

Improving Communications about People with Disabilities

Recommendations of a
United Nations Seminar



Cover photographs:

- 1. From a Canadian fund-raising campaign*
- 2. Photograph from United Nations Press Kit for the International Year of Disabled Persons*
- 3. David McFarlane, Canadian with mental retardation, actor in a TV movie*
- 4. Alan Toy, successful U.S. actor*

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Improving Communications about People with Disabilities



RECOMMENDATIONS OF A UNITED NATIONS
SEMINAR, 8 - 10 JUNE 1982,
VIENNA

Foreword

The role of the information media in helping to accomplish the goals of the International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP) was examined by a seminar in Vienna, Austria, 8-10 June 1982. The meeting was organized by the United Nations Department of Public Information, based at the New York headquarters of the world organization.

Participants were disabled and non-disabled specialists in the media and rehabilitation fields.

The group developed guidelines to assist media personnel in improving public perception of people with disabilities and of the ramifications of life with a disability. The draft guidelines were augmented by a number of specialists around the world.

Since organizations of and for disabled persons are increasingly involved in public education programmes, a set of guidelines was developed to assist these efforts as well. As recommended by the meeting, both sets of guidelines are presented here, supplemented with illustrations.

The meeting recognized that some of the guidelines would be more or less appropriate, depending on each country's unique prism of social, economic and cultural factors.

It is hoped that the wide distribution of this booklet, implementation of the guidelines and initiation of recommended activities will help to perceptibly improve the image of people with disabilities in the media.

Acknowledgements

The following people deserve special thanks for their help in producing the guidelines and this booklet:

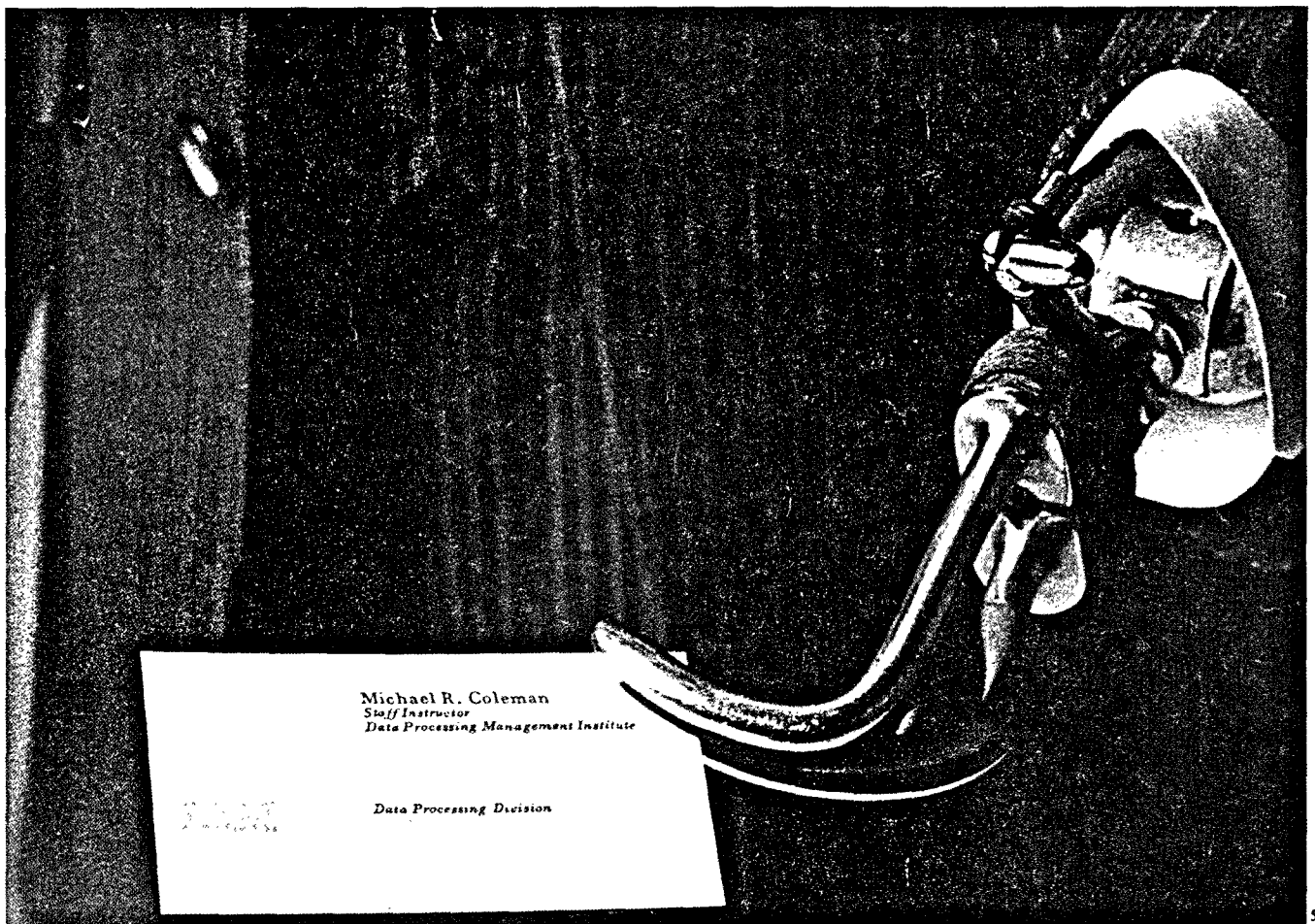
Norman Acton, Secretary General of Rehabilitation International, for his guidance throughout the process;

