



Journalist Fellowship Paper

A guide to improving the accessibility of Indian news and newsrooms

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Introduction

In the Winter of 2017, civil rights advocate Angela Glover Blackwell coined the term “curb-cut effect”.¹ She was referring to a “slab of concrete heard around the world” forty years earlier.²

Prompted by acts of civil disobedience (wheelchair-using students had been pouring concrete to create ramps off pavements), the city of Berkeley, California, installed its first official “curb cut” at an intersection on Telegraph Avenue in 1972.

What happened next was “magnificent and unexpected”: when pavements were made more accessible for people in wheelchairs, parents pushing prams benefited, as did workers with heavy loads, and businessmen wheeling suitcases. “When we create the circumstances that allow those who have been left behind to participate and contribute fully,” Blackwell wrote, “everyone wins”.

Over the past two years, COVID-19 has exposed a disability reporting gap, and “a distinct lack of care when it comes to nondisabled journalists writing about the community”.³

In India, my home country, a 2012 content analysis of two major outlets found their “news articles on disability issues appear to possess more publicity value than news value”.⁴ Another report on the depiction of mental illness between 2019-20, found the use of stigmatising tone, language, and photographs.⁵

It is my belief that the time is ripe for Indian media to give the world another “concrete slab” moment – one that will benefit more than just disabled audiences and journalists.

¹ Blackwell, A. G. (2016). The Curb-Cut Effect. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 15(1), 28–33.

<https://doi.org/10.48558/YVMS-CC96>

² Steven E. Brown, “The Curb Ramps of Kalamazoo: Discovering Our Unrecorded History,” *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1999, pp. 203-205.

³ Poynter.org October 2020. *How COVID-19 exposes a disability reporting gap*.

<https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2020/how-covid-19-exposes-a-disability-reporting-gap/>

⁴ Nookaraju Bendukurthi and Usha Raman, June 2016, Researchgate.net. *Framing Disability in the Indian News Media: A Political Economy Analysis of Representation*.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304009158_Framing_Disability_in_the_Indian_News_Media_A_Political_Economy_Analysis_of_Representation

⁵ Sonika Raj, Abhishek Ghosh, Babita Sharma, Sonu Goel, *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, Nov-Dec 2021, *Portrayal of mental illness in Indian newspapers*. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8793720/>

What counts as a disability?

The World Health Organization (WHO) acknowledges “disability” is an evolving concept: according to International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, a disability arises “from the interaction of health conditions with contextual factors”. When a person experiences impairment of body function or structure, as well as limitations on activities, and restrictions on participation in any area of life, they are considered to be part of the disability community.⁶

Under this definition, you might include someone deaf, blind or using a wheelchair. You might also include someone whose brain has low levels of norepinephrine and makes some activities less easy to complete, and participation in society more difficult. (To put it more plainly: someone with ADHD.)

WHO estimates 15% of the global population is disabled. In India, the 2011 Census recognised only eight categories of disability and recorded 2.2% of the population as disabled (26.8 million people).⁷ Experts suggest this is a highly underreported number: if it were aligned with global estimates, 207 million people in India stand to benefit directly from improved disability hiring and coverage. And, with curbs-cut effect, 1.38 billion (the population of India) might benefit as a positive externality.

To make the case for cutting the curbs on media accessibility, I spent six months at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism looking at the barriers disabled journalists face to work in Indian newsrooms, the quality of disability coverage in Indian news, and the accessibility of news sites. I spoke to 14 Indian journalists with physical and mental disabilities about barriers they faced, consulted four editors from three Indian publications about the appetite for improvement, and sought out replicable creative strategies for improving newsrooms. But first: why bother improving things at all?

⁶ World Health Organisation 2011. *World Report on Disability 2011*.

<https://www.who.int/teams/noncommunicable-diseases/sensory-functions-disability-and-rehabilitation/world-report-on-disability>

⁷ Eight categories of disability were used in the 2011 census: 1) seeing disability, 2) hearing disability, 3) speech disability, 4) movement disability, 5) mental retardation, 6) mental illness, 7) any other disability, and 8) multiple disability. Saikia N, Bora JK, Jasilionis D, Shkolnikov VM. Disability Divides in India: Evidence from the 2011 Census. *PLoS One*. 2016 Aug 4;11(8):e0159809. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0159809.

Why it's worth improving

The curb-cutting effect of improving accessibility of newsrooms and news is perhaps best expressed by award-winning journalist [Nicole A. Childers](#), who told Nieman Lab: “I’ve learned in real time that the wider the range of perspectives and backgrounds covering the news, the more capable a newsroom will be in reaching a wider audience, the more revenue that audience will bring in, and the more attractive a newsroom becomes for drawing more diverse talent.”⁸

Research backs up her sentiments, and suggests newsrooms that embrace diversity – including disability – may be more appealing to audiences: 74% of the respondents in the Reuters Institute of the Study of Journalism’s Digital News Report 2021 said “they still prefer news that reflects a range of views and lets them decide what to think”.⁹ Siperstein et al (2006) researched consumer attitudes to businesses that employed people with disabilities and found organisations that hire people with disabilities are viewed more favourably.¹⁰

Beyond the data on hiring, there is anecdotal evidence of the benefit of including disabilities in the newsroom. At BBC News India, staff have been getting together virtually once a month for an hour-long “My Story” session, where they talk about a chosen aspect of their life. Among other things, many have spoken of their own, and their family members’ physical and mental disabilities, chronic illnesses and life-threatening conditions.

