

MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND COVERAGE OF
LANDMARK MOMENTS IN DISABILITY HISTORY

by

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(Under the Direction of Janice Hume)

ABSTRACT

This thesis takes a historical approach to examine the media coverage of landmark moments in disability history, both in the nineteenth century and during the beginning stages of the Disability Rights Movement in the twentieth century. The thesis illustrates how the media has been instrumental in helping the disability community gain a sense of identity within society, while at the same time reflecting longstanding disability stereotypes and hindering their acceptance. Although the terminology used in the articles improved significantly between the centuries, many of the stigmas that existed about the disability community remained. This study reveals the complexity of the media coverage of disability issues and the differences that arose in articles as coverage changed with each era.

INDEX WORDS: Disability, Disability Rights Movement, Disability Community, Stereotypes

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION, LITERATURE REVIEW, THEORY

In the fall of 1962 when the press was focused on the integration of African Americans into institutions of higher learning, another civil rights movement was also taking place. That same semester Ed Roberts, a post polio quadriplegic, entered the University of California at Berkeley and so began the Disability Rights Movement.¹ Quietly and without much fanfare Roberts persuaded the California Department of Rehabilitation to pay for his four-year education. He also convinced Berkeley to admit him, despite the non-accessible lunchroom, dormitories and classrooms and their admittance that “we’ve tried cripples before and it didn’t work.”² Living in the University’s Cowell Hospital—the only place that could house Roberts’ iron lung—he completed his undergraduate, master’s and doctoral degrees at Berkeley.³ By 1967, twelve others students with severe disabilities had followed suit and the hospital floor serving as their dormitory was transformed into the “Rolling Quads” floor.⁴ Almost single-handedly Roberts forged the way for Americans with disabilities to have a chance to attend college.

Americans never learned about Roberts’ contributions in the same way they learned about the fight for racial desegregation. Yet the protests and marches in the fight for racial integration did not go unnoticed by the disability community. “When blacks and women talked about the power of language, I understood,” Roberts said in a study by Jack Nelson entitled “The Media Role in Building the Disability Community.”⁵ Roberts understood that people with disabilities had rights like other citizens, and he led a movement to reject the images of people

with disabilities as simply charity cases. He helped redefine independence for people with disabilities by insisting on having ramps built for curbs and for state-paid personal attendants. Eventually he also established the Center for Independent Living in Berkeley, which became the model for other centers around the country.⁶ Roberts' move to Berkeley signified what many disability advocates consider to be the beginning of the Disability Rights Movement even in light of the contributions made in the 1940s for veterans with disabilities.⁷

The Disability Rights Movement arose out of the new thinking that there was no pity or tragedy in having a disability. While the campaign for disability rights forged a coalition of millions of people with disabilities, without any one particular leader—such as was the case in the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Rights Movement—the Disability Rights Movement went largely unnoticed by the press.⁸ The purpose of this study is twofold. First, it will look back to a time before the Disability Rights Movement and examine how nineteenth century magazines covered people with disabilities. Secondly, this study will explore the patterns of coverage in newspapers of pivotal moments in the Disability Rights Movement, including the signing of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the passing of the Americans With Disability Act (ADA).

The disability community, comprised of one in five Americans, represents people of all backgrounds and is the largest minority group in the nation.⁹ According to the United States Census Bureau, a person with a disability is defined as one who has difficulty performing certain functions, such as hearing, walking, climbing stairs, talking, lifting and carrying. Additionally, a person with a disability has trouble performing daily activities, including attending school, having a job or working around the house.¹⁰

Individuals with disabilities, their families and friends, as well as disability advocates have criticized mainstream media for their failure to recognize people with disabilities as equal members of society and for reinforcing stereotypes in their coverage.¹¹ People with disabilities have largely been portrayed in mainstream media as persons who should either be pitied or admired.¹² Jack Nelson in his article “The Media Role in Building the Disability Community” examined the longstanding disability stereotypes reflected in the current mainstream media’s coverage which includes the idea that a person with a disability is pitiable and pathetic, a “super crip,” sinister, evil and criminal, better off dead, maladjusted, a burden and unable to live a successful life.¹³

For much of the twentieth century the media viewed people with disabilities as child-like and incompetent or unable to provide for themselves. Other times they were portrayed as super heroes or “super crips” and mentioned only in terms of their courage or the obstacles they have overcome.¹⁴ Nelson asserts that the disability stereotypes prevalent in today’s media were brought about by the way disabilities were viewed in the past:

historically, those who have been most isolated and with the greatest sense of alienation have been people with serious disabilities. The situation for the most invisible, the most pitied, or the despised remained unchanged through the centuries.¹⁵

Nelson argued that the media played an instrumental role in sustaining negative stereotypes, as well as building a sense of community among people with disabilities.¹⁶ In explaining how the media has helped construct such a community, Nelson developed what he called the “Four Stages of Community.”¹⁷ Stage one, The Dark Ages of Disability, referred to the stigmatizing

stereotypes that endured over centuries and were not questioned until the twentieth century. For centuries people with disabilities were a stigmatized minority, and it was not until the middle of the twentieth century that “a growing awareness took place in American society of the ethical problems presented by shunting aside a considerable segment of the population as unworthy of attention or consideration.”¹⁸ Negative portrayals of disability dominated folk tales, books and films, and these negative attitudes towards people with disabilities “served to increase the negative effect of their disabilities and enlarge their sense of powerlessness and dependence,” Nelson wrote.¹⁹ Thus, it seems likely that mainstream media coverage in magazines and newspapers, which are reflections of social norms, would have also perpetuated these stereotypes.

Once it became apparent that changes needed to take place to recognize this neglected group in society Nelson said, “it remained for the media to take a large hand in changing the views of the public and the lawmakers to bring about legislation that was right and just for an ethically oriented society.”²⁰ After World War II, journalists began to realize that some groups were being denied Constitutional rights, thus forming what Nelson refers to as Stage Two, Awareness of Rights.²¹ In addition to the coverage of civil rights abuses of women and blacks, the press highlighted several cases about the abuse of people with disabilities. Yet, many people with disabilities continued to face stigma and discrimination silently. The articles written often focused on “some sort of stress, trauma, overcompensation, character flaw or bizarre behavioral tendencies.”²² Stage Three, Mobilizing To Action, looks at how people with disabilities demanded rights like other citizens. The rise in awareness about disabilities began with Roberts’ integration into Berkeley and culminated with the passing of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990. During this stage the media experienced a growing sense of the injustices

felt by those with disabilities and began to bring awareness of these injustices.²³ Stage Four, Revolution of Technological Community looks at the growth of the technological advanced, electronic media and the ways in which the Internet accelerates the growth of disability communities, which can be done through online disability publications and disability-related chat rooms and group listings.²⁴

Demeaning Disability Terminology

One way in which changes have occurred in the coverage of disability issues in the media is through the terminology used. Disabling language is defined by: “language that (a) perpetuates myths and stereotypes about people with disabilities, (b) uses nouns instead of adjectives to describe people with disabilities, or (c) uses demeaning or outdated words or phrases in reference to persons with disabilities.”²⁵ The disabling language used in the media has “the potential to affect nearly every person with a disability and the insults are likely to be perpetrated by practically every speaking person in our society.”²⁶ Todd Gitlin in *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* explains media frames as “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual.”²⁷ In examining the coverage about disability issues it is important to consider the media frames, which could include patterns in the terminology and language used about the disability community.

People with disabilities have made it clear that they do not want to be defined by their disability, but rather they want to be regarded to as people first.²⁸ In response to the demeaning terminology, People-First Language has been developed to help improve attitudes towards people with disability.²⁹ People-First Language seeks to put the person before the disability, and

descriptive phrases such as “a person who uses a wheelchair” are used rather than “wheelchair-bound person.”³⁰ The change in terminology was intended to provide a greater sense of dignity to those with disabilities.³¹ Yet, despite the change in terminology, the idea that a person with a disability is a supercrip, sinister, criminal, pitiable and pathetic, a burden or evil remains.³²

Disability Activism and Quest for Civil Rights

Since the inception of the Disability Rights Movement several key pieces of legislation have passed protecting civil rights of people with disabilities. One major turning point during the Disability Rights Movement was the passage of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which made it illegal for any federal agency, public university, defense or other federal contractor, or other institutions or activities that received federal funding to discriminate against anyone solely because of a disability.³³ Section 504 was the first civil rights law for people with disabilities, but the issuance of the final regulations was stalled four years because of the costs associated with its compliance.³⁴ Major protests took place demanding the enactment of the law which marked “a political coming of age of the disability rights movement.”³⁵ Disability activists, including Roberts, attended the protests and spoke to the crowds about the importance of integration.³⁶ On April 28, 1977, four years after the law had passed, the regulations were finally implemented.³⁷ The protests served as a defining time for the Disability Rights Movement as people with disabilities risked their health and arrest to fight for change. The protestors’ “civil disobedience tactics...had surprised a nation...with their own power.”³⁸ Since its inception Section 504 has remained instrumental for people with disabilities and their families as it allows for almost everyone to receive quality schooling in integrated facilities.³⁹

Another major piece of legislation that impacted the lives of people with disabilities was the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, which promised full social

integration. The ADA was a landmark civil rights decision that changed the ways in which people with disabilities live their daily lives, with the guarantee of equal opportunity in public accommodations, employment, transportation, state and local government services, and telecommunications.⁴⁰ The ADA had more impact than any civil rights law since the 1964 act that banned discrimination against blacks, women and ethnic and religious minorities.⁴¹

However, as Joseph Shapiro noted in *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement*, despite the vast impact of the Disability Rights Movement, media coverage of petitions, protests and the passing of landmark legislation for disability rights made little mention of the larger issues of the disability community or this civil-rights movement.⁴²

As Beth Haller, a disability scholar who has conducted some of the most extensive work on the media's coverage of disability issues, explains, lobbying for rights through demonstrations and protests may produce positive implications for people with disabilities since "when they take an active stance and grab the limelight, they are confronting their social construction as passive, disadvantaged people."⁴³ In coverage about the protests and demonstrations the media constructs the identity of the activists and in the case of people with disabilities this often combines old stereotypes with a more progressive construction.⁴⁴

Existing Literature

Existing literature on the media's coverage of disability issues consists mostly of content analyses focused on the number of articles and placement in newspapers during the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In 1990, Clayton Keller and Daniel Hallahan sought to check the validity of the longstanding claim that people with disabilities were ignored or misrepresented in the press. Their research found that references of disability issues in American newspapers occurred more in features or soft news articles rather than hard news stories.⁴⁵ The person's

disability was also viewed as having a negative impact on the individual's life.⁴⁶ Specifically, the study found that coverage tended to be about physical disabilities and was identified with generic labels such as "handicapped" or "disabled." Keller and Hallahan speculated that the limited representation could produce a skewed picture of disabilities.⁴⁷

While Keller and Hallahan determined their own categories for analyzing disability coverage in daily newspapers, in more recent studies, the categorizing of coverage of disability issues in mainstream media has come from a set of characteristics developed by media scholar John Clogston. In the 1990s Clogston developed three models of media portrayal when he studied articles on disabilities in *The New York Times*. The traditional model presented people with disabilities as malfunctioned in an economic or medical way. Traditional categories are based on a deviance that considers the person with a disability as dysfunctional because he or she is not able to function in an environment designed by and for people without disabilities.⁴⁸ This model includes:

medical and social welfare/economic models of perceptions of disability. These consider persons with disabilities as dysfunctioning in a medical and/or economic way. The traditional perspective assumes that because of an inability (real or perceived) to function in a physical, social and occupational environment designed by and for those without disabilities, those with disabilities are to be cared for (medically and/or economically) by society.⁴⁹

The progressive model viewed people with disabilities as those who have the right and ability to participate in all aspects of society. Articles that are progressive show disability problems as

located in society's failure to accommodate all members of a population. This model included minority or civil rights and "view a disability's limitations as lying not within the individual but in society's inability or unwillingness to adapt its physical, social and occupational environments to accommodate all members of the population."⁵⁰ Thirdly, the "super cripp" model explained how people with disabilities are presented as "superhuman" or "amazing" because they appear to overcome their disabilities and have made physical accomplishments.⁵¹

Haller added to the categories created by Clogston and created the business model where "news media present disabled people and their issues as costly to society and businesses especially."⁵² According to the business model of media presentation, accessibility is not profitable and is not a "good value" for society or businesses.⁵³ The flipside to the business model is the consumer model, which is when media represents people with disabilities as an "untapped consumer model. Making society accessible could be profitable to businesses and society in general. If disabled people have access to jobs, they will have more disposable income. If disabled people have jobs, they will no longer need government assistance."⁵⁴ Haller's other category is the legal model, which refers to the fact that the ADA is a civil rights law. In this media model theme it is illegal to treat people with disabilities in discriminatory ways and, "the ADA is presented as a legal tool to halt discrimination."⁵⁵

Yongjoo Jeon and Donald P. Haider-Markel further explored how the media can impact public policies for people with disabilities in their study entitled "Tracing Issue Definition and Policy Change: An Analysis of Disability Issue Images and Policy." Specifically, the study found that "media attention and tone influenced the number of Congressional hearings and the tone of these hearings."⁵⁶ In this study, the authors examined the 40 years leading up to the passage of the ADA. The study found that the media helped increase attention to the disability

community, which subsequently encouraged new participation in disability-related policy debates. Secondly, the study concluded that the media, “can direct attention by bringing publicity to a particular issue and assist in the construction of an issue’s policy image.”⁵⁷

The existing literature does confirm the longstanding claim by disability advocates that mainstream media has misrepresented or ignored disability issues in past publications. Researchers have developed categories for analyzing major news organizations’ coverage of this social issue. This study seeks to go beyond counting article length and placement and takes a historical approach to examine coverage of key events during this civil rights movement.

History of Disability Coverage in the Media

While researchers have explored more recent coverage of disability issues in mainstream media, this study will examine how publications covered disability issues during the nineteenth century and then will focus on the beginning stages of the Disability Rights Movement. Disability history first received national recognition in 1998 with Laurie Block’s “Beyond Affliction: The Disability History Project” on National Public Radio. The four-part radio series explored the changing attitudes on disabilities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the impact and consequences these opinions had for people with disabilities today. Specifically, Block looked at the nineteenth century idea that people with disabilities should accept their suffering as the will of God. Additionally, she examined the rise of professional institutions and professionals and the notion of who is considered “normal,” as well as looked at the increased number of charities and philanthropic organizations.⁵⁸

Nora Groce explored the ways in which people with cognitive disabilities were viewed during the nineteenth century in “‘The Town Fool:’ An Oral History of a Mentally Retarded Individual in Small Town Society.” While the study focused on one individual, Groce believed

that the examination of Millard Fillmore provided insight into how “mentally retarded” individuals were perceived in other societies.⁵⁹ In most cases as long as the person with the cognitive disability was able to work and be useful he was somewhat accepted in the community. However, in the case of Fillmore, the townspeople did use him as a source of gossip and sometimes the brunt of jokes.⁶⁰ James W. Trent’s *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Mental Retardation in the United States* also explored mental retardation and the rise of institutions as a place to confine and contain people with mental disabilities. Trent contended that the changing meaning of mental retardation “is shaped both by individuals who initiate and administer policies, programs, and practices, and by the social context to which these individuals are responding.”⁶¹ In examining the shift from mental disabilities as a local and family issue to a state and social problem, Trent argued that despite the emphasis on educating those with a mental disability, there was a move toward developing institutions and separating this group in society from others.⁶²

The nineteenth century is regarded as a time of significant medical advancements and social reforms for people with disabilities. During this time of immense change in the ways that people with disabilities were treated and viewed by society, this study first seeks to understand how these disability issues were covered in magazines. In the 1800s the elite led the call for social reform and the development of institutions and schools for people with disabilities, and continued to categorize and define people’s differences.⁶³ Wealthy Protestant men determined who should be separated from the rest of society, and those who were considered dependents had no say in deciding on their proper care. As Peter Hall explained in an interview for National Public Radio’s Disability History Project, in the pre-Civil War period wealthy Protestants had money, but no political power so they created themselves a class by engaging in institutional

building: “the emergence of a national elite, national experts, who presume to make authoritative statements about what’s normal and what’s not, what’s disability and what’s not are the same people who are creating institutions.”⁶⁴ The categorization of groups of certain people referred to in the nineteenth century magazines’ coverage continued. According to Nelson it was not until the middle of the twentieth century that the stigmatizing stereotypes were questioned, yet the damage had already been done and “in the media-in books, in dramas, in the early films-the negative, stigmatizing portrayals persevered.”⁶⁵

As Patricia L. Gibbs and James Hamilton explained, historical perspectives are sometimes needed in order to take account of the “formative power of historical conditions.”⁶⁶ Furthermore, “neglecting these contexts or simply adding them as the synoptic, obligatory ‘historical background’ prior to the ‘real’ study obscures these active, formative relationships and the ways they enable or disable such efforts.”⁶⁷ Little research has been done to understand how disabilities were portrayed in the press historically and throughout the beginning stages of the Disability Rights Movement.