Barbara Kolucki, expert on the media and disability, for her assistance in organizing the meeting and editing the guidelines and booklet;

Alan Brightman, Assistant Director, Community Foundation of Greater Boston, Boston, Mass., U.S.A. for his participation throughout;

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The seminar participants and those who responded with suggestions for improving the guidelines.



Above is a positive example of an advertisement which appeared in the mass media during 1981.

Introduction

In newspapers, books and magazines, on television and in the cinema, on stage and through the airwaves, the media exert a uniquely powerful influence on how individuals come to understand the changing world around them. Whether one views any media form as a window on a wider world or as a mirror on one's own surroundings, the media's capacity to examine and communicate about people, places and ideas is unequalled.

Mindful of the media's ever-expanding role in shaping society's views of itself and mindful that an estimated 10% of every society is composed of individuals with disabilities, the United Nations, in the summer of 1982, convened a working group of specialists from around the world to formulate guidelines for the inclusion and portrayal of disabled people in the media. This group worked in Vienna and drafted guidelines that were then distributed to individuals and agencies in 77 countries for critical review.

Several primary considerations must be appreciated in order to make full and effective use of the guidelines:

1. Every attempt was made to formulate guidelines that could be adapted by individuals working in all forms of media in different countries and situations. What follows are not rules that must be rigidly adhered to in the same manner by everyone. They are, instead, suggestions designed to facilitate the accurate and appropriate portrayal of disabled individuals in a variety of media, while still encouraging the range of creativity and individuality that is inherent in the media industry.

2. The guidelines were developed with reference to all disability groups including individuals with limited or no vision, hearing or speech; individuals who are mentally retarded; individuals with limited mobility; individuals with emotional disturbances; and others impaired by chronic illness and other factors. Similarly, they were developed to be appropriate to media designed to inform, educate and to entertain.

3. Finally, it is important that people working in the media not lose sight of the guidelines' primary objective:

TO PRESENT PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN WAYS, THAT, WHEREVER POSSIBLE, DEMONSTRATE THEIR VARIED, POSITIVE AND MULTIDIMENSIONAL PARTICIPATION IN SOCIETY.

The guidelines, as revised by a subgroup on the basis of the world-wide review, are contained in this booklet.



Some Positive Media Presentations

BREAK DOWN THE BARRIERS

One of a series of posters used in Australia to promote the International Year of Disabled Persons.

