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Dropping the Disability Beat



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DROPPING THE DISABILITY BEAT

Why Specialized Reporting Doesn't Solve Disability (Mis)representation

Chelsea Temple Jones

I'm sitting in a downtown Toronto coffee shop and the journalism student across the table hits "record" on her phone's voice-recorder app. I chip away at my nail polish, and then remind myself not to do that. Journalism students are trained to pay attention for details like anxious ticks, and this one is smartly scribbling down observations before I even speak. "So, did you ever think of adopting a disability beat?" she asks, pen at the ready. She knows I am a journalist, and that most of my stories have strong leanings toward community-based disability politics. "It's not as simple as that," I try to explain. "You can't just snap your fingers and assign yourself a disability beat. It doesn't work that way."

We're here to talk about intersections between journalism and disability advocacy, specifically as they pertain to a class I teach at Ryerson University called Writing for Disability Activism. As the instructor I am constantly thinking through a pedagogical puzzle built from both pieces of journalistic practice and critical disability theory. I'm interested in how disability is represented—and, in some opinions, *mis*represented—in contemporary Canadian journalism. There is a well-established gap between journalists and disabled people,¹ and the literature suggests that disability advocates feel under- and misrepresented in journalism.² Meanwhile, journalists attempting to cover disability-related stories feel cut off from sources who might speak in the stories with the added punch of disability activism. As a (currently) non-disabled journalist, ally and disability studies researcher I've always felt too easily connected to medical "experts" but disconnected from folks who could give a non-mainstream read of disability experiences and current events such as disabled people, disability activists and academics.³

In the past, before social media webbed together conversations between those of us with the literacy and technical skills to participate in them, misrepresentation of people with disabilities in mainstream North American news media was met with relatively few solutions. Some researchers suggested journalism students should receive more diversity education, which would include disability as a topic.⁴ Others called on disabled journalists to carry the fight toward accurate disability representation in the newsroom on the premise that without such workplace activism, low levels of employment of disabled people in newsrooms would affect journalists' attitudes toward disabled folks and translate into skewed representation.⁵ And others have suggested another remedy still: a disability beat.⁶ Calling for a disability beat means calling for news agencies to assign one reporter to build connections with disability communities and specialize in disability-related

coverage. The problem is that in a cultural landscape where both journalism and disability are evolving concepts in scope and meaning, disability beats are not a catchall solution for changes facing both fields.

“You can’t just decide to pick up a disability beat and expect a publication to think it’s a great idea,” I say, hesitating. I think of my colleague Helen Henderson, the first person to hold a long-term disability beat for a major Canadian newspaper. The original proposal for this book chapter was written when Henderson was alive, and called for a reflective back-and-forth about the labor of upholding a disability beat for the *Toronto Star*, Canada’s most widely read newspaper. Henderson, who had multiple sclerosis, didn’t just cover the disability beat because she wanted to; being employed by a major newspaper for decades and patiently waiting put Henderson en route to such specialized reporting.

A few years before Henderson died in 2015, she and I had a similar conversation in her warm apartment tucked into the grey Toronto skyline. We agreed that developing a beat entails the privilege of an entry point into the politics of journalism. “You might develop an expertise in a certain area, or you might know that disability can almost always be included in a story because disability is part of every facet of life,” I try to explain, “but writing about disability full time, or writing a disability beat, calls for more than that.”

My decade-long experience writing disability-related feature stories at a rate of a handful per year pales in comparison with Henderson’s 17 years of weekly disability-based writing. Though her work is often overlooked in scholarship on the topic, Henderson answered critics’ calls to bridge the gap between journalism and disability, writing columns that taught readers what disability-based journalism can look like.⁷ And as I try, now, to speak to the communication gap between journalism and disability, I am left in a ghostly conversation with Henderson’s broad and optimistic “sitpoint.”⁸ At my disposal are email snippets, transcribed interviews, notes from personal conversations, memories and scribbles from her various exchanges with students whenever she rolled into a classroom as a guest speaker. This method of collecting scraps and echoing memories is both journalistic work and archival work, but runs into the risks and politics of disability misrepresentation.⁹

My own relationship with the prospect of a disability beat is a tired one. Experience suggests to me that the fantasy of the disability beat works as follows: Someone, or maybe a group, decides they deserve more or better media attention because they read “the media”—broadly speaking—as negatively representing their issues. (The first problem with this reading is the assumption that it is a journalist’s role to tell stories accurately within a complex media framework but also in alignment with the group’s preferences.) The group might then follow the literature’s guidance and pitch aggressively to journalists, and sometimes their pitches are heard if folks agree to talk on record. When the group finally connects with a journalist who seems interested in their cause, they latch on to her and eventually suggest she adopt a disability beat.

