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Media images of disability

Brian Trench

You only have to look at her picture to know that Rosemary Murray is a carer. A serious, calm woman, who also looks very much as though she ought to be somebody's muse, but she would not dream of dressing her slender frame up for the photographer or even of fixing her hair especially.

Thus writes Sandra Woolridge in *The Southern Star* (11 November 1990). Rosemary Murray, an occupational therapist working with people with disabilities, is elsewhere described as a 'barely noticeable figure somewhere amongst the little clutch from St. Joseph's Workshop, behind them as they sell their craftwork'.

Though they are standing in front, we do not see them at first. The barely noticeable Ms Murray dominates the picture. But as the profile explores Rosemary Murray's work further there is a description of people using sewing machines, of someone planning patchwork, of Ann Wilcox making a rug. And another of the workshop workers is named too – 'Margaret ably handles masses of proofreading, accounts, layouts and photocopying from her wheelchair'.

The profile was one of the items collected in a week-long 'media watch' campaign organized by the National Rehabilitation Board through local administrators and workshop participants in preparation for the NRB/RTE conference, 'Challenging Images – Perceptions of Disability and the Role of the Media', held on 2–3 December, 1991. The conference organizers asked staff and trainees to collect newspaper cuttings referring to disabilities and long-term illnesses. Of sixty-six items from the local press and twenty-six items from the national press supplied – all covering the period 9–15 November 1991 – *The Southern Star* profile was the only one which named people with disabilities who did not have some extraordinary sporting or academic achievement to their name or who were not the object of some appeal for financial assistance. People with disabilities were the ostensible topics of many other stories, but they generally remained an undifferentiated mass – 'the handicapped', 'the disabled'; able-bodied people who assisted them were generally identified.

Girl guides who collected money to buy wheelchairs for young people with disabilities were photographed and named. The members of support groups' committees were named. The winners of prizes in charity fundraising draws were congratulated. The celebrities who contribute to charity fundraising campaigns were celebrated.

The coverage appeared to reflect a fear of the 'other', even a desire to keep a distance from disability. Those who lived with their disabilities without significant constraint were to be admired – but from afar. A similar syndrome can be observed in coverage of the 'Third World': Irish voluntary and professional people are identified and quoted in detail; other participants in the development process remain largely anonymous and are most often seen as supplicants or sufferers.

Most of the supplied material on disabilities fell readily into three categories: reports of fundraising; reports of support group activities; tributes to individuals with disabilities deemed to have demonstrated extraordinary courage. Smaller groups of items arose from public statements about inadequate facilities. Those statements came most frequently from public representatives, suggesting that those with disabilities or long-term illnesses and their carers, where they have them, represent a significant political constituency. Yet it is a constituency represented in the media at one or more removes.

Sources make the news and it is not possible to identify a single item among the ninety-two under scrutiny which originated from and relied mainly on someone with a disability or long-term illness. Parents are sometimes the intermediaries, even when the focus appears to be on their adult offspring. The diminution of people with disabilities – even, or especially, those praised for their achievements – reinforces a view of them as eternally dependent, eternally children.

Fundraisers

The activities of charity and support groups are a staple part of the media menu. People who give their time to these activities are frequently profiled. The issue of *Southern Star* that contained the profile of Rosemary Murray also included a smaller feature on Paddy Clifford, ESB area supervisor in Bantry and chairman of the Bantry and District Mentally Handicapped Association which maintains St. Joseph's Workshop where Rosemary Murray works.

The women who support the work of the Cope Foundation by attending a cookery demonstration in Midleton were photographed in *The Carrigdhoun Weekly* (14 November). Dympna O'Kane of Dundalk was profiled in *The Argus* (15 November) which reported she 'is always taking the plunge for charity' – taking a Christmas Day swim at Gyles Quay to raise funds for Rehab, for instance.

Tom Culbert and colleagues at De Beers, Shannon, raised £25,000 in a parachute jump to help the Share a Dream organization which provides support for children who are terminally ill, it was reported elsewhere (source not indicated). 'Tom is son of Una and the late Philip Culbert, Limerick Junction. Well done, lads,' the report concluded. Even the parents of fundraisers rate a mention.

