often contains stereotypes, prejudices, and paternalistic methods, which contribute to their further marginalization. It is necessary to adopt communication practices that emphasize empowering language, avoiding offensive or derogatory terms. Reporting on persons with disabilities should be fact-based, avoiding sensationalism or unethical emotional manipulation, reflecting respect for the autonomy and perspectives of persons with disabilities. The use of appropriate language helps frame disability as part of human diversity. The media and institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina should adopt an approach that promotes the realization of the rights of persons with disabilities and combats stigmatization by educating media professionals on ethical reporting standards and enforcing laws that protect the rights of persons with disabilities. The aim of this paper is to offer recommendations for improving communication and reporting practices involving persons with disabilities, in order to reduce stigmatization and foster respect for their rights.

Keywords: communication about persons with disabilities, ethics, inclusivity, rights of persons with disabilities, stigmatization.

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INTRODUCTION

Communication about persons with disabilities represents a crucial segment of societal discourse, as it shapes public perception of this population and impacts their social position. The manner in which persons with disabilities are communicated about reflects the degree of respect for their rights, dignity, and individuality. Therefore, establishing ethical principles in communication about persons with disabilities is key to reducing stigmatization and promoting inclusion. Ethical principles of communication about persons with disabilities are grounded in universal values such as respect for dignity, autonomy, and equality. Communication that perpetuates stereotypes, prejudices, or has a paternalistic tone contributes to the marginalization and exclusion of persons with disabilities from society. On the contrary, empowering language and approaches that emphasize abilities rather than limitations foster the integration and acceptance of persons with disabilities as equal members of society.

Media reporting on persons with disabilities plays a particularly significant role in shaping social awareness. Unfortunately, the media often resorts to sensationalism, using disability as a means to elicit emotional reactions from the audience. Such practices not only violate ethical standards but they also further stigmatize persons with disabilities, portraying them as objects of pity or inspiration rather than as individuals with rights and capabilities. Therefore, it is necessary to develop guidelines for ethical reporting that will ensure respect for the dignity and autonomy of persons with disabilities while contributing to an objective and fair portrayal of their lives and societal contributions. Introducing guidelines for proper communication about persons with disabilities is essential to ensuring an inclusive approach that views disability as an integral part of human diversity. These guidelines include the use of appropriate terminology, respect for the right to self-determination, and the active involvement of persons with disabilities in decision-making processes on topics concerning them. The goal of such approach is

not merely to raise awareness but also to change structural power relations that often place persons with disabilities at a disadvantage.

The aim of this paper is to explore the ethical principles of communication about persons with disabilities, analyze current practices of media reporting on persons with disabilities, and offer guidelines for proper communication, with the ultimate goal of reducing stigmatization and enhancing social inclusion of persons with disabilities.

THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

The most important international legal instrument ensuring that persons with disabilities enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with others is the **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** (Škorić, 2017). According to the definition contained in the Convention (hereinafter referred to as the Convention), persons with disabilities are those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and equal participation in society (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2010). Attitudes toward persons with disabilities have changed significantly throughout history. In earlier societies, their presence was often not accepted. Social attitudes toward persons with disabilities were influenced by specific cultural, material, and spiritual beliefs of particular communities, as well as the historical circumstances in which they lived. These attitudes were shaped by various factors, including social organization, legal norms, economic development, religious doctrines, and the degree of scientific progress. Persons with disabilities were often not treated in the same way as those without disabilities (Gadžo-Šašić, 2020). Social norms and overall living standards further influence perceptions and attitudes toward persons with disabilities (Leutar & Buljevac, 2020).

Despite progress in improving the status of persons with disabilities over time, they still expe-

rience high levels of discrimination in almost all spheres of life. Their social status significantly lags behind that of persons without disabilities, which is particularly pronounced in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The adoption of the Convention, ratified by Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2010, has contributed to improving the status of persons with disabilities in the country. By ratifying the Convention, Bosnia and Herzegovina committed to “promoting, protecting, and ensuring the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, as well as promoting respect for their inherent dignity” (Article 1).