Sharing those experiences has led to conversations that help staff understand how the challenges associated with these disabilities can be navigated. In a country with largely

⁸ Nieman Lab, November 2020. *The moral argument for diversity in newsrooms is also a business argument — and you need both.*

<https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/11/the-moral-case-for-diversity-in-newsrooms-also-makes-good-business-sense/>

⁹ Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. *Executive summary and key findings of the Digital News Report 2021.* <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/dnr-executive-summary>

¹⁰ Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 2006. *A national survey of consumer attitudes towards companies that hire people with disabilities.*

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228675339_A_national_survey_of_consumer_attitudes_towards_companies_that_hire_people_with_disabilities

inaccessible infrastructure for people with disabilities, they often go unseen. These conversations are critical to building better perception of the issues.¹¹

Ambika Raja is a journalist who uses a wheelchair for mobility. She said her presence in the newsroom and interactions with co-workers changed their perceptions about disability. “Earlier, my colleagues thought of people with disabilities as victims of traumatic situations,” Raja said. After spending time getting to know her, she said, they realised there is more to a person than their disability. To an extent, both their perception, and reporting about disability changed.

Likewise, Ranjitha Gunasekaran, a senior editor at the *New Indian Express* in Chennai, said she has been able to steer the reporting on mental health for accuracy and language in her newspaper.

Beyond human resources, including disabilities on the news agenda is helpful, too.

A diverse agenda may build audience trust

Research on this topic is ongoing but early reports suggest trust in news media may be related to how people see themselves represented in it. According to Toff et al (2021), “Identities [...] often played a more subtle role in how people evaluated the factual basis of stories they encountered in the news and made assessments about bias and impartiality.”

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) has two disability affairs correspondents: one national and another regional. Their presence has been a boost in building disability as a beat, according to Carol Raabus, ABC’s workplace adjustment support officer, who I interviewed for this project. Disabled sources respond to them more easily than to others, and the duo also receive numerous story ideas and tip-offs from disabled contributors.

In 2020 and 2021, on the occasion of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, ABC News ran a campaign to publish more stories on disability by writers from the community. Raabus said this also built trust among the disabled audiences about the public broadcaster’s commitment to inclusivity.

¹¹ Al Jazeera, March 2022. *India’s Mumbai: Living with a disability in the megacity*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/3/30/indias-mumbai-living-with-a-disability-in-the-megacity>

A diverse agenda may build new readership

Journalist Melanie Reed has been writing the *Spinal Column* for The Times UK's Saturday Magazine for the past 12 years. Started as a record of her experiences in hospital after she was paralysed after falling off horse, the column evoked a "strong response, got a big and loyal following, and won lots of serious awards," Reed said at News UK's Disability and Journalism conference in March 2022. "Perhaps collectively people were more open to reading about disability than we journalists realised," she said.

"The column engaged with [many] people with chronic health problems and physical and mental challenges of their own – an audience the media had previously neglected. I don't think we were really aware it existed. I certainly had no idea – I felt I'd fallen down a rabbit hole to join some parallel world – a vast army of people for whom every day was a bit of a struggle. And these people were delighted because they felt someone was giving them a voice and talking about the problems they faced all the time: the frustrations, the difficulties. They didn't feel so invisible anymore."

Healthy people were gripped, too. Reed said they frequently write to say that her column "puts their own woes in perspective".

With both these categories of readers, Reed said: "*The Times* inadvertently stumbled onto something way ahead of most other media outlets: that there was a real market for subject matter which wasn't just about the happy-shiny-perfect people who we see reflected back at us from every screen and advertising hoarding. We learnt that, in the real world, our readers were more caring than we were. We learnt there was an untapped audience among people whose lives were both different and more difficult; and among fit people who had a family member or a friend in that situation."

The case for product accessibility

There's a business case for improving website accessibility: a 2019 Accenture study found organisations that focused on disability engagement were growing sales 2.9 times faster and profits 4.1 times faster than their peers.¹²

There's legal incentive for it, too: the Right of Persons With Disabilities Act (RPWD Act, 2016) extended India's list of recognised disabilities from seven to 21, and made companies responsible for complying with digital accessibility by 15 June 2019.¹³

The case for more disability staff and coverage is patently not just a moral one: there are indicators to suggest it may improve trust and widen reach, and there are legal incentives that should motivate Indian newsrooms, too.

So why haven't we seen change yet?

¹² Accenture.com. *Enabling Change - Getting to Equal 2020- Disability Inclusion*.

https://www.accenture.com/_acnmedia/pdf-142/accenture-enabling-change-getting-equal-2020-disability-inclusion-report.pdf

¹³ Maxability. *June 15, 2019 deadline for digital accessibility in India*.

<https://www.maxability.co.in/2019/06/15/june-15-2019-deadline-for-digital-accessibility-in-india/>

Why haven't Indian newsrooms been able to prioritise disability inclusion?

I spoke to four editors from three of India's most trusted media outlets about why they haven't had much success in hiring more journalists from the disability community. I've chosen not to name or quote anyone here, because I'm grateful that they were willing to speak honestly to me – a first step in fostering the conditions for change – and I don't want to discourage future engagement.

That said, these conversations made me feel that disability is invisible to the Indian media industry. Several key themes were repeated in our conversations.

