

Disability and Media

Speech by Sanjaya Mishra at the WE Care Film Festival at Apeejay Institute of Mass Communication, New Delhi

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Mr. Ashok Ogra, Director, Apeejay Institute of Mass Communication, students of the Institute and Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to be here amongst you and I congratulate AIMC and the students of the Institute for taking up such an important topic as the theme of the Student Film Festival. I am no expert on the topic, but my humble association on the issue of disability goes back to 1992, when I did a research paper on library and information services for the disabled individuals and received the best paper award from the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. That was 20 years back, and I tried to focus on our attitudes towards disability and how we are ill equipped to empathise and support people with disability. Things have not changed much over the years, but we now at least have the People with Disability Act, 1995.

I strongly believe that we need to sensitize people about disability early during childhood. We need to not only see disability from the medical angle, but also from the social angle. Disability affects each one of us at some point in time. Today, in the digital world, we should be more careful about inclusion and access to websites and digital information for people with disabilities. You may like to check how many of our websites are accessible and designed according to Web Accessibility Guidelines.

As journalist and media students, you may like to do research on many areas covering people with disabilities. One potential area of research is portrayal of people with disability in our films and television. Media play an important role in influencing public opinion and attitudes. The choice of words, images and messages can determine perceptions, attitudes and behaviours. How people with disabilities are portrayed and the frequency with which they appear in the media has an enormous impact on how they are regarded in society. Portraying people with disability with dignity and respect will help promote inclusion and tolerance in societies, even educate people to handle disability appropriately at home and work environments. The fourth estate has a significant role to play in this area, not only by identifying what is *not happening right*, but also by promoting and *showcasing good practices* in the society. Good stories about disability issues may cover issues of employment, skill development, and organizations supporting people with disabilities. You may also like to undertake a study on number of people with disability employed in media houses.

Media has educative powers, and I am happy to know that this festival is showing some of the creative works and documentaries highlighting the issues of disability. By addressing the issues of disability, everyone benefits. For example, when you add a ramp in a public building, you are not only following the law of the land, but also assisting the aged and the young to access the building with less difficulty. When learning resources are available in audio book format, it helps students who have an auditory learning style. When you design website accessible, you help everyone with low vision. Many a times, it is thought that developing systems for people with disability is costly, and is not good economics. In reality, it is all about attitudes and not economics. We need to develop the right attitudes towards disability, and media can help a lot in this direction.

Thank you for your attention.