According to Article 2 of the Convention, discrimination based on disability refers to any distinction, exclusion, or restriction on the basis of disability, which impairs or nullifies the enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms. Such discrimination can occur in various spheres, including economic, social, cultural, and public life, and prevents persons with disabilities from participating equally in society. The primary forms of discrimination include **direct** and **indirect discrimination**, harassment, incitement to discrimination, failure to provide reasonable accommodation, segregation, victimization, and severe forms of discrimination. This paper focuses on direct and indirect discrimination. The key characteristic of direct discrimination lies in the fact that individuals are not valued based on their personal qualities but are treated unfavorably due to their membership in a specific group (Grbić et al., 2012). Indirect discrimination occurs when provisions, criteria, or practices that appear neutral at first glance, in reality, place individuals at a disadvantage due to their specific characteristics, status, orientations, beliefs, or value systems. Indirect discrimination is a common form of discrimination that is often harder to recognize, which complicates its prevention (Vasiljević, 2014).

Discrimination against persons with disabilities represents one of the most pervasive social stigmas that society has yet to overcome. Regardless of gender and age, persons with disabilities are often among the most marginalized groups in

society, facing unique challenges in exercising their human rights. It is crucial to acknowledge that cultural, social, physical, and other barriers continue to hinder persons with disabilities from enjoying their constitutional rights to equality, freedom, and human dignity (Marumoagae, 2011).

In accordance with Article 21 of the Convention, Bosnia and Herzegovina committed to taking all necessary measures to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise their right to freedom of expression and opinion, including the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas on an equal basis with others and through all forms of communication of their choice. The use of **inclusive language, people-first language**, and non-discriminatory expressions ensures respect for the rights of persons with disabilities as provided by the Convention. Inclusive language avoids terms or phrases that exclude specific groups of people. While anyone can be excluded through language, this term is most often associated with traditionally marginalized, underrepresented, and non-privileged groups, such as persons with disabilities. Inclusive language avoids offending or diminishing others based on entrenched stereotypes or personal perceptions. The use of people-first language, which prioritizes the person before their disability or difficulty, is essential for promoting inclusivity and respect. This approach treats disability not as a primary identifier but as one of many characteristics of a person. For example, the term “person with a disability” should be used instead of “invalid,” thereby avoiding a reductive view of the individual solely through the lens of their disability. This recommendation also applies to referring to people with various health conditions, where medical ethics should be avoided to prevent reinforcing stereotypes that portray individuals with conditions solely as “patients” (Caritas BiH, 2024).

MEDIA REPORTING ON PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Communication is one of the basic human needs, with the understanding that every individual has

unique ways of communicating and perceiving communication processes, whether they are children, adolescents, youth, adults, or vulnerable groups such as persons with disabilities. Each act of communication presents specific challenges on both the sender's and receiver's ends (Tustonja & Marić, 2022). In this context, communication about persons with disabilities is incomplete without communication with persons with disabilities themselves. Within the media space, the approach to persons with disabilities should be based on respect for their autonomy and viewpoints about the topics being communicated.

A key challenge in the media portrayal of persons with disabilities is the lack of adequate representation. This population is underrepresented, and when represented, the focus is often solely on their disabilities, with their achievements and everyday lives rarely highlighted. To achieve equality in all aspects of social life, it is crucial to develop collective awareness and sensitivity toward persons with disabilities, wherein the media plays a significant role in shaping public perception.

The media has a crucial role in forming attitudes and relationships toward persons with disabilities. However, the portrayal of this population frequently emphasizes issues of injustice, thereby fostering feelings of pity and the perception that they are a societal burden. This approach contributes to the creation of negative stereotypes within the public consciousness. Increased media presence of persons with disabilities, with an emphasis on their abilities and achievements, can significantly reduce stereotypes and raise awareness about their potential.

The media outlets observed for reporting on persons with disabilities include *ljubuski.net*, *n1info.ba*, *vecernji.ba*, *bljesak.info*, and *avaz.ba*, which are among the most-read internet portals in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The time frame covers the period from February 2020 to October 2024, in order to analyze recent examples of reporting and identify current trends in media representation of persons with disabilities.

