

Inclusion of disabled persons on the Internet

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What is this module about?

This module is meant to give the reader an understanding of the complex topic of disability and language, as it exists today, from the point of view of persons with disabilities. The module is also meant to explain some of the ways in which we can make materials more accessible for persons with different kinds of impairments by ensuring their inclusion in technological access. [**Editor’s note:** “Technological access” in the context of this module refers to access to content on the Internet and to devices such as mobile phones, personal computers, laptops and their peripherals.]

Whom is this module designed for?

This module is designed for people who would like to write on issues related to disability and persons with disability. It is also designed for people who produce knowledge in various forms and formats and want people with disabilities to be able to access such knowledge.

Why is this important?

Wikipedians often write about impairments or about people who have lived with impairments. This is observed quite commonly when editing biographies of people who have or had disabilities, or when certain medical conditions are being discussed. We must ensure that our writing reflects the present framing of disability. It is also important to universally design our output so that it can be consumed by a wider audience. An audience that experiences better inclusion of their issues and perspectives may feel more welcome and comfortable while contributing to this body of knowledge.

Understanding disability

Disability is an identity, like race, religion, caste, gender and sexuality. Even if a person does not want to be labelled as a disabled person, other people may attribute this identity to them. For example, people will refer to any person who uses a wheelchair, or a white cane, or a mobility scooter, as a person with a disability. On the other hand, persons who would like to be recognised as disabled may not be given that recognition because they do not look disabled from their physical appearance. For example, the general public does not consider persons with anxiety disorder¹, or chronic pain², as disabled because they look ‘normal’.

Disability is based on an impairment of the body or mind, and it is something any of us can develop at any stage in our lives. It is an issue that will affect all of us. Some of us may experience it as our parents grow older.

Unfortunately, owing to popular culture and other influences, many of us may not understand the present framing of disability. It is useful to take a brief look at the development of disability as an identity over time. This may help us appreciate where the discourse is now.

The charity/ medical model of disability

In earlier times, people thought disability was a curse or penalty for sins committed in this life or a previous one. Some people believed that persons with mental health disabilities or epilepsy were ‘possessed’ by an unworldly spirit. People with disabilities were objects of pity or scorn. This is referred to as the **‘charity model’ of disability**. People would make donations to the disabled of amounts that they believed were adequate. This assistance was not

¹ “Anxiety and panic attacks”

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/anxiety-and-panic-attacks/anxiety-disorders/> Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

² Laura Kiesel, “Chronic Pain: The Invisible Disability”

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/chronic-pain-the-invisible-disability-2017042811360> Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

enough to help the person with the disability live well, but it was enough for the person making the donation to feel better about themselves. Over time, scientific approaches to medicine improved. So did our understanding of the human body. This led to the ‘**medical model**’ of disability. This focused on the individual impairment and on how to fix it. If the individual could not be fixed, sometimes they would be removed from society in the ‘best interests’ of everyone concerned. This includes groups such as people with mental disorders, intellectual impairments, and contagious diseases such as leprosy. People believed that disability was an ‘undesirable’ trait in humankind. Much of the discourse around disability was how to prevent these traits from persisting in the human race. This field of science came to be known as **eugenics**. Eugenics became an influential field throughout the western world. It was adopted by the Nazi regime as a justification for laws relating to sterilisation of persons with undesirable traits. This later escalated into genocide – one of the first victims of the Holocaust were, in fact, children with disabilities³.

Disability rights came to the forefront in the aftermath of the world wars. After the wars, the available labour force sharply reduced in number because of casualties and injuries. This prompted better economic inclusion for many persons with disabilities⁴, particularly war veterans⁵. Persons across disabilities came together as a lobby force demanding their rights to citizenship. One such organisation formed in the United States was the American Federation of the Physically Handicapped (AFPH)⁶.

The social model of disability

The social model of disability emerged around this time. The social model is: **A person may have an impairment, but what really disables them are various barriers that prevent their participation in society on an equal basis with others.** A lack of availability of books in braille or in an electronic format disables a blind person in the context of receiving an education. A lack of sign language interpretation disables a Deaf person. A lack of accessible infrastructure disables a wheelchair user. Negative attitudes and stigma disables a person with mental health issues. The social model seeks to move the focus away from the individual’s impairment. Instead, it

³ Irene Zoch, “Named: the baby boy who was Nazi Germany’s first euthanasia victim” <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/1443967/Named-the-baby-boy-who-was-Nazis-first-euthanasia-victim.html> Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

⁴ Audra Jennings, *Out of the Horrors of War: Disability Politics in World War II America*, UPenn Press <http://www.upenn.edu/pennpress/book/15574.html> Last visited on 23 November, 2018.

