



Media guide

Reporting on athletes
with a disability

In cooperation with:



Aktion
MENSCH



www.aktion-mensch.de



Martin Schlitt deftly delivers the next stone for the German National Wheelchair Curling Team.

© Ralf Kuckuck, DBS-Akademie



A new perspective

The media has a major influence on the public's perception of people with a disability. It serves as a source of information and has the ability to highlight shared aspects of the lives of people with and without a disability, instead of creating stereotypes. However, athletes with a disability are often depicted as “victims” or “heroes”, with phrases such as “bravely overcoming her lot in life”. Many of them – both at the Paralympic and the recreational level – would like to see a different kind of media coverage, one that focuses on the person rather than their disability. Aktion Mensch has joined forces with Leidmedien.de, a project of the non-profit organisation Sozialhelden (“Social Heroes”), to promote media reporting that uses non-discriminatory language. This guide provides tips and recommendations on how you can help change how people with a disability are perceived.

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He sets himself ambitious goals despite his physical impairment.

From a newspaper article. Response by **Martin Fleig**, Paralympian, biathlon and cross-country skiing

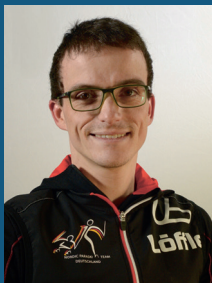
She not only battles against her opponents, but also against her disability.

From a news magazine. Response by **Andrea Rothfuss**, Paralympian, alpine skiing – © Paul Hoffmann

She overcomes her lot in life.

From a TV programme. Response by **Anna Schaffelhuber**, Paralympian, alpine skiing – © Bernhard Steiner

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“I don’t take part in sport *despite* my physical impairment – I simply do it *with* my impairment. It’s part of my life; it doesn’t stop me from showing what I’m capable of. Of course, experiencing success is motivating and plays an important role.”



“I ski because I enjoy it and because I enjoy competing with and against other people. I never ‘battle’ against my disability; it’s not relevant when I compete.”



“I certainly don’t consider my disability to be my ‘lot in life’. I think that has a negative ring to it. To me, my wheelchair is completely normal and a given so there’s nothing to overcome either. Skiing is my passion – pure and simple.”

Tips and topics



Deaf martial artist and actor Benjamin Piwko gives an interview – © Andi Weiland, Gesellschaftsbilder.de

Recommendations for choosing a topic

- Consider whether your piece is just going to be about the way of life of a person with a disability or whether you want to cover all sides of a multifaceted individual who has a disability.
- Make sure you also consider socially and environmentally disabling factors (for example, prejudice, unemployment and lack of accessibility) that prevent people who have an impairment from participating in society as equals.
- Look for aspects that affect both people with and without a disability (accessibility being important for buggy and rollator users too, for instance).

Conducting an interview

General recommendations: Ask your interview partner in advance **what they need** to ensure that the interview goes smoothly for them. This could include points such as where the interview takes place and how he or she wishes to communicate. **Avoid helping** (pushing someone's wheelchair or touching their things, for example) **if you have not been asked to**. The person will tell you if they want assistance. Talk to them as **an equal**, ideally at eye level. Don't just talk to the person accompanying them (assistant, interpreter, etc.)

Specific recommendations: **Blind people** need clear directions and details in order to position themselves properly for a photo, for example. **Autistic people** may well prefer clear structures (a fixed timeframe, for instance) and may want any communication to be in writing. They may also wish to be interviewed in a quiet place (which can also be true of **people with a hearing impairment**). **Deaf people** often need a sign language interpreter. **People with a learning disability** (sometimes referred to as an "intellectual disability") may require simplified language. **People who stutter** want to be able to finish what they are saying.

Content recommendations: Ask your interview partner **what topics are ok**. What about their private life, for example? Be careful not to make assumptions. For instance, not all athletes with a disability turn to sport to "overcome" their disability – they may simply be passionate and ambitious about their sport (and not just participate for fun). Make sure the tone of your piece doesn't overdramatise the story – **portraying people with a disability as "heroes" or "victims" tends to set them apart** instead of building bridges. Use varied visual content (photographs and graphics) to show **multifaceted individuals instead of merely persons with or without a disability**.

Terminology suggestions

When reporting on athletes with a disability, the most important thing is not to use patronising language. As different people and organisations consider different terms disrespectful and as opinions change over time, it is always best to ask them directly or to consult their terminology guide. Journalists should also be aware that there are some words and phrases that are considered more acceptable or are more commonly used in specific varieties of the English language.



Avoid	Instead try
Handicap, handicapped	Disability (medical model) or impairment (social model), disabled
Athlete with a handicap, handicapped athlete	Athlete with a disability (general), para-athlete (competitive), Paralympian (athlete at the Paralympic Games)
Blind	Person with a visual impairment
Care	Assistance



Avoid

Instead try

Confined to a wheelchair,
wheelchair-bound

Uses a wheelchair

Cope with a disability

Live with a disability

Deaf and dumb, deaf mute

Deaf, deaf person

Despite a disability

With a disability

Dwarf, midget

Person of restricted growth,
short person, little person

Healthy, normal vs. ill

Non-disabled vs. disabled

Insane

Person with a mental
health disorder, mental
illness

Invalid, severely disabled

Disabled, requiring sub-
stantial or significant per-
sonal assistance

Mentally handicapped

Person with learning diffi-
culties, cognitively disabled

Mongolism, mongoloid

Person with down syndrome

Paraplegic, quadriplegic

Person with...

Spastic

Person with cerebral palsy

Suffers from, is afflicted
by, victim of...

Has...

Paralympic disciplines

Winter sports

Para ice hockey

Wheelchair curling

Para alpine skiing

Para cross-country skiing

Para snowboarding



Para cross-country skier Clara Klug negotiates the descent, holding on to guide Martin Hartl's pole – IPC World Nordic Skiing 2017 in Finsterau. © Ralf Kuckuck, DBS-Akademie

Aktion Mensch is Germany's largest privately funded social welfare organisation

and its goal is to promote a society in which it is the norm for people with a disability and people without a disability to live side by side. Through its “Soziallotterie”, project funding and campaigns, it works to improve the lives of disabled people, children and adolescents. Aktion Mensch's public education campaigns strive to advance inclusion – in all areas of life. The aim is for people with a disability to be able to choose for themselves which school they attend, what job they do, where they live and how they spend their free time. To be successful however, reporting by the media needs to be free of prejudices too, because the way in which people with a disability are portrayed in the media plays a role in shaping public opinion. www.aktion-mensch.de

The Sozialhelden Leidmedien.de project is a website for journalists

who want to report on disabled people. It provides tips from media professionals – both with and without a disability – on how to lend a new perspective to media coverage, doing away with stereotypes and helping to allay people's worries about how to interact with people with a disability. www.leidmedien.de

Cover photo:

Andrea Rothfuss, Paralympian, alpine skiing –

© Paul Hoffmann



For more information,
please visit
www.aktion-mensch.de



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