The selection of portals is based on their high readership and influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the diversity in their editorial policies. Portals such as *ljubuski.net*, *n1info.ba*, *vecernji.ba*, *bljesak.info*, and *avaz.ba* represent a combination of local and national media, providing a broader insight into reporting practices at different levels of information dissemination. The following terms were searched on these portals: persons with disabilities, invalids, persons with special needs, disability, persons with developmental difficulties, and handicapped. Although some of these terms are not terminologically correct, they were used to collect texts relevant for the analysis. The selected texts were chosen due to errors found in journalistic articles that negatively impacted persons with disabilities. Additionally, they were analyzed for their specific journalistic style, which, through its manner of conveying news, contributes to shaping public perceptions of persons with disabilities.

1. *Ljubuski.net* (**October 2024**) The article titled "Invalidi od države traže strategiju" ("Invalids demand a strategy from the government") uses discriminatory terminology in the headline, despite employing correct terminology, "persons with disabilities," in the body of the article. The author of the article uses a term that is discriminatory toward persons with disabilities, and ultimately, the title of the article promotes sensationalism. It is evident that the title deviates from the content of the article, where the correct terminology for persons with disabilities is used.
2. *N1info.ba* (**October 2024**) The article "Meho je u ratu ostao bez supruge i danas se brine za dvojicu sinova koji su invalidi" ("Meho lost his wife in the war and now takes care of two sons who are invalids") uses inappropriate terminology. The very title of the article reveals the use of incorrect terminology regarding persons with disabilities. The phrase "sons who are invalids" in this context is disrespectful to the principles of people-first language, which emphasizes the importance of the person rather than their disability as a key defining characteristic. It would be more

- accurate to use the term “sons with disabilities,” recognizing disability as one of their traits, rather than a defining characteristic. Such language promotes dignity and reduces the stigmatization of persons with disabilities.
3. *Vecernji.ba* (**October 2024**) The headline “*Danica Ružić bila najbolja mlada odbojkašica Europe, a danas je invalid*” (“Danica Ružić was Europe’s best junior volleyball player, and today she is an invalid”) lacks inclusivity and sensationalizes the individual’s disability. A better phrasing would be “today lives with a disability,” maintaining a focus on her personhood rather than portraying her disability as a tragic loss. Furthermore, such a headline can be considered sensationalist as it implies a drastic loss of value or identity due to a disability, which contributes to a negative perception. This approach overlooks the individual’s achievements and emphasizes disability as a tragedy, which is inconsistent with ethical standards for representing persons with disabilities.
 4. *Avaz.ba* (**March 2022**) The article “*Čovjek se pati: Mirsad je vezan za kolica, jedva pride svojoj kući zbog makadama*” (“The man suffers: Mirsad is bound to a wheelchair, barely reaches his house due to gravel”) employs outdated and patronizing language. The term “bound to a wheelchair” does not align with modern approaches to terminology used for persons with disabilities, as it implies that the individual is unable to function without their wheelchair, thereby reinforcing negative stereotypes. A more accurate term would be “a person who uses a wheelchair” or “a person with a disability who uses a wheelchair.” Similarly, the phrase “the person is suffering” can be perceived as patronizing, as it suggests that the individual suffers or endures hardship solely due to their disability, thereby negating their autonomy and potential. Instead, it is recommended to use language that focuses on the societal and environmental barriers that hinder a person’s life, such as “Mirsad experiences difficulties accessing his home due to inadequate infrastructure.” This shifts the emphasis toward the need for so-
 5. *Vecernji.ba* (**July 2023**) The headline “*U Federaciji BiH ima 974 djece koja su ometena u fizičkom i psihičkom razvoju i koja primaju pomoć*” (“In the Federation of BiH, there are 974 children impaired in physical and psychological development receiving aid”) uses outdated and inappropriate terminology. The use of the term “impaired in physical and psychological development” in the context of disability is outdated and inappropriate, as it carries negative connotations and implies obstacles or deficiencies inherent to the person. Such language can further stigmatize children with developmental difficulties by emphasizing their challenges rather than their abilities and potential. It is recommended to use terms such as “children with developmental difficulties,” which are more neutral and focused on respect of the dignity and individuality of these individuals.
 6. *Bljesak.info* (**February 2020**) The article “*Upoznajte taksistu koji besplatno vozi djecu s posebnim potrebama*” (“Meet the taxi driver who gives free rides to children with special needs”) uses the phrase “children with special needs,” which is becoming outdated. Instead, “children with developmental challenges” is more appropriate, promoting inclusivity without sensationalism. Furthermore, while it is commendable to highlight the altruism of the driver, it is important to avoid sensationalism or paternalism that may reinforce stereotypes of persons with disabilities as merely passive recipients of assistance.
- The provided examples clearly show that persons with disabilities rarely receive adequate media coverage. When reporting on them, terminological inaccuracies are often found, which can create negative stereotypes and potentially shape public perceptions that become socially accepted. Media content specifically intended for persons with disabilities, supporting their full social integration, is extremely limited. Furthermore, although the media reports on injustices they face, such as barriers to accessing public facilities, there is rarely an insight into the lives of persons with dis-