TV MAILBAG

Toward a Truer Picture Of the Disabled

To the Editor:

John J. O'Connor's essay "On TV, Illness Is an Epidemic" [Oct. 19] vividly points up the saturation method of programming a given theme or format that has characterized American commercial television. He recounted the television's latest preoccupation with dramas, documentaries and situation comedies built around the tragedies and triumphs of disabled people. Mr. O'Connor concluded that such interest in the disabled as subject matter for television will eventually peak, the disabled will be dropped, and television programming will move on to something else.

Of greater concern to many disabled people, and to those of us who serve or represent their interest, is the fact that television continues to miss the target. The current extreme portrayals of the severity of some disabilities and the triumphs of some individuals over them can indeed be moving and inspiring, but they reflect rather than expand the already limited level of awareness within the general population regarding disabilities and people who are disabled.

All disabled persons are nor super-achievers nor are they totally destroyed by their disability. They are average individuals who reflect the social, economic and intellectual makeup of our society. As Executive Director of the American Foundation for the Blind, Inc., and a visually impaired person myself, I speak from my experience with blindness, but I am sure that persons with other impairments have similar thoughts.

Teaching, law, psychology, engineering, secretarial, technical and factory work are some of the professions and occupations in which persons who are blind are employed. They are parents and grandparents; they are children; young adults and older persons. Any one of them can possess any of the qualities or shortcomings found in human nature. In short, most characters portrayed in television programs could be individuals who happen to be blind. Rather than programming stories about blind people, television should include people who are blind in the stories they program.

WILLIAM F. GALLAGHER
New York City

Letter to the Editor of a major daily newspaper regarding television programming about disabled persons.

Elizabeth Fanshawe Illustrated by
RACHEL Michael
 Charlton



Popular British children's book about a girl whose disability does not prevent her from attending regular school or having meaningful relationships with non-disabled persons.



A photograph from a UNICEF film nominated for an Academy Award ("Oscar"). It tells the story of people with disabilities from developing and developed areas of the world through personal profiles.

"Game" — written by Ted Bates 58 secs
 V/O Dicky Davies

Hi — I'm Dicky Davies. I've got a little game for you. Name the odd one out. Ray Charles. José Feliciano. George Benson. Stevie Wonder. The odd man out? Well it's George Benson — He's the only one who can see. All the others, great stars, are blind.

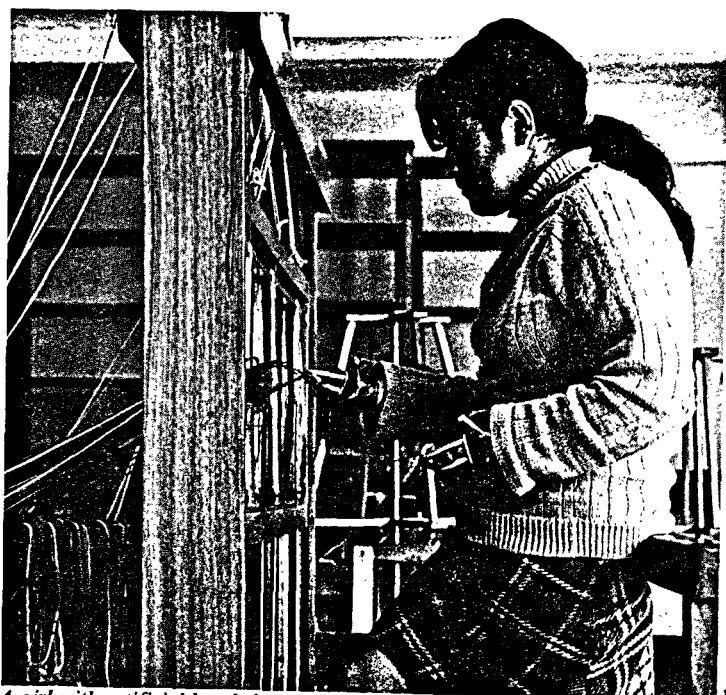
1981 is the IYDP. There are 120,000 blind people in Great Britain and you can help. Please see the person and not the problem.

