Journalist Fellowship Paper

How to make easier news for people with a learning disability

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Contents

Preface

This report was prepared by BBC radio producer, William Kremer. It is the product of a three-month industry-sponsored fellowship at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, funded by BBC News.

A note on language

This project refers to people with a learning disability. In the UK, a learning disability is defined as "a reduced intellectual ability, usually identified soon after birth or in the early years, [that] will last a person's whole life".[1] In other countries, the same term may be used to describe traits such as dyslexia or dyscalculia, which do not imply an intellectual impairment; this is not how the phrase is used in this report. People who might be described as having a learning disability in the UK may elsewhere be said to have an intellectual disability, a cognitive impairment, or intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD).

Many people with a learning disability are autistic, and many autistic people have a learning disability but the two do not necessarily co-occur.

The author does not have a learning disability and does not identify as disabled. However, the project is informed by lived experience: Kremer's 10-year-old daughter has a severe learning disability, and his son and several other close family members are autistic.

This report reflects that perspective in its focus on news provision for people with a learning disability in Europe. There is a particular emphasis on broadcast media, and the report also explores practical ideas for developing easy news within the author's own organisation, the BBC.

[1] Mencap (2025) What is a learning disability?

Introduction

Despite urgent industry-wide efforts to reach new audiences, there are 1.2 million adults in the United Kingdom that no mainstream news provider is currently trying to reach.

According to the charity Mencap, that figure represents adults with learning disabilities – more than 2% of the wider population.[2]

Why has this audience been overlooked? It may be due to assumptions that people with learning disabilities are not interested in the news or are incapable of understanding current affairs. It may also be because news executives underestimate the differing needs of this audience, both in terms of format and content, and assume – incorrectly – that existing news provision is enough.

This report seeks to address that gap. It begins by summarising what is known about how people with learning disabilities consume news, and the challenges they face in trying to understand it. It then explains why this matters, linking the lack of accessible news for this group to democratic and social exclusion.

There is, however, reason for optimism. News organisations outside the UK are already developing creative approaches to accessible news. The report examines five organisations in Europe and the United States that are trying to meet the information needs of people with learning disabilities in markedly different ways, analysing their work through the lens of accessibility, representation and participation.

The report then turns to the questions raised by these approaches, asking what people with a learning disability actually want from a news product. To inform this analysis, 31 people with a learning disability were asked five key questions.

Drawing on their responses, the report concludes with a list of ideas that public news broadcasters might consider experimenting with.

Throughout the report, the perspectives of people with learning disabilities are reflected through pull quotes presented in sidebars. These are intentionally included to ensure that the analysis remains grounded in the voices of those most directly

[2] Mencap (2025) How common is learning disability in the UK?

affected. These quotes come from interviews conducted for this report, and occasionally, where indicated, previous conversations and research.

At its core, the report asks an uncomfortable but overdue question: can mainstream journalism credibly claim to serve the public interest while excluding more than a million adults from meaningful access to news?

The news consumption of people with learning disabilities

"I do like watching the news. I find it quite interesting, the whole of the world and the country, Donald Trump and the Prime Minister…" – Lucy

"Everyone should have their own way of reading the news and understanding the news." – Josh

"I'd like to be able to understand and contribute to more conversations that are happening around me." – Eliph

The media consumption of people with learning disabilities has received scant attention from researchers. However, the work that has been done is consistent in its findings: people with learning disabilities are avid consumers of media across TV, radio and digital platforms. At the same time, they struggle to understand everything they see and, when it comes to news, they have needs and tastes that distinguish them from other audiences.

Research by the BBC

In 2005, the BBC Diversity Centre produced a report entitled *Not Seen, Not heard; Learning Disabled Audiences and the Media*.[3] The research was rigorous and thorough. The authors compiled questionnaire responses from more than 550 individuals (who filled them out with appropriate support), alongside qualitative

[3] Harpe, W., Malcolm, C. and O'Connor, F. (2005) Not seen, not heard; Learning disabled audiences and the media. BBC Diversity Centre.

data from six focus groups, and semi-structured interviews with people who supported people with a learning disability.

Television was the dominant medium, with 98% of respondents saying they watched it for an average of 4.62 hours a day – about 25% more than the general population. Soap operas were very important to the community, with sport, music and drama all genres that respondents preferred to the news. Nevertheless, three-quarters of the group watched TV news.

Many had difficulty understanding it. Nearly half of respondents (43%) said that the news featured difficult words, with almost everyone in the focus group agreeing with this criticism. A third of respondents said the news went too fast.

A similar proportion (30%) said the news contained "too much information". Little details, inessential to the story, are semantic "clutter" that gets in the way of understanding, in much the same way that physical clutter causes problems for wheelchair-users. People also struggled with conventional news storytelling – they complained that news "jumped around" and "started stories in the middle".

Other issues that came up in the 2005 research were related to the content of news stories:

- stories did not contain enough background information
- there was not enough news about disabled people
- there was too much bad news and not enough good news

This last issue was the one raised most frequently by participants. We know that many people find the news depressing or even frightening, but the authors of this report speculated that "what is different for this community is that many […] take the news personally."

The report recommended the BBC consider making an accessible news programme: "…Something this community would both welcome and value and which would also meet the BBC's remit as a public broadcaster."

The BBC did not create such a programme – and there is still a need.

BBC focus group findings

In March 2025, I assisted BBC News in the formation of virtual focus group. Six participants with learning disabilities were put forward by the charity Mencap, and the session was facilitated by researchers within the BBC Audiences team.

As with the participants from 20 years ago, this group were avid consumers of TV and radio, and some also used social media and the BBC website. However, all but one struggled to fully understand the BBC TV news item they were asked to watch.

"It was too quick to understand everything at once. Sometimes I wish the reporters could speak slowly, so there is time to understand what is happening." – Harry

"Some parts I did not understand what they were talking about. They used some words that I didn't understand." – Andrew

"A lot of news seems like it's made to distress people, made to make people scared. And… it's not fair for some people – especially for people with a learning disability." – Mo

The panel all agreed with Mo that they often found the news upsetting. Several people said they longed for lighter features and good news, such as stories about disabled people doing positive things, or funny or unusual stories.

Research in the U.S. and Germany

The U.S. researcher Rebecca Monteleone and co-authors recently held focus groups with 21 adults with learning disabilities to discuss their news habits.[4] They also found "the majority of participants expressed overwhelmingly negative emotional responses to the news". This attitude was caused by frustration at the inaccessibility of the news, but also fear, sadness and anger triggered by stories such as school

[4] Monteleone, R. et al. (2025) "You've got to either adapt to us or get out of the field": A qualitative analysis of people with intellectual disabilities' perspectives on journalism and news media. *Media, culture & society*. [Online] 47 (6), pp1168–1193.

shootings. Some participants were prevented from watching news by their families in case they became upset.

In terms of accessibility to broadcast news, difficult language and speed were noted as particular issues, as well as insufficient space between stories.

In Germany, Grütjen and Skusa recently spoke to 28 people, of whom 17 had learning disabilities.[5] Their findings were also gathered in a useful working paper aimed at journalists hoping to make accessible news, and were again consistent with everything stated so far, including the high levels of "empathy" they identify in people in this group. [6] Although, as discussed, this can lead to viewers finding the news upsetting, the authors pointed out that the human angle is important for this group, and an opportunity for journalists to raise their interest in news events.

Grütjen and Skusa also highlighted the positive impact that easier news broadcasts have already had in Germany. They identified a desire not just for news, but for information that could help participants in their everyday lives. This included information about their rights and how to vote, and also practical information, such as how to get across the city on the day of the city marathon. Local news was singled out as being of particular interest to the group.

Understanding the empathy finding

In group interviews conducted for this project, I have seen evidence of heightened content sensitivity too. In one session, a woman covered her ears while another participant, Emily, talked about an upsetting story she had recently seen on TV:

"There was a fire in a Muslim place. And I was very concerned for those people and their community. I felt very sorry for them because I know what it's like to go through things like that. With my special needs I find it very scary to deal with things that are sad. And with my disability I would be worried to go to a place like that. I get very overwhelmed and anxious." – Emily

[5] Grütjen, S. & Skusa, M. (2025) "Was geschrieben wird, ist manchmal wie so ein Gummiband gezogen". Leichte und Einfache Sprache im Journalismus aus Nutzer:innenperspektive. *Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft : M & K*. [Online] 73 (3), pp354–367.
[6] Grütjen, S., Herrmann, F., Skusa, M. (2025) Journalismus leicht verständlich; Otto Brenner Foundation Working Paper.

Emily was not wrong to be upset about the fire and its impact on the community, but she probably did not need to feel worried or overwhelmed. She might have been reassured if she had been given more context about the fire, like how rare such incidents are, exactly what part of the country it was in, and whether anyone was still in danger.

Anxiety about a news story is likely to be exacerbated by accessibility issues , since any uncertainty is unsettling. Emily went on to say her distress was made even worse the next day when she saw a TV interview with a man from the community where the fire had occurred. He was smiling in this interview but she could not understand why. Emily felt confused and angry by this because she was still very upset about the fire.