The ways in which the media covered disability previously still persuade public opinion as well as contribute to the characterization of people with disabilities even today. Similar to how past media coverage of African American women was stereotypical and contributed to their future portrayals in the press, the stereotypical images of people with disabilities were carried on through the years in media coverage.⁶⁸ Carolyn Kitch’s examination of the images of women in mass media categorized such historical research into the stereotypical approach, the search for alternative images, the examination of imagery as ideology and the “reading” of images as polysemous texts.⁶⁹ Kitch referred to Patricia Hill Collins’ argument that the recurring media stereotypes of African American women, “historically formed a framework for controlling black

women.”⁷⁰ Representations of African Americans and women added to our understanding about modern issues of race and gender. While the historical portrayal of other alternative groups such as women and African Americans in society have been studied from a historical perspective, the media’s past coverage of disabilities has yet to be fully explored. For that reason, this study first looks back to an earlier era to seek to understand how mainstream media in the nineteenth century portrayed people with disabilities.

Otherness

It is beneficial to consider how the media have portrayed marginalized groups in society. Catherine Kudlick explains in “Disability History: Why We Need Another ‘Other’” that the fields for studying race, gender and sexuality have given disability historians “valuable analytical and theoretical tools for exploring this new Other.”⁷¹ The notion of Otherness is explained as the representation of those people who depart from the dominant and social norm.⁷² The media’s construction of one group’s identity, such as the case of those members of the disability community, can lead to negative, misrepresentative stereotyping. Henry J. Steadman and Joseph J. Cocozza explain in “Selective Reporting and the Public’s Misconceptions of the Criminally Insane,” that the media often distort information about people with mental illnesses.⁷³ Their study examines how the distortion in media about the mentally ill results from “an overemphasis on the bizarre symptoms of mental illness which actually occur infrequently.”⁷⁴

The Other represented in media is oftentimes exploited or stereotyped, “showing the Other to be an expression of an inferior, if feared and repressed, self.”⁷⁵ Specifically, Steadman and Cocozza gathered data on the public’s perception of the criminally insane and whom the public thought constituted being insane. The response revealed that the public’s views were “heavily stereotyped” and suggested high levels of fear.⁷⁶ Additionally, the public’s fear of the

criminally insane was a result of unpredictability and the danger the insane were perceived to present.⁷⁷

Another study that looks at the media's portrayal of mental illness and also alluded to the media's power at shaping public opinion about groups that differ from the norm is Riley Olstead's study entitled, "Contesting the text: Canadian media depictions of the conflation of mental illness and criminally."⁷⁸ Olstead's study examined "how exactly the press is involved in the continuity of the system of power around mental illness."⁷⁹ Similar to the common stereotypes Nelson developed about fearing people with a disability and viewing them as hopeless and burdens to society, Olstead's study found that those with mental illnesses are most often portrayed as "having no specified occupation, no specific age, no family connections, unspecified marital status, and therefore, no social identity."⁸⁰

Of all the negative representations about the mentally ill, Olstead found that the lack in markers of social identity was the most implicit: "The portrayal of one-dimensional characters supports the depiction of a 'subhuman group, within which individual distinctions are difficult to ascertain."⁸¹ Mental illness was the defining factor in describing the person and as Olstead explains, "in some cases, this master status is conflated with portrayals of other stigmatized groups, which serves to underline that mentally ill people are fundamentally different from others."⁸²

As Russell Ferguson explains, a problem with the concept of Otherness in relation to media representation is that "characteristics are thus attributed to certain groups which are apparently timeless and frequently demeaning."⁸³ Understanding the media perceptions of people with disabilities is "important in assessing how social tropes are created and maintained by media depictions, particularly when those depictions have negative social consequences."⁸⁴ By

studying both the historical coverage of disabilities in the nineteenth century as well as the twentieth century this study is able to make comparisons about the stereotypes and representations of this Other group in two different time periods.

Media's Influence on Society's Views about Disabilities

Nelson looked at the media's influence in shaping the disability community and the ways in which the public viewed disabilities. He reveals how in the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century negative, stigmatizing depictions of the disability community "served to increase the negative effect of their disabilities and enlarge their sense of powerlessness and dependence. This frequently placed the disabled person in the position of needing help while resenting the helper."⁸⁵ Yet, Nelson explains that by the time of World War II the media realized that some groups of citizens were being denied rights, and that the press coverage about civil rights abuses increased. At the same time, the media, which "were instrumental in building and maintaining public attitudes" also realized that other minority groups, including those with disabilities, were being misrepresented and ignored."⁸⁶ Nelson referred to Gerbner's cultivation theory of television, which said that much of the world views that Americans have come from television exposure. With this theory in mind, Nelson makes the assumption that "the portrayals of those with disabilities seen in stereotyped roles on the screen have a lasting impression on the psyche that is carried over into one's daily attitudes."⁸⁷ Studying the ways in which the media covered issues of disability in the past will help in understanding the twentieth century and current coverage, in terms of the ways in which stereotypes are used, the public's perception of people with disabilities, and how disability issues are ignored or misrepresented.

Objective

Based on the lack of existing research on how disabilities were covered in the past, this study will provide a historical perspective about how disability issues were portrayed. The first part of the study provides an overview of how magazines covered disabilities during the nineteenth century. Myriad studies have taken a historical look at the press content in the era before the Women's Rights Movement and the Civil Rights Movement; yet, little exists that examines the time period before the Disability Rights Movement. Studying the historical context before the beginning of the Disability Rights Movement will help in understanding how disability coverage evolved and changed. Magazines were the chosen medium for the nineteenth century coverage because the articles provided a broad look at the century and reflected the societal views. This historical overview of the nineteenth century coverage of disabilities lays the groundwork for a close analysis of coverage of disability issues during the twentieth century. The examination of newspapers' coverage in the twentieth century will look specifically at significant events during the Disability Rights Movement. Newspapers were chosen for this part of the analysis because event coverage is better suited for newspapers rather than magazines.

Research Procedure

As an overall research question this study asks: How did print media report on disability issues throughout American history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?

Research Question 1: How were disability issues portrayed in magazines during the nineteenth century?

RQ2: How did newspapers cover the protests and sit-ins surrounding the enactment of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973?

RQ3: How was the passing of The Americans With Disability Act reported in newspapers?

RQ1 is concerned with looking back into an earlier era to better understand how disabilities were written about and explained to the public. Understanding the portrayal of disabilities in the nineteenth century is essential for the exploration of the twentieth century media coverage.

With respect to RQ2 and RQ3, exploring articles about the 1977 and 1990 disability activists' protests will allow for comparisons of the newspaper coverage during two different decades and legislative pieces. In a broader sense, this study will provide the background for future research that looks at whether the coverage of the Disability Rights Movement during its infancy impacted the ways in which the movement is covered today. At best, coverage on disability issues promotes awareness and knowledge about the disability community and the Disability Rights Movement, but at its worse, the coverage can perpetuate the existing stereotypes about disabilities.

Sources of Evidence

Specifically, this study will examine mainstream magazine coverage of disabilities issues during the 1800s in reference to the social and philanthropic reforms taking place, the rise in number of people diagnosed with having a cognitive disability or illness, and the change in public opinion about disabilities. While this study does not focus exclusively on either physical or mental disabilities, the time period during the study impacted whether more focus was on physical or cognitive disabilities. For instance, in the nineteenth century less coverage was found about physical disabilities, part of this coming from the fact that most people with physical disabilities, such as spinal cord injuries did not survive until the 1920s. Even after the Civil War produced large numbers of soldiers with physical disabilities the emphasis remained on cognitive disabilities or mental illness in magazines, in part because as long as the soldiers could still do

some type of work their disability was not considered stigmatizing.⁸⁸ In the twentieth century more emphasis was placed on physical disabilities, in part because the groups protesting and receiving media attention were often organizations for people with physical disabilities.

Secondly, the study explores news coverage in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* regarding the enactment of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. *The Washington Post* was chosen because of the proximity to the legislative acts taking place and the subsequent protests. *The New York Times* was used because of its prominence and for its highly regarded reputation for covering news that impacts a large number of people nationally. During the protests in 1977 and 1990 newspapers placed more emphasis on physical disabilities. One reason for the focus on physical disabilities was because centers for independent living, which spearheaded much of the disability rights movement “offered little to people with mental retardation [and] people with retardation were not immediately included in the larger movement.”⁸⁹ Furthermore, as Suzanne C. Levine, the founder and executive director of the Disability Media Project, noted reporters often sought to talk to someone most like them instead of a person that was “not pretty enough or is drooling or can’t speak clearly.”⁹⁰

In 1977 the protests by disability advocates took place against the Secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Joseph Califano. Califano refused to put into law Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.⁹¹ The issuance of the final regulations was stalled after it was realized that the compliance of Section 504 would cost billions of dollars.⁹² Califano was in the process of writing new regulations for Section 504 when members of the American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities led a group of demonstrators on April 3, 1977. The demonstrators protested outside Califano’s house and demanded he sign the regulations. Two days later, a staged demonstration took place in Washington and 300 people remained overnight

at Califano's office. The Washington sit-in ended when demonstrators were refused food, water and telephone communication. However, a similar sit-in took place in San Francisco at the same time and demonstrators occupied the regional HEW office.⁹³ The protest lasted 25 days and garnered national attention.⁹⁴

Another component of this study is the examination of newspaper coverage of the ADA legislation. While regulations from Section 504 began the process of integration for people with disabilities, it had not been enough to end isolation based on having a disability. Disability advocates, many of whom were still restricted from mainstream locations such as grocery stores, movie theatres and restaurants, realized their biggest problem was discrimination.⁹⁵ The ADA first garnered media attention in March 1990 when a "crawl-in" took place at the U.S. Capitol.⁹⁶ At the disability rights lobbying event activists fought to bring attention and public discourse to the ADA, which had not received attention by Congress. In a dramatic protest, activists left their wheelchairs and crawled up the Capitol steps, hoping to receive coverage by the media.⁹⁷

Although the Disability Rights Movement had, until this point, been largely invisible, the "crawl-in" received attention from the media and during legislative talks about the ADA, the movement gained support from public figures.⁹⁸ The support of the coalition of people with disabilities, their families, friends, physicians, politicians and disability professionals aided in the ADA moving quickly through Congress.⁹⁹ On June 26, 1990 the ADA was signed into law and in 1992 the law took effect signaling an earthshaking victory for people with disabilities.¹⁰⁰ Examining *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, this study will look at the coverage of the protests, marches and "crawl-ins" at the Capitol during legislative discussions about the ADA.¹⁰¹

Data Collection and Analysis

Magazine and newspaper articles for this study will be examined to determine emerging and common themes. The disability terminology used for the searches were found in medical journals, dictionaries and publications written about disabilities in the nineteenth century.¹⁰² Searching for magazine articles that used the disability terminology of the time, which included the terms feeble, mentally deficient, mentally defective, affliction, weak, disabled, cripple, idiot, insane and lame, articles were found in Readers' Guide Retrospective Index and Poole's Plus Index. Magazines were the chosen medium for this part of the study based on the lack of existing research on magazines' coverage of disabilities, as well as because of the popularity and prominence of magazines during the nineteenth century. Thirty-four articles ranging from 1847-1899 will be analyzed to determine common emerging themes and changes in the ways disabilities were covered throughout the century.

The newspaper articles examined during the 1977 and 1990 coverage of pivotal and defining moments for the Disability Rights Movement were found using the Historical Index for *The Washington Post* and the Historical Index for *The New York Times*. Search terms for the 1977 protests include Califano, handicapped, protest, HEW and disabled. Articles of the 1977 protests yielded 45 articles. Search terms for the 1990 coverage included the Americans With Disabilities Act, crawl-in, disabled and handicapped. The 1990 protests included 55 articles. Taking a narrative approach in its methodology this study will place emphasis on interpretive research in order to examine similar and emerging themes in disability coverage.

Chapter two focuses on the nineteenth century magazine coverage of disability issues between 1847 and 1899. Chapter three deals with the protests surrounding the enactment of Section 504 and chapter four looks at the coverage of the passing of the ADA. And finally,

chapter five discusses the findings and examines any comparisons and similarities between the disability coverage throughout the various time periods studied.

Notes

¹ Joseph P. Shapiro, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1993), 41.

² *Ibid.*, 45.

³ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵ Jack Nelson, "The Media Role in Building the Disability Community," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 15:3 (2000), 5.

⁶ Nelson, 5.

⁷ Henry McCarthy, "The Disability Rights Movement: Experiences and Perspectives of Selected Leaders in the Disability Community," *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin* 46:4 (2003):209.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹ U.S. Department of Commerce. March 2003. Bureau of the Census.
<<http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/cskbr-17.pdf>>.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Commerce. December 1997. Bureau of the Census. "Disabilities Affect One-Fifth of All Americans." <http://www.census.gov/prod/3/97_pubs/cenbre975.pdf>.

¹¹ Clayton E. Keller and Daniel P. Hallahan, "The Coverage of Persons With Disabilities In American Newspapers," *Journal of Special Education*, 24:3 (1990), 271.

¹² Olan Farnall and Kim A. Smith, "Reactions to People with Disabilities: Personal Contact versus Viewing of Specific Media Portrayals," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 76:4 (Winter 1999), 660.

¹³ Nelson, 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

²² *Ibid.*, 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁵ Ruth Torkelson Lynch, Kelli Thuli, Laurie Groombridge, "Person-first Disability Language: A Pilot Analysis of Public Perceptions," *Journal of Rehabilitation* (April/May/June 1994): 18.

²⁶ W. Drew Gouvier and Robert C. Coon, "Misconceptions, Discrimination, and Disabling Language: Synthesis and Review," *Applied Neuropsychology* 9:1 (2002): 49.

²⁷ Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁹ Lynch., 19.

³⁰ Nelson, 7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

³² *Ibid.*, 5.

³³ Shapiro, 65.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴⁰ Renee A. Middleton, "The Historical and Political Context of the Civil Rights of Persons With Disabilities: A Multicultural Perspective for Counselors," *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 27:2 (1999): 105.

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- ⁴¹ Joseph P. Shapiro, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1993). 106.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 11.
- ⁴³ Beth Haller, "Crawling toward Civil Rights: A Qualitative Study of Media Coverage of Disability Activism" at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication annual meeting, Atlanta, Ga. August 1994: 497.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 497.
- ⁴⁵ Clayton E. Keller and Daniel P. Hallahan, 271-272.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 272.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 271.
- ⁴⁸ John Clogston, "Fifty years of disability coverage in the New York Times." Paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Montreal, Quebec 1992: 510.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 512.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 512.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 512.
- ⁵² Haller, "Crawling," 482.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 482.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 483.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 484.
- ⁵⁶ Yongjoo Jeon and Donald P. Haider-Markel, "Tracing Issue Definition and Policy Change: An Analysis of Disability Issue Images and Policy," *Policy Studies Journal* 29:2 (2001): 1.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ⁵⁸ "Laurie Block, National Public Radio, "Beyond Affliction: The Disability History Project," National Public Radio 1998, <<http://www.npr.org/programs/disability/index.htm>>.
- ⁵⁹ Nora Groce, "'The Town Fool:'" An Oral History of a Mentally Retarded Individual in Small Town Society," in *Interpreting Disability: A Qualitative Reader*, (eds) P.M. Ferguson, D.L. Ferguson, S.J. Taylor, (1992) New York: Teachers College Press, 175.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 192.
- ⁶¹ James R. Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Mental Retardation in the United States*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 2.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 2-3.
- ⁶³ Laurie Block, "Beyond Affliction: The Disability History Project."
- ⁶⁴ Block, "Beyond Affliction: The Disability History Project."
- ⁶⁵ Nelson 2, 4.
- ⁶⁶ Patricia L. Gibbs and James Hamilton, "Alternative Media in Media History," *Media History* 7:2 (2001): 117.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.
- ⁶⁸ Caroline Kitch, "Changing Theoretical Perspectives on Women's Media Images: The Emergence of Patterns in a New Area of Historical Scholarship," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 74:3 (Autumn 1997): 477.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 480.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 480.
- ⁷¹ Catherine Kudlick, "Disability History: Why We Need Another 'Other,'" *American Historical Review* (June 2003): 763-764.
- ⁷² Peter Brooker, *A Glossary of Cultural Theory, 2nd Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc, 2003), 184.
- ⁷³ Henry J. Steadman and Joseph J. Coccozza, "Selective Reporting and the Public's Misconceptions of the Criminally Insane," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 41(1977-78): 523.
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 523.
- ⁷⁵ Brooker, 184.
- ⁷⁶ Steadman., 524.
- ⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 532.
- ⁷⁸ Riley Olstead, "Contesting the text: Canadian media depictions of the conflation of mental illness and criminality," *Sociology of Health and Illness* 24:5 (2002): 622.
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 622.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 625.
- ⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 625.

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- ⁸² Ibid., 525.
- ⁸³ R. Ferguson, "Otherness, Eurocentrism and the representation of 'race,'" in *Representing Race: Ideology, Identity, and the Media*. (London: Arnold, 1998), 69.
- ⁸⁴ Olstead, 622.
- ⁸⁵ Nelson, 3.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid., 4.
- ⁸⁷ Nelson, 4.
- ⁸⁸ Beth Haller. Personal Correspondence. August 14, 2005.
- ⁸⁹ Shapiro, 198.
- ⁹⁰ Suzanne C. Levine, "Reporting on Disability," <<http://www.media-alliance.org>>, May 14, 2004.
- ⁹¹ Shapiro., 65.
- ⁹² Ibid., 66.
- ⁹³ Ibid., 66.
- ⁹⁴ Ibid., 68.
- ⁹⁵ Ibid., 106.
- ⁹⁶ Haller, "Crawling," 478.
- ⁹⁷ Ibid., 486.
- ⁹⁸ Ibid., 118.
- ⁹⁹ Shapiro, 140.
- ¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 140.
- ¹⁰¹ Ibid., 133.
- ¹⁰² Trent, 5.
- Webster National Pictorial Dictionary, 3rd ed., 1873.