Asked why there weren't more people from the disability community in their newsrooms, they said: disabled people never apply for positions when advertised. The editors said they don't think about using inclusive language on job posts, and they don't proactively seek to hire people with disabilities.

None of them had ever investigated what proportion of their audience might have different needs, either.

Issues of unconscious bias, understaffed Human Resources teams, and low priority on the diversity agenda got in the way of inclusion. The editors I spoke to thought it was more important to first achieve fair gender, religion, caste, ethnicity and socio-economic representation in their content and workforce.

If that's the case, we'll be waiting a long time: research by digital media outlet, NewsLaundry, found that gender and caste representation are still a pipedream for Indian news media. Between 2019 and 2020, men got 75% bylines in 11 leading English and Hindi newspapers.¹⁴ And only 5% of articles in six English newspapers were authored by people of underrepresented castes such as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled

¹⁴ NewsLaundry July 2021. *Newsroom gender gap: Men get over 80% of TV panel slots, 75% of bylines.* <https://www.newslaundry.com/2021/07/13/newsroom-gender-gap-men-get-over-80-of-tv-panel-slots-75-of-bylines>

Tribes between 2018 and 2019.¹⁵ No one from these castes held any of the 121 leadership positions surveyed across Indian newsrooms.

Disability inclusion cannot take a backseat in diversity policies. A fair representation of society will reflect intersectional diversity. Someone who is disabled could also be from an underrepresented caste or gender, minority religion or ethnicity. Newsrooms don't need to wait to cover ground with gender, ethnicity, caste and religion, before looking at disability inclusion.

A newsroom in India pursuing change

BBC News India has a number of robust diversity projects that can be learnt from and adapted for intersectional inclusion.

The corporation proactively hunts for potential candidates by reaching out to colleges, universities and associations to acquire a list of students and youth from underrepresented castes and minority communities, and build up a database.

People from the database are contacted by email or phone every time there are job openings. This has helped BBC News India consistently increase its number of journalists from these segments.

Although BBC News India runs in eight Indian languages, job applicants are required to submit their CVs in English, as they are screened in the United Kingdom. To help candidates ramp up their CV-writing skills in English, a workshop is conducted by the corporation before every recruitment call. This lowers the first screening barrier for many good candidates, who may not be fluent in English.

“Any newsroom that wants to take action should first be uncomfortable with the lack of diversity in its constitution,” said Rupa Jha, head of India at BBC News.

¹⁵ Newslaundry August 2019. *Indian media is an upper-caste fortress, suggests report on caste representation.*

<https://www.newslaundry.com/2020/03/02/2019/08/02/caste-representation-indian-newsrooms-report-media-rumble-oxfam-india>

“If your newsroom is homogeneous, your journalism will be homogeneous and boring,” she told me. “It’s only when you’re diverse, and bring in different perspectives, that it becomes more authentic and interesting.”

BBC News India hasn’t set targets for disability inclusion yet, but their existing diversity projects could be extended to do so in the future.

BBC UK uses a carrot-and-stick approach to ensure teams focus on diversity. When Tim Davie took over as director general in 2020, he made it clear he wanted the BBC to be “an organisation that reflects more accurately the society we serve”.

“Every leader of the BBC will be assessed on how they are making progress towards these targets,” he said in his introductory speech.¹⁶ “From now on, if you are a leader looking to secure a new role, we will look at your overall team engagement scores; how you improved the diversity of your team; and how you created an environment where we treat everyone fairly and equally – no exceptions.”

To that extent, 50:50 The Equality Project has been a driver of sustainable cultural change at the BBC since its launch in 2017. Teams started to count and track their contributors in content: first for gender, and later for ethnicity and disability as well. What started out as a voluntary participation project now includes 750 teams across the BBC, all self-monitoring their content for gender, including over 250 tracking for ethnic minorities and disabilities as well.¹⁷

Setting goals – 50% women, 20% black, Asian and minority ethnic, and 12% disabled people – and tracking performance against them has been key. So has staff education.

Nina Goswami, former Creative Diversity Lead for 50:50, said: “For disability inclusion, accessibility and education of newsroom staff are critical.” The Reframing Disability Project, part of the 50:50 efforts, educates staff about disabilities. “[It] helps staff understand that everyone is different, and that we need to support each other and have conversations,” Goswami said. When people get the tools to understand this, criticism and opposition to rearrangements and re-processing reduces. “They are more willing to adapt and change.”

¹⁶ BBC. *Tim Davie’s introductory speech as BBC Director-General*.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/speeches/2020/tim-davie-intro-speech>

¹⁷ BBC *Impact Report 2022, 50:50 The Equality Project*.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/5050/documents/5050-impact-report-2022.pdf>

Goswami said the significance of representation in the workforce cannot be overstated: “You need the workforce to be right to make sure that the content is right,” she said. Newsrooms may be well-intentioned about disability content, but if they have no one with lived experience, they may have no frame of reference. “Just like you would seek out an expert for, say, economics, find someone for disability too, to get your content right.”

As *Spinal Column*'s Reed said at the News UK's Disability and Journalism conference in March 2022: “Facilitate disabled employees, and the rewards are considerable, immediate, far-reaching and long-lasting. [...] Having disabled staff representing you sends a clear message of kindness and humanity [...] It's something to boast about in a world where the media [...] are regarded as ruthless and cut-throat. Suddenly that reputation is challenged,” she said.