Emily's story shows how understanding is not binary in nature, but on a scale. Lots of factors may move news consumers up or down this scale. While the accessibility of news reports, and the cognitive ability of viewers are two prominent factors, a third might be the amount of exposure they have to a story, and the effort viewers put in to understand it. As Vijay, a learning-disabled man, put it to me in 2024:

"At times like the election or the pandemic, it was tiring [...] because there was a lot of things that were going on and it was just hard to just keep up with all of the information." – Vijay

Vijay's comment shows how people with a learning disability may be willing to put in extra effort to understand an important story. This may include work in between watching news reports, such as asking relatives and friends for clarifications. Trusted people can explain, comfort and reassure people with a learning disability about what they are seeing in the news. However, they also get in the way.

"Sometimes I have to ask my dad what's going on and then I get my dad's opinions. And I know my friends have a lot of their parents' opinions, and it was really difficult when there was a lot about trans [issues in the news]. And I didn't get the chance to get the information and make my own opinions. I think news avoidance is sometimes borne of frustration." – Eliph

News avoidance

News avoidance is an issue that divides journalists. Many are unapologetic about running upsetting stories; the defence is essentially: "It's not our job to paint the world as better than it is."

Moreover, when it comes to audiences with a learning disability, journalists may be justifiably worried about "gatekeeping" which stories they encounter. After all, isn't the whole point of creating accessible news to empower people with learning disabilities to take part in society?

To this, media researcher Benjamin Toff and his co-author say that news organisations must find ways to meet reluctant audiences where they are.[7] They suggest several valuable ideas for doing so: providing context, spelling out why stories matter, and exploring solutions journalism. They also suggest "news clubs" – an idea explored later in this paper.

In 2005, the BBC's focus group debated for a long time whether some news was too disturbing to be shown. In the end the vast majority thought that upsetting news *should* be shown, perhaps with a "health warning".[8]

In comparison to this editorial challenge, cognitive accessibility problems relating to language and speed are surprisingly easy to address. In the next chapter, we will see that many broadcasters in Europe have already begun doing so.

[7] Toff, B. et al. (2024) *Avoiding the news : reluctant audiences for journalism*. New York: Columbia University Press. pp162 - 176

[8] A remarkable conclusion given the absence of trigger warnings in popular culture in 2005.

This chapter has not discussed the news consumption habits of people with severe, or profound and multiple learning disabilities, who may account for about a quarter of the overall number of people with learning disabilities in the UK.[9] This is a very understudied group, and it is unclear how many people with this level of disability know about news or wish to access it.

Given the severity of some impairments, it is unlikely that news organisations will be able to make news accessible to every individual with a learning disability in the same way. However, they can and should make news accessible for every person that *wishes* to access it. The following section explains why.

[9] The Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust (2025) Learning disabilities.

Why make news for people with a learning disability?

Democratic exclusion

In many countries, people with a learning disability have the right to vote. This right is protected in Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.[10, 11]

In the UK, people with learning disabilities were given the right to vote under the Representation of the People Act in 1983.

However, democratic inclusion is about more than having the legal right to vote. In order for citizens to vote in an informed way, they need to have access to accurate information about their society.

Journalists are considered to have a critical role in supplying citizens with such information. The press is even occasionally referred to (perhaps idealistically) as the "fourth estate" – a reference to the three other parts of the political system (in the UK this is the monarch, the House of Commons and the House of Lords). As journalistic historian Mark Hampton writes, "Any concept of the press as a 'Fourth Estate', would seem, therefore, to require the accessible presentation of serious information and an independent perspective."[12]

In recent years, some (but not all) political parties have made an effort to write their manifestos in an accessible form.[13] However, in the absence of accessible, impartial election coverage, people with learning disabilities are given politicians' promises but not the tools to assess whether these are likely to be met. They may also feel they have an incomplete knowledge of the issues on which elections turn.

This could partly explain the low turnout of people with learning disabilities at UK elections. According to the advocacy organisation Enable, only 30% of people with a learning disability used their vote in the 2019 general election (compared to 67% of the general population). [14] According to a 2021 survey from Dimensions UK, a non-

[10] The United Nations (1966). International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
[11] The United Nations (2006) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
[12] Hampron, M., "The Fourth Estate Ideal in Journalism History" in Allan, S. (2009) *The Routledge companion to news and journalism*. New York, NY: Routledge p5
[13] Mencap (2024) General Election 2024 Easy Read Manifestos.
[14] Enable (2024). Enable the vote.

profit support organisation, more than a quarter of adults with learning disabilities and their families were unaware they had the right to vote.[15]

Accessible news coverage may increase democratic participation. Research from the U.S. shows that people who read local news are also more likely vote in local elections and take part in community activities.[16]

Grütjen and Skusa's recent study (see Research in the U.S. and Germany) suggests the introduction of easier news in Germany inspired some people to become more politically engaged. As one participant said:

> *"Thanks to the use of plain language, I'm becoming more and more interested in politics… What was it like back then with elections? I mean, when people go vote, I wasn't that interested before, but then it was translated into plain language… 'Oh cool,' I thought, 'now I finally understand it'."* [17]

The authors conclude their paper by saying:

> *"The development and implementation of journalistic content into Plain and Simple language represents a challenge which is not purely technical or linguistic but increasingly a responsibility to enable participation and inclusion in a democratic society."* [18]

Social exclusion

The low participation of people with learning disabilities in elections can be regarded as both a cause and a manifestation of their broader social exclusion.

Over the last century, this group has been subjected to incarceration, forced sterilisation and mass murder at the hands of governments in the U.S. and Europe.[19]

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[15] Anon. (2021). Empower people with additional needs to vote, says Dimensions UK. Care Management Matters.
[16] Barthel M, Holcomb J, Mahone J, et al. (2016) Civic engagement strongly tied to local news habits. Pew Research Center.
[17] Steffen Grütjen & Milan Skusa (2025) Ibid. Translation by Sandra Kremer.
[18] Ibid. Translation by Sandra Kremer.
[19] Unwin, S. (2025) *Beautiful Lives*. Headline Publishing Group.

Newly-won rights and a growing self-advocacy movement have improved things for people with learning disabilities in the UK. But many issues remain.

For example, due to profound health inequalities, people with a learning disability die, on average, almost 20 years before non-disabled peers.[20] Only 5% of people known to their local authority as having a learning disability are in paid employment.[21]

Accessible news could help people with a learning disability to recognise structural inequalities and talk about them as a community and with others. As Hanna Puffer points out, the ability to communicate about topics is a prerequisite for active participation in society.[22]

However, when news organisations in the UK do cover these issues, they do not trouble to make their reports accessible to the people they are about. Instead, such investigations are aimed at carers, parents, social policy wonks and politicians. It is the broadcast equivalent of "Does he take sugar with his tea?" – a notorious question sometimes asked by nursing staff to carers, over the heads of the people they are talking about.[23]

What's behind the does-he-take-sugar syndrome that has shaped news and current affairs? The truth is, people with learning disabilities have never been expected to hold knowledge about the world, or even about themselves. This form of exclusion has been called "epistemological injustice".[24] As disability and technology researcher Rebecca Monteleone puts it, "The systemic lack of access to knowledge, through the cognitive inaccessibility of most writing, including journalism, means that people with [learning disabilities] and others with limited literacy are denied their rights as knowers on a fundamental level."[25]

By extension, false beliefs about the world are also left uncontested. The exclusion of people with a learning disability from reputable news websites means they are

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[20] White, A; Sheehan, R; Ditzel, N; Ding, J; Roberts, C; Magill, N; Yu, MKL; Keagan-Bull, R; Chauhan, U; Tuffrey-Wijne, I; Strydom, A (2024) Learning from Lives and Deaths - People with a learning disability and autistic people (LeDeR) report for 2023.
[21] Mencap (2025c) Employment research and statistics.
[22] Puffer, H. (2021) 'Leichte Sprache als Aufgabe für die Medien.' *Media Perspektiven* (2), pp117-124
[23] In the UK, the phrase "Does he take sugar?" became shorthand for the exclusion of disabled people after a BBC radio programme adopted it as its name in the 1980s.
[24] Fricker, M. (2007) *Epistemic injustice : power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford ; Oxford University Press.
[25] Monteleone, R. et al. (2022) Intellectual Disability and Epistemic Justice in Journalism: Reflections from A Pilot Project. *Canadian journal of disability studies*. [Online] 11 (3), pp129–153.

likely to encounter news in places where it sits alongside opinion or misinformation, like social media.

There is evidence that people with a learning disability can struggle to differentiate between news and false information on social media.[26] They may also be more vulnerable to being taken in by misinformation. Experiments on mainstream audiences have found that individuals with less general knowledge about the world ("crystallised intelligence") are more likely to believe real stories are fake, while those who engage more in analytical thinking are better at identifying fake news.[27, 28]

"These people who make fake news… for people reading it – especially people with learning disabilities – it's very, very confusing. And that's why we need reputable news." – Luke

Anecdotally, it seems that many people with learning disabilities recognise certain brands as reliable (for example, the NHS, the BBC), but they might still struggle to use these brands' websites as verification tools to double-check information they have encountered. Misinformation, especially on Facebook, was a topic that people with learning disabilities raised without prompting several times in this project.