abilities from their own perspective. Therefore, it is crucial for the media to present persons with disabilities as equal members of society, rather than as a burden. Highlighting their abilities, determination, and efforts in achieving success can positively influence their motivation for further progress and more active advocacy for their rights and needs.

GUIDELINES FOR APPROPRIATE COMMUNICATION ABOUT PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Reporting on persons with disabilities in the media requires careful consideration of ethical guidelines to avoid negative and patronizing practices. Portraying persons with disabilities as victims or subjects of a protective stance in the media can negatively impact societal perceptions of these individuals (Sarić, 2012). Reporting on a person with a disability as you would on anyone else reduces stigma and discrimination, creating an environment in which society can recognize persons with disabilities as active and equal members of the community.

Integrating persons with disabilities into scenarios commonly experienced by individuals without disabilities is an important step toward promoting inclusion and equality. This approach involves removing social barriers that marginalize persons with disabilities, enabling their participation in activities and situations common for the broader population. When considering disability, it is important to acknowledge its various forms rather than focusing solely on specific impairments, such as hearing or vision loss. Disability is a broad and complex concept encompassing diverse physical, mental, and sensory challenges. Each person with a disability has a unique experience depending on the type and degree of their disability (Sarić, 2012). Understanding this diversity allows for more precise and inclusive approaches in social, educational, and professional contexts, contributing to the reduction of stereotypes and the promotion of social integration for all persons with disabilities.

An approach that focuses on depicting everyday situations involving persons with disabilities, rather than situations solely related to their disabilities, can significantly contribute to creating a more realistic and balanced portrayal in the media. This approach ensures that disability is not perceived as the dominant characteristic of an individual but instead shows persons with disabilities in various contexts where their daily experiences and interactions with society are not solely defined by their disabilities. It is also important to avoid the opposite extreme: constant portrayal of persons with disabilities through the lens of extraordinary achievements, or the concept of the “super-crip.” Such an approach can create unrealistic expectations and put pressure on persons with disabilities to always stand out through exceptional accomplishments while neglecting the everyday challenges and realities they face. Instead, media reporting should provide a balanced portrayal that includes various aspects of the lives of persons with disabilities, recognizing their daily needs as well as their success without idealizing or creating unrealistic images of their capabilities.

Media reporting on persons with disabilities should depict them as equal members of society, allowing them to express themselves in their own voice. In this context, it is important to highlight their positive statements and enable them to demonstrate their autonomy and empowerment. This approach contributes to breaking stereotypes and promoting the image of persons with disabilities as active and capable individuals who have the right to make their own decisions and shape their own narratives, thereby fostering their social inclusion and equality. Media professionals often avoid the topic of disability and collaboration with persons with disabilities due to a lack of information, fear of the unknown, and discomfort in communication (Sarić, 2012).

Therefore, it is crucial to educate journalists and other media professionals on proper communication with persons with disabilities:

- **practice patience and active listening**, allowing the person to express their thoughts and needs without interruption or haste.