Inaccessibility in newsrooms and news

From hiring a journalist to reading an article online, almost every point in the production and distribution process of news in India is full of both visible and invisible barriers. No one illustrates this better than the people with disabilities working in Indian newsrooms. I've gathered their stories here to highlight the core themes of inaccessibility in Indian newsrooms.

Barriers to joining the industry

Sometimes the barriers to becoming a journalist crop up long before entering the newsroom. Raja, a journalist who uses a wheelchair for mobility, worked at the *New Indian Express* in Kochi, a coastal city in South India from 2017-19.

Before she decided to study journalism, her parents discouraged her as they felt that she may not be able to work in such a “risky” and fast-paced profession.

She was able to convince them and attended a journalism school, but always faced problems with the inaccessibility of the city's infrastructure. “I had to meet my sources at accessible venues,” she said. Finding accessible public spaces in India is not easy.¹⁸

Barriers to employment

Nandita Venkatesan is a data journalist for the Indian financial daily, *Mint*. Prior to her cochlear implant in 2018, she had very little hearing. In 2016, when she joined *Economic Times*, a leading business daily in India, Venkatesan did not mention her hearing loss in her CV. When she was invited for an interview, senior editor Malika Rodrigues communicated with her by exchanging written notes across the table. Venkatesan was hired for her journalistic skills and worked for *Economic Times* as a business journalist for four years. She said she is always careful not to mention her disability in her CV, lest it backfires.

Dheepak PS, a senior sub-editor of the sports desk at *The Hindu*, a national English-language daily with the second-largest readership in the country, waited a year

¹⁸ The Times of India, February 2021. *Public buildings a no-entry zone for the disabled*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/public-buildings-a-no-entry-zone-for-the-disabled/articleshow/80797802.cms>

after his recruitment to start working, while his newsroom built a ramp to make his department wheelchair-accessible.

Other barriers to employment include:

- An overall low awareness of India's Disability Law, the Rights of Persons With Disabilities (RPWD) Act, and an absence of diversity, equity and inclusion policies in newsrooms. Consequently, managers have little idea about reasonable accommodations.
- An absence of basic access, such as ramps and toilets in newsrooms, meaning journalists don't even have access for interviews.
- The ignorance of hiring managers and an awkwardness around disability. When journalists mention their disabilities in their resumes or job induction forms, hiring managers ignore it, not knowing how to take the conversation forward.
- Journalists with disabilities not getting a sense of which news outlets in India would be open to hiring them, since disability hiring is sparse. A disconnect between Indian disabled journalists adds to the problem.

Barriers in the office

When Dheepakh PS finally started working after a ramp was built, he had to use a storeroom on the ground floor of the office as a makeshift accessible toilet for the first two years of tenure, until one next to his department was constructed for him.

Dheepakh, along with [Vidya Sagar](#), an NGO that works to support parents of disabled children, guided his newsroom to help make it accessible for him.¹⁹ Since we do not live in an ideal society where universal design will be implemented anytime soon, it is up to the person with a disability to explain their needs and get them met, Dheepakh said.

Suresh started working for an English-language daily as a reporter over a decade ago. He needed screen reading software for his office computer, because he is blind. His newsroom wasn't prepared to spend over £1,000 at the time on an assistive device for one employee. Suresh had to purchase it himself, at the cost of two months' pay.

¹⁹ Vidya Sagar NGO, Chennai. <https://vidyasagar.co.in/genesis.php>

So little was the awareness about blind people among his co-workers that, when he joined, “a lot of people in the newsroom were genuinely puzzled and asked me what I could do for them”.

Suresh wasn't surprised. Even during his internship at a different newspaper, his bosses were not receptive to giving him work. “What if you fall and hurt yourself when you're out reporting?” “How will you commute to the site?”

“I told them that just like a lot of others, I too, would take an auto rickshaw for my commute,” he recalled. “Publications have never hired someone like me, so they are bound to have apprehensions,” Suresh said. Until disability hiring becomes a norm, or at least more disabled people are visible in newsrooms, apprehensions about their performance will persist.

Former journalist Sundari Sivasubbu worked at the editorial desk of *New Indian Express* between 2010 and 2012, doing shifts that involved working from 5pm to 1am. Her newsroom set up a ramp for her, since she uses a wheelchair, and her editing job meant that she didn't need to move out of the office.

Two women housekeeping employees came to the office at 8pm to assist her to the restroom, as she couldn't afford a personal assistant then. On days they couldn't come, Sivasubbu could not visit the washroom at all.

“Those days were hell,” she remembered.

She asked to work from home sometimes, to avoid restroom problems. “In a few hours, I would finish my editing work for the day's news and would work on columns, which could be done from home.” But those were pre-pandemic days when working from home was unthinkable, so her request was ignored.

The office cab dropped her home late at night, but she needed to hire an accessible taxi to come to the office. Her pay did not factor in that amount.

Data journalist Venkatesan said that before her cochlear implant – for two plus years – she couldn't hear well over the phone, so she conducted interviews with sources over email. To comprehend newsroom presentations and meetings, she received assistance sporadically from a colleague or another.

Conversations with co-workers in the newsroom were sometimes through written notes, sometimes without. But not everyone had the patience to converse with her. “Once, when I couldn’t understand what my senior was trying to tell me, I asked him to write it down,” she recalled. “His face dropped and he told me to hasten up as time was running out.”

The cochlear implant has raised her hearing ability, and now Venkatesan uses virtual video calls that can auto-transcribe. Being face-to-face helps her to lip-read and the transcription rescues her when she misses something.