In my case, this recollection ends with the journalist balking at the suggestion and wondering how to gently explain a disability beat that may not effectively create accurate and ongoing reportage.

Working Through Newsroom Norms

Early in her career as a *Toronto Star* journalist, Henderson was assigned a Valentine’s Day feature story about two disabled people in love. The editor spat out a question with an angle that rang of the derogatory “overcoming” narrative:¹⁰ “How could two people so tragic find love?”

Henderson sensed the communication gap between journalists and disability advocates early on the job. In 1971, fresh out of university and carrying a master’s degree in English Literature, the young reporter was the first woman hired as a business journalist for the *Star* when she was

asked to cover the “Resources” beat, which meant tromping around the Arctic writing about oil and mining. A few years later she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. The idea for a disability beat began brewing as her job shifted into the “Life” section, and she became increasingly aware of the ways in which her unfolding disability was surfacing in the newsroom. Henderson wrote a proposal for a disability beat, knowing that this beat could add valuable knowledge to our local understanding of disability. It was rejected. Instead, she was told to write a weekly, unpaid disability column in her spare time. So she wrote, knowing that she had to earn a beat rather than demand it.

Traditional beat journalism grew from the demand of 24-hour news cycles. These cycles echo modernist demands for progress and circulate a constant flow of stories on a regular basis in an era where journalists hit the ground, knocking on doors and making cold calls in order to insert themselves into their communities.¹¹ Imagine the journalist’s job: The day opens with a story meeting somewhere amid a newsroom webbed with desks. At the center of the web is the senior editor. He—and later *she*—assigns a story or agrees to an idea and the journalist is out the door.¹² When the reporter returns, the story leaves their hands and travels through various newsroom channels, hitting the copy-editor’s desk and being slapped with a headline before reaching a newspaper page. These fixed norms and practices in North American print newsrooms have been documented often in past journalism research.¹³ David Ryfe reminds us of the “virtuous” economics of journalism that propelled such scenes:

Reporters wrote stories that attracted large audiences. Their news organizations translated these audiences (through advertising dollars) into revenue ... More revenue allowed organizations to hire more reporters, who produced more stories that attracted larger audiences, and so on ... Journalism succeeded so well because it meshed neatly with key strands of modern society, with everything from the temporal rhythm of the eight-hour workday to urbanization, to the increasingly bureaucratized, professionalized, and consumerist world that came into being.¹⁴

It was here—somewhere between morning coffee and story meetings—that news values percolated and became newsroom norms.

News values are the “innumerable shared values and beliefs” editors sense audiences want to experience; things audiences “get” and want to learn about (at times without much explanation).¹⁵ Researcher Murray Dick points out that journalists have traditionally relied on “official” bureaucratic organizations to “pad the boundaries” of their beats: city council (the municipal politics beat), police (the crime beat), hospitals (health beats) and churches (religion beats).¹⁶ The routines of these organizations, including events tied to them and “expert” spokespeople they put forward, help journalists draw up routines and agendas to fit the daily news cycle and the news values it espouses.¹⁷ (Arguably, the routinized nature of beat reporting also led to journalists’ over-reliance on particular “expert” sources available, such as public relations professionals or other tightly managed spokespeople.) Progressing somewhere in this scene was Henderson, floating through the crowded sidewalks of downtown Toronto looking for love-stuck disabled folks and knowing full well that disability should not be written up as tragedy or what would later be dubbed “inspiration porn.”¹⁸ Still, she did not want to miss out on an opportunity to strengthen her case for a disability beat she’d been pitching for years now—no matter how cringeworthy the task.