Fundraisers provide one of the principal types of 'human interest' stories, that is, stories of ordinary people doing extraordinary things. Don McDonald plans to run the 375 miles from Malin to Mizen Head and at the age of fifty, *The Evening Press* (13 November) reported. He hopes to raise over £40,000 to pay for treatment for six-year-old Terry Cullen who is deaf. People with disabilities become vaguely visible as the objects of other people's extraordinary efforts. Of the sixty-one cuttings supplied from local papers, forty-one concerned fundraising or support activities. 'Sale of work to help the handicapped' was the headline on the Newmarket notes in *The Corkman* (14 November), which detailed that purchasers of tickets on the door will enter a draw in which the first prize is half a ton of coal, second prize 5 cwt. The particular charity or charities to benefit from the event were not identified: 'the handicapped' becomes a catch-all category. 'All proceeds go to the handicapped,' it was stated.

County Sound, the Cork local radio station, included the same sale of work among the items covered by its Newmarket correspondent. Local radio reproduces many of the forms established in the local papers. Radio Kerry had items relating to disability on each of the days under review – most dealt with charity events, flag days, one with training and another with a talk to be given by a man in a wheelchair cured at Lourdes.

In the hierarchies observed by the social columns of the national newspapers those with a prominent role in charities concerned with disabilities or long-term illnesses enjoy special privilege. *The Evening Press* (11 November) reported that the fundraising community had its own hierarchy: awards were to be presented to celebrities 'to honour their fundraising work for charity over the years'.

Support groups

Support groups for those with long-term illnesses or disabilities are significant sources of information for the local media. The local notes in provincial papers act as bulletin boards for their card drives and other activities. The Donegal papers (e.g.

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Donegal Democrat, 14 November) reported initiatives to set up a talking newspaper and the formation of a committee to examine wheelchair accessibility. The support groups for those with long-term illnesses or disabilities are also sources of a smaller group of pieces in the local and national media explaining the nature of a particular illness or charity. In Cavan, *The Leader* (13 November), *The Anglo Celt* (14 November) and the local radio station, Northern Sound, all carried items on epilepsy, reflecting the impact of the Irish Epilepsy Association's Brainwave campaign. *The Evening Press* carried a feature on epilepsy (12 November) and reported plans to set up a support group for those with Turners Syndrome (15 November), explaining the syndrome through the experience of a couple whose daughter was born with it. *The Cork Examiner's* health column (13 November) focused on asthma as a potential killer.

Specialist health writers generally stand out from the prevailing trend which hinders understanding. In the *Sunday Independent* (10 November) columnist Patricia Redlich wrote about children who have a disability or disfigurement. 'We equip them best by first of all making them feel good about themselves, self-confident and self-assured, and we do that by loving them unconditionally...(we need to) make sure that the subject of their disability is never taboo, not harped on but mentioned often enough to give them the opportunity to talk about it whenever they encounter unkindness.'

Items on autism on *Morning Ireland* (RTE Radio 1) and on RTE Cork Local Radio reflected the Irish Society for Autism's efforts. But most attention focused on the society's fundraising exhibition in Dublin (see *Sunday Press*, 10 November, *Evening Press*, 9 November) and, in particular, on the display of the work of Stephen Wiltshire, a young man with autism, who had appeared earlier on *The Late Late Show*, sketching Dublin buildings from memory.

That appearance, representing the chat show's taste for the exotic – Wiltshire is black as well – caused discomfort to at least one mother of a child with autism. *The Irish Times* (12 November) interviewed Mary Gahan about her son Andrew, also autistic and an artist. She described Stephen Wiltshire's Late Late appearance as 'like a circus in which he was expected to perform'.

In a matter-of-fact account, *The Irish Times* related that Andrew Gahan, aged 20, has been drawing and painting since he was eight, has won prizes for his work, was included in a group exhibition in Brussels last year and now has a solo show there. Through art, says his mother, he has developed his confidence. His mother used to look after his work diary. A few months ago Andrew took it over himself.

Andrew Gahan's work went on show at the Guinness Hop Store from 3 December, along with other work by artists with disability. *The Sunday Business Post* (10 November) carried a photograph showing one of the artists involved and a poster ad publicizing the exhibition. The caption story: 'Poster companies More O'Ferrall and David Allen have donated several poster sites, etc.' *The Sunday Business Post* added that the exhibition would tour Europe sponsored by IBM. The sources which make the news were, in this case, the commercial companies.