“News media is still an industry that lays a lot of emphasis on strength and resilience,” said Delhi-based freelance journalist Tanmoy Goswami who runs Sanity, an independent mental health storytelling platform.

“There’s an expectation that you will cast aside all your personal experience and not get emotionally invested in the story you’re reporting.” Opening up about neurodiversity or mental health in that environment is difficult.

Other barriers in the office include:

- During the onboarding process, most induction forms don’t include fields for capturing disability information. Journalists, particularly with invisible disabilities, are unable to declare it on paper, which prevents them from asking for reasonable accommodations – their legal right.
- Asking for reasonable accommodation and leave is often equated with weakness, so a lot of journalists refrain from doing so.

Barriers to belonging

For Manasa R, the office is “six songs away” from her home. That’s how the 20-something journalist, who lives with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and autism, processes time and distance.

She is hyperenergetic: her brain likes the urgency of the high-intensity and high-pressure environment that the newsroom of her Indian daily can offer her. But she struggles with time management and deadlines due to her neurodiversity.

To deliver work on time, Manasa arrives early at her *New Indian Express* newsroom in Chennai, and leaves later than everyone else. Often, when she needs more time to focus

on something, she works late into the night. “I do this to avoid the overwhelm when work piles up,” Manasa said.

Short regular meetings with her editor, and knowing which stories to prioritise first, help her function better. But she feels her co-workers don’t understand her daily difficulties. How could they? A neatly filled planner, reminders on her phone, and a desk full of sticky notes, make her appear very much in control.

She said she has explained her neurovariance to her colleagues in several ways, multiple times. But they still ask her: “Why do you ask so many questions?”, “Why are you always working beyond your working hours?”, “Why do you work so hard?”.

“I face shame on a daily basis,” said Manasa.

Former journalist Sivasubbu said the newsroom was designed in a way that didn’t allow her to move around in her wheelchair. Apart from her restroom trip, she stuck to her desk all the time, which meant interactions with her team and colleagues were limited. “A lot of grapevine [information] is exchanged over tea and meals,” she said. “It took me much longer to understand the dynamics of the newsroom because I missed that.”

Bengaluru-based journalist Sandhya Menon, who lives with Bipolar Affective Disorder, explained how she feels when she has a depressive episode. “Everything feels out of control. Nothing, including just having a meal, seems like something I can handle,” Menon said. “But from the perspective of someone else – your friend, or your manager – it looks like you’re not committed enough. You’re not working; you’re slacking off. Because if your basics are not in control, you are unable to meet deadlines, and unable to understand even an instruction that’s given to you,” she said.

After a bad episode many years ago, she went back to her newsroom and explained her condition to her boss and her team. In the first week, everyone was sympathetic and treated her with kid gloves. But the following week, she was told: “Everyone has struggles, everyone goes through stuff, so, please, buck up because there’s not much that we can continue to do.”

“While the message was perfectly fair, its delivery was very harsh and cruel,” Menon recalled. Most newsrooms Menon has worked in, she said, have replicated that messaging in some form when she needs support.

Other barriers to belonging include:

- Since neurodiversity is often invisible, it is hard for someone on the spectrum to explain how their disorganised day looks very different from a neurotypical person's.
- Mental health problems, when communicated, get a casual response by co-workers and bosses. “I also feel low these days” or “just keep yourself busy” are common reactions to those who have tried to convey clinical depression or bipolar disorder.
- Often the journalist's boss is the only one who understands their disability, so it becomes difficult to work with other co-workers or departments. Since there is no system of educating newsroom staff on disability, and the general awareness is low, journalists avoid talking to their disabled colleagues about it.
- Journalists on the mental health spectrum hide their disability because there are still questions their employers have due to ignorance, such as, “What if we employ them, and in a weak moment they try to harm themselves, putting us into legal trouble?”

Sivasubbu and Menon both left journalism for corporate communications roles at multinational companies, where inclusion and mental wellbeing are written down in policy and baked into the culture of the organisation. Both have received genuine support and understanding from their bosses and co-workers, and have gained not only a better job, but also much confidence and self-worth. The journalism industry, on the other hand, has lost two capable journalists who could have contributed diverse perspectives to news.

Barriers to news consumption

One of the consequences of a failure to employ a diversity of staff is that there is little awareness of inclusive language for disability in news content. Ableism, social prejudice and discrimination against people with disabilities based on the belief that typical abilities are superior, is widespread and stories perpetuate negative stereotypes.²⁰

²⁰ Access Living. *Ableism 101: What it is, what it looks like, and what we can do to fix it.*
<https://www.accessliving.org/newsroom/blog/ableism-101/>

Some of the inaccurate coverage swings between highlighting the stories of people with physical disabilities that are overly “inspirational”, or highlighting stories of people with mental health challenges that focus on the darkest side of their disease, without ever talking about success stories.

Inspirational stories that disabled people don't want to see in the news include those that portray them as heroes for doing their daily chores independently, “despite” their disability. Reporting that reflects that people with mental disabilities need to be rescued, should change.

Coverage might be limited to International Disability Day, and disability issues are not recognised unless a passionate reporter pushes for them. Planned features get spiked or postponed to a later date in the interest of the news of the day.

Since disability itself is underrepresented, complex issues such as the intersection of caste and sexual orientations with disability are almost absent.

Newsrooms do not bother to find out if disabled people are their audiences, so they don't create accessible content.