Public service exclusion

The BBC is the largest public service broadcaster in the UK and has a duty to serve all audiences. It is funded by a licence fee, paid for by all adult British users of its television content, including people with a learning disability. It is governed by a Royal Charter that lays out its duties. It says (my highlighting):

> *"The Public Purposes of the BBC are as follows. (1) To provide impartial news and information … **so that all audiences can engage fully** with major local, regional, national, United Kingdom*

[26] See Grütjen, S., Herrmann, F., Skusa, M. (2025) Ibid.
[27] Sindermann, C. et al. (2021) The evaluation of fake and true news: on the role of intelligence, personality, interpersonal trust, ideological attitudes, and news consumption. *Heliyon*. [Online] 7 (3) .
[28] Pennycook, G. & Rand, D. G. (2019) Lazy, not biased: Susceptibility to partisan fake news is better explained by lack of reasoning than by motivated reasoning. *Cognition*. [Online] 18839–50.

> *and global issues and participate in the democratic process, at all levels, as active and informed citizens.*
>
> *"(2) To support learning for people of all ages: the BBC should help everyone learn about different subjects* ***in ways they will find accessible****, engaging, inspiring and challenging.* [29]

The charter also demands the BBC ensures it "assesses and meets the needs of the diverse communities of the whole of the United Kingdom." Separately, the BBC's accessibility statement states:

> *"The BBC designs its products and services in a way that, as far as reasonably practicable, provides disabled people with an equivalent experience to that enjoyed by non-disabled people."* [30]

People with cognitive impairments, including those with learning disabilities, are covered by these general terms, but their specific needs have not been addressed by programme makers and journalists.

One idea might be to explicitly mention the needs of these audiences in the BBC's Royal Charter, which will be renewed at the end of 2027. This is what has happened at other public service broadcasters. The Interstate Media Treaty requires German public broadcasters to provide telemedia in plain language.[31] In Austria, a 2021 amendment to the ORF Act mandated that the national broadcaster transmit information in plain language at least once a day. Moreover, the content must be monitored and gradually increased in volume over time.[32]

"The BBC is such a very, very big organisation in Britain – the biggest TV organisation, that's run by the government. And it's very, very important that… everyone can watch the news in a more accessible format." – Harry

[29] BBC (2017) Charter and Agreement.
[30] BBC (2017) BBC Accessibility Statement.
[31] Grütjen, S. & Skusa, M. (2025) Ibid.
[32] Grütjen, S., Herrmann, F., Skusa, M. (2025) Ibid. See also, ENACT (2024) Report on current practices in easy-to-understand journalism.

The curb-cut effect

When improving accessibility for disabled people, non-disabled people also benefit. This phenomenon is sometimes called "the curb-cut effect" – a reference to lowered curbs on pavements that help both wheelchair users and people with prams or suitcases. In the same way, easier news does not just benefit people with learning disabilities, but a number of other groups too. These include:

- people with acquired brain injury or stroke
- people with dementia
- people for whom English is not their first language
- people with low literacy (for accessible text)

Altogether, that is a sizeable group of people. It has been estimated that between 10% and 14% of people in Finland need to access information in easy language.[33] It is important to note that the information and accessibility needs of these groups differ, but there remains an area of overlap which broadcasters can exploit to grow their audience.

Sonja Wielow, the project lead for Tagesschau in Plain Language in Germany, confirmed that all groups listed above are regular users of their plain language news service. And easier news appeals to mainstream audiences, too: "Some [non-disabled] people even wrote, 'After a hard day's work, I really enjoy watching it,'" she said.

This experience is familiar. When the Satakunta Hospital District in Finland introduced patient instructions in easy language, no-one wanted to read the standard instructions anymore. Relaying this anecdote, Camilla Lindholm and Ulla Vanhatalo write: "One answer to the question of who the Easy Language target groups are is: everyone."[34]

There may also be workforce benefits to doing easier news. Reporting with clarity and concision are essential tools for all journalists, and making easier news can only improve these skills. One of Tagesschau's journalists, Christian Frahm, said that doing easier news had changed the way he went about doing regular news. He said:

[33] Selkokeskus (2019). Need for Easy Finnish.
[34] Lindholm, C., Vanhatalo, U. (2021) 'Introduction' in Lindholm, C., Vanhatalo, U. (eds) *Handbook of Easy Languages in Europe*. Franke & Timme p14

“When I write the normal texts, I think: ‘OK, it’s very complex. Do I have to write it like this or can I make it easier?’”

Who is doing easier news?

Easy Language, plain language and accessible news

Many organisations around the world are already trying to make news more accessible for people with a learning disability. These efforts are sometimes referred to as "easy-to-understand news" or E2U news, but for simplicity I will use the term "easier news". They mostly build on the following systems:

- **Plain language** is grammatically simple language with a reduced vocabulary. It was originally developed in the late 1970s to make legal and official communication more understandable by most people
- **Easy Read**, or **Easy Language**, is an even simpler way of presenting language, with a very reduced vocabulary. Each sentence appears on a different line, alongside a picture to represent the meaning of the sentence. It is designed for people with a learning disability, and guidelines state this group should be involved in the production of these documents.[35]

A sample of this project as an Easy Read is included in Appendix 2. It was prepared by Go Easy Read.

The Nordic countries were trailblazers in the development of Easy Language, with efforts starting in the 1960s. It emerged in the UK in the 1980s, when people with learning disabilities were finally being asked to make choices about their lives, and official bodies needed a way to communicate information with them.[36]

Today, in the UK, plain language is mandatory on all government webpages. Since 2016, health and care services must communicate accessibly in documents aimed at people with a learning disability – these often utilise Easy Read.

For a visual example of Easy Read, see this extract of a news story from United Response, a non-profit-making care provider.[37] The organisation has been producing news stories, written and validated by people with autism and learning

[35] Inclusion Europe (2021). Information for all: European standards for making information easy to read and understand.
[36] Chinn, D., Buell, S. (2021) 'Easy Language in the UK' in Lindholm, C., Vanhatalo, U. (eds) *Handbook of Easy Languages in Europe*. Franke & Timme p627
[37] United Response (2025). Flags and protests in the UK: what is it all about? By Ben.

disabilities, since 2013. They are not professional journalists, but they are one of the few providers of easier news in the UK.

Easier news started in the 1970s with the launch of newspapers written in a version of plain language in both Sweden and the UK. Easy-to-understand newspapers followed in the Netherlands, Finland and Lithuania. One of the most prominent examples is Sweden's 8 Sidor, which has 5,000 print subscribers and 40,000 weekly web visitors.[38,39]

Over the past five years, several European news broadcasters have started to offer plain or easy language articles on their websites. Text articles are relatively easy to produce, which means news organisations can offer a varied selection of stories every day. The plain-language articles produced by RTV Slovenija are highly regarded, since they include clickable explanations for tricky words in the text, as well as a computer-generated audio reading. [40]

Easy radio broadcasts began in Finland in 1992 and later in Germany on two networks.[41] In Austria, radio and TV broadcasts in plain language began in 2020, and TV news in plain language followed in the Netherlands in 2021 and in Germany in 2024.

This field is growing. A recent survey found that 22 organisations in Europe were providing news in easy or plain language, and five organisations had plans to start.[42,43]

The survey was undertaken by ENACT, an ongoing EU-funded project that aims to provide guidelines and training for organisations to make easier news. [44] The project brings together public service broadcasters in Austria, Latvia and Slovenia with university experts and charities supporting people with learning disabilities. See the appendix for a list of all known producers of easier news.

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[38] 8 Sidor (2025) Homepage.
[39] Angelou, E. (2025). Piece of Cake: News in Easy Language. International Journal of Linguistics and Translation Studies6(2), pp51-63.
[40] RTV Slo (2025). Enostavno.
[41] Maas, C., Rink, I. and Hansen-Schirra, S. (2021) 'Easy Language in Germany' in Lindholm, C., Vanhatalo, U. (eds) *Handbook of Easy Languages in Europe*. Franke & Timme
[42] ENACT (2024) Report on current practices in easy-to-understand journalism.
[43] Cuitavi-Martín, M., Matamala, A. Mapping current practices, challenges, and opportunities in E2U news: a survey of European organisations. *Univ Access Inf Soc* 25, 30 (2026).
[44] ENACT (2025) Homepage.

Isn't this dumbing down news?

By making news easier to understand, are we at risk of dumbing it down? Some topics are intrinsically complex: the budget, COP negotiations or the war in Gaza. Can we really render these very difficult topics into plain language – or even Easy Language – without over-simplifying them?

As media researcher Benjamin Toff put it, at the core of accessible news, "is not intelligence, it is *intelligibility*".[45] Taking complicated issues and making them understandable and interesting to audiences is what journalists do every day. Easier news simply takes us one step further.

Very often, the "complex" version of a story is not the one that needs to be told, but simply: what is going to happen next and how will it affect me?

There are caveats. The first is that because accessible news is much slower, and because we should not assume prior knowledge, the telling can become very long – perhaps too long to sustain concentration. So it may be necessary to break big stories down into different episodes, or run a "special edition" focusing on one story, instead of a bulletin with different stories.