In 2010 I interviewed five journalists with various connections to disability.¹⁹ Henderson was among them. As part of my master’s research in critical disability studies, I wanted an updated understanding of how disability is understood in mainstream news production. Until then, and until now for that matter, the most accurate and comprehensive published Canadian account of

journalists' perceptions of disability was a 1988 government-authored investigation.²⁰ When I asked this handful of journalists whether journalism reflects public opinion or shapes it (a question that nods to a circular debate in the field of media studies), every participant answered, "both." Then, in separate interviews, each overrode any suggestion that disabled journalists understand the world differently than non-disabled journalists. And, because journalism is not necessarily advocacy work, they pointed out that no individual can fully understand the broad category that is "disability" and therefore anyone should be able to take up the topic—as a beat or as a one-off story.

In reflecting on their experiences working in a 2010 media landscape, most participants took the stance that journalists with disabilities must uphold the task of representing disability in the newsroom, despite the risks of tokenization. "I have the slow kind of MS," Henderson told me in that interview, "so I started out walking and then I had a cane and a brace on my leg. And then eventually I did have an electric scooter. So my evolution as a disabled person and as a journalist ... was slow,"²¹ with the *Star* following her lead in learning about accessibility and accommodation. Although Henderson was not the only reporter with a disability in the *Star's* newsroom, her push for a disability beat left her playing a dual role: She was a disabled reporter who covered disability. Her specialization worked to her advantage when she was assigned particularly prestigious stories, such as an opportunity to interview the then-lieutenant governor of Ontario and disability advocate, David Onley.²² Henderson believed she "earned" that assignment after years of developing a disability-based portfolio.

What's more, even for disabled journalists who didn't want to be disability advocates, doing so sometimes seemed like the only way to get disability issues into print. One interviewee, a Toronto-based editor who wished to be unnamed, pointed out that journalists don't make things happen; they report on things that happen—therefore advocating for disability in the newsroom came with implications of conflicts of interest or bias. "I'm not so much interested in changing perceptions," he said. "Because that's not my job ... as a journalist my job is this: inform people, engage them, add to their knowledge, and always, always, always, above everything, give a new perspective."²³

Henderson, however, might have taken a different view could she reflect on her job today. Even though journalism is not necessarily advocacy work, disability beat journalism played an important role in adding a layer of disability knowledge to public consciousness in Canada, specifically through her work. After all, Henderson took her time with stories like that Valentine's Day story in the early days of her disability beat; she began nosing around and learned that the two "tragic" characters at the heart of her editor's assignment hated one another before Cupid struck. So, recognizing the broad nature of news values and refusing to typecast disabled people as tragic, Henderson rounded up four more couples and re-shaped the angle to write an alternative audience-pleaser about unlikely lovers.²⁴ Her stories, often investigative in nature and sometimes written as feature stories, eventually evolved into a weekly opinion-based column.

#Redirecting: New Disability Journalism

Though beats have been important to journalism and disability representation in the past, contemporary storytelling has rendered them largely obsolete. Seven years after my interviews, the call for a disability beat is a call to fit into a mode of journalism that may reflect past news values and expectations. The motion of advocating for a mainstream disability beat overlooks "alternative" or "dissident" media that takes up disability differently using perspectives that interrogate the politics of its own representation.²⁵

In her book, *Representing Disability in an Ableist World: Essays on Mass Media*, Beth Haller describes a content analysis that samples “alternative” disability media—magazines, newspapers and newsletters—produced in the United States in the 1990s following an increased availability of personal computers and small-scale desktop publishing. Haller mentions *Ragged Edge*, *The Arc and the Dove* and *A&U* among others.²⁶ A few parallel degrees north, Canadians could add to this roster magazines such as *Abilities*²⁷ and *Phoenix Rising*,²⁸ to say nothing of the late 1990s radio show cum television program *Moving On*,²⁹ which brought an independent living focus to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), the country’s national broadcaster. Haller points out that the utility of these kinds of productions was their communication to audiences about local, accessible community events. This information breaks from traditional journalistic news values of objectivity and non-bias and instead speaks to a sensibility specific to “dissident” media, wherein content was designed not only to reflect community but also to support it.

