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DISABILITY ADVOCACY IN BBC'S OUCH AND ABC'S RAMP UP

Shawn Burns

It was an unexpected, if not unfamiliar, scene that greeted the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) staff at their Melbourne, Australia, offices on a cold Monday, June 30, 2014. About 20 people with disability, many using wheelchairs and their supporters were gathered at the main entrance to the Southbank headquarters to protest the axing of the disability website Ramp Up.¹ The protesters brandished placards to literally spell out their purpose. The signs urged: "Save Ramp Up," "Ramp Up Is Our Voice," "Disability, Discussion, Debate. Don't Ditch Ramp Up," and "Ramp Up Is Our Voice, It's A Right Not A Choice." A chant filled the air: "Hey, hey, ho, ho, Ramp Up should not go." Police were called when protester and "Save Ramp Up" coordinator Dr. George Taleporos refused to leave the foyer of the ABC building.² Some of the protesters and supporters mused online and at the protest line that they could be arrested and taken to lock-up, until they realized the police wagons were probably not wheelchair accessible and an actual arrest could come down to a question of disability access.

The protest was devised to draw attention to the demise of what Ramp Up proponents, this author included, claimed was the loss of an important vehicle for people with disability to tell their stories, raise their issues and have their opinions heard.³

People with disabilities, disability activists and allies have had and continue to have, a strained relationship with the Australian news media. For the most part, this fraught relationship emanates from the way disability is represented in the mainstream. Much has been written about the way people with disability are represented in the media, including news publications and broadcasts⁴ and how media representation affects the way people perceive disability.⁵ Despite this work, and the many media guidelines developed and distributed over the years from places like the United States, Australia and the International Labour Organization,⁶ mainstream media still often present disability within the traditional frames of tragedy and hero.⁷ As Canadian disability studies scholar Chelsea Temple Jones contends: "Journalistic representations of people with disabilities are continuously stereotypical."⁸

The remedy for this problem, the supporters of Ramp Up and other publications of its type would contend, is advocacy journalism, or, what could be termed for the disability community "self-advocacy" journalism.⁹ This chapter explores the relationship between disability and advocacy journalism through the case studies of ABC Ramp Up and the groundbreaking BBC Ouch blog in the United Kingdom. First, it looks briefly at the history of advocacy journalism and considers the relationship of disability and the media through the lens of journalism created to highlight disability issues and the opinions of people with disability.

Disability and Advocacy Journalism

Advocacy journalism has been tracked from the early nineteenth century—when it was variously known as muckraking,¹⁰ dissident press,¹¹ radical journalism, critical journalism or activist journalism.¹² Kessler documents in US history, for example, that many outsider groups like Black Americans, feminists, American Indians or socialists, who were denied access to the mainstream, began their own media outlets.¹³ Jensen described advocacy journalism as “the use of journalism techniques to promote a specific political or social cause.”¹⁴

By highlighting “the use of journalism techniques” and considering Wyatt and Badger’s focus on “persuasion,”¹⁵ it could be argued advocacy journalism is present when “journalism techniques” are used to influence public policy, raise community awareness and/or advance a particular position. Advocacy journalism relies on openness, transparency and declaration of position and, by definition, it contrasts with the oft-stated aspiration of journalistic objectivity. It wears subjectivity as a badge of honor, but does so scaffolded by dual positions of “gatekeeper”¹⁶ and member of the Fourth Estate.

It could be argued that advocacy journalism stands strongest in the Fourth Estate in its goal to “act on behalf of the people and report on and give voice to those in political, corporate, economic and social power.”¹⁷ Canadian journalist Sue Careless contends advocacy journalism “openly speaks for or pleads on behalf of another, giving the other a face and a voice.”¹⁸ It is the capacity of advocacy journalism to give voice to “the other” that makes it a powerful companion to disability in the media.