It is also true that details will be lost. For example, numbers and percentages are difficult for people with learning disabilities to grasp, and will be replaced with "many", "most", "some" and so on. Similarly, names and job titles might disappear to preference people's role in the story (e.g. "This woman is an expert on rocks"). By making these excisions, we are prioritising key information to be absorbed by an audience with learning disabilities. In fact, the overall information they receive may well *increase*.

This work is not easy: to tell a story in a really accessible way, journalists need to understand it better. The nuanced language and quotes that journalists often employ to fudge issues will not meet the test of comprehensibility. Annette Meisters, who oversees plain news services at Deutschlandfunk, makes the point that when journalists write news in plain language they sometimes realise their grasp of the original story was incomplete, and they have to re-read their source material.[46]

Lastly, it is true that because of the reduced vocabulary, accessible news can sometimes seem a bit indelicate. People in easy news stories tend to be sad, angry or happy about things. In a pilot easy news video for the BBC, I defined a far-right group as "People who don't like foreigners coming to the UK". It is not wrong; at the same time, it does not sound like the BBC normally sounds.

So news organisations need to be willing to look and sound different. They will want to explain to their current audiences what they are doing and why.

Even so, the experience of organisations who have taken this step in Austria and Germany is that critics will still accuse them of "dumbing down". So they have to believe in what they are doing, and be brave.

[45] Toff, B. et al. (2024) Ibid. P 165. Emphasis in text.
[46] Grütjen, S., Herrmann, F., Skusa, M. (2025) Ibid.

Five case studies of easier news

Stephen Unwin, an author and theatre director who campaigns for the rights of people with learning disabilities, identifies three ways in which the inclusion of people with learning disabilities has meaning in cultural production: access, representation and participation.[47]

Drawing on Unwin's framework, this project maps the three dimensions onto journalism as follows (questions in italics fall outside the scope of this project):

- **Access:** How can news organisations ensure that people with learning disabilities find and understand the news they make? *How accessible are the digital platforms organisations use? How do this audience's routines and living conditions shape their access – e.g. who controls the remote in their home?*
- **Representation:** Do we see reporters, news presenters and producers with learning disabilities? *How often do we see people with learning disabilities as sources in mainstream news? Is their portrayal fair?*
- **Participation:** How can people with learning disabilities get involved in making news?

While all three elements of inclusion are worthy and necessary aims, there is unlikely to be a single solution that hits all three.

The following five case studies have been selected for their varied approach, and emphasise the different aspects of inclusion of people with learning disabilities.

1. Tagesschau, Germany

Tagesschau (Daily News) is Germany's best-known news programme. It has been on air for more than 70 years, making it the oldest continuously running programme on German television. It is made in the ARD newsroom in Hamburg, and runs on the nationwide channel ARD1, as well as the news channel Tagesschau24.

In June 2024, ARD also began to broadcast an accessible spin-off: Tagesschau en Einfacher Sprache (Daily News in Plain Language).[48]

[47] Unwin, S. (2025) Ibid. p271.
[48] Tagesschau (2025). Tagesschau in Einfacher Sprache.

This news roundup covers three or four stories and the weather, and lasts between 7 and 9 minutes. It runs on Tagesschau 24 at 19:00 every weekday, in the same studio, and with the same news anchors, as the main show.

This makes logistical sense, but it also speaks to an underlying aim of the show. As the project leader Sonja Wielow said: “People have the feeling that they get the same value – it’s not a reduced version of Tagesschau.”
In this way, the focus of this product is accessibility. The producers include items about people with learning disabilities, but only if they are in the main news. People with learning disabilities do not work behind the scenes as producers or validators of the content.

As mentioned earlier, the programme is not only aimed at people with disabilities, but also the elderly, people with low levels of education and people with German as a second language (their largest audience). Every day, 50,000 people tune in on TV, YouTube and streaming platforms – though the actual number may be much higher, since the programme is shown in schools and care homes. An audience survey that took place six months after launch showed broad satisfaction with the format.

Sonja Wielow producing news anchor Susanne Holst during a recording of Tagesschau in Einfacher Sprache. Credit: Author’s own

The presenters speak much more slowly than on the main show and in plain language. To reduce on-screen distractions, no captions appear on the screen, except for at the start of the show and each item.

Tapes from the main show are voiced over by journalists working on the easier version, and they even speak over clips of speakers, to make their meaning clearer. In general, the pictures in the original reports do not need to be changed. The original reporters are not attributed, and their permission is not sought to re-use the material.

This English translation of a real item shows the level and style of the broadcasts: [49]

> And now, for the latest news. Football: the German team is participating in the WM.
> The German footballers just had an important game.
> They are pictured here.
> The thing was, could the German team compete in the football WM?
> WM is short for World Cup.
> The WM is taking place next year in the USA, Canada and Mexico.
> The German footballers won the game, which was against Slovakia.
> The score was 6:0.
> With this outcome the German team qualified for the WM.
> That means: Germany is in the WM.

Unlike normal reports, context is given before key facts, which here means that Germany's excellent scoreline against Slovakia was not mentioned until near the end of the item. Terms are defined if they are not in very common usage. Wielow explains that the aim here is to build the audience's capacity to use these terms in daily life.

The plain language edition of Tagesschau is produced by the same team, including the same producers, as the regular news programme. All the producers received two days' training in how to write from academics who specialise in plain language. The newsreaders are also keen supporters of the plain language edition, and their advocacy likely helped establish the importance of the work within the newsroom.

[49] Translation by Sandra Kremer

When the show launched, there was criticism of the "dumbed down" format on social media and in newspapers. One right-wing politician referred to it as "news for idiots" in the European Parliament. But then, 28 groups – many representing disabled people – circulated a letter in support of the show.[50] The furore died down.

Although the format of the show does little to target the interests of people with a learning disability specifically, it also doesn't presume to think their interests will be different from everyone else's. As Wielow said:

> *"People value that we take them seriously. And they are interested in politics, they are interested in international affairs, they are interested in climate change and sport – and all the usual stuff."*

2. ORF, Austria

The Austrian public broadcaster ORF offers a range of news in accessible forms. Like Tagesschau, they broadcast a daily TV news programme with a voiceover script written in plain language (though without an anchor speaking in plain language). [51] This script is also broadcast on some regional radio stations. The ORF news website features three accessible news stories on the front page.[52]

Some of ORF's inclusive writing team. Credit: Author's own

[50] Open letter accessed here.
[51] ORF. Nachrichten in Einfacher Sprache.
[52] ORF. https://orf.at/.

The TV news has an audience of 20,000 and online news draws around 2 million page views a year. ORF also offers weekly accessible local news in two regions: Vienna and Styria. The Viennese news is broadcast on radio, online and as a podcast, where it gets 800-1,000 downloads a month.
Like Tagesschau, ORF's target audience for their easier news is mixed: people with learning disabilities, elderly people with dementia and migrants for whom German is not a first language. What differentiates ORF's approach is the involvement of people with learning disabilities and autism in the production of national news. Therefore, the focus is not just on accessibility, but also participation.

The script for the daily TV news programme in plain language is usually written by Lorenz Lohr, an autistic journalist who has a learning disability, with support from the wider production team (who are non-disabled).

Lohr is a graduate of ORF's "inclusive writing team". This is a group of up to six disabled people and three support workers. Some have learning disabilities, others are physically disabled or autistic. The scheme is a three-year traineeship, operated in partnership between ORF and the NGO Jugend am Werk, and funded by the Vienna Social Fund. The focus is on transferable office skills (e.g. meetings, punctuality, interviews) but the members do receive some journalistic training.

They work in the same building as ORF's main newsroom. Once a week, the trainees are welcome to join the main editorial news meeting, although at the moment only one chooses to do so. The main task of the team is to produce plain-language news stories for the ORF website and social media, though they also sometimes create scripts for the TV news show.

Every two days, a different member of the team chooses between five and 10 stories, and the other team members select one that interests them. They generally start by "translating" a regular ORF news story into plain language. Corinna, a 22-year-old woman with a learning disability, explained the process:

"In the morning we look for texts. And then we print them out. I read it again. I highlight the important parts. I open Word. And then the basic work begins with translating the article into plain language." – Corinna

After a first draft, the trainers provide feedback and suggestions, but do not make changes themselves. The atmosphere in the room is calm and, except on rare occasions, there is no deadline. It often takes longer than a day to draft a story.

The team's stories are promoted on the ORF news homepage; they are revealed by pressing a button, which means viewers understand they are in plain language before clicking. In addition, a section at the bottom of each article explains why it looks different from the other news stories. They also write posts for social media.

In the past, the group also created original written work for the Topos site, a culture features section of the ORF website.[53] This allowed them to explore their own interests: for example, one of the group wrote a piece in plain language about the history of Vienna's subway.[54] Topos also provided space to cover stories of special relevance to learning-disabled readers, such as navigating romantic relationships, inclusive theatre, and living independently.

Topos closed recently but the trainees are still able to do original journalism on the monthly Einfach erklärt (Simply Explained) podcast.[55] This is a collaboration with FM4, a youth-focused radio network. The slow turnaround gives the team time to research the topic independently. The podcast, which is quite new, gets around 800 listens per month.