CHAPTER 2

OBJECTS OF PITY: MAGAZINE PORTRAYALS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN THE 19TH CENTURY

“The possibility of improving the condition of the idiot is one of those discoveries that will make the nineteenth century remarkable in the annals of the future for its philanthropic spirit,” wrote *Atlantic Monthly* in 1858.¹ Almost 150 years later, the nineteenth century is still regarded as a time of significant medical advancements and social reforms for people with disabilities. Yet, this philanthropic movement did not come without some negative consequences, as the stigma attached to those different from the rest of society became a justification for separation and isolation. During this time of immense change in the ways that society regarded and treated people with disabilities, this study seeks to understand how people with disabilities were covered in magazines.

The terms used to describe disabilities in the 1800s provide insight into the public’s attitudes. However, it is important to keep in mind that words used then had different connotations than today’s meanings, which are often considered offensive. This study uses the terms of the time in referring to disabilities as “they reveal in their honesty the sensibilities of the people who used them and the meanings they attached,” according to James Trent.² Nineteenth century descriptors of people with disabilities included words such as feeble, affliction, deficient, defective, lame, insane, imbecile and idiot.³ The terms searched were determined from conversations with disability scholars and from studying a nineteenth century dictionary. Until the mid nineteenth century, the terms idiot and insane were often used interchangeably and a

distinction was not made between the two mental disorders. The term “affliction” was most commonly used in the beginning of the century as it related to the Christian belief that God had afflicted certain people with disabilities in order to teach patience, trust and faith.⁴ By the late nineteenth century this terminology had changed and the word handicap came into use. This term evolved from a game called “Hand in Cap” and the phrase “handicapped in the race of life” referred to being handicapped as a struggle and an emphasis on overcoming and conquering.⁵

This chapter examines American magazine articles found in *Readers’ Guide Retrospective Index* and *Poole’s Plus Index* using disability terminology of the nineteenth century. Magazines were the chosen medium based on the lack of existing research on magazines’ coverage of disabilities, as well as the popularity and prominence of magazines during the era. Thirty-four articles ranging from 1847-1899 were analyzed to determine common emerging themes and changes in the ways disabilities were covered.⁶ From this qualitative analysis four themes emerged about the magazines’ coverage of disabilities, which included the shift of portraying insanity and idiocy as a moral flaw to a medical disease; the idea that idiots and the insane were pitiable and hopeless creatures; the rise in the public’s concern for dependents; and the emphasis on the need to separate those different and abnormal from the rest of society.

A significant number of the articles analyzed dealt with issues of idiocy and insanity, although some articles made reference to physical disabilities as well as including lameness, paralysis and physical deformities. Increased emphasis was placed on physical disabilities following the end of the Civil War, which produced more wounded soldiers than any other war in American history, yet even this coverage was limited in the magazine articles studied in this

analysis.⁷ Still, disabled veterans became a subject of public concern in terms of the development of soldiers' homes and the integration of these men back into the community.⁸

From a Moral Flaw to a Medical Disease

For much of the early nineteenth century people with disabilities were portrayed in mainstream magazines as either possessing some type of moral flaw or being a manifestation of evil. Regarded either with superstitious awe or abhorrence, in the case of idiots and the insane *Littell's Living Age* wrote, "Luther would fain have had one put to death as a monster filled with Satanic possession."⁹ As an 1894 article in *Popular Science Monthly* explained about the previous belief in insanity, "the mind was a special endowment, bestowed by the Creator upon man...a will was also given to man, by which he was allowed a sort of freedom to choose as to whether he should allow the Creator to control his mind, or whether he should allow the management of it to an opposing power or Satan."¹⁰ At the same time that people with disabilities were thought to possess evil spirits, the idea also existed that these people were suffering by the will of God. This belief that God made some people suffer a disorder in order to teach humbleness and patience was attributed to the American Sunday School Movement, which took place at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and instructed children to suffer in their ailment without complaint.¹¹ One of the most striking patterns found in this study was how articles explained the origins of disabilities. While science contributed to the shift in thinking of insanity and idiocy from a moral flaw to a medical disorder, many articles still made reference to the longstanding belief of the manifestation of evil on the people with mental disorders.

The puzzlement that first existed in some of the earlier articles on the causes of idiocy and insanity eventually gave way to more comprehensive and developed medical information about the disorders. During this time modern science was gaining ground in the United States as

the Smithsonian Institution was founded in 1846 and in 1876 Johns Hopkins University opened.¹² An 1857 article entitled “Idiots” acknowledged that the causes of idiocy were not yet understood and all that was known about the origin of the disorder was that idiocy “sometimes developed during the progress of detention, and that it would seem to be generally associated with mental suffering, fright, or anxiety, or with a latent want of power, in the mother.”¹³ Likewise, an article on insanity said that unlike other diseases, the insane may never be fully understood because insanity is “said to possess more of a psychological than a physiological character.”¹⁴ Another view on the causes of insanity referred to early childhood experiences. In an article written about an insane man it was speculated that the origins of his, as well as others, incurable mental diseases “may be clearly traced to the badly organized school, and to the criminal and cruel negligence of those whose solemn duty it is to guard the tender minds of the youth placed under their care from vicious habits and moral pollution.”¹⁵ The article cautioned society about its responsibility for caring for children’s education in order to prevent mental disorders. Despite the varying explanations given for the development of insanity or idiocy, in each of the articles the reasons provided had moved from being afflictions of evil or the will of God to being attributed to medical causes or negligent care.

One problem that arose in the shift from believing insanity to be a moral flaw to a medical disease was in the treatment of insane criminals. The responsibility of the criminally insane became a debatable topic as science indicated more often “the great influence of hereditary and early surroundings in moulding the whole nature of man’s intelligence and will.”¹⁶ An article in *The Arena* entitled “The Criminal Responsibility of the Insane: With Special Reference to the Case of Eugene Burt,” discussed the conflict between people’s conception of mental disease and whether it is looked at from a medical or legal standpoint.¹⁷ As

the author explained, “A person may be insane medically, yet not in the eye of the law. It is for the jury or experts to determine the fact of insanity; the courts to determine the effects on civil rights.”¹⁸ The article differentiated between insanity in medicine, which referred to “a prolonged departure of the individual from his natural mental state, arising from bodily disease” and insanity in law which looked at “whether there was mental capacity and moral freedom to do, or abstain from doing, that particular act.”¹⁹ Particularly, insanity in law referred to a “permanently disordered state of the mind, produced by disease, and beyond the control of the individual.”²⁰ Articles questioned whether one’s mental state relieved him from punishment for criminal actions, and if it did, then the debate evolved to what should be done to care for insane criminals.

More often in the discussion of idiots and the insane, attention turned to understanding the medical implications of the disorder. Images and explanations of the workings of the brain and classifications of idiocy and insanity accompanied articles written on the subject.²¹ Along with the change in the understanding about these disorders eventually came an adjustment in the terminology used. References to the insane as madmen, criminals and lunatics diminished and the insane were instead referred to as sick people. To conform to the new understandings of insanity, the name of state institutions also changed from lunatic asylums, which represented a place of refuge, to state hospitals, a name that referred to a place of care.²² Still, despite the significant transformation in how the origins of mental disorders were viewed, these changes were not always reflected in how the media portrayed and described this group of people.

Idiots and Lunatics as Pitiably and Hopeless Creatures

Another noteworthy pattern discovered in these nineteenth-century articles was how magazines discussed idiots and the insane as people to be pitied. Specifically, articles focused on the idea that idiots and the insane were pathetic people who lived a saddened life in the

deplorable conditions of many of the institutions. As one article explained, “idiocy is unquestionably one of the most fearful of the host of maladies, which pass like gloomy shadows over the brightest sports of human civilization.”²³ Much discussion in the articles centered on the authors’ feelings of sadness and hopelessness for the idiots they encountered. In an article entitled “The Lunatic Asylum” in *Littell’s Living Age* in 1847, the author recounted how “feelings of repugnance and pity froze my heart, and made my hair stand on end. I longed to finish this sad visit, and to get out of this painful abode.”²⁴ Not only did the article associate the asylum and its patients as places and people of despair, but the author had a pitiable admiration for the asylum workers as well. While he praised the workers for helping these dependents, he also mentioned the workers’ “countenance deep melancholy.”²⁵ The perception of idiots and the insane as objects of pity was not only limited to patients in asylums and institutions, but this association was carried on to those living in the community.

In the mid 1800s some magazine articles placed emphasis on defining the idiot and the insane and offering comparisons between them by giving physical descriptions of their characteristics. One such article, in *Littell’s Living Age*, began the piece “Idiots” by comparing the similarities in the definition of the idiot in various countries. In France the idiot referred to “a vacant creature, all in rags, gibbering and blinking in the sun, with a distorted face.”²⁶ In Switzerland the idiot was considered a “horrible being...of stunted and misshapen form.”²⁷ While the perceptions of the idiot varied slightly, the author noted that in each country the:

idiot would be of a hopeless, irreclaimable, unimprovable being.

And if he be further recalled as under restraint in a workhouse or

lunatic asylum he will still come upon the imagination in

wallowing in the lowest depths of degradation and neglect: a

miserable monster, who nobody may put to death, but whom everyone must wish dead, and be distressed to be alive.²⁸

Along with the notion of pitying the person with a disability, articles also made mention of the sorrow it brought to parents. One such article noted how the case of one boy, who was blind and mute, was “more sad, from the fact of his being an only child, long wished for by his parents.”²⁹

While the notion of pity continued throughout the century in articles written on idiots—and as some disability advocates would argue, still continues today in media coverage—there was a change in the belief that idiots were utterly helpless. “Influence of Music on Idiots” made reference to this change in thinking about the hopelessness of idiots.³⁰ At the time, the work being done to educate idiots was considered a “triumph of humanity.”³¹ In fact, the article’s first sentence alluded to this shift in thinking that the conditions of idiots could improve with education and music: “even those forlorn beings who mope in corners, apparently insensible to every outward impression, can be roused from their stone-like immobility, and a new life infused into them by the harmony of sweet sounds.”³² With music, the article asserted that idiots made progress with reading, writing and drawing.³³

In 1858 *Atlantic Monthly* wrote that the philanthropic movement of helping dependents was deserving of much praise for improving the condition of cretins and idiots who were “until recently considered as beyond the reach of curative treatment.”³⁴ The article further explained, “idiots have existed in all ages, and have commonly vegetated through life in either wretchedness or degrading filth, concealed from public view.”³⁵ Yet, at the same time that the article acknowledged the opportunity for improvement, the characteristics of the idiot and cretin that had been used in past years to describe their status in society remained the same. Instead of explaining the improvement with praise to the idiot, the acknowledgement was only given to the

educators and reformers. The characteristics of the idiot remained unchanged, as illustrated in how the article explained the cretin in terms of animal characteristics: “In intelligence he is far below the horse, the frog, the monkey, or even the swine; the only instincts of his nature are hunger and lust, and even these are fitful and irregular.”³⁶ Not only was the intelligence of idiots compared to animals, but their actions were juxtaposed to having animal instincts. These observations of an idiot as someone with nonhuman characteristics eventually formed the basis for the method of educating idiots.³⁷ In addition to references to idiots as possessing skills and abilities lesser than that of an animal, by some, it was believed that idiots possessed no human qualities at all. In 1865 an article in *Littell’s Living Age* referenced a physician who said “it would be hardly possible to find such a being in human shape, little above a sensitive plant, fashioned externally as man, but shorn of all other human attributes.”³⁸

Another compelling aspect on the notion of pity was that insane asylum patients authored several articles about insanity. In these cases, even the former patients made reference to their sad and miserable situation. In “Autobiography of the Insane” a former patient discussed when he was in an asylum as a young child “every hope of recovery was long banished.”³⁹ The author of an article written in *Harper’s New Monthly* magazine described in the introduction that he had the “misfortune” to be a patient at Blackwell’s Island Lunatic Asylum.⁴⁰ Similarly, in an article entitled “Insanity By One Who Has Been Insane” in *Popular Science Monthly* the author, who considered himself recovered, made reference to other patients in “hopeless helpless conditions.”⁴¹

Even in the later half of the century articles still referred to the insane as “a class one would willingly forget.”⁴² By 1893 when an article in *Popular Science Monthly* acknowledged the need to treat the insane as sick people rather than madmen, the article made mention of how

the insane were “thought the saddest affliction which can befall mankind.”⁴³ *Overland Monthly* also referred to the insane asylums as being “like a ruined temple, where the moonlight plays on broken arches and crumbling walls...In fact, it is a sepulcher of living dead, a monument of ruined hopes and saddened lives.”⁴⁴ The article told readers that if they had never before been thankful for unimpaired mental health they would after visiting an insane asylum.⁴⁵

Both the insane and idiots were regarded by most of the authors of the magazine articles as people who lived saddened lives. Many of the ideas of pity came from the authors visiting the institutions and viewing the deplorable conditions firsthand, and from the belief that the insane represented “darkened homes and broken hearts...many tears and never healing wounds...many lives of possible usefulness lost to the State and society.”⁴⁶ Idiots were regarded with similar pity as they too were expected to have minimal lives. To most people, the insane and idiots were considered to be a burden to society. Yet, at the same time the insane and idiots were regarded with pity, there was also a heightened resolve from the public that these dependents should receive care.

Growing Concern For Caring For Dependents

The rising numbers of people who suffered from feeble-mindedness and insanity caused concern for the public and had a tremendous impact on the insistence for social reforms. Beginning in 1840 the United States Census Bureau started collecting data on the insane and feeble-minded, but the results of the findings were questioned because it only referred to institutionalized people.⁴⁷ Still, the numbers from the census showed enormous increases in people considered idiots or insane. Census results on the insane revealed that in 1850 the number of insane equaled 15,610. By 1880 that number had increased to 91,994. Taking into account the

population increase of the United States, an article in *Popular Science Monthly* determined that the population of the insane had increased to an alarming 155 percent from 1870-1880.⁴⁸

An insistence for accurate numbers also resulted in a report in 1881 entitled *The Defective, Dependent and Delinquent Classes of the Population of the United States*, which revealed that the rate of feeble-mindedness was 153.3 per 100,000 people, an increase of two and one-half times the 1870 rate.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the data confirmed that a large number of feeble-minded people were not receiving proper care. As the numbers of people who were considered feeble-minded or insane increased—by the late 1880s it was estimated that one in five hundred Americans was feeble-minded—it confirmed to the public that reforms must be made to help with the burden of the caring for dependents. The public was told that feeble-minded people were burdens to society and without intervention the problems would increase and exacerbate.⁵⁰ It was believed that the only way to alleviate the problems caused by idiots was to develop more institutional care.

Among the numerous philanthropic movements, improving the case for idiots and the insane was regarded with the highest concern.⁵¹ Some of the first articles written about the care of idiots and the insane appeared in *Littell's Living Age*, which discussed schools for idiots and asylums for the insane. Credit was also given to the work already being done to help the idiots. As *Littell's Living Age* wrote, “there never was a greater triumph of humanity, than the success which has already attended the efforts made to improve the condition of idiots, a condition which had hitherto been considered utterly hopeless.”⁵² Detailed descriptions of the facilities, daily tasks and patients were provided for the reader to help in the understanding of the function of these institutions. Stories were relayed about individual idiots, who with the guidance of teachers and special schools, made remarkable improvements.⁵³ For the most part, the articles written in the

1840s and 1850s detailing schools and institutions for idiots did not emphasize the need to separate them from society, but rather the accomplishments and advancements of the pupil were highlighted.

The shift in thinking about idiocy and insanity as a moral affliction to a medical disease contributed to the increase in state assistance for dependents. By the late nineteenth century myriad articles existed that explained the duty of the state to help the insane and feeble-minded. An 1893 article in *Popular Science Monthly* discussed the need to provide for the insane because “it is thought the saddest affliction which can befall mankind, that it affects all grades of society, that three out of every thousand are its victims, [which] makes the consideration of the care of the insane from the purely scientific, the philanthropic, or the economic standpoint, a subject worthy of the most serious thought and of the deepest interest to all.”⁵⁴ According to the author of the article, the state believed that developing institutions, asylums and special schools for the insane and idiots was the only way in which to assist their case. The philanthropic work that had already been established proved “that the State cares for even the most unfortunate of her children, and seeks to soften as much as possible their sad lot.”⁵⁵ While the state’s intentions appeared well meaning on the surface, in actuality, the increase in institutions and specialized schools contributed to further separation of people with disabilities from others—a concern still prevalent with disability advocates today.