One of a series of IYDP Public Service Radio announcements from the United Kingdom.



Photograph from United Nations press kit for IYDP.

1. Depict people with disabilities at home, at work, at school, at leisure and in a variety of other ordinary social and physical situations.



A girl with artificial hands learning to weave in Bogota, Colombia.

10



Book designed to acquaint children with a young girl with a disability. It is part of a series of publications supplementing a U.S. TV programme.

11



Disabled persons with multiple handicaps perform work on a wage rate basis in Budapest, Hungary.

12

2. Acknowledge the natural curiosity and occasional awkwardness that may develop in social situations involving disabled and non-disabled individuals. Where appropriate, provide positive examples in which such curiosity is satisfied and in which awkwardness is lessened.



By Berke Breathed, U.S. syndicated cartoonist, known for his use of a person with a disability as one of several different characters. As shown here, he often humorously presents the awkwardness of non-disabled persons towards people who are disabled.

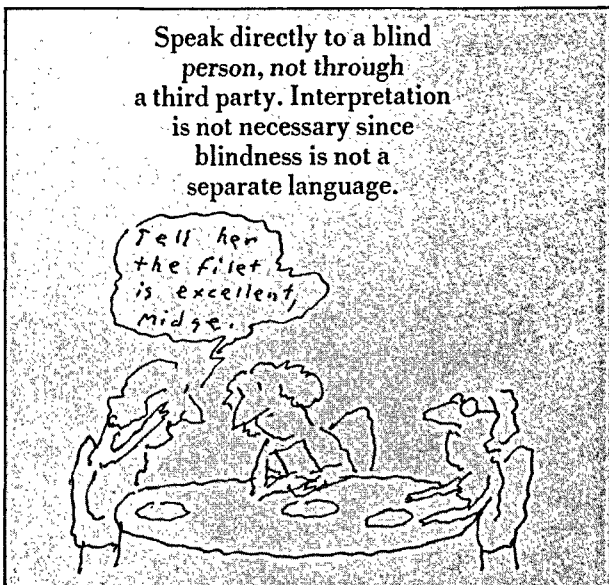


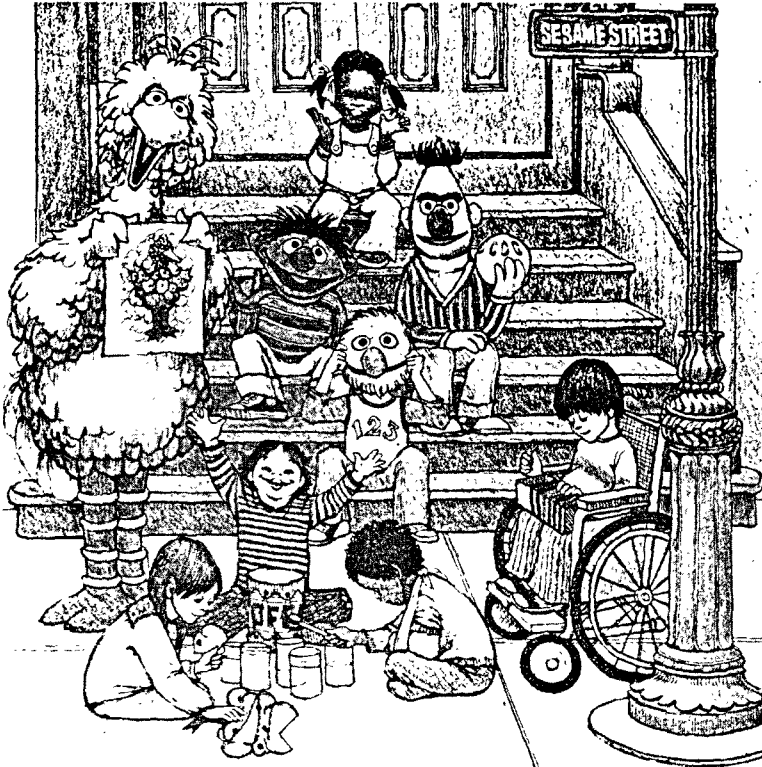
Illustration from a widely distributed public education booklet, "What do you do when you see a blind person?"