⁵ Ryan Reft, “World War I: Injured Veterans and the Disability Rights Movement” <https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2017/12/world-war-i-injured-veterans-and-the-disability-rights-movement/> Last visited on 23 November, 2018.

⁶ “The Work of the American Federation of the Handicapped” <https://library.uta.edu/txdisabilityhistory/file/1637/download?token=nD-hlgkW> [PDF] Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

focuses on how we can remove barriers that prevent people with disabilities from participating on an equal basis with others.

Video: “The Social Model of disability and what it means for people with disabilities” <https://youtu.be/oe24rfTZ2CQ7>

This is why the preferred term is “**persons with disabilities**”. ‘Differently abled’ or ‘specially abled’ or the now popular ‘*divyaang*’ places an onus on a person with impairment to have something extraordinary about them. This plays into tropes about persons with disabilities that they must be ‘extraordinary’. Instead, they would like the right to be as normal and mundane as everyone else!

[Editor’s note: “Divyaang” literally translates to “divine-bodied” in several Indic languages. The term has been adopted by agencies of the Indian government such as the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities⁸ and the Indian Railways⁹, which refer to disabled persons as ‘Divyangjan’.]

Do: Use the term ‘persons with disabilities’ or ‘disabled people’ when referring to this constituency.

Don’t: Use terms such as specially abled, differently abled, handicapped, special, *divyaang*, et cetera.

Person-first language and exceptions

Most people with disability prefer “person-first” language (“**I am a person first, and then I am disabled.**”) There are some notable exceptions to this preference. Many disabled groups prefer to be addressed by their impairment, for example, the blind, and the Deaf. The term (d)eaf is used for someone who has a complete hearing impairment, but the use of the term (D)eaf is to refer to people who are ‘culturally deaf’. The Deaf communicate in Sign Language and identify as members of the Deaf community. The community refers to itself as a ‘linguistic minority’. Persons who are (d)eaf may not use sign language, preferring to lip read and speak instead. They may want to opt for cochlear implants. Many people who are on the Autism spectrum call themselves “autistic” as opposed to “persons with autism”¹⁰.

Do: When you refer to a group of persons who have an impairment, do your research on the terminology preferred by the members of that group.

⁷ “What is the social model of disability? - Scope video” <https://youtu.be/0e24rfTZ2CQ> Last visited on 23 November, 2018.

⁸ “Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (Divyangjan)” <http://disabilityaffairs.gov.in/content> Last visited on 23 November, 2018.

⁹ PTI, “Indian Railway replaces ‘viklang’ with ‘divyang’ in concession forms” https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/indian-railway-replaces-viklang-with-divyang-in-concession-forms-118012700221_1.html Last visited on 23 November, 2018.

¹⁰ “Identity-First Language” <http://autisticadvocacy.org/about-asan/identity-first-language> Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

Remember to refer to resources developed by persons with that disability and not by parents or professionals.

Don't: *The disability movement and persons with disabilities have been reclaiming¹¹ terms such as “mad” and “cripple”. Please do not use these terms to describe persons with disabilities even if they have used the same terms to refer to themselves. Always use direct quotes of the person with disability in places where the person has used such terms.*

Disability as a part of human diversity

There is no fixed definition of people with disabilities that excludes or includes any specific group. The definition as per the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities¹² “include(s) those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others”. In line with this definition, the Convention has seven guiding principles, which includes “respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity”. Persons with Down’s Syndrome believe that prenatal testing will lead to them being ‘screened out’ of existence in the future and are protesting a new range of tests¹³. The Deaf community protests against the imposition of cochlear implants as a ‘cure’ for deafness¹⁴. They believe that the focus should be on removing barriers to participation, instead of removing them as a group of diverse human beings.

Do: *When you refer to a specific person with a disability, where possible, refer to the person’s own narration of their experience. You may also want to refer to the works of writers on disability studies who may have placed the person’s experience in context.*

Don't: *Assume disability is the end of someone’s life. Don’t let your writing reflect negativity either. Instead, try the following:
“Wheelchair bound” – “wheelchair user”*

¹¹ View an explanation of reclaiming pejorative terms and an interactive timeline of reclamation here: Elena Kuran and Caitlan Lucien, “Reclamation of Slurs” <https://www.tiki-toki.com/timeline/entry/927052/Reclamation-of-Slurs> Last visited on 23 November, 2018. [“The act of reclaiming slurs, “the phenomenon whereby a stigmatized group revalues an externally imposed negative label by self-consciously referring to itself in terms of that label,” is not a new phenomenon. Throughout history, in an attempt to reappropriate the original malicious and oppressive meaning, marginalized groups have reclaimed derogatory slurs.”]