The inclusive writing trainees receive a small amount of money for taking part ("pocket money") and, at the end of the course, a certificate of their vocational training. They are also paid extra for doing the podcast.

"I just think it's very important and fair that we work here. We make the ORF message more inclusive." – Thomas

As always with these schemes, a challenge comes with placing graduates in a proper job at the end, and Lorenz Lohr is unusual in finding a role within ORF.

[53] ORF(2025a). Topos: Nachrichten in Einfacher Sprache.
[54] ORF (2025b). Von der Stadtbahn zur U-Bahn.
[55] ORF (2025c). Einfach erklärt.

A similar scheme operates at a local level, in the region of Styria. Plain language stories are produced by a panel of four or five disabled trainees at the care-provider LebensGroß, and they run in a weekly three-minute radio bulletin.

Both schemes demonstrate how a public broadcaster can partner with third-sector bodies to bring people with learning disabilities into news production.

3. TV BRA, Norway

TV Bra (TV Good), is a non-profit TV news station with headquarters in Bergen.[56] It produces a weekly news magazine show, as well as factual series and election specials. These appear on the channel's own website and app, on social media, and are carried by a commercial network, TV2, on their streaming platform TV Play. TV2 also runs TV Bra's New Year and election specials on their main channel.

The 10 reporters for TV Bra all have a learning disability and/or are autistic.

Reporters at TV Bra during their 2024 Away Day. Credit: BBC

While some are based in Bergen, many are spread throughout Norway, where they file local reports and interviews for the show. They are supported in this by local producers who are non-disabled. The managing editor, Camilla Kvalheim, and a small technical and admin team, are also non-disabled.

The reporters are encouraged to find stories that interest them, but as in any newsroom, the editor (Kvalheim) has to approve their idea. The aim is a mixed output: the website might feature a story about zoo animals alongside coverage of a recent parliamentary vote.

[56] TvBra (2025) Home page.

I visited TV Bra in August 2024 to do a news report for the BBC. I watched one reporter with Down syndrome record a new trailer for the programme. He struggled with the autocue and the team had to record many takes, but this was done patiently and without any sense of tension or frustration.

Later, I watched a group of journalists – working in pairs – brainstorm questions for a politician, who swung by the office. They interviewed her as a group, in an informal location. Kvalheim intervened occasionally, reframing a question or steering the conversation.

Kvalheim asks her reporters to follow regular journalistic codes, and to look and sound like mainstream reporters. She said: "If they are going to be respected as reporters and journalists they need to follow the ethical standards of other news organisations."

"I love being a reporter, so that is what I am – I am a reporter! When I work here I have to be very professional. I have to follow the script and not talk about personal stuff." – Emily, reporter at TV Bra

Nevertheless, TV Bra aims for a friendly, happy style. Their studio décor is pink and they use comedy, music and drama to help frame ideas. For example, in a series that ran before the last parliamentary election, the reporters pretended to kidnap each of the party leaders, before taking them to a basement and grilling them on their policies.

Indeed, the most striking aspect of TV Bra is the superb access they enjoy to the political class. Meaningful hold-to-account interviews are regularly conducted by people with learning disabilities. Representation is prioritised over accessibility since interviewees do not always respond to questions in a clear and concise way.

The reporters are paid, though less than an industry-standard wage. This is partly because paid work affects people's welfare payments. Funding for the station comes from national and local government, grants and the syndication fee from TV2.

The broadcasts have an audience of around 4,000, with 70,000 tuning in for the New Year's broadcast on TV2. At an audience event, one viewer with a learning disability

said: “I think this TV station is really important for our community. They explain things really well.”

4. People First Podcast, UK

The People First podcast is a weekly show made by people with learning disabilities in Keighley, Yorkshire. The show started in 2018 as a radio programme made for a local community station, before becoming a podcast in 2021.

The usual format of the show is an interview with a person by three or four members of the podcast team. In the past they have interviewed activists, local politicians, and professionals working with people with learning disabilities. When I visited the group on 3 November 2025, they interviewed me about this research.[57]

Unlike TV Bra, this show has no editor. Adam Hopkins, who does not have a learning disability, works as the Podcast Lead Support Officer. He said: “I’m not in charge of the podcast; I’m in charge of supporting the guys to do the podcast.”

The People First Podcast team interviewing William Kremer. Credit: Author’s own

Hopkins supports the team to be involved in every stage of the production. However, some of the team have developed specialisms. For example, Alex often edits the podcast and creates music for it. He enjoys the work because “it’s something different”.

On the day I visited, the team’s day began with a morning meeting where they brainstormed what questions to ask me. Hopkins steered or framed the discussion, but the questions were decided by the group. For example:

[57] People First Keighley and Craven Podcast (2025). S4EP42 William Kremer Accessible News.

Hopkins: What are some of the common questions we like to ask people when they're coming in, about their job?

Tom: We normally ask, 'What's the favourite part of your job?'

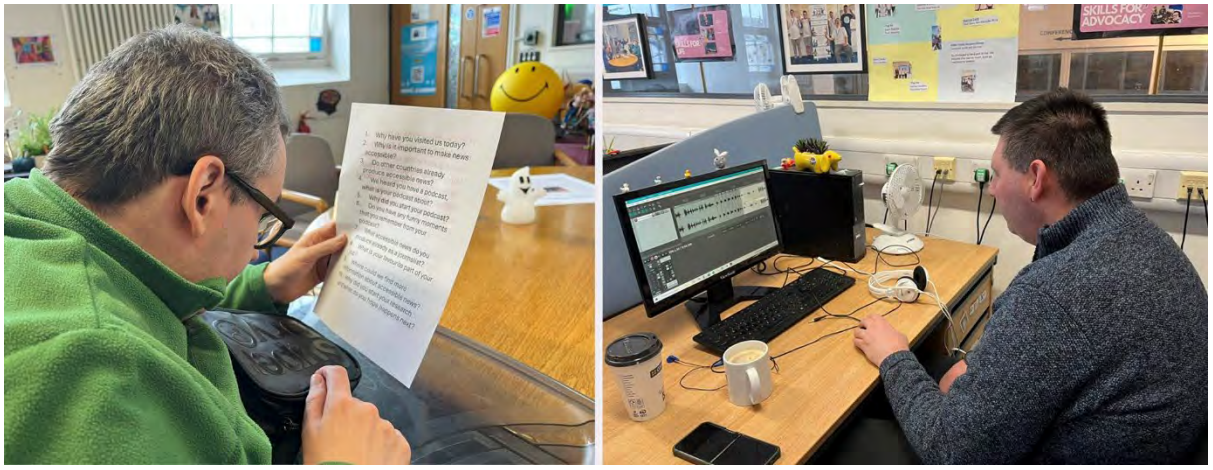
Hopkins: [To the other members] Do we like that one?

During the recording, three members asked the questions, while one took responsibility for recording. Hopkins supported this person to check the levels and start and stop recording. The interview was edited afterwards in Reaper. It typically takes Alex one or two days to edit the recording.

The podcast has about 150 unique listeners a month, with a third of these coming from the local area. The team thinks the audience consists of people with a learning disability and professionals working with them.

They're currently working to improve their follow-up questions and to make the podcast more spontaneous. An occasional second podcast – an unscripted chat about a fun topic – has been developed to help practise free-flowing conversation.

Participation is more important to the team than accessibility. For example, some of the interviewers are physically disabled and their speech can be hard to understand. The team are aware of this but choose to let these members have a turn asking questions or introducing the podcast. Guests do not receive a specific briefing about speaking slowly or in plain English, though Hopkins says that most do anyway.



Tom reading his script and Alex editing a podcast. Credit: Author's own

People First Keighley and Craven is a registered day centre, which means that the local government pays for users to attend (around £60 a day per person). This covers the cost of the support staff, and equipment has been paid for with grants in the past. The team also engages in paid research or communications work, though the members often prefer to be paid in vouchers rather than cash.

"I love coming here, I love meeting all the people. I love everything that we do, not just the podcast. And we always love new people to interview – it really makes us grow and grow and grow." – Luke

Tackling sensitive issues on the podcast – for example, mental health, hospital trips and the termination of foetuses with Down syndrome – has helped the team develop their own beliefs and positions. In addition, Hopkins says, some members have improved their literacy and speech by taking part.

For people with learning disabilities, doing journalism represents a significant shift in power. As Dan Goodley, a scholar in the field of critical disability studies, wrote, "People with 'learning difficulties' are the object of assessment strategies that belittle, patronise, pathologise and objectify."[58] Too often, news reporters unknowingly echo this medical viewpoint, or play into other tropes such viewing

[58] Goodley, D. (2001) 'Learning Difficulties', the Social Model of Disability and Impairment: Challenging epistemologies. *Disability & society*. [Online] 16 (2), pp207–231.

people with learning disabilities as 'eternal children', helplessly vulnerable, or objects of pity or inspiration. Participatory news-making is a chance for this group to reframe their story on their own terms, in a way that mirrors the broader self-advocacy movement.