Other barriers to news consumption include:

- Some websites do not have a magnifier to enlarge the font. Or pages are cluttered with pop-ups, auto-play videos, and text disrupted by advertisements, making them unnavigable for screen-reader users.
- Some news sites have introduced audio components like text-to-speech for listening to articles, but the rest need to catch up.
- Audio elements/podcasts on news sites do not all have transcripts.
- Videos lack captions or subtitles. Auto-generated captions are often inaccurate, creating confusion among deaf readers.
- Images almost never have alt-text.
- News is not presented in different formats, which limits its reach to disabled users.
- Social media is not accessible.

How to improve your newsroom

By now, you have read the business and legal imperatives for change, and heard the stories of challenges facing Indian journalists with disabilities. My hope is that you are feeling inspired to think about change. But where to begin?

Creating reasonable accommodations is not tantamount to letting people slack off; it's giving them an opportunity to fulfil their potential in a way that works for both the employer and employee. It's a misconception that disabled people come with a price tag and providing accommodations is costly.

Step 1: Adopt an accommodating structure and outlook

Do you need to know everything about all 21 disabilities protected under the law – and the many invisible disabilities like Crohn's Disease, arthritis and Alzheimer's that aren't? No. Just be open to learning as you go, and keep asking: "What can we do to help you?" Make people feel like they belong, and they will feel confident to talk to you about accommodations.

As someone living with clinical depression, Gunasekaran chooses to start her workday a little late and continue late into the night, as her sleep cycle is disturbed at times. Her newsroom gives her time off to recover whenever she experiences significant dips due to her depression.

Dheepakh goes home an hour early twice a week for his physiotherapy, and makes up for the time later or earlier.

Venkatesan needs captions for her virtual meetings.

Providing most of these reasonable accommodations might involve modifications in management skills or practices, but they don't necessarily cost money.

Apart from that, newsrooms should make basic access, such as ramps, elevators with audio output and accessible toilets, a norm.

Goswami also suggests that newsrooms take measures for all staff to ensure they do not become overwhelmed by occupational stress. "That really means having a more

compassionate workplace culture, like being respectful towards journalists as human beings, giving them an opportunity to open up about their feelings, and not exploiting their passion for journalism,” he said.

Step 2: Think about how to actively recruit

Make specific mention of diversity hiring practices in job postings so that disabled journalists know they can apply. Wording like “people with different abilities are encouraged to apply” can build trust for your organisation amongst interested candidates.

Recognise that written tests and job interviews that take place in another city might be a challenge for people with locomotor disabilities. Could you offer an online alternative? If the newsroom is not accessible, ask a potential interviewee to pick a venue for the job interview. Be respectful of their needs.

If diversity hiring is on your agenda, think about actively seeking out journalists with disabilities through universities or support organisations. Caste and socio-economic diversity should also be considered when hiring for disability to bring in different perspectives.

Implementing entry-level opportunities – such as internships, grants and fellowships for disabled journalists – can give your newsroom a chance to nurture talent and provide a gateway to full-time employment.

While you are implementing changes, consider outsourcing work to disabled freelancers to get their perspective on stories.

Step 3: Encode inclusive processes and foster a culture change

Diversity, including disability, has to be put front and centre of an organisation, as with any other goal. Having a Diversity Equity & Inclusion (DE&I) policy and discussing it can open up conversations among diverse staff as it gives them the confidence that they will be heard.

If newsrooms are not up to speed with DE&I policies yet, journalists with disabilities should read their organisation’s policies and ask for what is missing. They should also help them build new updated policies.

Once policy is set, diversity and inclusion should be baked into the culture of newsrooms. Unless there is a top-down approach to it, disability and mental health will not gain traction. And remember: representation should also reach the top levels in a newsroom, to help with leading a culture change.

Invite disability-rights NGOs for education on diverse disabilities, laws, policies and gaps. This can help, not only in shaping policies, but also improve reporting on the subject. Other ways to offer this critical education is through workshops, training, awareness sessions, and reading material.

Disabled journalists do not mind fielding questions about their disability either. Co-workers should have these conversations to understand their colleagues better.

Disabled journalists want to be hired for their talent – just like any other person on the staff – there should be adequate trust in their skills and the ability to manage themselves at work. Their editors should not block them from taking on an assignment solely due to their disability.

The entire newsroom, including all new hires, needs to have an awareness of disabilities. This way, when a disabled journalist's team changes, or a new boss takes over, they won't need to work from scratch to prove themselves all over again.

Getting the onboarding process right is critical. It can give new employees a sense that they belong and the importance of their contribution. Saying something like, "We have never had someone like you before, so please let us know what you might need, and we'll get it done," can go a long way in reassuring and building trust in a new employee.

As well as explaining the organisation's policies, hiring managers should explicitly inform new hires about who to approach for redressal. Assigning a buddy or a mentor during onboarding could also help a newly hired disabled journalist find a trusted person in the team for addressing queries.

Remember that a newsroom inclusive of disabilities will think about invisible disabilities too, including mental health. Look into the prevention of mental distress for all employees, which includes anxiety disorders, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and depression, among other things.²¹ Some of the questions senior editors and managers

²¹ Ethnomed.org. *Explanation of mental distress*.

<https://ethnomed.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/mental-english-rev.pdf>

need to ask themselves should be: Are we paying our journalists on time? Are we giving them time off when they want? Are we giving them training to report on trauma? If we cut staff, did we cut output expectations? Are the reporters doing just one person's job or double the work they were meant to do? Do they feel secure about their jobs? Mental health days off work should become a part of the system.