¹² The UN “Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol” <http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf> [PDF] Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

¹³ “Don’t Screen Us Out campaign” <http://dontscreenusout.org> Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

¹⁴ Allegra Ringo, *Understanding Deafness: not everyone wants to be ‘fixed’*, The Atlantic <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/08/understanding-deafness-not-everyone-wants-to-be-fixed/278527> Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

*“Suffered from polio” – “contracted polio” OR “is/ was a polio survivor”, if the person has used this phrasing to describe themselves
“devastated/ ruined by a condition” – “developed/ acquired a condition”*

Limitations of the social model

The social model isn't perfect. Many groups feel that they identify as persons with disabilities but do not share the view that barriers to participation are entirely external. An example of this is persons who experience chronic pain. They identify as persons with disabilities, but they also feel that more focus needs to be on curing the disease that causes this pain. Another example is persons who have spinal cord injuries. The social model means we need to focus on barriers to accessing assistive devices and accessible infrastructure. However, persons with spinal cord injuries also want the medical establishment to respond to, say, their vulnerability to urinary tract infections resulting from the use of catheters. In the present times, a balance has been sought between the medical and social model, depending on the impairment group that is involved.

Do: *Read user accounts of the impairment you are concerned with.*

Don't: *Assume everyone with a disability is looking for a cure, but empathise with those who are.*

“Inspiration porn”

One of the most important shifts in conversation regarding people with disabilities is the question of objectification of their lives, particularly with regard to the oft-repeated trope that people with disabilities are “inspiring” to the able-bodied person. People with disabilities have come out and explained why this practice is harmful and really makes no tangible value addition to the lives of persons with disabilities.

Video: “I'm not your inspiration, thank you very much| Stella Young”
<https://youtu.be/8K9Gg164Bsw>¹⁵

Do: *Appreciate the achievements of persons with disabilities who have had to overcome significant barriers.*

Don't: *Use words such as ‘inspiring’ and ‘divine’ to describe the attributes of a person with a disability.*

¹⁵ Stella Young, “I'm not your inspiration, thank you very much”. TED.
<https://youtu.be/8K9Gg164Bsw> Last visited on 7 January, 2019.

Technology and persons with disabilities

Technology has been the real game changer in removing the barriers to participation of persons with disabilities. The visually impaired can now have easy access to e-books and navigate most of the Internet with the help of screen readers. The deaf and hard of hearing can enjoy closed captioning and sign language interpretation for video material. Many persons with disabilities who were thought to be “nonverbal” are making their voices heard through modified keyboards. People who face immense barriers in even leaving their homes, be it on account of psychosocial impairments or fatigue, have built thriving communities and peer support with the power of their mobile phones. Technology has also enabled people without disabilities to learn from the lived experiences of people with disabilities, and perhaps help build a sense of empathy towards their specific needs with regard to inclusion. A contributor to Wikipedia may have a lot to draw from the lived experiences of persons with disabilities, especially in terms of understanding impairments and other disabling health conditions.

Universal design

In general, while designing systems or services adhering to the principle of ‘universal design’ is the best option to include the needs of all people, not just persons with disabilities¹⁶.

Video: “What is Universal Design?” <https://youtu.be/40FrlC2Bn6c>¹⁷

One of the most important aspects of universal design is the use of ‘[plain language](#)’. There are many benefits to plain language usage, including the fact that it works better when machine translated into other languages. The layout of documents written in simple language is overall more user friendly and helps readers find specific information quickly. Writing Wikipedia entries in plain language -- [these guidelines are an example](#)¹⁸ -- would be an example of universal design. The present practice of a separate ‘Simple English Wikipedia’ is not, as it is specifically meant for a separate audience.

¹⁶ See also, Elise Roy, “When we design for disability we all benefit” https://www.ted.com/talks/elise_roy_when_we_design_for_disability_we_all_benefit Last visited on 24 November, 2018.

¹⁷ “Universal Captions: What Is Universal Design?” <https://youtu.be/40FrlC2Bn6c> Last visited on 7 January, 2019.

¹⁸ “Federal Plain Language Guidelines”. March 2011. <https://www.plainlanguage.gov/media/FederalPLGuidelines.pdf> [PDF] Last visited on 7 January, 2019.

[Editor's note: English Wikipedia Manual of Style forbids "[editorialising](#)"¹⁹ and the use of [euphemisms](#)²⁰. It encourages the use of plain language instead of phrasing that specially caters to the sensibilities of one or more sections of the readership. For example, it is acceptable to write that the subject of a biographical article "died" instead of "passed away". Referring to someone as "blind" or "disabled" is also acceptable²¹.