Separating the Abnormal from the Normal

“Partly with charitable purpose, partly with selfish purpose, to provide a place of confinement for the lunatics, whom it was not safe to leave loose in the streets of London, abundant funds were raised,” explained an article written about the construction of an insane asylum in 1675.⁵⁶ While this article in *Littell’s Living Age* was written 182 years later, the same

reasons for building asylums still held true. During the nineteenth century idiots and the insane were regarded as being different from the rest of society and were considered abnormal. “The welfare of the patient, the safety and comfort of the community, and the amount of expense to be incurred,” were all reasons for the creation of institutions and separate schools.⁵⁷ Magazine articles written during this time consistently referred to the differences between idiots and the insane and the rest of society. As a result of the physical and mental differences found, the insane and idiots became outcasts from the rest of the population. Public speculation also occurred about what measures should be taken to care for and deal with these abnormal people.

Especially in the realms of education, there existed a general belief that idiots should be segregated from other students. An article in *Education* expressed the need for separation by explaining that feeble-minded students detracted from the education of normal students. In fact, Henry Lincoln Clapp, of Master George Putnam School in Boston cited numerous examples in “Special Schools for Feeble-Minded Children,” about how some feeble-minded students “were unfit to be associated with decent, normal children.”⁵⁸ In one instance, Clapp referred to a girl “who was so incorrigible that the teacher, who was strong in discipline, could not conduct recitations without putting the girl out of sight of the class.”⁵⁹ He further explained that the benefit of the girl attending a regular school “amounted to almost nothing in comparison with the intolerable burden imposed upon the teacher and the injury done to the class by the presence of the girl.”⁶⁰

After providing the reader with multiple instances of the harm feeble-minded students in regular classrooms caused normal students, Clapp suggested that every large city should develop special schools to educate the feeble-minded.⁶¹ Clapp concluded with a plea for the development of special schools in order to lift the burden from regular public schools, educate the feeble-

minded to become happy and self-supporting and save them from penitentiaries and jail, which would cost more money in the long run for the next generation.⁶² While Clapp stressed the point that special schools would be more beneficial in helping educate the feeble-minded, it should not be overlooked that another major emphasis for his argument on developing special schools was because of his belief in the harm feeble-minded students caused to normal students. The insistence that the feeble-minded could only be educated in special schools reflected the common idea to separate those people who were unlike the rest of the public.

While some articles highlighted the abnormal behaviors and characteristics of the insane and idiots, other articles disputed, to some extent, these differences. Because of the longstanding belief that people with disabilities were unlike others, the authors of several magazine articles who spent time visiting an institution or an asylum would often acknowledge in disbelief some of the “normal” actions of the patients. In an article from 1847 for instance, the author referred to her disbelief in seeing the idiots playing as they had, “a greater capacity for playful enjoyment than I could have supposed them capable of.”⁶³ Similarly, an article entitled “Was He An Idiot?” questioned how one man who could not count beyond five or six, could “tell the dominical letter for any year past or future that might be named.”⁶⁴ While the author wondered whether or not the man with unusual mathematical abilities was an idiot, twelve years later *Popular Science Monthly* devoted an entire article to explaining these exceptional intellectual characteristics as those of idiot savants. “Idiot Savants” explained the special aptitudes exhibited in some idiots as being, “always out of proportion to their intellectual development in other direction, and often remarkable as compared with similar accomplishments or faculties in normal individuals.”⁶⁵ Again in this article, as was also found in other articles, the author expressed disbelief that the abnormal were able to possess remarkable talents and intellect. However, despite finding that

some idiots exhibited unique aptitudes, the general thinking that they should be separated from the rest of society remained.

Sometimes the insistence for the separation of the insane played off people's fear that the insane were violent and dangerous. References to insane asylums did not mention the positive changes found in the patients, as was the case in articles about idiots. Rather, the articles on the insane detailed the helpless and hopeless patients' lives and often times made mention of a patient's violent insanity.⁶⁶ This fear of the insane eventually became one justification for why people who experienced insanity should be placed into an asylum.

By the late nineteenth century, extreme examples of the insane experiencing fits and rages or murdering their entire families had escalated and were used more regularly as a reason for the insane to be separated from the general public. Additionally, popular fiction had taken the stereotype of the insane as a violent creature and exaggerated these characteristics. An article in *Popular Science Monthly* examined the use of the insane in fictional characters and noted that many of the new plays contained "madmen" characters. And, if for some reason the character was not defined as being a madman then "they are agitated by such violent and strange passions as the ordinary world never meets in life."⁶⁷ One speculation for the dependence on insane characters was because dramatists found in madmen "the motives for great effects without departing from truth and probability."⁶⁸ Dramatists were not alone in their belief that the insane possessed violent qualities, and they realized that the actions of the insane characters they created would be believable and entertaining. Another reason noted for the trend of including insane characters was because of the rise in the number of people with insanity, which in turn, also increased the public's fear and curiosity about these people different from themselves.

Discussion

The magazine articles examined for this study provide only a small glimpse into the lives and experiences of people with disabilities during the nineteenth century. Yet, these articles reflect a significant shift in how disabilities were viewed during the 1800s, while at the same time holding on to some of the older stereotypes and beliefs. Returning to the stereotypes Nelson discussed about twentieth-century coverage of disabilities in the media, it becomes noticeable that the beliefs about people with disabilities today are quite similar to those about that same population group in the nineteenth century. During the 1800s, the repeated references to people with disabilities as pitiable and pathetic creatures continued even after it was found that the case of idiots and the insane could improve with training.

One surprising discovery from this study was that despite the large number of wounded soldiers returning from the Civil War, relatively few magazines discussed their disabilities. Instead of focusing on amputation, the few articles written about the soldiers after the war remained focused on cognitive disabilities or mental illness. As Haller explained part of the reason for the lack of coverage about amputees could have been because “people were pretty accepting of amputations and disabilities that needed canes at the time because it was no big deal as long as they could still do some kind of work.”⁶⁹ Future studies should question the lack of coverage about wounded soldiers in magazines and examine any differences that might have arisen in how soldiers with disabilities were perceived in the press as compared to other people who had disabilities.

Disability advocates assert that it is society’s myths, stereotypes and fears that make having a disability difficult.⁷⁰ How much the media’s coverage of disability issues impact and enhance these existing stereotypes and fears is another subject for future debate. Few people

would doubt that the changes made since the nineteenth century in how people with disabilities are treated and regarded have been for the better. Still, it should not be overlooked that while nineteenth-century magazine coverage praised the work being done by social reformers for the education and training of those with a disability, it was an elite group who decided which people should be separated from the rest of the society because of their differences. The isolation and categorization of groups of certain people referred to in the magazines' coverage has produced dire consequences throughout history.

Notes

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- ¹ “Cretins and Idiots,” *Atlantic Monthly* 1 (February 1858): 415.
- ² James R. Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Mental Retardation in the United States*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 5.
- ³ Webster National Pictorial Dictionary, 3rd ed., 1873.
- ⁴ “Laurie Block, National Public Radio, “Beyond Affliction: The Disability History Project,” National Public Radio 1998, <<http://www.npr.org/programs/disability/index.htm>>.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ It should be noted that Poole’s Plus and the Readers’ Guide Retrospective Index are not a comprehensive listing of every magazine article written about disabilities. Additionally, three articles from *Penn Monthly* found for this search were not available for viewing at any library in the state or through inter-library loan. Therefore, the three articles were not included in this analysis.
- ⁷ Laurie Block, “Beyond Affliction: The Disability History Project.”
- ⁸ Maria Barrett Butler. “The National Home For Disabled Volunteer Soldiers.” *Harper’s New Monthly* 73 (1886): 683.
- ⁹ “Idiot Asylums,” *Littell’s Living Age* 86 (1865): 386.
- ¹⁰ Sanger Brown, “Responsibility in Crime from the Medical Standpoint,” *Popular Science Monthly* 46 (December 1894): 154.
- ¹¹ Laurie Block, “Beyond Affliction: The Disability History Project.”
- ¹² Bynum, W.F. *Science and the Practice of Medicine in the Nineteenth Century*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 114-117.
- ¹³ “Idiots,” *Littell’s Living Age* 38 (1857): 222.
- ¹⁴ “Insanity: By One Who Has Been Insane,” *Popular Science Monthly* 23 (1883): 627.
- ¹⁵ “Autobiography of the Insane,” *Littell’s Living Age* 43 (1854): 51.
- ¹⁶ “The Criminal Responsibility of the Insane,” *Overland Monthly* 2S1 (1883): 174.
- ¹⁷ F.E. Daniel, “The Criminal Responsibility of the Insane: With Special Reference to the Case of Eugene Burt,” *The Arena* 20 (1898): 177.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 177.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 177-178.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 178.
- ²¹ Martin W. Barr, “Mental Defective and the Social Welfare,” *Popular Science Monthly* 54 (April 1899): 753.
- ²² Andrew MacFarlane, “The Duty of the State to the Insane,” *Popular Science Monthly* 43 (1893): 744.
- ²³ “Idiot Asylum,” *Littell’s Living Age* 86 (1865): 385.
- ²⁴ “The Lunatic Asylum,” *Littell’s Living Age* 13 (1847): 586.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 586.
- ²⁶ “Idiots,” *Littell’s Living Age* 38 (1853): 218
- ²⁷ Ibid., 218.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 218.
- ²⁹ “Influence of Music on Idiots,” *Littell’s Living Age* 52 (1857): 311.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 310.
- ³¹ Ibid., 310.
- ³² Ibid., 310.
- ³³ Ibid., 312.
- ³⁴ “Cretins and Idiots,” *Atlantic Monthly* 1 (February 1858): 414.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 415.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 411.
- ³⁷ “Idiot Asylum,” 391.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 389.
- ³⁹ “Autobiography of the Insane,” *Littell’s Living Age* 43 (1854): 57.
- ⁴⁰ “Blackwell’s Island Lunatic Asylum,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 32 (1866): 273.
- ⁴¹ “Insanity,” *Popular Science* 23 (1883): 632.
- ⁴² A.G. Warner, “The Care of the Insane,” *Chautauquan* 9 (1888-89): 397.
- ⁴³ MacFarlane, 741.

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- ⁴⁴ “Life in an Insane Asylum,” *Overland Monthly* 2S21 (1893): 161.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.
- ⁴⁷ Trent, 78.
- ⁴⁸ Cesare Lombroso, “Insane Characters in Fiction and the Drama,” *Popular Science Monthly* 55 (1899):58.
- ⁴⁹ Trent, 78.
- ⁵⁰ Trent, 79.
- ⁵¹ “Cretins and Idiots: What has been and what can be done for them,” *Atlantic Monthly* 1 (1857): 410.
- ⁵² “Influence of Music on Idiots,” 310.
- ⁵³ “Idiots,” *Littell’s Living Age* 38 (1857): 220.
- ⁵⁴ MacFarlane, 741.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 741.
- ⁵⁶ “The Star of Bethlehem,” *Littell’s Living Age* 55 (1857): 297.
- ⁵⁷ A.G. Warner, 397.
- ⁵⁸ Henry Lincoln Clapp, “Special Schools for Feeble-Minded Children,” *Education* 19 (1898-99):196.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 196.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 196.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 198.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 205.
- ⁶³ “Education of Idiots at the Bicetre,” *Littell’s Living Age* 13 (1847): 369.
- ⁶⁴ W.A. Cram, “Was He An Idiot?,” *Popular Science Monthly* 25 (1884): 111.
- ⁶⁵ Frederick Peterson, “Idiot Savants,” *Popular Science Monthly* 50 (1896): 232.
- ⁶⁶ “The Lunatic Asylum,” *Littell’s Living Age* 13 (1847):586.
- ⁶⁷ Lombroso, 53.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.
- ⁶⁹ Beth Haller. Personal Correspondence. August 14, 2005
- ⁷⁰ Shapiro, 5.

CHAPTER 3
NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF THE EMERGING MILITANT DISABILITY
COMMUNITY

Reminiscent of the actions taken by African Americans in the early 1960s when they demanded civil rights, the disability protestors sang “We want 504” to the tune of “We Shall Overcome,” over the refusal to sign into law Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The regulations affected the then 36 million Americans with some kind of a disability and covered activities in about 16,000 school districts, 8,000 colleges and universities and hundreds of hospitals and other institutions.¹ Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act promised that every child, no matter the severity of the disability, be entitled to a free public education. Additionally, the law stated that children with disabilities could no longer be segregated, but were required to be educated with non-disabled children in regular classrooms to the maximum extent possible. Furthermore, colleges and universities could not house students with disabilities in segregated classroom buildings, and programs and activities must be accessible.² While Congress passed Section 504 in 1973, the actual implementation of the act was the responsibility of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

Protests by disability advocates took place against Joseph Califano, the Secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, in 1977. From the beginning, Section 504 had been controversial because of the variety and range of services and people it would include.³ Califano had refused to sign into law Section 504 because he

wanted time to review it and write new regulations after it was realized that the compliance of Section 504 would cost billions of dollars.⁴ Califano said he believed that if “the previous administration took 2 ½ years to produce a complex regulation that it then refused to sign, I believe that it’s reasonable for me to take 2 ½ months to examine these regulations so that I may understand them and assess the implications.”⁵ However, disability advocates were adamant for Califano to sign the act immediately.

Protests took place in ten cities around the nation at Department of Health, Education and Welfare offices. This section of the study looked at *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post’s* coverage of the various protests in the weeks before Section 504 was signed into law and the reaction to its signing in the weeks after. The purpose of looking at the protests of 1977 is to determine the patterns of newspaper coverage of this pivotal moment in the Disability Rights Movement. It is important to study the newspaper coverage of the 1977 protests in order to form a basis for comparison to the 1990 disability protests regarding the passage of the ADA. Additionally, it is essential to study the media coverage because as Clayton Keller explained in his study entitled “The Coverage of Persons with Disabilities in American Newspaper,” the:

press can exert an enormous impact on our knowledge, attitudes, and public policies regarding a variety of issues. No better example exists than the matter in which the press portrays individuals with disabling conditions. This influence can, at its best, enhance knowledge and promote social awareness of disabilities. At its worst, it can

promulgate misinformation and reinforce negative stereotypes.⁶

When Yongjoo Jeon and Donald P. Haider-Markel examined how the media can impact public policies for people with disabilities, they found that media coverage influenced Congressional hearings and the tone of those hearings. According to Jeon and Haider-Markel's study, the media attention given to disability issues encouraged participation in disability-related debates.⁷ In the case of the protests of 1977, disability advocates protested the delay in the signing of Section 504 in an attempt to garner media attention on the subject, thus it is essential to examine the type and amount of newspaper coverage the protests received before the act was signed.

This part of the study asked the question: How did newspapers cover the protests and sit-ins surrounding the enactment of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973? The search yielded 45 articles. Many of the articles written about the protests preceding the passage of the Rehabilitation Act in *The Washington Post* appeared in Section B of the paper. In *The New York Times* articles about the protests were placed between pages 12 and 30. However, the day after Section 504 was signed into law, both newspapers placed their articles on the first page. In both cases, the headlines referred to the signing as an end to bias and discrimination for people with disabilities. From this qualitative analysis three large themes emerged in the newspapers' coverage of Section 504, including the newspapers' heightened references to disability activists' fight for civil rights as being similar to those of African Americans; the need for the media to raise awareness and educate the public on disabilities and the growing disability community's

militancy; and the acknowledgement by the press about the slowly changing attitudes toward people with disabilities.

Fighting For Civil Rights

The media spotlighted civil rights gains for African Americans and women in the 1960s and 1970s. As Nelson explained, “a concept developed that people with disabilities had rights like other citizens, and a sense of bonding and of militancy grew along with it.”⁸ As rights were won for people with disabilities and perceptions began to change, a significant turning point occurred with the signing of Section 504.⁹ Section 504 was the first civil rights act passed in Congress for people with disabilities. The regulation forbade discrimination against people with disabilities and extended civil rights guarantees similar to those for African Americans and women.¹⁰ The civil rights movement for people with disabilities began in the late 1960s when a group of students at the University of California campus at Berkeley demanded elevators and ramps to make classrooms accessible for students who used wheelchairs. Spearheaded by the Center for Independent Living, the movement “grew quickly and succeeded in getting Berkeley and San Francisco to pass ordinances eliminating architectural barriers like curbs at street corners, and making the two cities the most barrier free in the country.”¹¹ The press made references to the similarities between the anti-discrimination fight by African Americans in the 1960s and the disability rights movement by using familiar protest language.

In examining media portrayals of disability issues Haller developed the legal model, which refers to how laws such as Section 504 and the ADA are civil rights issues. In this media model it is illegal to treat people with disabilities in discriminatory ways.”¹² The legal model played out in several articles about Section 504 and the protests. Over

half of the newspaper articles analyzed highlighted the similarities between African Americans' battle for civil rights in the 1960s and people with disabilities' fight. Jeon and Haider-Markel found that during the 1960s and early 1970s disability rights advocates emulated the policy goals of other social movements, including the Civil Rights movement and the Women's Rights Movement: "Disability activists borrowed the language and images of these movements and reframed the issue of rights in a disability context."¹³ Disability advocates redefined disability as a Civil Rights issue by "stressing the American values of independence and participation to make the disabled more acceptable to the public and elected officials."¹⁴ This type of participation was found in the newspaper articles written about the protests, the conventions held with policy makers to advocate changes and in the human feature articles that helped educate the public about those with disabilities.