Autism also featured in *The Nationalist and Munster Advertiser* of Clonmel in a highly localized 'aid appeal' story. The report begins: 'A woman who left South Tipperary to live in London twenty-six years ago has appealed to the people in her home town of Clonmel, etc.' It continues: 'Helen Windsor, the eldest of the Keane family from Baron Park, Clonmel, has issued a heartfelt plea, etc.' Helen 'spends every minute of the day organizing fundraising events', it was reported. Hyperbole is also characteristic of the next category of media representations of disability.

Extraordinary courage

For those with disabilities to become the subject, as distinct from the object, of news stories they need to do things which would be quite out of the ordinary for the able-bodied. It is not enough that they do as well as, or even just better than the average.

In early November *The Irish Press* and *Irish Independent* (both 5 November) had reported the award to Una Burke of the Junior Chamber International Young Person of the Year award. She had juvenile arthritis while at primary and secondary school, needed dialysis treatment while she was at college and eventually two kidney transplant operations – one a failure, the other, apparently, a success. She later had a hip transplant as the arthritis returned, then another hip transplant.

In between, she graduated from UCD, though neither the Press nor the Independent stated clearly in what subject. She has trained and worked as a Montessori teacher. The Independent added that she hopes to study for an MA — the topic is not indicated. The Independent headline read: 'Brave young girl gets world prize'. Ms Burke is twenty-six years old. Hyperbole, on the one hand, is matched by diminution on the other. Una Burke's undeniably remarkable story was explored again later in *The Irish Times* (30 November). A reader later commented that 'it is discriminatory and perhaps even patronizing to sanctify the courage that people with disabilities often display', though she commended the tone of *The Irish Times* article.

Una Burke first came to media attention in late 1990 when she won a national 'courage' award. Her own reflection, as quoted in the *Irish Press*, was that she was barely aware of showing particular courage until she received the accolade: 'You think you're plodding along on your own and nobody's taking any notice and, to be honest, I wasn't taking much notice myself.'

Addressing the Challenging Images conference, Philip Boxberger, a member of the National Union of Journalists' Disability Working Party, criticized such 'courage' awards and media coverage of them: 'the public's attention is drawn, not to the 'story', but to the fact that the person, the celebrity, is disabled'. Taking the hypothetical case of a disabled artist who receives an award for his/her work, Boxberger suggested that the headline might read, 'Handicapped artist wins major art award'. He contended that 'the attention here is being focused on the disability of the individual rather than on the ability of the artist'.

On cue, the 1991 'courage' award, sponsored by Securicor, was presented the next day. *The Irish Independent* (4 December) highlighted in its headline the blindness of the recipient, law student Richard Daly. The report referred to him as 'Richard' and quoted his mother: Mr Daly is 24 years old. The *Irish Press* social diary headlined 'Courage award for Richard the Lionheart'. Equally, it referred to him throughout as 'Richard'. (The perhaps unlikely choice of security correspondent to cover the presentation of the award in the *Irish Independent* reflected the alliance that develops between specialist writers and their primary sources.)

The Argus of Dundalk (8 November) had told the story of Kieran Boyle who has been in a wheelchair since a bad motorbike accident six years ago. He went back to study and graduated from Dundalk Regional Technical College. Demonstrating that it was hardly sufficient to have merely completed the course in order to merit attention, *The Argus* underlined that Mr Boyle received the highest points in his class.

The Avondu of County Cork (14 November) reported Tom Leahy's winning of an individual gold medal at the world championships in boccia, held in Portugal. Tom Leahy was described as a 'paraplegic sports star', leaving it in doubt as to whether he was participating in 'special' sports – he was not, in fact.

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Stories of triumph over adversity acquire a particular flavour in the case of children. Dean Smollen, aged 12, was 'plucky little Dean Smollen' and a 'cheeky patient' in the *Evening Herald's* account (9 November) of the County Kildare boy's wait for a kidney transplant.