More recently, media produced by and for disabled folks has tapped Canadian public consciousness. The *Deliciously Disabled* podcast had a swelling audience until it was dismantled in 2016,³⁰ and community activists like those behind Toronto’s annual Disability Pride March have a strong presence on social media, with #CanadiansWithDisabilitiesAct being one advocacy tool of choice for some disability rights advocates. Canadians are now launching their stories through social media, rather than waiting for (beat) journalists to find them. For instance, in July 2016 disability advocates Tim Rose and Natalie Rose lit up Facebook and Twitter with their descriptions of discrimination tagged with #wheelchairsarentluggage after Tim’s standard-size wheelchair was checked as an oversized bag on an Air Canada flight.³¹ Evidently the hashtag caught the attention of former journalist and now disability advocate Ing Wong-Ward, who responded with a message that was shared 25 times at the time of writing: “What @TimDRose experienced is part of a larger, deeper, systemic issue for travelers w/#disabilities. #wheelchairsarentluggage.”³² Rose’s story was picked up by the *Globe and Mail*³³ and other major Canadian news outlets shortly afterward. On August 11, 2016, Rose was interviewed on a CBC Toronto morning show, which had picked up on that and another hashtag tied to Rose’s story: #AODAFail (in reference to the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act).³⁴

Importantly, stories that disability advocates create are not held tightly within national borders. Over the course of drafting this article, I was pointed toward Disability Twitter, a wide online community of disability advocates.³⁵ When disability communities make media they push forward a reminder that disabled people make up a “multi-community community” so diverse it is perhaps impossible to capture its essence in a single news beat.³⁶ Indeed, social media has done what a disability beat never could: People can tell their stories on their own terms, opening themselves up both to the possibilities and vulnerabilities of first- and second-hand representation as they cast their stories toward broad audiences.

Shape-Shifting Through Writing

Though social media allows advocates to redirect the script, both journalism and disability are at work in a Canadian cultural context, where physician-assisted suicide, euthanasia, reproductive interventions and other difficult conversation are often the news of the day. And here I am, face-to-face with a soon-to-be reporter, scraping away at my nail polish and wondering what she is thinking, and what she’ll want to discuss next, as she nods along. I could ask, but I don’t. I recall my own experience as a cub reporter: I’d chew on one story possibility for a few minutes before another would emerge; the myth that journalists go into their stories with an angle is an inflated one—I was taught that you never really know your story until you exhaust your sources.

Social media is increasingly influential, but getting a phone call from a journalist interested in your experience isn’t an obsolete occurrence. Therefore disability advocates are still tasked with

the responsibility of communicating with news creators, those people who do their jobs well when they uphold values of fairness and accuracy as they grant access to stories we might otherwise miss. Journalists are daily tasked with having to rely on others to develop a level of knowledge on any given topic—disability included—and advocates play a role in informing journalists. Yet, some disability advocates still nervously avoid talking to journalists or making their perspectives public.³⁷ Knowing how to communicate with journalists is essential for those who wish to engage in formal media channels, which is why I work with Toronto-based writer David Hayes to teach my students how to pitch.

News pitches are brief oral or written outlines of a story. “A journalist may describe the story basics in a minute or two, or write up a few lines to several hundred words to the editor or producer,” freelance writer Rob Wipond explains in the book *Mad Matters*.³⁸ Under my watch, students write well-researched, page-long proposals that, at minimum, outline a clear and reasonable focus with identifiable (on-the-record) characters. In 2013 Henderson spoke to the class about pitching, reiterating a point she made in my interview with her three years earlier: Anonymity is rarely an option as it puts a journalist’s credibility at stake. Even with her vested interest in making disability causes public, Henderson explained that a request for anonymity would usually just result in a search for someone else or a throw-away story that couldn’t be published:

Sometimes people are afraid to go on the record to say that they will allow their name to be associated with, and to be quoted. They’re afraid of the exposé. Or afraid of retaliation ... For the most part my policy is either you go on record or I can’t do the story. In very rare occasions would I ever hide somebody’s identity.³⁹

And in some ways, this is the first and foremost lesson of pitching: If you want to tell a story, you must be willing to use your voice and tell it. As scholars in the emerging field of mad studies have pointed out, the risks of personal storytelling are many in neoliberal contexts, where personal stories can be co-opted under ableist/mental health agendas that still rely on old notions of disability as a problem in search of a solution.⁴⁰ Yet, if we choose to push our stories forward and counter-frame stereotypical disability myths we have lived with for too long—overcoming, kill or cure, disability as object of pity/charity, disability drift, disability hierarchy and others that have been well documented by disability studies scholars⁴¹—we have to do so in a way that is understandable in journalism.