Advocacy journalism, in a disability context, has struggled to gain a foothold in the mainstream media. While there are journalists who have worked on the “disability beat” or covered disability in their stories, they mostly are reticent to describe themselves as advocacy journalists and instead present as journalists who cover stories about disability when there is “relevance.”¹⁹ There are, however, examples of opinion columns in the mainstream media dedicated to disability issues. Journalist Helen Henderson worked for the *Toronto Star* for almost four decades. She was a section editor and disabilities columnist. Henderson was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in the 1970s and over the years used a cane and a wheelchair. She was a staunch advocate for people with disability in her column and her life. In one of her last columns for the *Toronto Star*, Henderson reflected on the case of 12-year-old Tracy Latimer, killed by her father Robert Latimer in Canada in 1993. Tracy had quadriplegic cerebral palsy, and Robert Latimer claimed it was a “mercy killing.” He was found guilty of second-degree murder, but almost avoided a mandatory jail sentence of 25 years when Justice Ted Noble granted a constitutional exemption and declared it “compassionate homicide.”²⁰ The ruling was subsequently overturned on appeal and he was sentenced to a minimum of 25 years, with no chance of parole before 10 years. Helen Henderson tackled the issue of “mercy killing,” “euthanasia” and the value put on lives of people with disability in her column published on the eve of Robert Latimer being released on day parole in March 2008:

I have no doubt Robert Latimer loved his daughter. I have no doubt that, like the parents of any severely disabled child, he sometimes felt very alone. I also have no doubt that Tracy Latimer is a victim twice over—once of murder and once of the injustice served by a society that can’t see beyond the surface of disabilities and won’t invest the resources that families need to nourish children who don’t communicate or move or process information like the majority.²¹

Jones²² interviewed Henderson as part of her work exploring the backstories of five journalists writing about disability in Toronto. The five journalists, who all identified as having disability,

did not see disability as a dominant factor in their work, Henderson included, and assessed newsworthiness of stories that featured disability in the same way as another story. While Henderson produced a weekly column dedicated to disability, she remained committed to the use of journalistic technique: “A publishable story must make a difference and be able to ‘stop people in their tracks.’”²³

While advocacy journalism about disability has struggled to find a place within the mainstream media, it has a track record in niche, community and service-provider publications. The *Disability Rag* was published in print in the United States for 16 years from 1980 and became the *Ragged Edge* online in 1997;²⁴ *ABILITY Magazine* in the United States says it provides “new insights into our individual levels of ability.”²⁵ Nationally distributed *Link Magazine* in Australia features “opinions and perspectives directly from people with disability.”²⁶ *Abilities*, published by the Canadian Abilities Foundation, claims to offer “inspiration, information and opportunity for all Canadians with disabilities.”²⁷ While these publications have niche audiences, impact is potentially limited. It could be argued, in many cases, publications of this kind are preaching to the converted. Likewise, the advocacy of long-standing disability-focused blogs, like *Bad Cripple*²⁸ from US anthropology instructor and disability activist William Peace, provide powerful insight into disability and the multiplicity of issues faced by people with disability but, it could be argued, it is only when these issues and examples of advocacy journalism are ventilated in mainstream media that the “other” is truly given “a face and a voice.”²⁹

Advocacy journalism, like all journalism, relies on audience and funding. Without an audience, there is no consumption and redistribution of content, and without funding there is no capacity to produce content for distribution, consumption and potential redistribution. The road to sustainable journalism publications in the digital age is littered with the remains of mastheads that believed there was an audience prepared to pay for content. Disability and advocacy journalism face the same dilemma.

This chapter will now explore two cases where disability and advocacy journalism have been showcased in the mainstream, and, in doing so, the media have given more voice to the disability community. Ramp Up and Ouch identify as online publications (and podcasts in the case of Ouch) about disability, for people with disability and by people with disability. As discussed earlier, advocacy journalism is about “the use of journalism techniques to promote a specific political or social cause.”³⁰ Ouch and Ramp Up are examples of “self-advocacy” journalism—journalism about disability by people with disability. Significantly, the issue of long-term sustainability is present in the case studies. In Australia, Ramp Up, despite being part of a federally funded broadcaster, could not be financially sustained and, in the United Kingdom, Ouch—also part of a publicly funded broadcaster—was pared back and had significant elements incorporated into the general news operations, as a kind of disability beat space on the BBC website.³¹ The Ouch and Ramp Up experiences provide insight into innovative practices in a disability and advocacy journalism context and, importantly, provide people with disability a conduit through which their perspectives can be heard and their stories told to a much wider consumer base. However, the online publications’ sustainability issues serve to underline broader media realities facing those who would seek to expand public discourse around disability beyond the niche audience.