There is also a practical advantage to giving people with learning disabilities editorial control: it is difficult for non-disabled people to guess what they might want or need to know about the world. For example, in a BBC pilot interview between a learning-disabled reporter and a political correspondent about the government, the reporter abruptly asked: "What's the king got to do with it?" She knew that the king opened parliament and read a speech every year, but was unclear on his exact role.

In another interview that I helped to facilitate – between a community group in Oxford and a theatre director – the group asked about recent work by their guest, but they also wanted to know how the theatre decided where people would sit, how the lighting worked, and "Why is it Dick Whittington and his cat, and not his dog?"

5. Plain Truth Project, USA

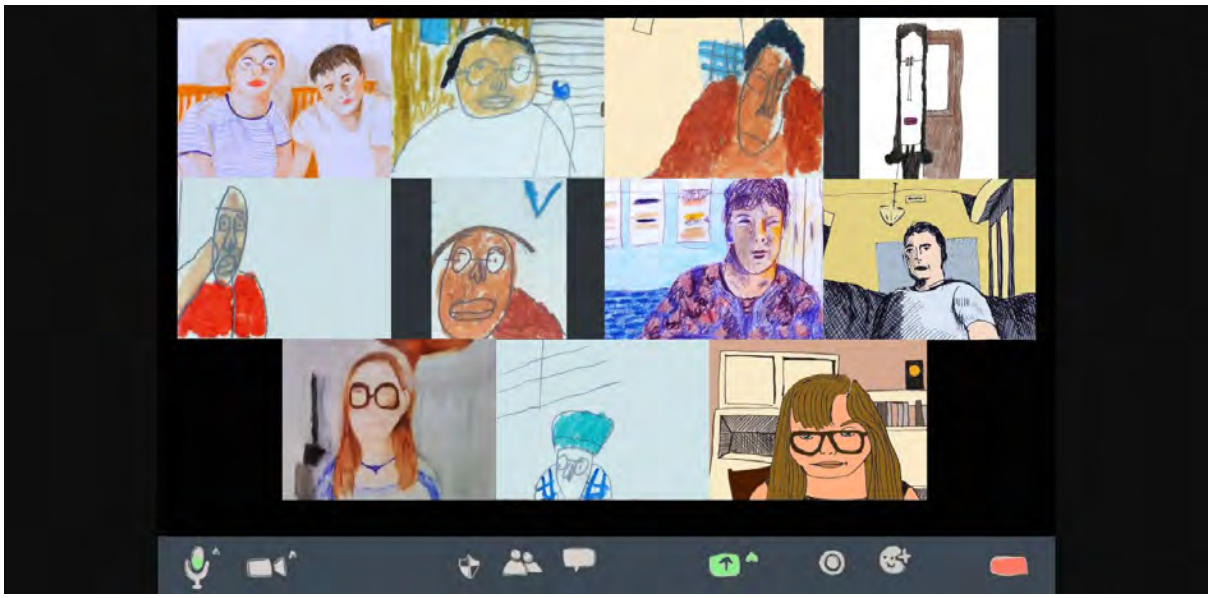
In 2020, journalist Amy Silverman worked on a months-long investigation into services for people with learning disabilities in Arizona, USA.[59] Her reports, made with the non-profit investigative newsroom ProPublica, ran in the *Arizona Daily Star*.[60] Silverman also partnered with engagement journalist Beena Raghavendran and disability researcher Rebecca Monteleone to produce plain language and audio versions of the stories. In her reporting, Silverman tried to centre the experiences of people with learning disabilities as much as she could, rather than just focusing on the narratives of parents and carers. The team also bookended the investigation with public events.

In this way, the project featured elements from all three areas of inclusion– accessibility, representation and participation. The work serves as a rare example of a cognitively inclusive investigation.

It was the first time that ProPublica had held audience sessions with people with learning disabilities. The first event, held virtually in July 2020, was attended by 130 people. It took the form of a storytelling show made in collaboration with a local

[59] Silverman, A., Monetleone, R., and Raghavendran, B. (2020) State of Denial. ProPublica.
[60] For an academic account of the project see Monteleone, R. et al. (2022) Ibid.

theatre group. Twelve performers with a learning disability delivered short monologues that had been workshopped with Monteleone on a range of issues.



Rosie Eck, Erika Clark, Tony LaBate and Louis Middleton/Make Studio for ProPublica. An illustration of a ProPublica audience event, used with permission.

The event also featured a workshop on what journalism is and is not, and a talk by a person with a learning disability on how to give interviews to a journalist. Following the event, 10 audience members followed-up with the investigation team.

The second public event took place in December 2020, a month after the publication of the investigation. This event was a chance to learn more about the investigation from Silverman, but also to hear directly from two of the case studies, who gave updates on their situation, and the disabled artists who had illustrated the story. Some local officials attended the event.

The project was celebrated in journalism media, but Silverman and Monteleone acknowledge that it's unlikely many people with learning disabilities read the plain text version of their story. [61] The pair have since developed the Plain Truth Project, a platform to learn more about the media needs of people with a learning disability, to distil best practice in journalism, and to advocate for change. [62] Monteleone also presents a podcast featuring the voices of people with learning disability.[63]

[61] Scire, S. (2020) ProPublica experiments with ultra-accessible plain language in stories about people with disabilities. NiemanLab.
[62] Plain Truth Project (2025). Welcome to the Plain Truth Project.
[63] NPR (2025) Telling it our way.

There are two areas of the Arizona project that warrant further exploration:

The importance of audience involvement

In public health research, the involvement of people with lived experience is now an essential element of project design, one on which funding depends.[64] Typically, this involvement starts with consultation work at the start. This gives the targeted group a chance to learn about the research, reframe the researchers' ideas and feed into accessible communications. Researchers may be expected to form an advisory group to act as consultants during the research, as well as a public involvement panel to give more detailed ongoing support.

These structures offer lessons for news organisations. Few reporters have spent any meaningful time with people with a learning disability. So at the outset of an investigation, a chance to meet people with lived experience provides journalists with valuable context and a chance to stand up potential stories. Leads and case studies may emerge. Being open to alternative modes of expression and communication – such as storytelling or drama – could introduce reporters to issues that mainstream society is unaware of. A consultation also offers an opportunity to check with the audience what an accessible telling of that story would look like.

The value of community news events

Community meetings are not a new idea in journalism. They have been proposed to allow groups to process difficult or traumatic news together, hold reporters accountable for their work, and formulate community-level responses.[65] Many outlets are already experimenting with news meet-ups and audience events.[66]

People with a learning disability may benefit especially from such an approach. The idea of "distributed competence" understands the ability of people with a learning disability to complete tasks as situated in, and

[64] National Institute for Healthcare and Research (2024) Briefing note seven: approaches to public involvement in research.
[65] Hayat, A., Clawson, H., White, R., Kulkarni, S., Clarke, S. (2024) "News for all"; Media Cymru Report
[66] Ragland, S. and Loker, K. Journalism has many roles. It's time to embrace the role of convener. American Press Institute.

distributed across, their social and support networks.[67] Such an idea stands in contrast to the traditional, medical view of learning disability, which links competence to an individual's IQ.

Therefore, people with a learning disability may benefit from social space to make meaning from news – both physical and temporal space. This space would allow people to ask questions, get support or reassurance, and work out how stories relate to *them*. Day centres, schools and residential homes could all provide the physical settings for such groups. News providers could support the activities by offering extra resources like transcripts, quizzes and topics for conversation, or – as in Silverman's project - the chance to speak to the reporter on a video call.[68]

Using journalism as a prompt for creative acts like storytelling or art could help people discover or develop these meanings and be a first step towards civic participation on an issue. Importantly, the people taking part in these sessions should be active participants, rather than (for example) students in a classroom.

There is already precedent for such an idea in the UK: Books Beyond Words make short books about important topics that consist only of pictures. They oversee a network of book clubs in the UK that bring people with learning disabilities together to make meaning from these resources.

[67] Booth T. and Booth W., *Growing up with parents who have learning difficulties* (1998) London: Routledge. p137
[68] See also Toff, B. et al. (2024) Ibid. pp162-176

Panel discussion of the five case studies

The five case studies in the previous section emphasise different aspects of inclusion – access, representation or participation – and relate to different platforms.

News broadcasters wishing to serve this audience have choices to make. To inform those choices, this section includes the results of panel discussions held with 31 people with a learning disability and/or autism.

Panel details and methodology

At each panel, participants gave answers to five questions as part of a group discussion. Prior to the discussion, each group was shown a presentation that included clips from Tagesschau, TV Bra and two video pilots made by the BBC.