One of the most obvious ways in which the press covered the Disability Rights Movement by comparing it to African Americans' Civil Rights Movement in articles that referenced both civil rights movements. For instance, one man, George Reed, told reporters, "I marched for my civil rights as a black man in the '60s. I never thought I'd see this day come when handicapped people would rise up and demand their rights. We've been begging for a long time. Now we're demanding our rights."¹⁵ Similarly, another article related to then First Lady Roselyn Carter and her pledge to help those with mental disabilities included a quote from Califano who said he was hopeful that "the next few years are going to mean to the handicapped and retarded some turmoil but the kind of progress blacks made in 1960."¹⁶

Another way in which commonalities were found between people with disabilities and their civil rights battles and the African Americans' civil rights movement was how newspapers reported on disability activists' boycotts and fights for equal transportation rights, similar to how African Americans had years before. "The disabled leaders borrowed from the 1960s civil rights marches and began fighting for their rights," explained Myra MacPherson in "Newly Militant Disabled Waging War on Discrimination."¹⁷ One article entitled "F.A.A. Prohibits Airlines' Denial of Seats to Handicapped Persons" looked at new regulations to prevent discrimination on airlines. The new requirements prohibited airlines from denying passage to those with disabilities. Specifically, the regulations instructed airline employees to address the person with the disability instead of speaking only to the person providing assistance. They also instructed employees to have briefing and menu cards printed in Braille and to be trained in sign language.¹⁸ Throughout the article about the airlines' new regulations the emphasis was placed on making certain that customers with disabilities were treated fairly and as equals.

Once Califano signed Section 504 into law, he was quoted in articles as explaining how the implementation of the act would bring significant advancements in the civil rights battle for people with disabilities.¹⁹ The language used in these newspaper articles were reminiscent to that of the African Americans' civil rights battle and included words such as struggle, a new era, segregation, discrimination and equality among others. Califano stated that the regulation would "work fundamental changes in many facets of American life and it opens a new era of civil rights in America."²⁰ Califano remarked to *The New York Times* that the law to which the regulations were based:

Reflects the recognition of the Congress that most
handicapped persons can lead proud and productive lives,
despite their disabilities. It will usher in a new era of
equality for handicapped individuals in Which unfair
barriers to self-sufficiency and decent treatment will begin
to fall before the force of law.²¹

The equality Califano mentioned included allowing the one million children with disabilities who were then currently barred from attending public school the chance for a free education.²² Furthermore, employers receiving federal funds would not be able to refuse employment to a person with a disability who is otherwise qualified for the job. The sources quoted throughout the articles written about the protests were one of determination and the acknowledgement that change had to occur in order for the situation for people with disabilities to become better. As one protestor who used a wheelchair and was refused a teaching certification at a school district acknowledged, “I let them discriminate against me.”²³ The article appeared to be one of hopefulness and change as it further explained how under the new law an employer was required to make “reasonable accommodation” for the person.

The authors of the newspaper articles written about the disability conferences and conventions became adept using the language and phrases reminiscent of how African Americans’ fight for civil rights were covered. One article mentioned how “The Department of Labor will wholeheartedly join the handicapped people’s struggle for civil rights. We’ve all got to be concerned about creating jobs as well as enforcing laws against discrimination,” explained Secretary Ray Marshall.²⁴ At a meeting of the

President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped, just one week after the anti-discrimination regulations of Section 504 were signed, the mood was mixed with joyfulness and caution. The guest speaker Dr. Joseph Panzarella who received the Handicapped American of the Year award from Roselyn Carter told the audience "We Shall Overcome," referring to the standard protest song used by Africans Americans in the 1960s. He said, "The handicapped group is the most discriminated against among minorities."²⁵ More words of caution came from Evelyne Villines, Iowa's commissioner for civil rights and a hospital director, who felt that people with disabilities would never have full legal protection until they are added to the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Villines said, "This is a turning point in the lives of millions of handicapped people. We've had champions before, but not ones who really listened to the desires of handicapped people themselves."²⁶ President Jimmy Carter also acknowledged the impact Section 504 would have for people with disabilities. He was quoted in one newspaper article as telling several thousand people during the opening session of the White House Conference on Handicapped Individuals, "I am here to say tonight that the time for discrimination against the handicapped American is over. For too long the handicapped have been denied jobs, education, access to streets and building and transportation."²⁷

One place in which the newspapers placed a great deal of attention in relation to Section 504 was in the educational realms. Over one million school age children who had once been denied access into public schools were given the opportunity for public education. Isolation in separated classrooms was supposed to be minimal, as Section 504 required that children should be included in regular classrooms "to the maximum extent appropriate."²⁸ In "Schools Are Forced to Pay More Attention to Disabled," Gene

Maeroff explained, “one of the most remarkable turnabouts in the nation’s schools involves the change in attitude toward mentally and physically handicapped students, who for years have been relegated to the basements of educational concern.”²⁹ The focus on mainstreaming students with disabilities began to replace the “out of site and out of mind” mentality that “the handicapped were supposed to be grateful that the schools let them in the doors.”³⁰ Only with the signing of Section 504 did some schools begin admitting many of the most seriously handicapped children, whose parents were previously told to keep them home or to find private facilities.³¹

The protests surrounding the signing of Section 504 and the media coverage following its implementation caused other governmental groups to follow suit. One week after Section 504 was signed the New Jersey Governor signed into law a measure dubbed “a bill of rights” for New Jersey citizens who have cognitive disabilities.³² Officially named the “Developmentally Disabled Rights Act,” the law was designed to guarantee people “suffering from mental retardation, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, autism and dyslexia their fundamentally Constitutional rights as citizens.”³³ The fundamental rights the act guaranteed included the right to vote, freedom of religion and privacy for correspondence and telephonic communication. Additionally, the act called for the establishment of guidelines and procedures for administration of physical and chemical restraints, isolation and other forms of treatment.³⁴

In the weeks following the signing of Section 504 the costs of implementation as well as the impact the act would have on the 36 million Americans with a disability was discussed throughout newspaper articles following the act. Many articles, while praising Section 504’s stance to end discrimination, also referred to the economic costs associated

with the implementation of the Act. Haller's business model and the perspective of the educational community was included and as Haller speculated, when emphasis is placed on costs, "it may cast a new stereotype to people with disabilities in the U.S. cultural narrative: that people with disabilities cost society money."³⁵ In almost every article written before Section 504 was signed into law, the costs involved in implementation was mentioned. Yet, the articles were relatively balanced in giving both the business community's side as well as the perception of the disability advocates. For instance, in one article the author explained how "some major corporations doing business with the federal government already have complained that the proposed regulations would be too costly to implement."³⁶ The article continued by giving an example of the Kaiser Aluminum and Chemical Company which estimated that it would cost \$160,000 to make its headquarters barrier-free. However, immediately after the cost was estimated, the article also contained a quote from Mainstream, a non-profit organization that helps people with disabilities live in the mainstream society, which contended that the job at Kaiser would only cost \$8,000.³⁷ While the cost differed significantly in the article, the author's inclusion of both price estimates prevented the readers from being compelled to believe that the costs were as extreme as the business estimated. Another example of what Haller found to be a new stereotype related to people with disabilities costing society too much money was found in *The New York Times*' article "Equity for Disabled Likely to be Costly" in which the author Nancy Hicks explained:

the regulations approved by the Federal Government to guide health, education and welfare programs in ending discrimination against handicapped persons show one

thing, if nothing else. Discrimination is expensive for its victims to live with and for society to erase.³⁸

The expenses Hicks made mention to was in reference to the \$2.4 billion the Department of Health, Education and Welfare estimated would be spent each year to end discrimination. Hicks' article did not assert that the costs were extreme. Rather the article examined the expenses of the existing discriminatory school system, as well as those associated with the implementation of new educational practices, and brought a heightened awareness to the systematic changes taking place for people with disabilities.

Raising Awareness about the Disability Community

While the Disability Rights Movement has its origins as far back as the 1940s when contributions were made for veterans with disabilities, it was not until Roberts entered the University of California at Berkeley in the fall of 1962 that most consider the start of the Disability Rights Movement.³⁹ With the inception of the Disability Rights Movement so too came the media's acknowledgement of the disability community as a group fighting for equal rights: "This emerging minority group of those with disabilities has made it clear they don't want to be defined by their disabilities. They want to be regarded as people first, who happen to have an inconvenience in their lives."⁴⁰ As Nelson explained, "along with that attitude is the sense that they have been pushed around too long and the time has come to stand up to paternalism and stigmatism."⁴¹

One way in which the disability community garnered support and influenced legislation was from a perceived attitude of militancy among the disability community. Harold Krents, a lawyer who experienced discrimination because he was blind, warned of the emerging militancy and said, "The handicapped are going to be this country's next

militant minority if something is not done very soon.”⁴² Krents raised the prospect that disability activists had planned a picket line of wheelchairs and blind persons in front of a corporate headquarters.⁴³ Newspaper articles highlighted this unusual militancy in articles written about the disability community. Regarded with both awe and caution article headlines often included the words militant and the disabled. One such article headline was titled “‘Helpless’ at Glenn Dale Turn Militant.” The paradox of people considered helpless rising up to fight for the rights was obvious in the lead sentence “Glenn Dale Hospital, Washington’s facility for the chronically ill and disabled in rural Price George County, is one of the last places where militancy among patients might be expected.”⁴⁴

The article describe the patients of Glenn Dale to have:

strokes, crippling injuries and terminal diseases [that] have made patients who come there invalids for life. Those who are not totally bedridden spend their days in various states of oblivion, sitting in wheelchairs along the institution’s hallways. Many of them are aphasic—unable to speak or comprehend words.⁴⁵

Yet, despite the described bleakness of the patients’ conditions, a few demanded better treatment and training. The patients organized “Wheels of Progress,” an organization aimed at better therapy, equipment and programs, and claimed that “the workers haven’t changed from the old days.”⁴⁶ As one patient is quoted as saying, the need for change was essential because “I look at myself and I think it might be this way for the rest of my life. I see four walls every day and nothing happening.”⁴⁷ By most standards, militancy is more than forming an organization and asking for better treatment, but in the case at

Glenn Dale, *The Washington Post* felt that the patients' actions displayed militant qualities.

Less than one month after the Glenn Dale article appeared, *The Washington Post* ran another article focused on the disability community's militancy titled "Newly Militant Disabled Waging War on Discrimination." In this article, militancy referred to more than just demands for better hospital treatment. Described as America's new militants, "the blind, crippled, deaf, mentally retarded: victims of war, of automobile wrecks, and disease, and accidents of birth" emerged to fight for the passing of Section 504. The article explained how "after years of being carefully hidden in homes and institutions, hundreds of disabled militants ...marched into peoples' consciousness—picketing in wheel chairs and on crutches, singing the song of the 1960s civil rights marches, 'We Shall Overcome.'"⁴⁸ The article quoted people with disabilities explaining the emergence from a passive victim to becoming an active citizen with the same rights as other Americans. As Denning Gearhart explained with optimism, "Hopefully the era of 'Tiny Tim' is gone forever. We've been too used to sitting on Bob Cratchit's shoulders, saying 'God Bless Us Every One,' instead of saying 'Dammit, I am as qualified as the next person.'"⁴⁹

One explanation the articles gave for the emergence of the newly visible disability community was a result of the growing number of Americans with disabilities. As Myra MacPherson explained:

One grim reason for their strength today is that more and more Americans are becoming eligible to join this minority. Modern medicine is saving those that used to

die—from strokes, automobile accidents, cancer, war wounds—and they are often being saved only to be shunned by society.⁵⁰

Newspaper articles also explained another reason for the newly militant style of the disability community, which was because of the war veterans, who returned from war only to find non-accessible facilities and discrimination in school and employment. Max Cleland, the Veterans Administration Director who lost both legs and an arm in Vietnam, explained in an article that Vietnam produced over 400,000 disabled veterans. These veterans were “used to being treated like first class citizens in their ‘former lives,’” said Cleland. “They are now fighting for their rights.”⁵¹ During the struggle for civil rights, protests took place in 11 cities as part of a nationwide campaign by people with disabilities to pressure Califano into immediately signing regulations to implement Section 504.

On April 4, 1977 occupation of local offices of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare took place in 11 cities.⁵² The protestors for Section 504 came from all walks of life and were led by “seeing eye dogs, others in wheelchairs and many ‘speaking’ with their hands.”⁵³ The occupation in San Francisco lasted 22 days whereas other protests, such as the one in Washington, D.C. lasted fewer because protestors were refused food and water.⁵⁴ *The Washington Post* included a picture in one edition of its newspaper revealing a large crowd of protestors holding signs and singing “We Will Be Back” after a 28-hour protest.⁵⁵ During the protests hundreds of people with disabilities demanded to speak with Califano.⁵⁶ As Judy Heumann, the organizer of the San

Francisco sit-in explained, “We have worked a long time for these rights. We are just not going to let them water the regulations down.”⁵⁷

Another protest in Washington began April 20, 1977 when two dozen people with cognitive or physical disabilities flew from San Francisco to Washington, D.C. to protest in front of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare headquarters. The group also visited Califano’s house to request a meeting, despite his home being guarded by Washington police dressed in plain clothing.⁵⁸ Although the group was refused a meeting with Califano they returned to conduct a daylong vigil in front of the White House and received support from some legislators. In the articles written about the protests, several members of Congress were quoted. For example, Senator Alan Cranston, a Democrat from California wrote in a letter to Califano, “Given the background, I believe you must bear the burden of justifying not only to handicapped Americans, but to all citizens and Congress, any changes that you make.”⁵⁹ Protests continued both in Washington and San Francisco until Califano signed the bill into law on April 28, 1977.⁶⁰

Once Section 504 was signed into law, there was a motion to dispel the more militant activism on the part of the disability community. Peg Edmonds remarked on this changing climate: “I see a tremendous optimism, more than ever before. We’re ready to back off from militancy and cooperate with the community, and the community at large is getting less defensive at our visibility. They’re seeing individuals where they used to see pieces of protoplasm in wheels and metal.”⁶¹ Still the optimism of the signing was received with caution and much trepidation, which was reflected by disability advocates quoted in the aftermath of the signing of Section 504. One disability activist, described as a polio victim, advised a “continued banding together of the consumer and advocacy

organizations of the disabled.”⁶² The banding together the disability activist spoke about was demonstrated at the Conference on Handicapped Individuals dispelling “any doubts that handicapped Americans are becoming a political force.”⁶³ More than 3,000 people with disabilities and their friends attended the conference led by the secretaries of Transportation of Labor, of Health, Education and Welfare, and of Housing and Urban Development. During the meetings the secretaries “apologized for past injustices. They praised the courage of handicapped people. They promised new programs and money.”⁶⁴ Throughout the coverage about the protests over Section 504, attention was given to the growing awareness of the needs and desires for people with disabilities.

Awareness was also brought about the ever-changing disability community in an article about the Section 504 protests that began by describing a conversation with one of the protestors. The article began by mentioning how Frank Bowe was talking on his telephone about his concern for people with disabilities. When the person on the other line asked if Bowe had a disability he replied, “Yes, I am deaf.” The article continued by explaining how an aide is listening on an extension, translating the conversation in sign language so rapidly there is barely a pause between a question and Bowe’s response. Later when the person asked Bowe if he had ever experienced job discrimination, he laughed and said, “Yes, I was told I couldn’t hold a job because I wouldn’t be able to use the phone.”⁶⁵ The author used this scenario as played out in the lead paragraphs of the article to illustrate the changes taking place in communication for people with disabilities. In addition, the experience with Bowe showed how people with disabilities were capable of doing many, if not all of the daily tasks other people do, even if some of them may need to be adapted. Another example used to dispel some of the longstanding

stereotypes and beliefs about people with disabilities was also given. The author explained that, “Hale Zukas has cerebral palsy so severe he is immobile in a wheelchair, his useless hands tied in a brace.”⁶⁶ While Zukas was unable to speak he pointed to a clipboard and rapidly tapped out the message, “people wrongly believe that all c.p.’s (cerebral palsied) are mentally retarded.” The author then pointed out that Zukas holds a bachelor’s degree in math and a master’s degree in Russian.⁶⁷ In each example given, the author sought to dispel the more common beliefs about people with disabilities by showing first-hand examples of people with disabilities defying most people’s expectations of them.

Articles about housing options for people with disabilities included the perspective of the disability community. Judith Martin’s “A Self Help House For the Handicapped,” described the limited living options available for adults with disabilities. The article described Mary Pat Bradley, a 34-year-old woman who is a paraplegic and has a master’s degree and a job, who lived at home with her parents because her other option would be an institution. The article raised awareness about the need for living options for people with disabilities. Bradley explained some of her concerns with institutional living and said, “you are treated as a patient, a sick person. You are thrown in with a lot of people you didn’t choose—a mixed bag of the retarded, the physically handicapped, the aged and senile. The lack of mental stimulation can’t help changing you. Personal initiative, mental perceptiveness, creativity are drained.”⁶⁸ The article continued by mentioning an alternative to living at home with aging parents or in an institution through housing programs by the Independent Living for the Handicapped.⁶⁹

Another article that addressed housing for people with disabilities looked at the need for people's independence in terms of living options. The Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development was quoted as saying that the effort to provide for independent living options was part of "the conviction that it is time to ask every part of the Government to re-examine its programs and policies to determine whether they encourage the handicapped to shape their own lives and to live independently."⁷⁰

The articles related to housing were used to raise awareness of various governmental housing organizations and to illustrate how housing through these organizations were more affordable than society's expenses for institutional living. Similarly, another article called "Housing designed for the handicapped" explained the shortage of housing options available. The article discussed how Robert Bentley, a paraplegic, only found one apartment in 12 years that had an accessible bathroom. As the article explained, to someone without a disability "access to a bathroom or kitchen is rarely a subject of concern. But to the physically disabled, a narrow doorway, high shelves and counters or a narrow turning space can be a significant barrier to independence."⁷¹ The article discussed a new apartment complex that was designed for low-income "handicapped person" which would provide an alternative to living at home or in an institution. The article also mentioned the need for more housing alternatives for people with disabilities. As Beverly Price, the founder of Independent Living for the Handicapped, noted, "the handicapped need decent places to live."⁷² Without voicing their own opinion or bias, the articles written about the need for fair housing appeared to educate the public about the disability community. By including first-hand examples

about one particular person's battle the articles were able to put a human face on the members of the disability community.