Background

BBC Ouch is a well-established online entity, and ABC’s Ramp Up was a comparatively short-lived Australian-based disability site. As discussed, both publications are embedded within the digital platforms of their respective publicly funded national broadcaster. It is important to acknowledge both operate or, in Ramp Up’s case, operated, in the public space—funded by the public purse. The BBC and ABC are governed by charters that include commitments to serve the needs of all audiences, and both have editorial policies that address how disability and

diversity should be covered—most specifically in regard to stereotypes and discrimination. Impartiality and diversity of perspectives are also addressed.

The ABC aims to present, over time, content that addresses a broad range of subjects from a diversity of perspectives reflecting a diversity of experiences, presented in a diversity of ways from a diversity of sources, including content created by ABC staff, generated by audiences and commissioned or acquired from external content-makers. Impartiality does not require that every perspective receives equal time, nor that every facet of every argument is presented.³²

Despite the public funding, both ABC and the BBC are independent statutory bodies that operate editorially at arms-length from government.

Ouch³³

In 2002, the BBC did something that was impressive in purpose and positive in its delivery—it established Ouch Blog. Ouch provided disabled people the opportunity of self-representation and opened a portal for disability-focused advocacy journalism. In doing so, disability in the media was moved into the mainstream, albeit through a disability-dedicated page on the BBC site. Ouch broke new ground by being an online location for people with disability to produce and publish journalism and opinion pieces about disability issues. Among the written and pictorial contributions, it became the home of the Ouch Disability Talk Show, and provided a first-person perspective of disability. Ouch says it “goes beyond the headlines of disability news, and also lifts the lid on the little details about being disabled that are not widely talked about.”³⁴ The aspiration of the advocacy journalism and impact of self-representation was observed by Thoreau: “It produces a disability-centred, experience-based, active, and positive picture of disabled people.”³⁵

BBC Ouch provided broad coverage of stories about disability that would otherwise remain the domain of niche publications within the disability sector or blogosphere. It is a portal for a variety of opinions and styles. A notable entry on the blog’s message board in its early days focused on the impact of two characters in the comedy series *Little Britain*, Lou and Andy. Andy used a wheelchair and Lou was his “carer.” The Ouch post reported the characters were being blamed for the increase in wheelchair thefts from hospitals: “People parody the Andy and Lou sketch and send pictures of themselves dressed up.”³⁶ In a more traditional journalistic report from 2012, Emma Tracey explored the development of “talking” cash machines, observing: “Accessibility of machines, or lack of, has a significant impact on how blind and visually impaired people get their money.”³⁷

The Ouch Talk Show podcast was launched in 2006, and is the mainstay of the site. It is now serves as the primary source of much Ouch content. With a variety of hosts over the years, it has addressed issues ranging from sex and relationships—the 100th episode broadcast in September 2013 asked: “How does a young man go about losing his virginity when his arms and legs don’t work?”—to Pokémon Go and access for disabled gamers.³⁸

In 2010, there were concerns the BBC would close Ouch as part of “major changes” to BBC Online.³⁹ At the time of the review, Ouch was one of 400 “top-level directories” to be reviewed and held to account against three key questions: “does it meet our public purpose; does it fit one of the BBC’s five editorial priorities; how does it perform in terms of reach, quality, impact and value for money?”⁴⁰ At the time, BBC director general Mark Thompson declared the broadcaster was “putting quality first” and its “five clear priorities” would be:

The best journalism; inspiring knowledge, music and culture; ambitious UK drama and comedy; outstanding children's content; and events that bring communities and the nation together. We will focus on the areas which most clearly build public value and which are most at risk of being ignored or under-invested in by commercial players.⁴¹

In the context of the longevity of Ouch, Thompson's reference to areas that are at "most risk of being ignored or under-invested in by commercial players" is notable. With this statement, he was drawing a line between the priorities of the taxpayer-funded BBC and those of its commercial contemporaries. Thompson, it could be argued, was committing to prioritize areas like disability, one that is at "risk of being ignored" in the media landscape. As it turned out, the BBC did not close Ouch, but it did shut down its popular "message boards" in 2011,⁴² and archived ten years of blog material (which is still accessible). Much focus then turned to the Ouch Blog, only for it to be phased out and content moved to the BBC Ouch programmes page in March 2016.