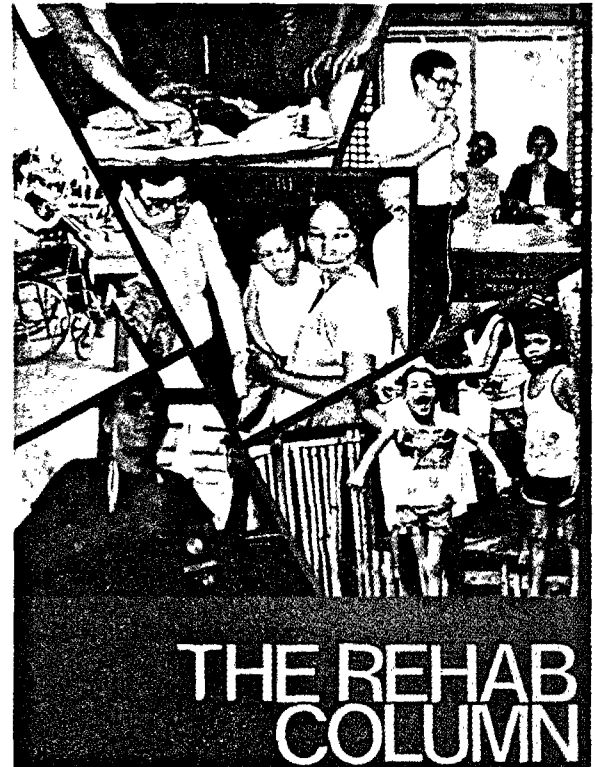
A Danish IYDP poster illustrating the correct ways of communicating with individuals with hearing impairments.

"If I had one thing to tell people I would say stop treating me so specially, stop being afraid of me."
Ed Roberts
Director,
Dept. of Rehabilitation
State of California

3. Include people with disabilities as part of the general population in media products in addition to those in which their story is the primary focus.



Sesame Street, a U.S. educational TV show for pre-school youngsters, has regularly included children and adults with disabilities since 1974. The producers also recently created a disabled puppet character. Sesame Street can be seen in English in 30 countries around the world and there are 9 other language versions of the show.



A compilation of newspaper columns which appeared regularly in a major Philippine newspaper. The Philippine National Commission Concerning Disabled Persons also circulates "Broadcasters Newswatch", a quarterly newsletter sent to radio and TV broadcasters which provides appropriate information on disability prevention and rehabilitation programmes.



A disabled person working together with other workers in an umbrella factory in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

4. Avoid presenting people with disabilities as dependent or pitiful. Other stereotypes to be avoided include presenting people with disabilities as inherently saintly or asexual, gratuitously dangerous or uniquely endowed with a special skill due to a disability.



19



20

19
Scene from a film portraying a monster man attacking a woman, a favourite theme of horror movies.

20
A well-known story book character Hook, stirs up children disabilities in adults.



21



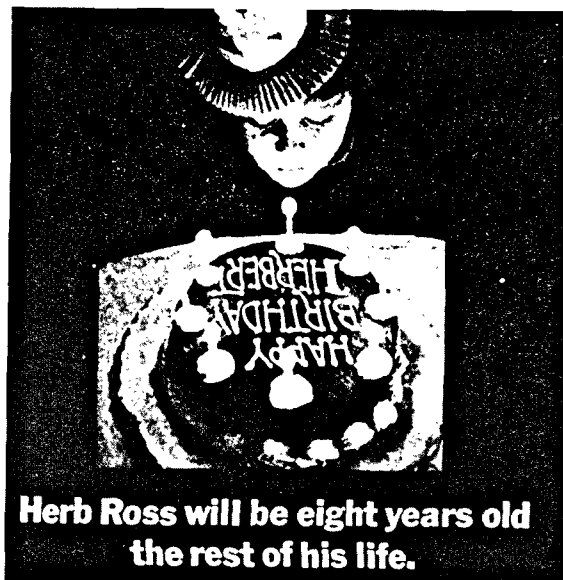
22

21
This photo from a fund-raiser plays on the public's pity for disabled persons. Many charities present the services provided as a privilege, not a matter of rights.