And, just as there is risk in telling stories, there is risk in keeping silent. Canadian journalists with an interest in disability know rejecting media requests can cause problems. One particularly unsettling example arises in journalists’ reflections on the 1993 onward coverage of the killing of Tracy Latimer, a 12-year-old with cerebral palsy. Her father, Robert, admitted to poisoning Tracy with carbon monoxide on October 24, 1993 in rural Saskatchewan.⁴² The court case unfolded at a distance from the Toronto journalists I interviewed, who, in their writing, struggled to understand the seemingly shifting moral compass of their audiences who, around the same time, were also grappling with unsettling calls for physician-assisted suicide out of British Columbia by Sue Rodriguez⁴³ and her supporters. Ing Wong-Ward, who was working as a radio producer at CBC at the time, spoke about her experience watching the Latimer case unfold and attempting to find an angle that would humanize Tracy—if only someone could (or would) speak to Tracy’s experience:

We will never know the whole story of what happened in [the Latimer] family, aside from what is on record as fact ... And we’ll never know Tracy’s side of the story and that, to me, is disturbing ... Now whose responsibility is that? When somebody’s dead, is it the [responsibility of] disability organizations? Well, if they’re going to do that,

how do they frame their conversations with the larger public? And these are questions not for me to answer because I am a journalist, even though I am a disabled person. Those are for them to answer, and for them to figure out.⁴⁴

In an era where euthanasia and “mercy killing” were already making headlines, journalists and audiences were left trying to piece together and frame an accurate account of Tracy Latimer’s death. Framing is a way of building a story and can be loosely described by the view that news stories must be told in a way that is relatable and understandable to a broad audience.⁴⁵ But as Ruth Enns wrote in her book responding to Tracy’s murder, “By the time many had recovered from their shock enough to organize a forceful protest, the story had already been framed in a way that connected [Robert] Latimer with euthanasia, and euthanasia with disability.”⁴⁶

As activist writers, we frame our stories cautiously, wary of stereotypical framing John Clogston⁴⁷ and Beth Haller⁴⁸ have noticed in media coverage: supercrip models that emphasize overcoming, social pathology models that rely on medicine as authority on disability topics and the consumer model that considered disabled people a marketable consumer base, among others. These models cater to news producers who curate media material for the public and whose minds, in Wipond’s words, “are filled with shared beliefs ... most of them are misinformed, deeply prejudicial beliefs.”⁴⁹ Journalists, however, may resist such beliefs. Clogston’s 1990s research on journalistic attitudes, which, although dated, suggests journalists’ attitudes toward disability are more progressive than their final news stories. Their stories are transformed by institutional barriers, such as editorial control and style guides.⁵⁰ Yet, as Haller explains, journalists experience triangular pulls that influence framing as they are caught between reporting, working in the interests of disabled people and working for the corporations that employ them.⁵¹ Two decades later, the journalists I interviewed placed responsibility on both themselves and advocacy groups in their call for better disability-related news coverage.

For some, the communication gap between journalists and disability advocates is exemplified by journalists’ attempts to work *with* disability allies rather than *for* them. Some of my 2010 interviewees argued that disabled people need to agitate for the stories they want covered, saying it is the disability community’s responsibility to unearth these stories for the public. “You can’t complain about the media not caring about your issues if you’re not going to meet them halfway,” explained Wong-Ward.⁵² Wong-Ward now works for the Center for Independent Living Toronto and is part of the social media-circulated media video collection called “Project Value,” which on Facebook describes itself as “a collection of disabled Canadians sharing why disabled lives have value.”⁵³ Her #ProjectValue work demonstrates the shape-shifting of journalists and advocates as our possibilities for story production widen, and other people have posted videos of their own. The video stories reframe in humanizing ways disability as desirable and valuable, offering counter-narratives to stories that frame disability as tragic and fatalistic as right-to-die legislation is challenged in Canada.