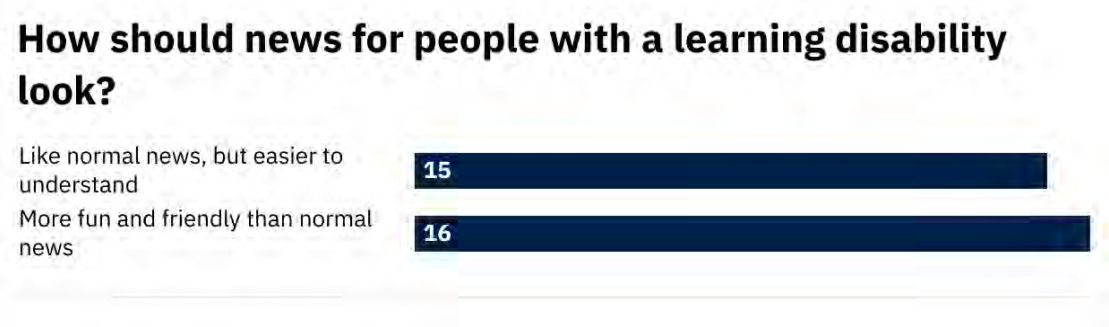
Panels included:

- Six people from People First Keighley and Craven, Yorkshire
- Seven people from TAPE in Old Colwyn, Conwy County
- Seven people from Yellow Submarine in Witney, Oxfordshire
- Five people from Carousel in Brighton, Sussex
- Six people from My Life, My Choice in Oxford

Question one: serious or fun?

There is wide variation in style across the five case studies, ranging from the conventional, studio-based format of Tagesschau to TV Bra's use of humour, stunts, and informal presentation. This diversity raises the question of whether people with a learning disability have a preference for a particular style or tone. The risk here is that news organisations go too far in altering their product, to the point that it loses its appeal. As one member of the BBC's audience focus group put it:

"I think some people with learning disabilities don't want to think that we're getting all this special treatment. I think if it's played out like normal news, but slower so we can understand it, it could work." – Paul



Opinions were divided, though perhaps not by as much as this result suggests. Several people thought that the tone could and should vary, depending on the story.

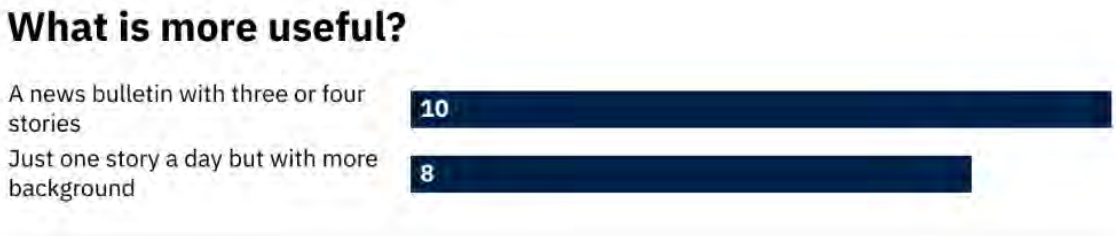
"It can be fun and friendly, but sometimes serious as well." – Nancy

"It needs to have a balance, because at the end of the day you want it to be friendly, but you want it to match the world. You don't want to turn it into a joke." – Kumudu

Some people added that even if it looks like regular news, it could still be presented by someone with a learning disability.

Question two: In-depth or a bulletin?

Tagesschau and ORF both offer short news round-ups that give viewers an overview of the day's events. This contrasts with a BBC pilot produced in 2024, which focused on a single story in greater depth, using a five-minute video format. The following question was introduced part-way through the research, resulting in a smaller number of responses (18 total).

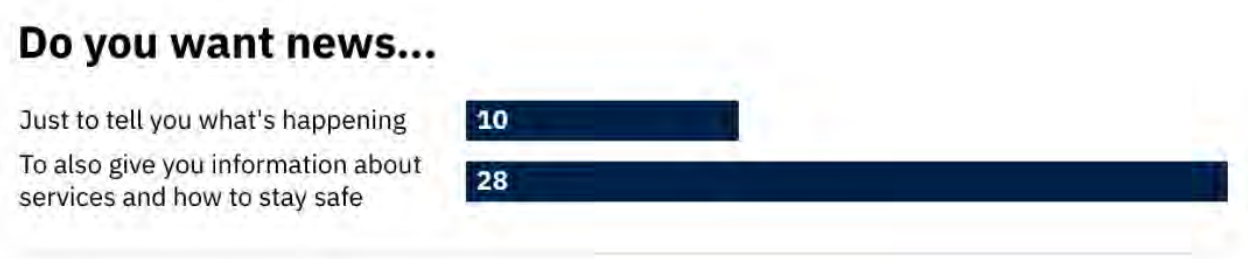


The results suggest a strong appetite for information, but they do not tell the whole story. Some participants expressed frustration at having to choose between one in-depth story and a bulletin, arguing instead for three or four in-depth stories each day. Others who selected option A added that, for particularly important or complex topics, a standard bulletin could be replaced by a single, more detailed story.

This tension is illustrated by a comment from Eliph, highlighted earlier in the report. Eliph selected option B because they wanted to take part in more conversations about key social issues, and believed that in-depth coverage would better equip them to do so.

Question three: News or information?

Research shows that this audience craves practical information that can be applied in everyday life. There is evidence, too, that people with learning disabilities may require clearer guidance on how to act on information — for example, how to participate in elections. To explore this, the following question was put to the panel:



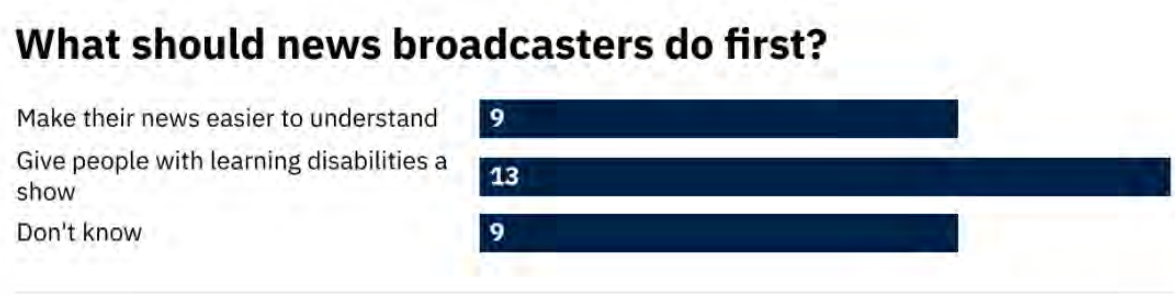
Responses suggested that audiences wanted clearer pathways from information to action. Participants in the Yorkshire panel argued that news programmes should offer follow-up options, drawing comparisons with the BBC Action Line, which provides support to mainstream audiences who have been affected by what they have seen or heard.

This perspective was echoed by LJ in Brighton, who linked news more explicitly to activism, saying: “I want the news not only to tell me what’s going on, but also make the scenario better.”

Question four: Access first or representation?

The case studies examine news products that differ in how they prioritise access, representation, and participation for people with learning disabilities. This audience values inclusion across all three dimensions. The question, however, is one of priority: which is most pressing, and where should news organisations begin?

To explore this, the following question was put to the panels:

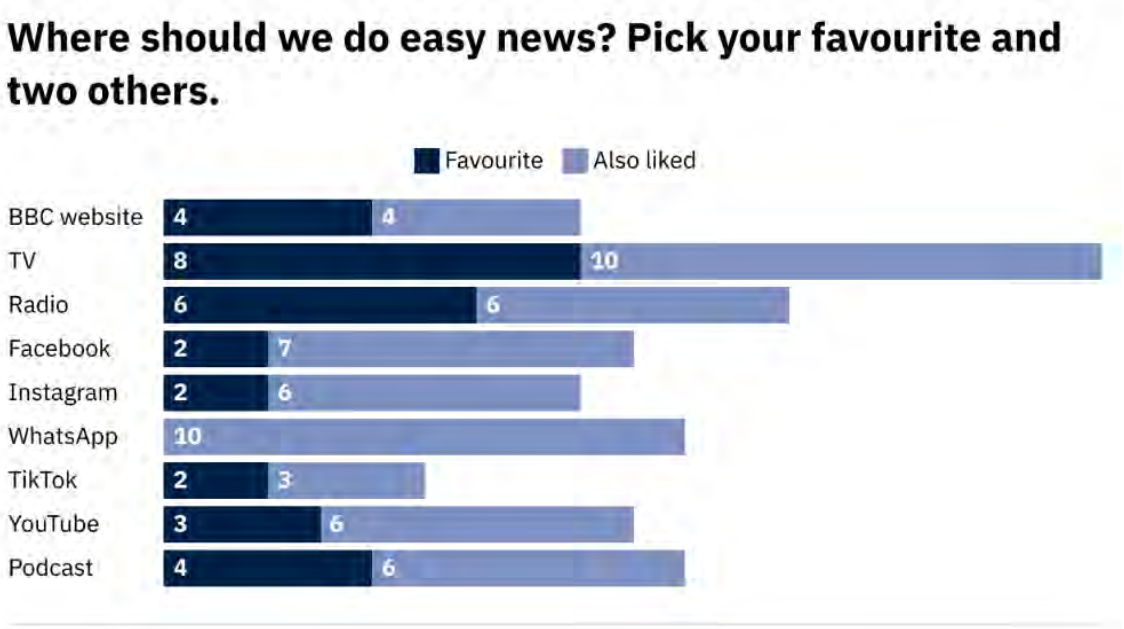


Many participants found a binary choice between the first and second option difficult, which led to the inclusion of a third option. Luke, a participant in Keighley, expressed this clearly, saying: “It’s all worth it.”