The loss of the message boards caused most angst. It was seen by its users as a mechanism for direct participation—an open and accessible means of raising and discussing disability-related issues. The message boards element of the Ouch Blog was broken into sections—Ouch Talk, Disability Q&A, Ouch Café and See Hear Talk. Each board had a particular focus, and at the time of archiving, boasted almost half a million "replies." The Ouch Talk message board had 299,168 replies alone over almost a decade.⁴³ In 2005, Macias, Lewis and Smith explored health-related message boards and chat rooms on the web. While the paper had a medical context, its observations could help explain the apparent popularity of the Ouch message boards.

Although these boards have a strong emotional and support component, they are being used more often for advice and information, particularly for medical and drug information ... These boards are being utilized as a word-of-mouth communication device that was never available before. Before the Internet, it would have been difficult for people to form such an extensive support group because of geographic barriers as well as the embarrassment of talking about certain illnesses (e.g., infertility, IBS, etc.). The anonymity of the Internet appears to be providing an important forum.⁴⁴

It could be argued, the decision to abandon the message boards appeared to be a sign of the digital media times more than an attempt to silence voices. As Virginia Heffernan observed in the *New York Times*: "Message boards were key components of Web 1.0—the Web before broadband, online video, social networking, advanced traffic analysis and the drive to monetize transformed it."⁴⁵

The Ouch Blog, which has been archived, can be traced back to its earliest contributions in 2002,⁴⁶ and there is social media operating under the Ouch banner, including a Facebook page, Twitter handle and Instagram account. However, a search for BBC Ouch and BBC Ouch in Facebook groups yielded no results. This is interesting, as it either indicates there is a replacement for the Ouch message boards operating under a different title, or there has been no official replacement for the message boards established. There are multiple posts on the Ouch Facebook page (which has more than 21,000 Likes), but nothing that seems to have filled the void of the message boards.

Ouch has moved its primary focus away from written pieces. Whereas in 2013 it had a mix of content, written, video and audio (with a focus on the Disability Talk podcast), written content is now dominated by summaries of topics and interviews featured on Disability Talk rather than stand-alone items. It acknowledges as much in its auto-email replies, which include responses to frequently asked questions, one being: "What happened to the Ouch! website? Ouch! has entered

a new stage of its development and is now centred around our monthly disability talk show and frequently updated blog.”⁴⁷

Ouch is embedded within the broader digital platform of the BBC. Therefore, it is publicly funded (under its license fee structure)—as opposed to community funded—and is held to the same level of accountability and transparency dictated by the BBC Royal Charter and Agreement under the BBC Trust.⁴⁸ Significantly, Ouch includes a list of other BBC online pages featuring and/or dedicated to disability. This is important in the context of disability-focused advocacy journalism. While the avenues for direct community contribution to the disability discussion may have been lessened through the loss of the message boards, there is arguably greater potential for journalists in the mainstream to focus on disability issues through alternate BBC digital pages, including the “Disability Sport” page⁴⁹ and “See Hear” (“a magazine for the deaf community highlighting issues affecting the community”⁵⁰).

Ouch continues to provide a mechanism by which disability issues can be discussed and disability-focused journalism published as part of mainstream content of the national broadcaster. To this extent, Thoreau is correct in the observation that Ouch aimed to deliver a

non-precious representation of disability that recorded life for people with disability in a way that bridges the gap ... between the way people with disability are represented in the media and the way they want to be represented in the media.⁵¹

However the longevity, reach and, therefore, impact of disability and advocacy journalism in this context is cushioned with the still welcoming, yet somewhat more relaxed, embrace of the BBC. Questions of sustainability have clearly been asked and answered at the BBC and changes implemented. Ouch continues to exist, albeit in a pared back form. The same cannot be said for its Australian contemporary, Ramp Up. Questions of sustainability were asked and answered far more dramatically in the Australian case.