22



23



24

23
Many fund-raisers play on the myth that disabled people need a miracle. Yet, what most people with disabilities need is not a miracle, but simply an end to stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination.

24
The message in this photo from a public education campaign is that a person who is retarded will be a child forever, rather than having any possibilities for maturation.

Herb Ross will be eight years old the rest of his life.

5. Consider carefully the words used to describe or characterize disabled individuals. Recognize and avoid phrases that may demean these individuals (e.g., blind as a bat, deaf and dumb).

Some recent negative headlines from the press:

No Longer a Human Wreck
Handicapped No Longer Act Like It
Bilateral Amputee Is A Lesson In Courage
Device Helps CP Victim Widen His Horizons
Washington Sees Dramatic Gains As Retarded Move To Community
Pinball Machine Helps Brain-damage Cases

The above headlines, extracted from the daily press from several countries, are negative examples of words often chosen to describe people with disabilities. The words used demean people with disabilities in the following manner:

- The words “victim” and “human wreck” present a picture of a less than human and pitiful person, devoid of dignity.
- To refer to someone as an adjective (handicapped, retarded) rather than a noun (person who is disabled or person who has a disability, person with retardation or who is retarded, etc.) is to negate his/her personhood.
- The use of “cases” and “bilateral amputee” reduce a person to a medical condition.

Below are some examples of terms which are preferable to those used:

AFFLICTED WITH — say “The person has...”

CRIPPLE/CRIPPLED/THE CRIPPLED — say “The person with a disability” or “individual with a disability.”

INFLICTED — say “caused by”

AN INVALID — say “the person who has a disability resulting from or caused by...”

RESTRICTED TO/CONFINED TO — say e.g. “uses a wheelchair” or “walks with crutches.”

VICTIM OF — say “person who has...”, “person who experienced...”, or “person with...”

WHEELCHAIR BOUND — say “uses a wheelchair.”

THE RETARDED — say “person who is retarded” or “person who has mental retardation.”

6. Portray people with disabilities in the same multidimensional fashion as others.

Some positive examples



People with mental retardation can also complete an education.



The art of make-up is not restricted to non-disabled people.



People with disabilities enjoy music just like everybody else — shown here is a band consisting of disabled persons in Thailand.

7. Present the achievements and difficulties of people with disabilities in ways that do not overemphasize the impairment or exaggerate or emotionalize the situation. For example, in news stories and documentary reports, the fact of a person's disability should be reported only when it is directly relevant.

positive presentations



This photograph demonstrates that with the proper assistance, a child with mental retardation can participate with his peers.

28

Mental Patient Dies on Staten I. After a Sedation

The Fourth Similar Case at State-Run Hospital

By JOSEPH B. TREASTER

A 27-year-old mental patient at the South Beach Psychiatric Center on Staten Island died Wednesday shortly after he had been injected with a sedative and placed in a straitjacket, city and state officials said yesterday.

...appropriately includes mention of a
...is necessary information to
...news item.

negative presentations



BREAK DOWN THE BARRIERS

This Australian poster unnecessarily dwells on the isolation which can befall a person with a disability. It is intended to arouse pity.

29

"The jobless handyman, who lives next door to the Kellys, was described as an alcoholic and mentally incompetent psychotic who was mentally retarded."

This news story uses demeaning, and in some cases, meaningless labels which have no news or information value.

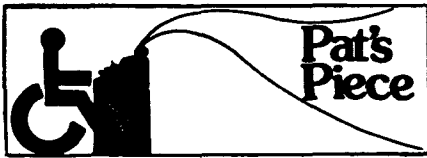
8. Information should be provided to the public about prevention and treatment of impairments that lead to disability, as well as the availability of services for people with disabilities and their families. This can be done through public information campaigns and also can be integrated into general products.



