

Increase in negative coverage of disability issues in print media, report finds

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There has been a significant increase in the amount of negative reporting of disability issues in the print media, according to a new study by the University of Glasgow.

The report, commissioned by disability equality organisation Inclusion London, compared print media articles from 2004/5 and 2010/11 and found a reduction in the proportion of articles which describe [disabled people](#) in sympathetic and deserving terms.

Conversely, the number of articles focusing on disability benefit fraud increased and was the theme typically mentioned by focus groups.

Professor Nick Watson of Strathclyde Centre for Disability at the University of Glasgow, which conducted the study alongside the University's Glasgow Media Group, said: "This report provides a strong body of evidence to suggest there has been a significant change in the way that disability is being reported in much of the press in the UK today.

"Much of the coverage in the tabloid press is at best questionable and some of it is deeply offensive. The increased focus on benefit fraud, with outlandish claims that over 70 per cent of people on disability benefits are frauds, is an example of this type of reporting.

"The increased pejorative coverage of disability may have a long-term effect and further work will be need to monitor this."

Anne Kane, Policy Manager at Inclusion London, said: “The findings of this research will strike a deep chord with disabled people who have to live with the daily reality of offensive, hate-filled and false media coverage – coverage that is becoming more offensive in rhythm with the savage impact of government spending cuts on disabled people.

“The researchers at Glasgow University have done a great service by analysing the disturbing way in which bad government policy finds its reflection in pejorative language and an increasing portrayal of disabled people as ‘undeserving’.

“The disabled people questioned in the study said they felt threatened by the changes in the way disability is being (mis)reported and by the planned cuts to benefits – with these two assaults combining and reinforcing each other. This points to the action that needs to be taken: a stop to cuts that threaten more isolation and poverty and a stop to media coverage that stigmatises and breeds fear. ”

The report entitled ‘Bad News for Disabled People: how newspapers are reporting disability’, analysed 2,276 print articles in a variety of tabloid and broadsheet newspapers. The report found:

- A significant increase in the reporting of disability in the print media with 713 disability related articles in 2004/5 compared to 1015 in 2010/11,
- A reduction in the proportion of articles which describe people in sympathetic and deserving terms, and stories that document ‘real life’ experiences of living as a disabled person have also decreased, with people with mental health issues and other ‘hidden’ impairments more likely to be presented as ‘undeserving’,
- Articles focusing on disability benefit fraud increased from 2.8% in

2004/5 to 6.1%. When the focus groups were asked to describe a typical story in the newspapers, disability fraud was the most popular theme mentioned,

-- Articles are impacting on people's perceptions of disability related issues. The focus groups all claimed that levels of fraud were much higher than they are in reality, with some suggesting up to 70 per cent of claimants were fraudulent. They justified these claims by reference to article they had read in newspapers,

-- A significant increase in the use of pejorative language to describe disabled people. The use of terms such as 'scrounger', 'cheat' and 'skiver' was found in 18 per cent of articles in 2010/11 compared to 12 per cent in 2004/5,

-- Disabled people are feeling threatened by the changes in the way disability is being reported and by proposed changes to their benefit entitlements.

Prof Watson added: "In addition to the content analysis we also ran some focus groups to see what people thought about the way that the media is covering disability. When the focus groups were asked to describe a typical story in the newspapers on disability benefit fraud was the most popular theme mentioned. Participants in the focus groups all claimed that levels of fraud were very much higher than they are in reality, with some suggesting that up to 70% of claimants were fraudulent. They justified these claims by reference to articles they had read in newspapers."

The research team involved in the study also included Prof Greg Philo, professor of communications and social change; and Dr Emma Briant, from the Glasgow Media Unit.

A total of 42 people were involved in the focus groups, including two who were disabled, split into five groups. Some disabled people also took part in one-to-one interviews.

Provided by University of Glasgow

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