Ramp Ups And Downs

Progressive representations of disability and the media in Australia are far from regular dance partners. There is the occasional dalliance but, to a large extent, the pairing is rarely observed. News publications in Australia continue to embrace traditional media models of disability,⁵² with stereotypical depictions of people with disability as heroes or tragedies still the unstated rule.⁵³ However, there was a notable exception that sought to achieve change and to do as Ouch did in the United Kingdom.

On International Day of People with Disability, December 2, 2010, the late journalist, comedian and disability activist Stella Young announced the arrival of the Ramp Up website in Australia. Young was co-editor of the site and declared it to be “dedicated to all things disability. It’s a place to share our stories, our truths, our resources—to ramp up the conversation about disability in Australia.”⁵⁴ Ramp Up was part of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s (ABC) online platform, and had been seed-funded by a contract with the Australian Government’s Department of Social Services. The longer-term plan was for it to be included as an ongoing part of the ABC and for it to be funded from its overall budget. Over three and a half years, the site published more than 500 articles, with the vast majority produced by people with disability. The publication included news and opinion pieces and tackled issues that varied from the National Disability Insurance Scheme⁵⁵ and fair pay and work conditions for people with disability⁵⁶ to disability in film⁵⁷ and even Lady Gaga’s wheelchair props: “I can’t see that performing from a wheelchair while dressed as a mermaid makes any more comment on disability than arriving at the Grammys in an egg makes on chickens,” Stella Young wrote for Ramp Up in 2011.⁵⁸

Through advocacy journalism and self-representative practice, Ramp Up showed people with disability as part of the fabric of Australian society, rather than objects of pity and charity and/or heroes for simply doing what everyone else does. It provided them the opportunity to move from the sidelines of critical conversations and into the centre of debate. Discussion about the murder of people with disability under the guise of mercy killings was an example of the crucial disability topics addressed.

The unlawful killing of one human being at the hands of another is universally acknowledged as the worst possible crime of which we are capable. To imagine culpability as somehow eased by the victim's disability is untenable. Murder is murder; rape is rape; violence is violence. All are a product of power wielded for its own sake—no further explanation or excuses should be allowed.⁵⁹

Ramp Up's content illustrated what the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank's *World Report on Disability* identified as necessary to improve social participation of people with disability: shining a light on significant disability issues. That the report found the disability community still faces "negative imagery and language, stereotypes and stigma,"⁶⁰ and media initiatives like Ramp Up fit with what WHO and the World Bank said needed to happen, by "raising awareness and challenging negative attitudes" and in so doing, was taking "steps towards creating more accessible environments for persons with disabilities."⁶¹

But that initiative fell apart in May 2014 when the Australian Federal Government announced funding cuts to the ABC, saying that the Ramp Up contract would not be renewed. ABC managing director Mark Scott decided to cease publication of Ramp Up and maintain the site as an archive of previously published material. Scott described Ramp Up as "a positive," according to *New Matilda*, and alluded to the large number of ABC website blogs as the potential contributory reasons behind the closure.

One of the issues that we are asking from the organisation as a whole is whether we have too many standalone websites and whether, in the interests of efficiency and audience service but also the drive to bigger numbers, we need fewer websites which have richer levels of information in them.⁶²

Ramp Up was officially shut down on June 30, 2014. Its editor, Stella Young, was retained by the ABC to continue to produce disability-related content for its multiple platforms. Young, in confirming the ABC decision to cease publication, acknowledged its accomplishments as an online publication of "self-advocacy" journalism:

We've also had the honour of publishing great work from many talented, emerging writers with disability. We have seen a significant shift in coverage of disability issues in the media and a move towards more critical thinking within the movement. We're proud to have been a part of that journey.⁶³

Save ABC Ramp Up

The decision not to renew the Ramp Up contract drew together a coalition of people with disability, activists and allies—this author included.⁶⁴ The "Save ABC Ramp Campaign" was borne out of belief that the website's closure would again silence people with disability. The campaign raised questions about the need for issues and/or community-specific sites within a national broadcaster's digital footprint and, more broadly, advocacy journalism as a means of greater, fairer and more accurate representation of people with disabilities and the issues and events that are important to them.