Other articles discussed the changes businesses were making to accommodate people with disabilities. For instance, almost one month after Section 504 was passed, the White House held the Conference on Handicapped Individuals. The meeting brought together more than 3,000 people. In order to house the conference, the Sheraton Park Hotel modified 396 rooms and other areas of the hotel. The article titled "A 'Turning Point' For Millions" examined some of the issues to be discussed during the conference including the enforcement of free public education, fair hiring practices and building accessibility. One attendee noted, "The climate is changing. Society is geared to the able-bodied adult male between 45 and 50. We're talking about problems which affect all women, all old people, all children... We're talking about 70 percent of the population."⁷³ The conference also discussed issues specifically for women with disabilities, especially in relation to birth control. During the conference a National Disabled Women's Caucus formed in an effort to dispel the assumption that women with disabilities do not need birth control information. Villines explained some of existing ideas in relation to women with disabilities to be that women "don't have the right to adopt children, and we are discouraged from having them to the point where disabled women are likely to be given abortions without their consent."⁷⁴ The author of the article mentioned several taboo topics such as sex but used them as ways to dispel some of the more common assumptions about people with disabilities. Additionally, by mentioning the modifications the Sheraton Park Hotel made for its guests, it illustrated some of the progress that was being made to make buildings accessible to all.

Changing Attitudes by the T.A.B.s (Temporarily Able-Bodied)

As the disability community grew in strength and number, there was a heightened awareness to the need to change the public's perception of people with disabilities. The desire of disability advocates to alter society's attitudes about people with disabilities became a major concern and was often highlighted in articles written about the disability community. Articles often noted the term used by the disability community for the rest of society, which was T.A.B. (temporarily able-bodied).⁷⁵ Articles often quoted disability advocates explaining the problems associated with having a disability. For instance, philanthropist-businessman Douglas C. McMurtie asserted soon after World War I that the "greatest handicap is not the loss of a limb or other disability but the weight of public opinion, which could include encounters with disconcerted non-disabled people, low expectations, limited employment options, housing discrimination, lack of financial or personal assistance, an inaccessible environment, or limited educational opportunities."⁷⁶ Ed Roberts, the leader of the Disability Rights Movement, noted the changes in attitude and improvements made in gaining rights when he said in an article, "we were considered vegetables a few years ago, but now the vegetables are rising."⁷⁷ One disability advocate remained hopeful that the "somber attitude towards the disabled held by the T.A.B." will change, but admitted that it was up the disability community to help change the attitudes. She explained how at the present time "The idea of the 'active victim' is a paradox, but it's becoming more and more of a reality. Because unless we take it on our shoulders, this pattern is never going to be broken."⁷⁸

However, at the same time disability advocates were quoted in articles in an attempt to change the opinions about the disabled, other articles continued to reinforce

some of the more stagnant stereotypes. These stereotypes included the idea that people with disabilities should be pitied, are a burden, child-like, or a super cripp. One of the more blatant examples of the super cripp stereotype occurred in the article titled “A Jubilant Greeting for a Handicapped Super Achiever.” The title itself reflected the longstanding belief that in order to be recognized or given an award as someone with a disability you must be working to overcome your disability. However, in the case of this article, while the title appeared as though the emphasis was going to be about the great lengths the man was going through to overcome his disability, the quotes were used to dispel this belief. For instance, while the Handicapped American of the Year was traditionally given to someone who “does a lot more than most us who are not handicapped,” as described by Roselyn Carter, the recipient used his acceptance speech to speak about the discrimination people with disabilities receive: “We must break down the barriers of ignorance and fear, intolerance and indifference. All we disabled want is the chance to compete without further handicaps.”⁷⁹

While articles discussed some physical barriers for people with disabilities that were architectural, others were related to society’s attitudes and perceptions about this minority. As Cleland told *The Washington Post* “changing attitudes, in fact may be far more difficult than changing architecture. Fear and revulsion towered the handicapped.” Another disability advocate who was deaf was also quoted as saying “today the problem is not so much with us—but with the people who are not disabled. We are always defined in terms, of what we cannot do. We are determined to change those attitudes. I want to help others to see us as people—not as crutches and wheelchairs and canes.”⁸⁰ While disability advocates were quoted in their attempt to alter society’s attitudes, other articles

continued to reinforce certain stereotypes, especially those myths about cognitive disabilities.

For instance, in the article “A Landmark Before Its Doors Open” the focus was on the Bronx Developmental Center, the newly constructed addition to the Bronx State Hospital. The article mentioned the publicity the building had received because of various scandals and lawsuits then continued by mentioning, “while it waits for the transfer of those pathetic shards of humanity and severely retarded and handicapped of the Bronx who are eligible for this state institution, the structure has become the cynosure of the architectural world.”⁸¹ By referring to the patients as “pathetic shards of humanity” the author reaffirmed the idea that people with disabilities are pitiable and helpless. The author also noted how the building gained publicity for its controversial treatment for those with cognitive disabilities even though there had been “changes in attitude toward the care and treatment of the severely mentally and physically disabled...and the debate still rages about whether they should be institutionalized or their treatment ‘normalized’ within the community.”⁸² While the article does mention the criticism of the building to be the “unhomelike” atmosphere, the only explanation given was that the emphasis was not on having a “familiar ambience.”⁸³

Another article that served to reinforce some of the existing stereotypes about people with disabilities occurred in “10,000 at Festival Brighten the Day for 4,000 Retarded.” Although the article appeared to be one that illustrated a fun day for those with disabilities, at closer glance the coverage on the event mostly harmed the disability community. The purpose of the fourth annual Hand-in-Hand festival was to “get retarded people out of their institutions and to provide them with a day of fun and relaxation.”⁸⁴

The article claimed that the best part of the day for many participants was “the personal things—a handshake, a hug, an encouraging word from a volunteer.”⁸⁵ For the most part, the article appeared patronizing and only acknowledged the good deeds of the volunteers for taking time to make the day brighter for someone with a disability. However, in the last several paragraphs of the article, disability advocates were quoted, including the editor of *Accent on Living Magazine*, a quarterly publication for the physically handicapped who said, “the stigma associated with the handicapped is one of dependence. My greatest handicap is not polio but having people decide what I can and cannot do.”⁸⁶ Cheever’s comment was the silver lining to an otherwise stereotypical disability story about others helping those with disabilities by providing them with a day of child-like activities.

Discussion

The signing of Section 504 did more than just provide educational and employment opportunities to those with disabilities. In the fight to have the regulations signed the disability community emerged as a political and militant force. Without a doubt, the disability community drew strength from the successes of the Civil Rights Movement and the Women’s Rights Movement, which “sparked the imagination and fueled the self-motivation of the early leaders of the Disability Rights Movement and continue to cultivate a consciousness of disability pride.”⁸⁷ A core similarity between press coverage about the Disability Rights Movement and the Civil Rights Movement was that the articles focused on the struggle for fairness of opportunity from people denied control from the rest of society.⁸⁸ In “The Disability Rights Movement: Experiences and Perspectives of Selected Leaders in the Disability Community,” Henry

McCarthy explained that the “identification of the disability experience with that of other minority groups that have endured discrimination dates from the earliest academic writings on the social psychology of disability, and the designation of the disability community as an oppressed minority is prevalent in the disability studies literature today.”⁸⁹

Newspaper coverage of “American’s hidden minority group” appeared to have responded to the desires of the disability community.⁹⁰ Not only did disability advocates organize and carry out protests in order to receive the same civil rights guaranteed to other Americans, but also through their actions they used the media to help educate the public on what it means to have a disability. From explaining everyday activities to discussing their ongoing battles with accessibility and discrimination, the articles written during the weeks before and after the signing of Section 504 served to educate the public on the lives of the 36 million Americans with disabilities. While for the most part the articles appeared to reflect the disability community accurately and included both the governmental and business sides as well as that of the disability community, articles still existed that reinforced previous beliefs about the community, leading disability advocates to continue the fight against discrimination.

Notes

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- ² Myra MacPherson and Joseph D. Whitaker, "Handicapped Rights Rule Is Signed," *The Washington Post*, April 29, 1977: A1.
- ³ MacPherson, A6.
- ⁴ Joseph P. Shapiro, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1993). 65.
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- ⁶ Clayton E. Keller and Daniel P. Hallahan, "The Coverage of Person with Disabilities in American Newspapers," *Journal of Special Education* 24:3 (1990): 1.
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- ¹³ Jeon and Haider-Markel, 4.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ¹⁵ Whitaker, B8.
- ¹⁶ Donnie Radcliffe, "Mrs. Carter Begins Fulfilling Her Pledge," *The Washington Post*, April 19, 1977: A10.
- ¹⁷ Myra MacPherson, "Newly Militant Disabled Waging War on Discrimination," *The Washington Post*, May 9, 1977: A2.
- ¹⁸ "F.A.A. Prohibits Airlines' Denial of Seats to Handicapped Person," *The New York Times*, April 15, 1977: 44.
- ¹⁹ MacPherson, "Handicapped," A1.
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- ²³ MacPherson, "Newly," A2.
- ²⁴ Margot Hornblower, "Handicapped Get Promises of Aid At Conference," *The Washington Post*, May 27, 1977: A4.
- ²⁵ Judith Martin, "A Jubilant Greeting for a Handicapped Super Achiever," *The Washington Post*, May 6, 1977: D1.
- ²⁶ Judith Martin, "A 'Turning Point' For Millions," *The Washington Post*, May 26, 1977: D4.
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- ⁶⁰ MacPherson and Whitaker, A1.
- ⁶¹ Martin, "A 'Turning Point,'" D4.
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CHAPTER 4

THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT: A LANDMARK DISABILITY LAW WITH LIMITED NEWSPAPER COVERAGE ABOUT THE DISABILITY COMMUNITY IT WOULD IMPACT

The Americans With Disabilities Act promised to ban discrimination against people with physical and mental disabilities in public accommodations, the workplace, and transportation and communication services.¹ Described as the most comprehensive civil rights measure since the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the ADA was passed by the U.S. Senate in September 1989. In March 1990 the ADA finally gained consideration by the U.S. House of Representatives. In an effort to bring recognition to the bill, disability activists met at the U.S. Capitol to discuss with representatives the urgency for the bill's passing. The meeting took place in March 1990 and afterwards disability activists staged a demonstration.² During the demonstration activists chained their wheelchairs together around the Capitol Rotunda. The activists also staged a "crawl in," leaving their wheelchairs and crawling up the eighty-three marble steps outside the Capitol. *The New York Times* described the crawl-in after the protest took place and said:

The pictures were striking, just as they were intended to be:

Children paralyzed from the waist down crawling up the steps of the Capitol, and more than 100 protestors, most in wheelchairs, being arrested by police officers in riot gear after a raucous demonstration in the Rotunda.³

The activists that participated in the “crawl-in” fought to bring the ADA into public discourse since the lack of attention to the bill threatened its passage.⁴ While the “crawl-in” provided striking images for the media and activists accomplished their goal of bringing television attention to the ADA, the newspaper coverage was still minimal. This chapter explores the newspaper coverage about the ADA legislation before and after its passing.

The ADA extended to people with physical and mental disabilities the same protections against discrimination that had been given to women and minorities under the Civil Rights Act of 1964.⁵ While Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 had guaranteed public education for people with disabilities, it had not been enough. A 1989 poll by Louis Harris and Associates found that 40 percent of people with disabilities polled said their access to public places was restricted by physical barriers and 66 percent of these people were unemployed, while two-thirds of that group said they could and wanted to work.⁶ Similarly, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that between 1981 and 1989 the percentage of men with disabilities working full time dropped from 29.8 percent to 23.4 percent. Earnings of both men and women with disabilities fell from 77 percent to 64 percent.⁷ Joseph Shapiro in *No Pity: People With Disabilities Forging A New Civil Rights Movement* explained that “no other group of citizens was so insulated or so removed from the American mainstream...That is why disability activists now turned their attention to winning passage of a broad civil rights bill. For the first time, people with disabilities were asking Americans to recognize that the biggest problem facing them was discrimination.”⁸

Newspapers were slow to report on the ADA legislation. Disability media scholar Beth Haller in “Crawling Toward Civil Rights: A Qualitative Study of Media Coverage of Disability Activism” found, “Of the elite newspapers that covered the ‘crawl-in,’ *The Washington Post* had done two articles on the Americans With Disabilities Act before March 1990; *The New York Times* had done two articles, and *The Los Angeles Times* printed one commentary that called the Act ‘more loophole than law.’”⁹ Frustrated with the lack of media attention the ADA legislation was given, disability protestors tried to shock people:

They were loud, chanting and yelling. They were active, not passive, chaining their wheelchairs and being uncooperative with police. And they deviated from their ‘handicap’ by leaving their wheelchairs and crawling. They knew if they deviated from the silence and passivity society expected of them they would receive media coverage. And they did. Both NBC and CBS covered the protest, as did *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Time* magazine.¹⁰

Disability advocates knew that drawing national media attention would help in providing public discourse about the ADA and disability issues in general. The disability protestors had a specific agenda when they crawled up the Capitol steps, although some advocates questioned the message being sent to the public when people with disabilities were shown leaving their wheelchairs and crawling on their hands and elbows.¹¹ Yet, the coverage produced by newspapers remained minimal with *The Washington Post* only

reporting the crawl-in and Rotunda protests as a police story, which explained why more than 100 people with disabilities were arrested. *The New York Times*, however, wrote about the protests the day after, and the following Sunday the newspaper also featured an analysis article about disability rights.

It is essential to examine the newspaper coverage surrounding the ADA legislation in an effort to better understand the media's relationship with people with disabilities, as well as to understand the role the media might have played in the construction of how people with disabilities were viewed by society. As Haller explained, "Media act as mechanisms in the social construction of people with disabilities...Stories in the media make certain claims about people with disabilities and their actions."¹² In order to evaluate present day coverage of disability issues, it is valuable to understand how the media covered people with disabilities in the past.

Media scholar John Clogston's traditional, progressive and supercrip models, along with additional categories developed by Haller can be used in examining ADA coverage in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.¹³ Haller's business model explained how the news media present people with disabilities to be costly to society. The implication is that people with disabilities harm businesses because of the costs associated with making buildings accessible.¹⁴ Opposite the business model is the consumer model, which is when the media presents the disability community as an "untapped consumer market."¹⁵ Haller's other category is the legal model, which refers to the fact that the ADA is a civil rights law. In this media model theme the ADA is presented as a legal tool since it is illegal to treat people with disabilities in discriminatory ways.¹⁶

Keeping these media models in mind, this chapter asks the question: How did newspapers report on the ADA protests and legislation before and after the bill's passing? In examining 62 articles found in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* from January 1989 until August 1990, it was found that coverage before the "crawl in" was limited, but not as minimal as Haller had found in her study. Rather, the articles written before the "crawl in" focused mainly on quick inserts about the ADA legislation being discussed in Congress or of an individual legislator's opinion on the bill. From this qualitative analysis, three themes emerged in the limited news coverage of the ADA: its focus on the ADA's inconvenience to business; its portrayal of the protests as isolated events by individuals; and its focus on a white-middle class perspective in its use of sources.

The Business and Consumer Media Model

Under the business model, news media presented people with disabilities and their issues as costly to businesses and society. The cost of the ADA implementation was mentioned in almost half of the articles analyzed for this part of the study. In many cases, the fear of the bill's economic impact dominated the news articles. While supporters of the bill considered the ADA to be the most far-reaching civil rights bill in more than a quarter-century, opponents were "concerned about the cost of compliance and the prospect of lawsuits from disabled people who are not hired or served as customers."¹⁷ The newspaper presented the business community's perceptions repeatedly, highlighting the costs associated with the bill, with little mention of the injustices and discrimination people with disabilities endured because of the lack of accessibility and acceptance.

In an article written about the landmark ADA in *The Washington Post* on August 3, 1989, the author first acknowledged the intensity of the legislation, describing it as a “bill [that] is going to change this country forever. This bill is to the disabled community what the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was to the black community.”¹⁸ However, immediately after that, the author made mention of the strong reservations on the part of the business community. Fred Krebs, the manager of business and government policy for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, was quoted as saying “It’s still a bad bill,” and Susan Perry of the American Bus Association called the bill a virtual “death sentence” for the bus industry.¹⁹ The article did not expand on the business organizations’ opinions by further examining the costs and changes the businesses would be required to take. Instead, after reporting on the costs and punishments if businesses did not comply, the article ended with quotes from civil rights advocates. Rather than have the civil rights advocates respond to the concerns of the business community, the advocates only responded to their excitement over the landmark legislation. While at first glance the article appeared balanced on both the businesses and the ADA proponents’ sides, it lacked clarification about the costs and changes a business would have to make. For instance, in some cases all a business would need to do to employ a person with a disability was to provide minimal and inexpensive changes, yet those minimal adjustments were not mentioned. Instead the implied message was that the ADA and people with disabilities would in most, if not in every case, destroy businesses.