More often it is the parents who are centre stage. *The Sunday Press* (10 November) carried the episode from Veronica Staunton's book about her daughter Gillian telling of the drama of the parents' rush to Harefield Hospital where young Gillian made medical history as Southern Ireland's (sic) first cystic fibrosis heart and lung transplant patient.

The Nationalist and Leinster Times of Carlow (9 November) reported that 'courageous Carol McFadden ... recently became the first fully disabled person to obtain a degree from Dublin City University'. The report referred to the provision of special facilities for her at her national school and at the accountancy firm where she is training- the implicit question about the previous lack of such facilities was ignored.

Facilities

Stories of inadequate facilities were generally based on statements from public representatives - Councillor John O'Halloran, quoted in the *Evening Herald* (13 November) calling for wheelchair-friendly access to playgrounds, John Dennehy TD quoted in the *Southern Star* (11 November) calling for the extension of facilities for disabled drivers to those who have had a hand amputated and Councillor Con O'Leary of Cork reported in the *Sunday World* (10 November) to be 'campaigning for a fair deal' for part-time home helps employed by the Southern Health Board.

The Leinster Express (10 November) reported that four urban councillors in Athy took to the streets in wheelchairs and found they could not get money from ATMs, could not cross the railway tracks at the station to the southbound platform and much more. The report was one of the few echoes of Wheelchair Awareness Week other than pictures and stories of girl guides collecting (e.g. *The Argus*, 15 November, *The Corkman*, 14 November). *The Star* (13 November), alone among the national papers, reported the presentation to The Square in Tallaght of the National Wheelchair Accessibility Award. That item was also unusual in including a picture of someone in a wheelchair- but Lord Dunraven, president of the Irish Wheelchair Association, is himself a celebrity.

The Star had, like other daily papers, reported the protests of taxi drivers' organizations about the issuing of 100 new taxi plates for Dublin in the days before the period under review. Only *The Irish Times* (11 November) reported the call from the Union of Voluntary Organizations for the Handicapped that preference to be given to applicants who undertake to provide for handicapped passengers.

Gerry Ryan took up the call on his 2FM radio programme, insisting repeatedly that it made good sense that twenty-five of the plates should be reserved for those properly equipped to provide for handicapped passengers. Ryan cited his own taxi-driver in support.

The Cork Examiner (9 November) reported the struggle of a Midleton couple to get assistance in caring for their nine-year-old daughter, said to be severely mentally handicapped, unable to speak and epileptic. In a related feature, it was explained that COPE Foundation is unable to offer places to eighteen mentally handicapped children on the waiting list for its Cork centre because of shortage of funds.

To find media images of those with disability other than images of dependence or suffering, on the one hand, or extraordinary achievement, on the other, it was necessary to look further afield. In a report of Huddersfield Town's 3-2 victory over Birmingham City, *The Guardian* (11 November) recorded that 'it was a cracking afternoon's entertainment, particularly for one visitor sitting next to a Huddersfield supporter with a wooden leg who whacked him with the timber every time Town looked like scoring, which was often'.

South, a Third World business magazine, showed people with disabilities enjoying themselves (August 1991 edition, distributed in November). The picture accompanied a story on Japanese designer Saiko Aika who included brightly coloured wheelchairs and crutches in a fashion show of 100 items from pyjamas to formal party outfits, like the one-piece dresses with 'red lace-trimmed inner bloomers so that disabled women (would) not have to face the embarrassment of showing their legs when someone carries them'.

Saiko Aika found, said *South*, 'the concept that disabled people would want to look desirable, or be sexually flirtatious by wearing attractive clothes, was clearly a touchy subject'.

It is certainly a subject far removed from the Irish media's agenda for coverage of disability. And, though it be unconscious and inarticulate, there is an agenda as there is for the construction of news in general: news-gathering techniques and newsroom organization lay down a framework into which the contradictory and unexpected events of the day are fitted day after day. In relation to coverage of disability the agenda is tightly circumscribed and the largely unexamined notion of 'human interest' keeps it that way. Media conventions add their own layer of discriminatory images to the marginalization within society of people with disabilities.

Note: This article is based on a paper delivered to Challenging Images: Perceptions of Disability and the Role of the Media, (2-3 December 1991), a conference organized by the National Rehabilitation Board with support from RTE.