This scene on accident prevention is from a TV series designed to increase awareness of major health problems.



This picture illustrates how people can become disabled in their daily work.



32



33



34

Newspapers and Disability, United Kingdom. Pat Saunders is a United Kingdom writer who has just written his 120th weekly article for the press. He is physically disabled and, after eight months of being rejected, was asked to be a feature writer for a British newspaper, writing under the heading "Pat's Piece", on the affairs of people with disabilities. He says "It is up to us, the disabled, to close the gap by seeing that every provincial paper in the country has a weekly feature for disabled people. When possible the writer should be disabled; that way he has natural empathy with readers. The article should give information. Entertainment and humor help to bring in the casual reader." In response to the draft of the media guidelines, Mr. Saunders stressed the difficult role of the journalist as an interpreter of experts to the common man.

It is recognized that people in the media might need assistance to ensure that their products are accurate, sensitive and fair when relating to people with disabilities. These additional guidelines are suggested to be of further assistance:

1. Include people with disabilities in all aspects and at all levels of media development and production. Create opportunities for this inclusion, ranging from administrative, creative and technical staff to participation in consulting and training programmes.
2. Establish effective contacts with people with disabilities and with those who are personally or professionally involved with the issue of disability. These include persons knowledgeable about both media and disability, organizations of and for people with disabilities, families with a disabled member, parent groups, civic groups and educators.
3. Facilitate access by people with disabilities to the media and encourage their critical evaluation of media products.

Theatre and Disability, Australia and the USSR

The two photographs at left show talented people with disabilities already involved in artistic productions for the public. Photograph 33 depicts a dancer with a USSR national troupe of performers who are deaf or hearing impaired. At left is a member of an Australian theatre troupe of performers with mental disabilities. A film of their debut at the Sydney Opera House, entitled, "Stepping Out", has won high critical acclaim around the world.

TV Captioning for People who are Deaf or Hearing Impaired

The provision of captions for television news and entertainment programmes has begun recently in several countries. For the first time people with severe hearing impairment have access to information provided by the media. In places where captioning is found to be too expensive, sign language interpretation is often used.

Radio Station for Disabled, Australia

Radio station (7RPH) in Hobart, Australia held its second open house in 1981. It is a station for people with disabilities and it invited all visitors, particularly those interested in volunteering — from technical programming to administration. It also requested assistance to help make the station accessible to people with physical disabilities. Hobart's open house exemplifies not only people with disabilities actively involved in all aspects of running the studio, but also an effort to make "media places" accessible. And, non-disabled people are encouraged to work together with people who are disabled.

Television Interview, Hong Kong

This person with a disability is being interviewed for a television programme in Hong Kong. It demonstrates that people with disabilities can and should be on camera speaking for themselves whenever possible.

Some comments about the media and disability

"There are some problems related to the mass media, internationally and nationally. On the international level, the mass media is concentrating on and giving more concern to the political issues. Even the mass media within the United Nations itself is doing so. How can one raise the awareness of the international community about the rights of disabled persons if the international mass media does not play an active role in this regard? This media is invited to participate in and promote the success of the IYDP."

Statement by Ambassador
Mansur R. Kikhia, Chairman of
the UN Advisory Committee
for the International Year of
Disabled Persons, 1980.

"One of the main basic objectives of the year was to inform the public of the rights of the disabled persons, to alert National Governments and the international community regarding the need for social integration of disabled persons, to foster awareness of the abilities of disabled persons in order to mitigate still existing prejudices against such persons and to promote more positive attitudes towards them.

After the International Year of Disabled Persons, the media cannot only assist in fighting the remaining prejudices of all kinds but may help the public to look at the disabled person so as to see not his disability, but his talent or evident abilities."

Statement by Mrs. Leticia R.
Shahani, UN Assistant
Secretary-General, Centre for
Social Development and
Humanitarian Affairs and
Special Representative of the
Secretary-General for IYDP,
1981.