Just being patient with an employee with a disability can be enough. Asking if they need to do something differently and being accommodating of their needs can be very reassuring. Ask if they need extra time. Check for a convenient time before allocating meetings as some people need more time for reaching a place.

If you have team socials, think about accessible venues where disabled journalists get a chance to mingle and engage with others and learn more about each other.

Do not make jokes about or light of someone's physical or mental disability. They will withdraw as it will validate the fears that they had always internalised.

Celebrate lesser known days such as Wheelchair Day or World Braille Day. Call someone as a guest on a podcast or TV.

Finally, media outlets should praise the good work of staff who produce inclusive coverage and reward them for good representation of diversity in their stories.

Step 4: Document editorial policies

Guidelines for engagement with disabled sources should be handy to all newsroom journalists.

This [BBC guide](#) could help disabled interviewees prepare for a broadcast interview, while the journalists could keep [these points](#) in mind for engagement with their disabled sources.^{22,23} The ABC also has a [comprehensive guide](#) on how to photograph disabled people sensitively.²⁴

²² Media Trust Guide. *How to prepare for a media interview- a guide for disabled interviewees*
<https://mediatrust.org/resource-hub/media-interview-for-disabled-interviewees/>

²³ Media Trust Guide. *Interviewing disabled experts- a guide for newsrooms and journalists.*
<https://mediatrust.org/resource-hub/interviewing-disabled-experts-a-guide-for-newsrooms-and-journalists/>

²⁴ Australian Broadcasting Corporation. *Reporting and portraying disability in ABC content.*
<https://www.abc.net.au/edpols/reporting-and-portraying-disability-in-abc-content/13645960>

A language and style guide inclusive of diversity should be available for journalists. This *BBC Worklife* [article](#) explains what ableist language is, and how to eliminate it from your vocabulary.²⁵ [The Disability Language Style Guide](#) by the National Centre on Disability and Journalism, is widely accepted worldwide.²⁶

The Carter Center has [a comprehensive guide](#) for reporting on behavioural health conditions, including mental health conditions and substance abuse disorders.²⁷

India's Centre for Mental Health Law & Policy offers [a free course](#) on responsible suicide reporting for all journalists.²⁸

Step 5: Adapt your coverage style

Reporting should be rights-based, meaning, it should rest upon the legal rights of people with disabilities. The charity and medical models of disability coverage have long expired. More news and features on policy and laws should be commissioned. Stories portraying the everyday lives of people with disabilities, and focussing on them as untapped talent, should also be given space.

Disability coverage isn't just "stories of overcoming difficulties to inspire readers" – and when it is, it should still be backed by social and cultural context.

Replace the 'positive' story frame with a solutions-oriented one.

Mental health coverage should include narratives of how people successfully navigate their work and life. Caregiver burden, options for recovery and what recovery means would also make for good stories and foster public understanding.

New and unrepresented voices should be interviewed, and disabled people should be spoken to directly, rather than through their family or caregivers.

²⁵ BBC.com. April 2021. *The harmful ableist language you unknowingly use.*

<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20210330-the-harmful-ableist-language-you-unknowingly-use>

²⁶ National Centre on Disability and Journalism. *Disability Language Style Guide.*

<https://ncdj.org/style-guide/>

²⁷ Carter Center. *The Carter Center- Journalism Resource Guide on Behavioural Health.*

https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/health/mental_health/2015-journalism-resource-guide-on-behavioral-health.pdf

²⁸ Centre for Mental Health Law & Policy. *Reporting Suicides Responsibly: Implementing Evidence-based Guidelines for the Media* <https://cmhlp.org/course/suicide-reporting-course-for-journalists/>

Preparation for an interview with a disabled person should involve doing research about their disability, and having a conversation about their needs.

Remember: disabled sources can be interviewed for their expertise for any story, not just disability.

Lastly: disabled people have explicitly noted their dislike for “Divyang”, (Hindi for divine bodies), a term coined by Prime Minister Narendra Modi for disabled people. News media should avoid its usage.

Step 6: Get in early

Training on disability and accessibility in news should begin in journalism schools.

J-school buildings and hostels should be made accessible to enable more aspiring disabled youth to study journalism. Accessibility features should be explicitly mentioned on their websites to attract aspiring youth with disabilities.

Grants and fellowships for courses can help disabled students from low economic backgrounds study journalism.

Newsrooms can also train aspiring disabled youth and hire them as correspondents or freelance contributors.

Play up to people’s strengths. Be creative and find how they can perform to suit a newsroom’s requirement. Not every journalist is “in the field”: there are roles in audience management, social media, and more that can be filled.

Step 7: Audit on network accessibility

Website accessibility should be tested by people with every disability it serves, instead of relying simply on a team of non-disabled technical experts. WCAG 3.0 guidelines for accessibility should be complied with, and a few basic access features are listed below.

Websites should have a dedicated page listing accessibility features.

Sufficient colour contrast between foreground text and its background should be provided.

Images should have alt-text.

Videos should be captioned and should avoid flashing lights, or warn of them.

Either turn off autoplay on embedded videos, or mute it.

Podcasts should have transcripts.

Advertisement placement should be carefully designed to avoid clutter that makes pages un navigable. And incorporating text to speech is a helpful feature for print-disabled people.