And here, in a non-stagnant media landscape, it is perhaps possible to imagine a media context where the battle for disability-related stories is tamed and where authorship remains in the hands of disabled people who are in conversation in the “hyper-democratic” sphere of online content creation.⁵⁴ Yet, what this leaves us with are two visions of what journalism and disability can do without a disability beat: The first is that anyone can work *with* disabled people and tell stories. The other is that disabled people can tell their own stories.

Both of these outcomes can complement one another, blending insider and outsider positionings as good journalism ought to do, and making room for increasingly sophisticated stories. For me, the outcome of this blending is that I no longer feel much desire to plant my byline on disability-related stories written on behalf of under- or mis-represented groups. Though, at times, this task is unavoidable. For example, I once spent several weeks suggesting to an editor that yes, it is possible

to interview a person who does not speak verbally and still count her as a reliable and viable source. And years of practice convincing editors that people carrying intellectual disability labels are reliable sources on their own prepared me for similar conversations with my university's Research Ethics Board when I undertook my 2015 doctoral research. There are still people who are not in positions to reclaim their stories because they are not believed to have lives worth narrating, but perhaps these are the people upon whom storytellers should be focused. After all, disability advocates have long been reminding the news media, "nothing about us without us."

For me, this writing is tangled in the complexities of allyship, and the work of teaching future news creators about disability. When I am tasked with stories about disabled people I am keenly aware of my own positioning and capable of making and defending a decision to decline such stories in favor of people who will more accurately represent themselves. I can also teach students, many of whom can claim ownership over such stories, strategies for tapping into an increasingly accepting media landscape and claim their own stakes. My role as a journalist, an ally and educator is never settled.

Blurring the Beat: Emergent Disability Journalism

For Henderson, it took two years of asking, and being told "maybe later," before her editors recast her disability column-writing work into a full-time, paid beat for the *Star* in the 1980s. One of her first features, published in 1991, told the story of a blind woman who "dropped off the edge of the world and fell to her death on the tracks of Lawrence West subway station," and the disability activists who sprung to action advocating for safer, more accessible transit in Toronto.⁵⁵ Among other interventions, this advocacy work led to stop announcements, request-stop buttons and uniform-length subway trains we encounter on Toronto's subway system today. Then she expanded the column's scope, adding illness, madness and aging to the mix. She made it her job to make sure disability stories didn't disappear. I once asked Henderson how she thought her stories influenced the public, and she said the answer was difficult to gauge. "Sometimes you feel as though [the stories you write] just go out into the ether and nothing happens," she said. "I hope that it's a chipping away process."⁵⁶ Perhaps Henderson's "chipping" was the building up of something more nuanced than a disability beat—a new form of disability journalism with advocacy at its core.

Though echoes of the beat still exist, it is no longer the driving force of disability-related media. Increasingly online news sites seem to have room for disability-related sections—virtual beats. The *Huffington Post's* "Disability" section brought in stories from its other sections (home, sports, business, etc.) as early as 2010.⁵⁷ Major broadcasters like the BBC put out disability-related podcasts, such as *Ouch!* and its accompanying blog.⁵⁸ And while smaller broadcasters host the *Disability Matters Radio Show*,⁵⁹ *Disability Radio World Wide*,⁶⁰ blogs such as *The Body Is Not an Apology*⁶¹ have put out job calls for writers with vested interest and life experience with disability. Plus, writing about disability knowledgably is easier than ever before. With style guides available from the National Center on Journalism and Disability,⁶² older guides that contain little information on how to cover disability in ways that might be in-line with disability community values are collecting dust. As Haller, who archives a long list of such disability-based content on her blog *Media dis&dat*, explains, "the disability beat that never really took off in traditional print journalism has morphed into having a place in a variety of ways on the Internet."⁶³