Similarly, another article that provided the business perspective was entitled “Business Not Fighting Bill For Disabled; Plan to Ensure Access, Affecting Phones to Buses, Raises Fears of Cost.” In this article the businesses tried to repair their image,

getting out the message that they did not oppose disability rights, but rather they were worried over the costs, especially for small business owners. The article explained how “business lobbyists said any strategy they undertake to modify the measure will be aimed at making it more practical and less burdensome financially.”²⁰ Nevertheless business lobbyists were quoted calling the legislation “a bullet to the heart” as well as quoting costs for implementation up to \$200 million annually. While the author disputed the astronomical costs suggested by businesses, the author also mentioned the hardship of publicly opposing the bill: “for those who must bear the costs, it is difficult to oppose individual rights in America.”²¹

The article “Bill Barring Bias Against Disabled Hold Wide Impact, Lawsuits Seen Over Cost, Businesses Expecting to Pay Hundreds of Millions to Meet Rules on Access” began by focusing on the business model exclusively. The article explained how the ADA legislation would cost hundreds of millions of dollars a year for businesses. Additionally, the article mentioned how the bill “will almost certainly invite a wave of lawsuits.”²² Businesses, including the Greyhound Lines asserted “any increase in our costs results in a decrease in our service to small towns.”²³ In addition to highlighting the costs associated with the bill the article discussed legislative support and explained how “no politician can vote against this bill and survive.”²⁴ The article failed to mention the numerous legislative members with a personal investment or interest in seeing the bill passed; rather the article appeared to imply that most legislators felt obligated to pass the ADA so as not to be portrayed negatively by the public. Only nearing the end of the article was a counterbalance given to the business model, with several of the bill’s sponsors minimizing the issue of costs saying the businesses had overestimated and short

sighted the costs. Senator Tom Harkin, a Democrat from Iowa, was quoted as saying “Costs do not provide the basis for an exemption from the basic principles in a civil rights statute. The mandate to end discrimination must be clear and unequivocal.”²⁵ Harkin further stated in the article that to “dwell on the costs misses the bigger picture.”²⁶ That same article also included the consumer model when it mentioned the economic benefits to society in “terms of reductions to the deficit from getting people off welfare, out of institutions and onto the tax rolls.”²⁷ In this article both proponents for and against the ADA legislation were represented, however, more attention and emphasis was placed on the impact for the businesses rather than the evidence given that downplayed the cost estimates.

One article that went as far as to defend a business’s inability to comply with the ADA was entitled “Even Helpful Bookseller Faces Problem With Act.” The article described how Olsson’s Books and Records Dupont Circle store was jammed with buyers and browsers in the “intellectual messiness” of books stacked up to the ceiling. The store’s assistant manager is quoted as saying how “people like to step over piles of books. It’s a sense of discovery and exploration.”²⁸ The article explained how the owner did not go out of his way to make life difficult for customers with disability and how the management “has made extraordinary efforts to carry wheelchairs up stairs or give personal assistance to the disabled book and music lover.”²⁹ While the article appeared to highlight the good efforts of the store, it failed to mention that for someone with a disability being carried up stairs in a wheelchair is not the ideal situation, and many wheelchair users would balk at the request. When the bookstore owner was asked if a person with a disability could do the routine clerical work the bookstore required, he

responded “it would be impossible to have a clerk in wheelchair...but not impossible to have a disabled worker do office work. They would be handled like anyone else. You always try to put people in positions that speaks to their strengths.” The article concluded with a quote from a disability lobbyist who uses a wheelchair and visited the bookstore. The lobbyist found the store “fairly accessible and the help friendly,” but suggested moving some bookshelves, making the aisles wider, generating a computer print out of the titles that are inaccessible or creating a ramp.”³⁰ In this case, the modifications would be relatively inexpensive—definitely not the extravagant costs some business owners suggested that the ADA compliance would cost.

Another such article in *The New York Times* that played to the business model included a cartoon drawing of a bus cut open to make a ramp for a person using a wheelchair. The headline was entitled “Bye, Bye, Bus Industry,” and the author explained in his essay how having a “lift on every bus is overkill.”³¹ Furthermore, the author believed that discussion about the ADA had been framed entirely by disability proponents “who insist that it is inappropriate to discuss costs in a ‘civil rights’ issue. By economically crippling the private bus industry with costly and unwarranted mandates, this bill would virtually eliminate the last form of public transportation available to most rural communities.”³² The author clearly does not include the disability perspective, especially from those people with disabilities who have been turned away from riding the bus, or for those people’s who only form of transportation is the public bus system. As Marilyn Golden, a policy analyst with the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, explained, “Bus travel is the only travel available to poor Americans, and disabled Americans are three times more likely to fall below the Federal poverty line than

nondisabled Americans. Bus travel is also the only route available to rural Americans, and disabled Americans live in rural areas in higher concentrations than the nondisabled.”³³

Even in articles about the passage of the ADA which hailed that the “powerful new disability rights law [would] emancipate millions of disabled people who spend their lives ‘overcoming not what God wrought but what man imposed by custom and law’ ...it’s what legislators have wrought and what courts may impose that concerns skeptics in the business community”³⁴ However, instead of focusing entirely on the business costs, this article mentioned the money that would be made from people with disabilities. As the article explained, “The government now spends \$60 billion a year to help support disabled people, including some eight million who want to work but can’t find it. The law will help transfer them from welfare ledgers to tax rolls.”³⁵ Additionally, the article dispelled the high costs business owners would pay, explaining that many changes would cost virtually nothing, such as altering work schedules.³⁶

Despite the praises given to Congress by the media for its promotion of the ADA, Congress balked on toughening penalties for businesses that refuse to comply with the bill. While most articles skimmed over Congress’s shift away from total support for the bill, one article in *The New York Times* brought these changes to the surface. In “Measure Barring Discrimination Against Disabled Runs Into Snag” Congress’s reluctance to support penalties for non-compliance was highlighted. The changes in the bill came at the same time that the disability protestors held a rally at the Rotunda and the “crawl in.” As one advocate was quoted, “Too often disabled people are seen as objects of charity or pity...we’re here to change that image. And we’re here to send a message to the President

and to Congress that this bill needs to be passed with no weakening amendments.”³⁷

Although this one article mentioned the weakened penalties, other articles brushed over the changes and only praised Congress for enacting the civil rights act.

‘Isolated Protests’ in Support of the ADA

In the five articles written in the days following the protest at the Capitol and the “crawl in” the newspapers characterized the demonstrators as just another individual activist group. Media coverage only focused on the regional pockets of activism, separating the protests over transportation issues in Atlanta from the “crawl in” at the Capitol steps. *The New York Times* wrote about the “more than 100 protestors in wheelchairs...arrested today in the Capitol Rotunda after they boisterously demonstrated for swift passage of a civil rights bill for the millions of Americans with physical and mental disabilities.”³⁸ The article explained that the protestors were part of a militant group and quoted the leader Wade Blank as saying, “We’re taking the strategies of the 60’s that helped get rights for black and brown people and women, and using them for people with disabilities.”³⁹ Despite Blank’s quote, the explanation for the protest was given little attention; instead the disorderly, illegal and disruptive acts were highlighted.

As Haller explained about the articles written on the demonstrators’ arrests in *The New York Times*, the language used reflected that “society may not yet understand what this empowerment means to the oppressed disability community...On the other hand, disability demonstrators are being characterized as just another activist group causing an uproar because of perceived injustices.”⁴⁰ The article pointed out how activists had broken the law and been defiant: “It focused on their demonstration in the Capitol as illegal under federal law. It explained how police had to dress in riot gar and use chain

cutters and acetylene torches to cut the chains that were used to link wheelchairs... The story's focus constructed the protest as costing time and money, forcing tourists out of the Capitol and requiring two hours for police to unchain the protestors."⁴¹ Similarly, coverage in *The Washington Post* approached the protests as a police story and only focused the article on the disorderly conduct of the demonstrations.⁴²

An article appearing a day after the first article on the protests occurred in *The New York Times*, attempted to reflect the larger picture about the civil rights movement taking place for people with disabilities. In the article "The Disabled Find a Voice, And Make Sure It Is Heard," the author explained how the attitudes of people with disabilities had shifted in the last two decades from "being passive recipients of institutional largess and paternalism to demanding a full role in society."⁴³ Yet, the article fell short of truly understanding the movement as it characterized the movement as a product of better technology:

The disability rights movement was shaped by a number of scientific, cultural and political forces. In many ways, it is a by-product of the technological revolution. Breakthroughs in medicine, the development of computers that allow the hearing and speech impaired to use telephones, and advancements in motorized wheelchairs have meant more people with severe handicaps live longer, can do more for themselves and have the potential for enjoying fuller lives.⁴⁴

While it is true that technology provided more opportunity for some, it must be acknowledged that this better technology was only available for a higher class of people.

Technology is costly and not everyone with disabilities can afford motorized wheelchairs, advanced medical treatments or computers with communication opportunities.

Nevertheless, the article was one of the few attempts to bring attention to the larger Disability Rights Movement, even mentioning the need to dispel discriminatory attitudes about people with disabilities: “You can’t legislate attitudes... But the attitudinal barriers will drop the more disabled people are employed, the more they can be seen on the street and when we become not just a silent minority, but full participating members of society.”⁴⁵ Despite the occasional connection of a protest to the Disability Rights Movement, for the most part newspaper articles isolated the “crawl-ins” and failed to connect one protest to another protest.

The White, Middle-Class Perspective

A common problem in reporting on disability issues is that the people with disabilities are rarely quoted. In examining the coverage surrounding the ADA, the sources used often included those who were white, middle-class and in almost every instance had a physical, rather than mental disability, despite the fact that the ADA legislation encompassed both physical and mental disabilities.

One article that included the disability perspective appeared in an article entitled “Doors Opening for the Disabled; New Law Would Require Sweeping Social Changes Proposed Disabled Law.” In this article 21-year-old Lisa Carl recounted being denied admission into a movie theatre because she used a wheelchair. The theatre owner told Carl’s mother who later called to inquire about the incident, “She can’t even open the goddamn door. I don’t want her in here, and I don’t have to let her in.”⁴⁶ In the same article another disability advocate told her experience of being denied a rental car

because she used a wheelchair. Later the article even mentioned Joseph F. Danowksy's, a blind attorney with a degree from Harvard Law School, experience with job discrimination. In job interviews Danowksy told interviewers he needed a reading assistant but would be able to work longer hours. He did not receive a single job offer. While he was eventually offered a job, he credited his employment to his Harvard credentials: "Why should someone with a disability have to go to one of those schools to get a job?"⁴⁷ Danowksy's question also raised an even larger point, which was that in many cases it was only the privileged people with disabilities who received access or partial acceptance. This article, which included the perspectives of several people with disabilities was absent from the usual business perspective and provided a fresh change from the typical business media model articles.

In the few instances where disability activists' perspectives were given, they only related to the more affluent people with disabilities, which in many cases included public figures. One such instance occurred in an article entitled "Ready, Willing and Disabled 'L.A. Law' Star Cited by Dole Foundation." In this article Senator Bob Dole, who has limited use of his right arm and left hand as a result of World War II injuries, discussed his organization called The Dole Foundation.⁴⁸ The article explained how the foundation helped people with disabilities find jobs. Dole stressed the need to change the public's perception about people with disabilities: "For a lot of people, it's attitude. They don't know what to do when they see a wheelchair. Some people cross the street—they're embarrassed to talk to somebody with a disability."⁴⁹ The article used Dole, a public figure, to discuss the need to change the public's perception about people with

disabilities, however, hundreds of other disability activists were also advocating the same message.

Silence of Text

While the themes that emerged from analysis about the ADA coverage are essential for understanding media coverage of disabilities, even more striking was what was not included. For instance, many articles failed to include the consumer incentives that would result from the passing of the ADA. Despite the fact that at that time there were labor shortages and the employment section of the ADA would most likely have increased the applicant pool for jobs as well as boost the economy, this was rarely included in articles. When the incentives were included, it lacked substance. For instance, in “Businesses Not Fighting Bill for Disabled, Plan to Ensure Access Affecting Phones to Buses, Raises ‘Fears of Cost,’” the federal affairs director for the American Restaurant Association was quoted as saying, “The public accommodations section also is a plus for business... ‘because if someone has a few extra dollars in their pocket, they’re going to go out and buy a hamburger. And we like people to buy hamburgers.’”⁵⁰ Never once in the article were disability advocates or organizations used as references; instead only directors of business organizations were referenced.

The disability activism of the protestors at the “crawl in” represented a nationwide Disability Rights Movement. Instead of expanding on the banding together of the 43 million people with disabilities to form the Disability Rights Movement, the newspaper focus was on the isolated group of demonstrators. For instance, in an article in *The Washington Post* about the sit-in at the Capitol, the article did acknowledge that many of the protestors were members of the American Disabled for Accessible Public

Transportation (ADAPT), a more militant disability group, but it failed to mention ADAPT's connection with the greater Disability Rights Movement.⁵¹

Another way in which garnering attention on the Disability Rights Movement was made more difficult was because of the newspaper's absence of the disability rights perspective. A common problem in reporting on people with disabilities was the lack of the disability right perspective. In reporting on the legislation and protests about the ADA, only a minimal number of quotes were given from people with disabilities or disability rights organizations or lawyers. Instead the focus remained on the business perspective while ignoring the perspective of the then 43 million Americans with disabilities. *The Washington Post* failed to include the disability perspective in articles written about the Atlanta transportation protest, a protest over the lack of access to public buildings, and the "crawl in" and arrest at the Capitol.

In the cases of the ADA the real experts, those with a disability, were seldom quoted. By not including the perspectives of those dealing with the inaccessibility and discrimination, the newspapers failed to provide readers with an inside look at the face of disability. Furthermore, it made it appear as though people with disabilities were incapable of speaking for themselves. Instead of using the opportunity to provide the disability perspective and perhaps help dispel the myths about this minority group, the lack of using this group of people as sources further kept people with disabilities isolated from the rest of society.

Discussion

The ADA embodied a civil rights issue that contrasted significantly to the perceived stereotypes about people with disabilities. In the past, media stereotypes about

people with disabilities had included the idea that this group of people were pitiable and pathetic, childlike, a burden and unable to live a successful life. However, the ADA proposed that people with disabilities should be given the same rights as other citizens, which included providing them with fair employment opportunities and accessibility to buildings and transportation.

The newspapers' analyzed revealed that the ADA legislation was covered in ways similar to how other legislative issues were reported. Rarely was the larger context of the Disability Rights Movement highlighted or explained to the public. Despite the emerging powerful and often time militant disability community, newspapers failed to recognize this group as being a united front. The protest paradigm, as described by Douglas M. McLeod and Benjamin H. Detenber in "Framing Effects on Television News Coverage of Social Protest," explained how often "examinations of news content shows that news stories about protests tend to focus on the protesters' appearances rather than their issues, emphasize their violent actions rather than their social criticism, pit them against the police rather than their chosen targets, and downplay their effectiveness."⁵² In the limited number of articles about the ADA protests, most the coverage was consistent with the protest paradigm as articles focused on the violence and lawlessness of those protesting rather than on their fight for civil rights.

On the occasions that the newspapers stepped out of the traditional legislative mode of presenting the articles, the papers framed the ADA as a civil rights issue; however, much more attention was placed on the business perspective and the costs of the bill's compliance rather than the discriminatory issues. One reason for the heightened emphasis on the business model stems from society interests at the time, which were

culturally focused on money and business. This differed from coverage in 1977 when the country had been experiencing a surge in civil rights activism from the African American and Women's Rights Movements, which was reflected in media coverage on civil rights.

Unlike the newspaper coverage of the 1977 protests which, for the most part, sought to educate and inform the public on the disability community, in the ADA coverage the protestors were separated from the larger Disability Rights Movement. Despite the fact that both Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the ADA were seen as civil rights legislation, the 1990 coverage was presented more as a legislative article, rather than a civil rights issue. Additionally, when comparing the coverage from 1977 to 1990 the ADA coverage failed to provide the disability perspective. Whereas the 1977 coverage included quotes from disability organizations, and persons with both physical and mental disabilities, rarely did this occur in 1990. Additionally, the ADA coverage focused on the business perspective almost exclusively, whereas the 1977 coverage tended to include both the business and the disability perspectives in articles. While the disability perspective was rare in the ADA coverage, in the cases that people with disabilities were used as sources, those with physical and visible, rather than hidden or mental disabilities were used as references.

Notes

¹ Susan F. Rasky, "Bill Barring Bias Against Disabled Holds Wide Impact," *New York Times*, August 14, 1989: A1.

² Beth Haller, "Crawling toward Civil Rights: A Qualitative Study of Media Coverage of Disability Activism" at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication annual meeting, Atlanta, Ga. August 1994: 479.

³ Steven A. Holmes, "The Disabled Find a Voice, And Make Sure It Is Heard," *The New York Times*, March 18, 1990: E5.

⁴ Haller, 478.