Step 8: Audit off network accessibility

There are a number of steps to take to ensure your content on social media platforms is accessible.

YouTube automatically creates captions, but since they are often inaccurate, [Classic Studio](#) and [Creator Studio](#) can be used for creating and editing captions.

Twitter provides auto-caption support for [videos](#), [voice tweets](#) and [Twitter Spaces](#). This is how to add [Alt Text](#) to Twitter images, and upload a caption file for a twitter [video](#).

Facebook has auto alt-text for images, but it should be edited for accuracy. Here's how [captions can be added](#) to a video posted on Facebook.

Instagram also has auto alt-text, which needs editing to be precise. Here's how to add captions to a video using the Captions sticker, and [Kapwing](#).

Step 9: Look for success stories to replicate

Here are a few replicable ideas that newsrooms across the world have successfully adopted:

- BBC India has Mental Health First-Aiders, identifiable by their identity cards with green ribbons.²⁹ They are trained to look out for any signs of changes in staff members' mood or behaviour, and chat to them about available resources for support. A 24x7 mental health counselling helpline dedicated to BBC India's staff members is available.

²⁹ All information about BBC News India comes from interviews with Ashish Dikshit, Editor BBC News Marathi, and Rupa Jha, Head of India, BBC News.

- ABC News recruits talent from the community through their Media Cadet Programme.³⁰ Cadets don't necessarily need to have journalistic qualifications, "just a real and demonstrable passion for the media". Many of them are absorbed by ABC News after their cadetship.
- ABC's values around respect and collegiality – and a declaration of their workplace adjustments – is on their careers page, and applicants can find the information straightaway. "It makes disabled applicants feel that maybe it is one place they could apply and get the support they need," Raabus said.
- ABC Inclusive is a forum for staff with disabilities and allies. They meet once a month and discuss the upcoming important days and content related to it, what the staff members can do for each other, and tackle any workplace issues related to accessibility.
- ABC News engages with communities of interest from underrepresented parts of the country on disability issues, and whether they are reflected in ABC content.
- In the UK, the BBC has a target of representation of 12% disability in its workforce and content. Having a target, collecting data, assessing it and identifying gaps helps in achieving goals.³¹
- Across UK newsrooms, a centralised "BBC Passport" informs managers about the reasonable accommodations each disabled person needs, which simplifies the process of moving around the organisation for disabled staff.
- Under the Reframing Disability project, the BBC trains and mentors journalists to better comprehend disability to ensure they are comfortable around co-workers and sources.
- The BBC's 50:50 The Equality Project's new database of expert contributors invites diverse people across specialisms to fill in a form if they would like to contribute as sources.³² With over 2,500 experts, including 200 who are disabled, the database is a good place to find new voices for stories.

³⁰ All information about *ABC News* is from an interview with Carol Raabus, Workplace Adjustment Support Officer at the organisation.

³¹ All Information about BBC in the UK received from interviews with Nina Goswami - BBC's former Creative Diversity Lead, and Sean Dilley - BBC News Correspondent.

³² BBC *BBC's 50:50 Contributors database*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/send/u65290961>

- Trainee programmes at the BBC such as [Extend in News](#) and [Elevate](#) are dedicated to hiring journalists of diverse disabilities at different levels of their careers.
- To make a 2021 investigative series about people with intellectual disabilities and developmental disabilities accessible, [ProPublica](#) translated it into plain language. Common words were used to simplify the language and complex information was broken up into bullet points.
- In July 2020, [the New York Times](#) 30-year anniversary coverage of the American Disability Act was converted to digital Braille files that could be downloaded and read with an electronic Braille reader. Hard copies in Braille were also printed.
- For their podcast [More Than This](#), Vox Media created an immersive visual transcript for deaf and hard of hearing people “by [translating the emotions](#), pacing, and atmosphere of the podcast into a visual medium.”
- [Al Jazeera Contrast](#)’s interactive project Inaccessible Cities helps the user navigate the accessibility in New York, Lagos and Mumbai.

Conclusion

At the start of this paper, I wrote about how Angela Blackwell coined the term “curb-cut effect” to describe the benefits of making a society more accessible. To heavily paraphrase her own conclusion: equitable accessibility of the news and newsrooms in India is not a political issue. Nor is it strictly a question of morality or efficiency. All Indians have an interest in “developing targeted, achievable reforms that yield real results and make noticeable differences in the lives of our most vulnerable”.

In explaining why, Blackwell quotes Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

I spoke to 14 journalists with disabilities in India who painted a vivid picture of the barriers they face to joining the industry, finding employment, and thriving in the workplace. And what affects these journalists translates into media products that reflect a lack of accessibility for our audiences, too.

But all hope is not lost: there are clear and replicable steps and strategies that can be adopted to cut the curb in Indian newsrooms.

When I set out on this project, I was disturbed by a lack of inclusion of the disability community in COVID-19 coverage. I wondered whether disabled reporters on staff in Indian newsrooms could advocate for better coverage. But when I went looking for them, I couldn’t find more than a handful who were full-time employees.

The absence of a thriving community for disabled journalists surprised me. There are myriad support groups for journalists, and myriad disability groups – but nothing connecting the two. What can a handful of disconnected journalists sitting in newsrooms criss-crossing the country do to improve representation for their communities in the nation’s news media behemoths?

As I have learned in the last six months: they have done a fair bit alone. Imagine the outcome if they could all work together?

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