When we think of news production, our images of a room full of buzzing desks stocked with a hierarchy of reporters and editors becomes increasingly inaccurate. Online news rules, and new values and practices are being forged in realms of digital journalism. Ryfe argues that "the pushing and pulling" between professionalism, the economy and the state—the stuff propelling traditional news cycle—is much weaker than ever before and this weakness compromises the

cohesiveness of the field as its boundaries become increasingly blurred.⁶⁴ This blurring can be a relief for writers penning disability-related stories, whether stories about themselves or others: Whereas once disability advocates needed journalism to carry their stories forward, we are entering a different era of knowledge and information production where journalism appears to be losing its boundaries and thus making room for ad hoc writing. The tension here lies somewhere between the suggestion that disability beats have run their course, and the acknowledgment that particular disability beats, such as Henderson's, have served both disability communities and the nature of mainstream media production.

Disappearances and Backstories: Making Something Our Own

The student-journalist sent me an email the day after our meeting. "To be honest," she wrote, "[the story] probably won't run; my editor was just scrambling for something last night."⁶⁵ That's how it goes sometimes: stories disappear.

The communication gap between journalists and disability advocates remains open—neither journalists nor advocacy organizations are obligated to perform in constructive ways that complement each other's ambitions. With the combination of journalistic limitations and advocacy hesitation at work, it almost seems fitting that disability-based stories tend to be easily dropped. Right now journalistic news values do not operate on *crip time*,⁶⁶ nor is *crip politics* willing to succumb to the demand of a modernist news cycle or a journalistic ethic that suggests things about disability can be written—and written well—without disabled people penning the content. So disability stories, and the question of making a disability beat, gets dropped.

However, the stories that don't disappear can be trophies. Henderson has explained that journalists must "carry the fight" for reasonable disability representation into each newsroom. I often wonder what she would have said if she'd been writing with me now. I would suggest to her that public storytelling has a new, active setting: online, weaving in and out of newsrooms and very often in the hands of disabled people and advocates who engage in grassroots journalism.⁶⁷ I don't know if Henderson would agree.

I do know Henderson valued a good backstory. And there's space here for me to try, as I might, to share one: In December 2007, Henderson had the first line of her story (the lead) changed by an editor. He said he thought he was making things better. "It was about someone who was deaf and blind at Christmas," she recalled.⁶⁸ The editor inserted a sentence about how disabled people can finally "enjoy" Christmas. "It was just appalling. It was unbelievable. I think of that as being my own challenge, my own fault. And I kicked up a real stink about that, but the way to handle it is to not let it happen."⁶⁹ And here, in this changing journalistic terrain, Henderson's advice to shepherd and protect stories is still relevant as the activist work of telling stories and continuing to care for them as they publicly circulate is work that calls for great care.

Henderson continued writing her disability beat after retiring in 2008, freelancing from home and losing some control over her writing. Though she was effectively answering critics' calls for a disability beat, she was rarely acknowledged. She never knew from one week to the next when her column would be cancelled. However, with the newsroom at a distance, the disability community shifted closer. People began counting on her to take up issues (like the provincial legislation now in motion to make Ontario accessible called the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act—"it has no teeth," she told a class of disability studies students in 2013). She waited. She wrote. The last of her columns appeared online in 2012.

In 2014 Henderson spoke to another group of students. One asked where she found her ideas. "I come up with very few ideas," she responded softly and slowly, in her patient way. "It's the community that does all the work and I react to them. A lot of my job is persuading the gatekeepers."⁷⁰ This persuasive type of advocacy, she said, means having patience. It means

accepting that you will not always satisfy your audience, whether they are editors or advocates—“it cuts both ways,” she cautioned. It means understanding the limitations and possibilities of storytelling and, as Henderson taught us, patiently making something our own.

Notes

- 1 Patrick Boyer, House of Commons, Standing Committee on Status of Disabled Persons, *No News Is Bad News: First Report of the Standing Committee on the Status of Disabled Persons* (Ottawa, ON: Queen’s Printer for Canada, 1988).
- 2 Chelsea Temple Jones, “‘Why This Story Over a Hundred Others of the Day?’ Five Journalists’ Backstories About Writing Disability in Toronto,” *Disability & Society* 29, no. 8 (2014): 1206–1220.
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