"Highly persuasive communication is ordinarily needed if a point of view is to have any hope of changing a generally held attitude. Successful communication must impact on an individual's attitude, either by way of altering currently held attitudes or developing a desired attitude."

Mike McFarland,
Canadian Rehabilitation Council for the
Disabled

"Affliction themes (stories about the tragedies and triumphs of a temporarily or permanently disabled person) do not promote positive attitudes as well as subtle, natural, everyday integration."

UN Media Seminar

"In addition to not presenting people with disabilities as extraordinary, don't present people who work with them as such either."

UN Media Seminar

"Care should be exercised to ensure that not only those disabled people who are strong, athletic and physically attractive are highlighted, but also those who may be weaker, or plainer."

Heather Coombes,
Australian Council for
Rehabilitation of the Disabled

"It is most important to have disabled people working in all areas of media production...an information service for the media is a good idea, but difficult to fund and to develop to the level of needed expertise.

...Recognition for outstanding media portrayals is a great idea...It is important also for some competent source to advise those responsible when a production is not done right."

Tom Bettag, Producer
"60 Minutes", CBS, USA

"Present competent disabled adult role models to children with disabilities."

UN Media Seminar



Recommendations to Organizations of and for People with Disabilities

Organizations which, because of their own experience, have knowledge, information and insights concerning the problems of disability, must accept a special responsibility to ensure that the media present people with disabilities and the issues related to disability in ways that are constructive. Each organization should ensure that all its media outreach, including fund-raising campaigns, publications and other presentations, be **models** in their attention to the dignity of people with disabilities.

Measures that will be effective in this regard include the following:

1. Promote and make widely available to the major media the guidelines developed by this seminar. Whenever possible, organizations are urged to communicate the guidelines through direct personal contact with those individuals responsible for developing and producing media.
2. Establish a system by which media presentations about persons with disabilities can be systematically and critically examined and by which the results of such examination, positive and negative, is regularly reported to the media.
3. Collect examples of outstanding presentations of subjects related to disability in the different media forms and bring them to the attention of all media.
4. Organize seminars of persons with disabilities, advocates and media representatives to develop and implement plans for promoting public awareness, understanding and acceptance of people with disabilities. Such plans should be reviewed and revised regularly.
5. Establish an information service to provide personal and practical assistance to the media in their efforts to develop products for and about persons with disabilities.
6. Develop a network to encourage and train people with disabilities to participate on all levels and in all forms of the media. Include in training programmes, seminars, workshops and informal clubs in which persons with disabilities may develop their skills in all fields related to the media. These different forums should whenever possible include participation by people who are not disabled.
7. Ensure that all institutions and organizations dealing with training and research in fields associated with the media incorporate disability-related subjects as a regular part of their work.
8. Make use of mobile media units where appropriate to inform about prevention, education, rehabilitation and training of disabled persons.
9. Ensure that people who are disabled, their families and communities are taking an active part in media activities through group discussion, community activities and feedback to the media (e.g., farm radio forums, teleclubs, reading groups, cineclubs and viewing sessions for and by the target groups).
10. In addition to the mass media, give attention to oral and other traditional forms of communication, especially in areas not regularly served by the mass media.
11. Co-ordinate, on a national basis, all actions taken in regard to the media with other organizations of and for disabled persons.

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Cover

1. The Canadian Rehabilitation Council for the Disabled
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3. From the TV film "One of our Own" produced by CBC
4. Alan Toy

Page 5

5. IBM Corporation

Pages 6 and 7

6. IYDP Poster (Australian National Committee for IYDP)
7. "Rachel", by Elizabeth Fanshawe, illustration by Michael Charlton
8. UNICEF film — photo by Tom Marolta
9. UN Press Kit for IYDP

Page 8

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11. Alan J. Brightman, from "Feeling Free"
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- 19-24 Human Policy Press, Syracuse, New York

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26. New York Public Library
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29. IYDP Poster (Australian National Committee for IYDP)

Page 15

30. Children's Television Workshop
31. WHO/ILO

Pages 16 and 17

32. Pat Saunder's "Pat's Piece"
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