The core policy for civility [[WP:Civil](#)], which forbids the use of profanity, vulgar language, et cetera, prevails over most of the other rules, policies and guidelines on Wikipedia and its sister projects. However, there are major disagreements between Wikipedia contributors who do not want political correctness to take over the representation of encyclopaedic knowledge and those who want language to be acceptable to certain sensibilities. These differences are resolved by acknowledging in the article that certain terms may be considered offensive or pejoratives in certain contexts, geographies, languages, et cetera. For example, the article entitled "[Spastic](#)" states, "Colloquially, spastic can be pejorative; though severity of this differs between the United States and the United Kingdom. Disabled people in the United Kingdom consider "spastic" to be one of the most offensive terms related to disability." In some other cases, contributors arrive upon words acceptable to all sides.]

Other good practices to make content universally designed include:

1. **Captioning photos with clear descriptions:** There may be options for 'alt-text'. This benefits users who use screen readers and also those with slow or patchy Internet connections that do not load pictures. If this is not an option, a brief description of the photograph in accompanying text will also be readable by a screen reader. (Refer to Jennifer Stuton's "[A Guide to Making Documents Accessible to People Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired](#)"²² and <https://webaim.org/techniques/alttext>)
2. **Closed captioning of video content:** YouTube supports automated subtitles for videos in English but it is not very accurate. If you have

¹⁹ Wikipedia: Manual of Style/Words to Watch - Editorializing https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Manual_of_Style/Words_to_watch#Editorializing Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

²⁰ Wikipedia: Manual of Style/Words to Watch -- Expressions that lack precision https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Manual_of_Style/Words_to_watch#Expressions_that_ack_precision Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

²¹ Wikipedia: Manual of Style/Words to Watch -- Expressions that lack precision, Footnote #5, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Manual_of_Style/Words_to_watch#cite_note-5 Last visited on 1 November, 2018. ["The [National Federation of the Blind](#), for instance, opposes terms such as *sightless*, in favor of the straightforward *blind*. Similarly, the same group argues that there is no need to substitute awkward circumlocutions such as *people with blindness* for the simpler phrase *blind people*; see [Resolution 93-01](#)..."]

²² "A Guide to Making Documents Accessible to People Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired" <http://www.sabeusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/A-Guide-to-Making-Documents-Accessible-to-People-Who-are-Blind-or-Visually-Impaired.pdf> [PDF] Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

made a video based on a script or speech or lecture, you can upload the subtitle file of the video to YouTube and YouTube will synchronise it for you. For detailed instructions about how to add and edit captions to a YouTube video, refer to: <https://mediaaccess.org.au/web/how-to-caption-a-youtube-video>

3. **Audio description of videos:** Audio description is like a voiceover meant to narrate what is happening on screen to viewers who cannot see it. Audio description is important where the visuals have some narrative value. Refer to '[You Describe](#)'²³ for instructions about how to add audio description to any YouTube video.
4. **Transcripts of podcasts:** While transcription helps the hearing impaired, it is also of use to people who are not able to listen to the podcast for other reasons. There are several options for transcribing audio to text which can be made available online. [Happy Scribe](#)²⁴ is one such application. Note that it is a paid service.
5. **Sign language interpretation:** This is very helpful for the Deaf community. Sign language is not a translation of spoken language. Sign language is not the same across the entire world. If you want to provide sign language interpretation for your video, ensure that you use an interpreter who is conversant with the sign language used by your target audience. Provide the material for interpretation in advance to the interpreter. Offer to help if the interpreters need better understanding of any concept, as this will impact the quality of interpretation. Get feedback from a Deaf individual on their understanding of the video before posting it. It is recommended to provide both captions and sign language interpretation wherever possible. Refer to the W3G guidelines for "[Including a sign language interpreter in the video stream](#)"²⁵.
6. **Infographics:** Infographics are all the rage but not all of them are accessible. If an infographic is interactive, ensure you have an explainer on how to use it. Some more tips on how to make infographics accessible to all are available at [Piktochart](#)²⁶. Additionally, you may refer to the W3G working draft on accessibility needs for people with low vision²⁷. While a simple solution is to type out whatever the infographic says, you can also try an audio clip of someone explaining

²³ "You Describe" <https://youdescribe.org> Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

²⁴ "Happy Scribe" <https://www.happyscribe.co> Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

²⁵ "G54: Including a sign language interpreter in the video stream" <https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20-TECHS/G54.html> Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

²⁶ "Inclusive Design: How to Make Your Visuals Accessible to All" <https://piktochart.com/inclusive-design-make-visuals-accessible> Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

²⁷ "Accessibility requirements for people with low vision" <https://www.w3.org/TR/low-vision-needs> Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

the infographic, which may be more appealing to readers having difficulty accessing the visualisation.