⁵ Joseph P. Shapiro, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1993), 105.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁷ "Study on Disabled and Jobs Find Work and Good Pay Are Scarce," *The New York Times*, August 16, 1989: A22.

⁸ Shapiro, 106.

⁹ Haller, 478.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 479.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 493.

¹² *Ibid.*, 480.

¹³ John Clogston, "Fifty years of disability coverage in the New York Times." Paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Montreal, Quebec 1992: 512.

¹⁴ Haller, 482.

¹⁵ Haller, 483.

¹⁶ Haller, 484.

¹⁷ Steven A. Holmes, "House Approves Bill Establishing Broad Rights for Disabled Persons," *The New York Times*, May 23, 1990: A1.

¹⁸ Paula Yost, "Accord Set on Disabled-Worker Bill; White House, Senators Endorse Anti-Discrimination Legislation," *The Washington Post*, August 3, 1989: A6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, A6.

²⁰ Paula Yost, "Business Not Fighting Bill for Disabled; Plan to Ensure Access, Affecting Phones to Buses, Raises Fears of Cost," *The Washington Post*, August 19, 1989: A12.

²¹ *Ibid.*, A12.

²² Rasky, A1.

²³ *Ibid.*, A1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, A1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, A1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, A1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, A1.

²⁸ Cindy Skrzycki, "Even Helpful Bookseller Faces Problem With Act," *The Washington Post*, May 25, 1990: A18.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, A18.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, A18.

³¹ Wayne J. Smith, "Bye, Bye Bus Industry," *The New York Times*, November 30, 1989: A1.

³² *Ibid.*, A1.

³³ Betsy Wade, "A Bill of Rights for the Disabled Nears Passage," *The New York Times*, December 17, 1989: XX3.

³⁴ Jason DeParle, "Realizing the Rights of the Disabled," *The New York Times*, December 17, 1989: E1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, E1.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, E1.

³⁷ Steven A. Holmes, "Measure Barring Discrimination Against Disabled Runs Into Snag," *The New York Times*, March 13, 1990: A20.

³⁸ Steven A. Holmes, "Disabled Protest and are Arrested," *The New York Times*, March 14, 1990: B7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, B7.

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- ⁴⁰ Haller, 492.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 493.
- ⁴² Stephen Buckley, "100 Disabled Arrested on Hill," *The Washington Post*, March 14, 1990: B4.
- ⁴³ Steven A. Holmes, "The Disabled Finds a Voice, And Make Sure It s Heard," *The New York Times*, March 18, 1990: E5.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, E5.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, E5.
- ⁴⁶ Sharon LaFraniere, "Doors Opening for the Disabled; New Law Would Require Sweeping Social Changes Proposed Disabled Law," *The Washington Post*, May 25, 1990: A1.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, A1.
- ⁴⁸ Roxanne Roberts, "Ready, Willing & Disabled; 'L.A. Law' Star Cited By Dole Foundation," *The Washington Post*, June 15, 1990: C1.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, C1.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, A12.
- ⁵¹ Stephen Buckley, "100 Disabled Arrested on Hill," *The Washington Post*, March 14, 1990: B4.
- ⁵² Douglas M. McLeod and Benjamin H. Detenber, "Framing Effects of Television News Coverage of Social Protest," *Journal of Communication*, Summer 1999: 3.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Vast improvements in quality of life have provided monumental changes for people with disabilities. Although once considered the most isolated and alienated in society, the disability community is currently the largest minority group in the nation and a growing awareness about people with disabilities has taken place in the past several decades. One way this awareness has occurred is with the Disability Rights Movement, which is changing the ways in which people think about civil rights. However, “the disability movement, unlike other civil right causes, remains rarely recognized and little celebrated.”¹ As the disability community has worked to gain acceptance and equal rights, the media have also been instrumental in helping this group gain a sense of identity within society, while at the same time reflecting some of the longstanding disability stereotypes and hindering their acceptance. This study reveals the complexity of the media coverage of disability issues and the differences that arose in articles as the coverage changed with each era.

Jack Nelson in “The Media Role in Building the Disability Community” explained the revolution occurring for people with disabilities and:

their portrayal in the media, their use of the media to achieve group aims and their use of the new on-line media to communicate with others who have limitations and the non-disabled world. In a very real way the growing

sense of community among those with disabilities has been linked to the media.²

Furthermore, Nelson examined how the media aided in the struggle of the disability community by taking “a large hand in changing the views of the public and the lawmakers.”³ While this study also found ways in which the media coverage aided in the passage of key legislative acts for people with disability, it should not be overlooked that the media also reinforced negative and misrepresentative stereotypes about this group. This study sought to examine the role of the media, and to understand how they covered the disability community and key moments in the Disability Rights Movement. From this analysis, the complexities of the media coverage about disability issues are revealed. While at times the media helped the disability community, providing attention to just causes and seeking to end discrimination, at other times the coverage reinforced outdated stigmas about people with disabilities and inaccurately portrayed this group.

Catherine Kudlick in “Disability History: Why We Need Another ‘Other’” explained how the study of disability should “sit squarely at the center of historical inquiry, both as a subject worth studying in its own right and as one that will provide scholars with a new analytic tool for exploring power itself.”⁴ It was significant to examine the nineteenth century magazine coverage about people with disabilities for a basis of comparison to the twentieth century newspaper articles. While various marginalized Other groups, such as African Americans and women, have campaigned somewhat successfully to change their public image, people with disabilities still carry a negative social charge. As Kudlick explained, “unlike racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities, disabled people experience attacks cloaked in pity accompanied by a widely

held perception that no one wishes them ill.”⁵ These demeaning representations about people with disabilities can be found everywhere:

from the media’s emphasis on normality, youth and bodily perfection and its feel-good holiday stories about blind people getting guide dogs to everyday expressions such as ‘a crippled/paralyzed economy,’ ‘blind obedience/rage/ambition,’ ‘that’s so lame/idiotic/dumb,’ ‘her suggestion fell on deaf ears,’ or in admonitions to ‘stand up for yourself.’⁶

Additionally, stigmatizing and negative portrayals persevered in books, dramas and early films.⁷ Referring back to the concept of Otherness, it is the construction of one group’s identity that can often lead to negative and misrepresentative stereotyping. Despite the massive changes that took place for the disability community in the twentieth century, including gaining civil rights, employment opportunities and accessibility, the media were slow to reflect the changes for this group. The media coverage played into outdated perceptions about people with disabilities, which resulted in timeless stereotypes about the disability community that continues in today’s media coverage.

After analyzing print media coverage about the disability community in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries similarities can be found by referring back to Nelson’s Four Stages of Community and the media’s role in these stages. Nelson discussed the Dark Ages of Disability and explained how the media often shunned, scorned and made people with physical and cognitive disabilities feel invisible or inadequate.⁸ Similarly, in examining magazine coverage in the nineteenth century a significant number of the articles also included these ideas about people with disabilities and referred to them as

being “hopeless, irreclaimable, [and] unimproveable.”⁹ The belief that people with disabilities were pitiable and hopeless creatures and needed to be separated from the rest of society because of their “abnormalities” was a common portrayal in magazine coverage during the 1800s.

The newspaper coverage of the 1977 protests surrounding the enactment of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 had commonalities to Nelson’s Awareness of Rights stage. In this stage, the media acknowledged that the rights of individuals needed to be protected, which was done by raising awareness about the disability community. Newspaper articles from 1977 made reference to the larger disability community and often informed the public about people with disabilities and the struggles they encountered from inaccessibility and discrimination. Additionally, the media made a point to explain the changing attitudes about this group of people by comparing the hardships they encountered to the struggles of African Americans and women in their fight for civil rights.

In the Mobilization to Action stage, a growing sense emerged among those with disabilities that they had rights, and they were part of a larger group and could gain power as a united front. The 1977 newspaper coverage explored this new group, and explained the growing militancy among the disability community and covered their protests at the Department of Health, Education and Welfare offices. In comparison to the 1989-1990 coverage, where the disability community originally sought to garner media attention for the passing of the ADA by holding “crawl-ins,” they soon found that their side of the story was, for the most part, ignored. Instead of gaining media attention for their actions, more focus was placed on explaining the businesses’ opinions to the ADA

passage. Still, it was the intention of the disability community to gain support and attention from the media.

Todd Gitlin in *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* explained media frames as “principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters.”¹⁰ After analyzing the nineteenth century magazine coverage as well as the newspaper coverage from 1977 and 1989-1990, it becomes apparent that the media frames in reference to disability issues varied substantially. The news stories that developed from the protests in the twentieth century have certain frames that “rejects or downplays material that is discrepant.”¹¹ Some of the media frames that existed can be explained by considering the political, cultural and economic situations taking place during the time period. For instance, the business model media frame of the ADA coverage was representative of the consumer culture of the 1980s and 1990s. In comparison, the 1977 civil rights framing of articles about Section 504 reflected the emphasis being placed on ending discrimination and awarding civil rights to all Americans. The use and repetition of terminology and slogans conceived during the African Americans’ Civil Rights Movement were used in articles written about the Disability Rights Movement in an effort to draw similarities between the two movements.

One of the most surprising discoveries when examining the 1977 and 1989-1990 coverage in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, was that the 1977 coverage appeared more progressive than the 1989-1990 coverage. One possible reason for this could have been that the 1960s and 1970s were a time of great social change for many Americans and the media spotlighted civil rights issues. Whereas the articles written

about the protests in 1977 sought to explain the needs of the protestors and connect their actions to a larger, oftentimes militant, disability community, the coverage in 1989-1990 did not make as much reference to the Disability Rights Movement. Instead the limited number of articles about the “crawl ins” were framed as a police story and the emphasis was on the lawlessness of a small group of people with disabilities. Rarely was there a reference to the Disability Rights Movement and their quest to gain the same rights that were already guaranteed to other Americans. The failure of the media to explain the Disability Rights Movement and the disability community to the public hampered the full inclusion for people with disabilities and many stereotypes about this group—including the idea that they were burdens, helpless, childlike or pitiable—continued.

Articles from 1977 were often two-sided, addressing the concerns of the business community about providing employment opportunities and accessibility to people with disabilities, unlike the 1989-1990 coverage which focused almost exclusively on the fears and concerns of businesses about having to comply with the ADA. Excluding the disability perspective in the coverage of the ADA was a disservice to the disability community, which could have used the heightened media attention about disability rights to provide the public with a better understanding about the face of disability. If more of the disability perspective had been included maybe the public would have understood that this was not a group that should be pitied or wanted charity. Instead maybe the public would have realized that the disability community was a group growing in number, and while they may experience some limitations they were fully capable of leading a happy successful life.

Although present day coverage of disability issues in the media use more politically correct language, for example, the term idiot was replaced with mental retardation and is now being referred to as mental or cognitive disabilities, some of the stigmatizing stereotypes that occurred in the nineteenth and twentieth century coverage remain. Nelson developed a list of longstanding disability stereotypes that are reflected in the current mainstream media's coverage which includes the idea that a person with a disability is pitiable and pathetic, a "super cripple," sinister, evil and criminal, better off dead, maladjusted, a burden and unable to live a successful life.¹² In examining the views of the media from the 1800s and in thinking about the present time, it is alarming that some of the same problems with the coverage of disabilities from the nineteenth century still exist today. Unfortunately, the unflattering depiction of people with disabilities as being pitiable and hopeless has carried on since the nineteenth century. Characteristics of people with cognitive disabilities as being pitiable, hopeless and violent are still reflected in today's coverage on disabilities, even if it is less noticeable to the general readership. Even now, disability advocates are still concerned with being depicted as someone who should be pitied, which can be found in articles that detail the hardships and discrimination that results from having a disability. In fact, a major component of the Disability Rights Movement relates specifically to the idea that people with a disability want others to realize there is no pity or tragedy in disability.¹³

Another stigma attached to people with mental illness that was revealed in nineteenth century coverage of the "insane" and still holds true in the present is the focus on violent and dangerous actions of people with mental illnesses. A study by Gail Auslander and Nora Gold referred to the depiction of people with mental illnesses on

broadcast media and found that television often depicted them as “dangerous and menacing, likely to commit acts of violence or be victimized, having no families and no worklife, and generally reinforcing the idea that disabled people are non-productive, marginal elements in society.”¹⁴ Similarly, in examining print coverage, Henry J. Steadman and Joseph J. Coccozza discovered that the media distort information about people with mental illness by overemphasizing bizarre symptoms that in actuality occur infrequently.¹⁵ Despite the fact that violence and crime from people with mental illness occurs infrequently, the demeaning stereotypes have remained in media coverage. A problem with the concept of Otherness as Russell Ferguson explained is that the negative, misrepresentative stereotyping about people that depart from the dominant and social norm—such as people with mental illness—are difficult to alter.

In addition to the shifting media frames between the centuries, it was interesting how the types of disabilities varied in each time period. Whereas the magazine coverage from the 1800s looked more at mental illness and cognitive disabilities, the twentieth century coverage focused almost exclusively on physical disabilities. Some of the differences undoubtedly had to do with the fact that in the 1800s medicine was not advanced enough to allow as many people with physical disabilities to survive. However, the coverage from the twentieth century focused more on physical disabilities than cognitive. One speculation for this is because many of the activists groups protesting during the 1970s and 1980s-1990s were organizations for people with physical disabilities. However, another reason could simply have been because reporters felt more comfortable around a person with a physical disability, such as someone who used a wheelchair, rather than someone whose speech was difficult to understand or someone

who looked significantly different from others. Furthermore, as evident from the pictures in newspapers from the 1989 “crawl in” that only showed children crawling up the Capitol steps, rather than the adults, the media often wanted to be as aesthetically appealing as possible and showing a smiling child in a picture was less uncomfortable for the general public than featuring an adult struggling up the steps on his elbows.

Few people would doubt that the changes made since the nineteenth century in how people with disabilities are treated and regarded have been for the better. Still, it should not be overlooked that while nineteenth century magazine coverage praised the work being done by social reformers for the education and training of those with a disability, it was an elite group who decided which people should be separated from the rest of the society because of their differences. The isolation and categorization of groups of certain people referred to in the magazines’ coverage produced dire consequences throughout history. The coverage in the twentieth century reflected these consequences as newspaper articles still referred to people with disabilities as a group outside of the norm. The perspective of the person with the disability was often missing. Instead of using the person with a disability as a source, the articles about the protests, especially in 1990, only referred to the legal actions taking place, or quoted a legislator or other public figure. Similarly, the coverage from the 1800s often lacked the disability perspective. Although some articles in the nineteenth century were written by people who had been in a mental institution, for the most part, physicians and schoolmasters were used as sources rather than people with disabilities. Excluding the perspective of the disability community prevented this group’s voice from being heard and further reinforced the

stereotype that those with disabilities are childlike and incapable of speaking for themselves.

Since disability stereotypes are so engrained in the media, it falls on journalists to take steps to change these longstanding myths. Judgment about people with disabilities must be taken out of the language used in the media coverage. Continuing to use outdated disability terminology further disables people through stereotypes. Journalists should analyze disability reporting, which could be done by considering the elements of the story including the perspective the article takes, the sources and the language used.

Additionally, journalists should take advantage of the large quantity of resources available on disabilities, both in books and on the Internet. The People First Language guidebook would be a starting point for learning which terminology is most acceptable. Additionally, becoming more comfortable speaking with people with disabilities is essential and can be done by immersing oneself in the disability community and learning more about disabilities. The National Center on Disability and Journalism, founded in 1998, is another place that provides opportunities for journalists to receive education in disability reporting.

While the disability community has made great strides in gaining full acceptance under the law, it is inevitable that there will be future legislation regarding disability rights. Studying the ways in which the media covered issues of disability in the past helped in understanding the twentieth century and current coverage in terms of the ways in which stereotypes are used, the public perception about people with disabilities, and how disability issues are sometimes ignored and misrepresented. This study is helpful for determining what changes should be made when the media reports on future disability

issues. In examining the views of the media from the 1800s and in thinking about the twentieth century newspaper coverage, it was alarming that some of the same problems with the coverage about disabilities from the nineteenth century still existed. Magazine and newspaper coverage reflected the existing perception of the disability community as a group that should be pitied, as being a burden to society and harmful to businesses, and as unable to speak for themselves. Although the terminology used in the articles improved significantly between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many of the beliefs that existed about the disability community remained. While it can be argued that media coverage, even if it is not an accurate portrayal, is better than no coverage, until the stereotypes diminish completely from the media, the public will continue to receive inaccurate depictions of this group in society.

Notes

¹ Joseph Shapiro, *No Pity: People With Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1993), 339.

² Jack Nelson, "The Media Role in Building the Disability Community," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 15:3 (2000): 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴ Catherine Kudlick, "Disability History" Why We Need Another 'Other,'" *American Historical Review*, June 2003: 765.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 768.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 768-769.

⁷ Nelson, 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹ "Idiots," *Littell's Living Age* 38 (1853): 218

¹⁰ Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4.

¹³ Shapiro, 5.

¹⁴ Gail Auslander and Nora Gold, "Media reports on disability: a binational comparison of types and causes of disability as reported in major newspapers," *Disability and Rehabilitation* 21:9 (1999): 421.

¹⁵ Henry J. Steadman and Joseph J. Coccozza, "Selective Reporting and the Public's Misconceptions of the Criminally Insane," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 41 (1977-78): 523.

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