

# This is the way to media that mirror disability-inclusive aspects of society

In his famous 1922 book *Public Opinion*, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Walter Lippmann examined the role of the media in shaping public opinion. While pointing out that one gets facts in news more than truth, he noted that stereotypes play a huge role in how news is presented. This then skews public opinion as regards a given topic. A century later, this strongly resonates with how the media covers persons with disabilities (PWDs). Disability groups have throughout history relentlessly pushed for better coverage of their issues in the media. Colin Barnes, university professor, leading activist and renowned disability studies scholar, in his study, "Disabling imagery and the media", identified various stereotypes media give to PWDs. They're presented as pitiable, unable to take part wholly in life, sexually abnormal, super cripple, bitter cripple, and so on.

In Kenya, a 2018 study by Muryne Abwao of Southern Illinois University showed that 18 per cent of media disability stories label PWDs as stigmatised and marginalised, social pathology (as seeking aid) at 13 per cent and medical (viewed as an illness) at 12 per cent. Visible or physical disabilities receive more than twice as much coverage as invisible ones, such as intellectual disabilities. This further marginalises those with disabilities not immediately apparent or observable.

The study also says PWDs largely feature only during commemoration of disability-related days, when seeking medical support or having made achievements. But this does not signal a lack of experts with disabilities who are worthy of getting covered. Predictably, a PWD presumes that any call for a media interview has to be about their disability.

## Mainstream disability in our media houses by employing PWDs



### Harun M. Hassan Disability rights

However, the media isn't entirely an absent player in the disability movement; it plays a crucial awareness and advocacy role as PWDs have for a long time been disenfranchised. Unfortunately, over time, such stories create an over-representation of the subjects' disabilities and little about their other socioeconomic capabilities and potential.

But stereotypes are difficult to uproot. Research by the US Geena Davis Institute on top 100 US movies of 2019 that also usually hit the global audience showed eight per cent of them had lead characters who had disabilities — a historic peak, having stagnated at one per cent over the previous 10 years. But they were more likely to die (20 per cent) than those not disabled (12 per cent) and to be rescued, at 34 per cent, against 21 per cent.

How many times have you come across a movie scene where a character with disability has a villain role, or watched an African film where a person is 'supernaturally' punished with blindness for a wrong they did?

There is a lot of work to be done. The stereotypes hamper fair coverage of disability matters. This is where the media comes in — to

help promote a disability-inclusive society through mirroring an all-round perspective of what the world of disability entails.

First, we should mainstream disability in our media houses by employing PWDs. That will diversify story ideas and shape editorial decisions on how PWDs are covered. Also, tapping into experts and opinion shapers who are PWDs goes a long way towards changing the public perception of them from people in need of help to crucial and productive members of our socioeconomic society.

Second, mainstreaming will change the language in disability stories. While phrases such as 'persons living with disabilities' and 'the disabled' sound disarming, they actually promote stigmatisation. To PWDs, they present the disability as a side-burden. The portrayal of PWDs as achieving 'unexpected' success feeds into the 'super cripple' stereotype, excessively praised over relatively usual feats.

Finally, creating specialised desks in our newsrooms will spearhead the disability agenda greatly and ensure a steady flow of related stories to firmly place it in the national dialogue. In a bid to promote women empowerment, some media houses have established gender desks manned by gender editors to help mainstream gender equality.

Through changing the lens of disability coverage, we will avoid what Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi called the "danger of a single story". That stereotypes not only erode equality but also put heavy stress on what differentiates us and little on what we share.

Mr Hassan is the chief executive officer, National Council for Persons with Disabilities, [harun.hassan@ncpwd.go.ke](mailto:harun.hassan@ncpwd.go.ke).



Psychiatric Disability Organisation CEO Iregi Mwenja (holding a laptop) with participants at a mental health wellbeing awareness workshop in Nakuru County on April 18. FILE IN NATION

Many countries, institutions and researchers now flock to Japan to learn waste management



### Edwin Murimi Environment

## Take 'green' lessons from the Japanese

The recent Tokyo Games gave the world nations a chance to showcase their Olympics prowess. And as curtains fell on the event last Sunday, Kenya sent the message home that it was Africa's finest.