- **use a normal tone of voice**, without patronizing, to maintain equality in communication.
- **avoid completing sentences or answering on behalf of the person with a disability**, respecting their autonomy and right to formulate their own thoughts and responses.
- **address the person by their name**, avoiding overly formal forms of address unless societal norms require formalities for everyone.
- **speak directly to the person with a disability**, not in the third person, even if they are accompanied by an interpreter or assistant, respecting their autonomy and rights.
- **refrain from making assumptions about the person's abilities or limitations**, as each individual with a disability has unique capabilities and experiences.
- **avoid using labels** that often associate persons with disabilities with static and negative characteristics, which can reinforce stereotypes of disability as something tied to illness and dependence.
- **if it is necessary to mention a person's health condition**, use precise and respectful expressions, such as "a person with epilepsy" or "a person with Down syndrome," emphasizing the human aspect rather than just the disability.
- **do not feel uncomfortable using common expressions**, such as "see you later," or similar phrases that do not imply negative connotations related to disability.

CONCLUSION

Based on the previously analyzed examples, it is evident that media reporting on persons with disabilities plays a crucial role in shaping societal perceptions. However, current practices reveal significant shortcomings. The media rarely provides sufficient coverage for persons with disabilities, and when it does, inappropriate, stereotypical, and stigmatizing terminology is often used. Such reporting not only deepens existing prejudices but it also hinders the process of inclusion, the establishment of equality, and the fight against discrimination. Sensationalist portrayals or the emphasis on disability rather

than personal qualities and achievements further perpetuate the image of persons with disabilities as passive victims or a societal burden.

It is essential to develop a responsible and ethical approach to media reporting on persons with disabilities. This involves using people-first language that places the person before the disability, avoiding paternalistic tones and medical labels. Media should recognize their role not only in informing but also in educating the public about the rights, abilities, and contributions of persons with disabilities. Highlighting their success, creativity, and efforts helps break down prejudices and raises awareness about their role as equal members of the community.

Such an approach would not only foster collective sensitivity toward persons with disabilities but it would also strengthen their self-awareness, motivation, and participation in social life. The media should become a tool for empowerment, not for further stigmatization. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce journalist training on responsible and inclusive reporting and ensure the implementation of appropriate ethical guidelines in practice. A systematic and high-quality change in the media narrative can serve as a catalyst for broader social inclusion, contributing to the creation of an equitable society where persons with disabilities enjoy equal rights, opportunities, and dignity.

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PRINCIPI KOMUNIKACIJE O OSOBAMA S INVALIDITETOM – ETIČKI POSTULATI

SAŽETAK

Postulati etičke komunikacije o osobama s invaliditetom temelji se na njihovu dostojanstvu, pravima i individualnosti. Komunikacija o osobama s invaliditetom često sadrži stereotipe, predrasude i paternalističke metode, čime se pridonosi njihovoj dodatnoj marginalizaciji. Potrebno je provoditi komunikaciju naglašeno koristeći osnažujući jezik, bez uvredljivih ili pogrdnih izraza. Izvještavanje o osobama s invaliditetom treba biti utemeljeno na činjenicama, bez senzacionalizma ili neetične emocionalne manipulacije što se ogleda u uključivanju poštivanja autonomije i stajališta osoba s invaliditetom, uz korištenje odgovarajućega jezika koji pomaže da se invaliditet doživi kao dio ljudske raznolikosti. Mediji i institucije u Bosni i Hercegovini trebaju usvojiti pristup koji promiče ostvarivanje prava osoba s invaliditetom i borbu protiv stigmatizacije educiranjem medijskih profesionalaca o etičkim standardima u izvještavanju, kao i provođenjem zakona za zaštitu prava osoba s invaliditetom. Cilj je rada ponuditi preporuke za poboljšanje pristupa komunikacije i izvještavanja s osobama s invaliditetom kako bi se smanjila stigmatizacija i potaknulo poštovanje prava osoba s invaliditetom.

Ključne riječi: komunikacija o osobama s invaliditetom, etika, inkluzivnost, prava osoba s invaliditetom, stigmatizacija.