“Save ABC Ramp Up” centered on the need of people with disability to have a say in the disability agenda and their representation in the discourse. Taleporos said: “The Ramp Up site is on the national broadcaster page, and it means that we have exposure to policy makers, it can influence the way people think and understand social issues that people with disabilities face every day.”⁶⁵ Freelance journalist, Ramp Up contributor and Save ABC Ramp Up campaigner El Gibbs said people with disability had lost a place to tell their stories, in their own words.

Ramp Up offered a chance to examine in detail, disability policy developments. For example, I was commissioned to write a long feature reflecting on the first year of the NDIS (National Disability Insurance Scheme). I interviewed people in the trial sites, peak bodies and read reams of Senate committee transcripts, then pulled it all together. I doubt any other media outlet would have given me the space (and the cash!) to do this kind of work.⁶⁶

The demise of Ramp Up showed clearly what is lost when the advocacy journalism of people with disability is silenced, and the Save Ramp Up campaign shows how deeply connected the Australian disability community felt about this silencing.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored disability and advocacy journalism, which is a kind of “self-advocacy” journalism for the disability community. The activities of Ouch and Ramp Up have provided insight into the capacity that mainstream disability-focused media has to tell the stories from the disability community. This chapter also highlights the vexed position the news media find themselves in when faced with financial limitations. While there is recognition that people with disability continue to be inaccurately represented in mainstream media, the Ramp Up and, in part, the Ouch experiences, have shown efforts to improve the quantity and quality of media coverage can be diminished, if not quashed, by the withdrawal of funding and/or realignment of editorial approaches and priorities.

As was shown through the exploration of the Save ABC Ramp Up campaign, there remains a belief within the Australian disability community that there needs to be dedicated space within mainstream media for the discussion of disability issues and disability-focused advocacy journalism. The inclusion of such work in mainstream media news sites will potentially broaden the audience, and counter the perception that disability is a niche issue. As Goggin and Ellis contend: “Armed with an understanding of disability in news, we can better understand, decipher, and confront stereotypes, myths and images of disability.”⁶⁷

However, a conundrum exists when the call for dedicating space to disability-focused journalism, as exemplified by Ouch and Ramp Up, is weighed against the desire of people with disability to be fully included in society. Full inclusion, it could be argued, would render disability indistinguishable within the broader digital news media landscape. Disability-focused advocacy journalism would simply be a part of the greater tapestry of coverage of diverse communities by the news media. To a degree, this is the aspiration from the BBC by embedding Ouch within its general news operations.

By presenting disability-focused content in a digital media environment and moving outside traditional representations of disability, Ouch and Ramp Up have taken significant steps toward imbedding better disability coverage into the major news channels in the United Kingdom and Australia, but full inclusion means disability-focused journalists must move disability away from niche news and features and into the mainstream of coverage. The digital media environment provides opportunities for disability to be discussed as readily as any other sociopolitical issue,

with many perspectives coming directly from people with disability themselves (but many times with no pay for them, however⁶⁸). If disability-focused advocacy journalism can claim and maintain position within the mainstream, the need for issue-specific digital space and significantly, issue-specific funding, is lessened—if not eliminated. There are examples of issues perceived as niche topics that have been taken from the rare coverage into the mainstream news. It has, for example, been argued that climate change was once relegated to infrequent science stories, whereas now it is front-page news due to its framing and representation as a crucial issue globally and locally.⁶⁹

In conclusion, the imperative for disability-focused advocacy journalists is to recognize their capacity to influence, to foster change and to produce fairer and more accurate representation of disability within mainstream media. Journalists can broaden the discourse and reframe disability as part of routine news coverage, rather than a rarely covered niche issue. Ouch and Ramp Up describe themselves as places for people with disability, by people with disability, but the great leap forward will be achieved when disability is not considered out-of-the-ordinary subject matter but can claim a place within the mainstream news media conversation with progressive, rather than traditionally stigmatizing, representations. If this does happen, the protesters who gathered on that cold winter morning in Melbourne, Australia, in 2014 to save Ramp Up, may not have done so in vain.

Notes

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