That was exemplary for the team, especially considering that the magnificent team came from a small developing country that has barely vaccinated two per cent of its population against the deadly Covid-19 quagmire. But as the team boarded their homeward flight, there are a few lessons they can bring back.

From an environmental perspective, Nairobi and Tokyo were on the same level in the 1970s and early '80s. History has it that the Japanese disposed of their waste haphazardly, in the open, like many Nairobi residents do. The former didn't have much regard for urban green spaces and any free space was up for grabs.

Then, waste separation, treatment or even appropriate incineration didn't exist. Their libraries will make one think they were living in the current Nairobi time, with photos of raw sewage flowing freely along poorly maintained roads.

Today, those are bygone. Many countries, institutions and researchers now flock to Japan to learn waste management. A few Kenyan county governments have sent staffers to Tokyo, Kawasaki and Teshima prefectures for benchmarking.

In Teshima, for instance, the government has been on a multi-billion-dollar reclamation programme to restore soils that were accidentally polluted decades ago, and they will not rest until every soil grain is clean. It was interesting to watch on the screen as athletes took cover from the scorching sun under well-manicured trees.

It took the sacrifice of most, if not all, Japanese to see their country ranked among the cleanest. Remember, the famous Kyoto Protocol was penned in Japan. The country sets aside huge budgets for environmental conservation and ensures every coin counts. Can we emulate it?

Mr Murimi is an environmentalist. [siredwins@gmail.com](mailto:siredwins@gmail.com).

## THE CUTTING EDGE by THE WATCHMAN

Send an e-mail to [watchman@ke.nationmedia.com](mailto:watchman@ke.nationmedia.com) or write to The Watchman, POB 49010, Nairobi 00100

**Our rivals** • During the just-ended Tokyo Olympics, Mwangi Wanjohi says, a number of athletes with Kenyan names represented other countries. "They were not people who had picked the names to celebrate Kenyans' athletic prowess, just the way we take up Christian names to invoke the good deeds of saints, but our own, who were running for their own countries." His contact is [wanjohimwangi@yahoo.com](mailto:wanjohimwangi@yahoo.com).

**Bad attitude** • Though happy with Team Kenya's performance in the Tokyo Olympics, Carey Yiembe is saddened by the loss of the steeplechase title. "The runners may have assumed that they only needed to show up at the start line and win the gold medal without breaking a sweat. A similar attitude could dearly cost some leading politicians in the 2022 presidential election. His contact is [yiembe@gmail.com](mailto:yiembe@gmail.com).

**Medicare** • Medical insurance should be taken seriously, says F. Mukumbu. A recent survey, he adds, confirmed that ordinary Kenyans can no longer afford medicine. "Another thing is that not all illnesses are covered by insurance. The rates should be reviewed to benefit more Kenyans. Health insurance should be affordable to the average Kenyan." His contact is [fmukumbu@gmail.com](mailto:fmukumbu@gmail.com).

**Saboteurs** • Arrest and punish protesters who block highways purporting to be seeking justice, says Japhet Tonui. They must be held responsible for losses incurred by motorists and other law-abiding citizens, he adds. The national roads agencies should team up with law enforcement bodies to stop the sabotage. "Acts of lawlessness should never be allowed." His contact is [tonuijaphetkk@gmail.com](mailto:tonuijaphetkk@gmail.com).

**'Deputy Jesus'** • Ezekiel Mutua's sacking as the Kenya Film Classification Board CEO. Prof Sam Chege notes, "has lit up social media with many young people celebrating the departure of the self-declared moral cop they had derisively nicknamed 'Deputy Jesus'." To many parents, Dr Mutua protected children from bad influence. We've not heard the last from this man." His contact is [samchege@aol.com](mailto:samchege@aol.com). Have a rewarding day, won't you!