Discussion suggested that the perceived importance of representation varied by format. For example, it mattered less to participants whether a newsreader delivering a script had a learning disability. In contrast, when interviews were involved, the interviewer’s lived experience was viewed as central, and representation became significantly more important.

Question five: What should be the home of easy news?

However news is produced, it is essential that these efforts reach their intended audience. To explore this, the following question was put to the panel:



Discussion

The panel’s responses are a reminder that people with a learning disability are not a homogenous group, but individuals with a broad range of tastes, opinions, and abilities. Discussions demonstrated strong media literacy, with participants often

making nuanced distinctions and offering practical suggestions for how formats might be adapted depending on the story.

The emphatic responses to question three — news or information? — indicates that it is not just language that this audience struggles to understand but the wider meaning of the news, and what to do with it afterwards. This suggests that people with learning disabilities do require a bespoke news product. To provide the context and guidance they value, such a product would be unlikely to serve multiple audiences simultaneously.

At the same time, a "news-plus" service of this kind would require careful editorial judgement and, potentially, oversight. As a crude example, while it may be appropriate to explain how to vote, it would not be appropriate to advise audiences who to vote for. News organisations could therefore consider establishing advisory boards to review output and act as critical friends.

The need for a tailored news product also aligns with the strong preference expressed by many participants for a dedicated programme for people with learning disabilities (question four). Such an approach could empower the community itself to offer information and advice, and sits comfortably alongside calls for news that is "fun and friendly" (question one).

However, the results also point in a different direction: around half of respondents said they wanted news to be serious (question one), while a narrow majority preferred a bulletin format over in-depth reporting. In both practical and tonal terms, a short, serious bulletin is difficult to reconcile with a tailored "news-plus" programme.

On this basis, the most responsive outcome for this panel would be a mixed offering: a short, daily news programme alongside a looser, more informal weekly programme. This approach reflects the near-equal weighting participants placed on accessibility and representation.

If resources only allow for one core product, the priority should be a daily news briefing with an approachable but serious tone. It should specifically target people with a learning disability and feature a disabled presenter.

A plan for inclusion

What can public service broadcasters like the BBC take from these findings? Results suggest that there is unlikely to be a single solution. Instead, the evidence points towards a combination of approaches, designed to meet different needs around accessibility, representation, and participation. No single format or platform can address all three equally well.

This final section presents two workable solutions, as well as a list of modular elements that can be combined and adapted. These suggestions are intended to be scalable, testable, and compatible with the BBC's existing public service remits.

Option 1: A daily roundup and a weekly show

As results in the previous chapter demonstrate, the most responsive outcome for this panel, the most responsive outcome would be a mixed offering: a short, daily news programme alongside a looser, more informal weekly programme.

Around half of respondents said they wanted news to be serious, and a narrow majority prefer a bulletin format over in-depth reporting. This points towards **a daily news roundup in easier English** in the style of ORF and Tagesschau. Such a programme would be relatively inexpensive to produce and has the advantage of appealing to other underserved audiences too, such as those with dementia and cognitive brain injury. It would work best as "appointment viewing" on the BBC News channel, which aligns well with this panel's preference for linear broadcasting.

A daily bulletin alone would not meet the panel's expectations around representation, with many saying the BBC's priority should be to "give people with learning disabilities a show". Moreover, the panel's emphatic response to question three — news or information? —suggests people with learning disabilities require a bespoke news product to help then make sense of complex stories. **A weekly TV show or visualised podcast** would provide a space to do this. Tonally, it would be more fun and approachable than the daily roundups, with room for background, and occasionally, advice. Upsetting stories would not be avoided, but their treatment could be tailored to the sensitivities of this audience.

Like TV Bra in Norway, it would be a place for serious issues but also joy and curiosity. Real-life stories would inspire and raise the ambition of this audience to participate in public life. Besides news, the show could feature sport, weather and

entertainment updates. Such a mix would offset the anxiety we know this audience has in consuming news in an undiluted form.

It would also allow the BBC to develop disabled talent, both within the organisation and in the community. The BBC could commission short items for the show from creative groups in the community, such as People First Keighley and Craven.

Option 2: A daily briefing

If resources only allow for one core product, the priority should be **a daily news briefing** with an approachable but serious tone. It should specifically target people with a learning disability and feature a disabled presenter. In order to meet the information needs of this audience, it should cover one story in more depth, rather than give a roundup. Some episodes could be given over to interviews too.

Although the panel preferred linear platforms, they also have a presence on social media, and the briefings could be developed as a digital offering, perhaps as vertical video. Audience research with people with a learning disability in Germany found a clear interest in receiving news on WhatsApp.[69]

One reason to explore this further is how embedded this application is in individuals' support networks. If someone reads a story that leaves them with questions, they can easily share it friends.

Community-focused news services have already experimented successfully with WhatsApp.[70]

Additional elements

- The BBC should consider **establishing an advisory group** to inform next steps in this area. This group could provide feedback on tone, format, and priorities, and act as a "critical friend" as new approaches are trialled.
- To address the "does-he-take-sugar" issue highlighted in Why make news for people with a learning disability, the BBC should support reporters covering issues related to learning disability to produce **accessible versions of their journalism**. For longer features and investigations, reporters should consider involving members of this community at an early stage.
- **Online text articles in easier English** are straightforward to produce and are likely to find a broad audience. Providing readers with an option to click

[69] Grütjen, S. & Skusa, M. (2025) Ibid.
[70] Tameez, H. (2023) How 13 news publishers are using WhatsApp Channels. NiemanLab.

through from regular articles to easier versions would open a back door to accessible content for those who do not identify as having cognitive impairments, including a large group of people with low literacy. Preliminary work at the BBC indicates that AI can create a reasonable first draft of an article in easier English, but further work is needed to programme the algorithm to meet the needs of people with a learning disability.

- Following the example of ORF, the BBC could **introduce a training scheme with a third-sector partner**. Such a scheme would help the organisation discover and develop talented broadcasters who cannot enter the workforce using existing schemes due to their inaccessibility. Such a scheme should have strong links to output aimed at people with a learning disability. This would allow such content to be validated by people with lived experience and also provide potential career pathways for the graduates.
- The BBC could establish or support **a news club** to give people with a learning disability additional space to make sense of the news. With relatively little investment, the organisation could provide support resources, such as downloadable transcripts and conversation topics, or make reporters available to answer questions about their stories. A key aim might be to improve media literacy and counter misinformation. The club should be a safe space for people with a learning disability to ask questions and make comments. Therefore, rather than being open to the general public it would work well as a partnership programme with schools, colleges and service providers.

Conclusion

This project has examined evidence that people with a learning disability in the UK find the news difficult to understand and engage with. It has argued that public service broadcasters must provide bespoke news products to meet this need, for democratic and social reasons.

The report examined five organisations that are already doing this. These range from small charities to large public service broadcasters, and vary widely in their reach and approach. Some only target people with a learning disability, others seek to provide easier news to a broader range of people. Some actively involve people with a learning disability in the production of news, others are focused more on integrating the production of accessible news into existing teams and workflows. There are positives and drawbacks to each approach.

People with a learning disability were emphatic that they want the news to do more than just tell them what's happening. They want it to provide context and useful information to help enrich their lives and keep them safe. Some were keen for the news to look different from normal – to be more fun and friendly – but others were more conservative in their tastes. There was huge interest in a show presented by people with learning disabilities. They made it clear that their favourite outlets remain linear channels.

Taking these findings together, this report has set out a series of options that could help meet the needs identified. The evidence suggests that no single product is likely to be sufficient, and that progress is more likely to come through a combination of approaches, developed incrementally over time.

Most importantly, this isn't a problem that news organisations can solve by themselves. They need to talk to people with a learning disability and look for opportunities to open themselves up to this community. That does not mean that journalists have to become psychologists or community workers. The skills required – empathy, curiosity, and editorial judgement – are already central to good journalism. What is needed is the confidence to apply those skills in new ways.

Appendix 1

Where is easier news happening?

This collection of all known accessible news products was produced as part of *How to make easier news for people with a learning disability* by William Kremer (2025)

Country	Organisation	Type	Platform	Link
Austria	Andererseits	Company	Online texts	Startseite - andererseits.org
	APA	Company	Online texts	Nachrichten leicht verständlich
	ORF	PSB	TV, radio, online texts, podcast	Nachrichten in Einfacher Sprache - ORF ON
Denmark	TV Glad	NGO	TV, online texts, podcast	Forside - TV Glad
Finland	YLE	PSB	TV, radio, online texts	Selkokieliset
Germany	ARD (Tagesschau)	PSB	TV, Online texts	tagesschau in Einfacher Sprache
	Deutschlandfunk	PSB	Radio, Online texts, Social media, Teletext	Nachrichten in Einfacher Sprache
	Easy Newstime	Company	Social media	Easy Newstime
	Hamburger Abendblatt	Company	Online texts, podcast	Einfaches Deutsch: Nachrichten in leichter Sprache
	Kleine Zeitung	Company	Online texts	Nachrichten leicht verständlich
	Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk	PSB	Online texts, podcast, whatsapp	Nachrichten in Leichter Sprache
	Norddeutscher Rundfunk	PSB	Online texts	Leichte Sprache im NDR | ndr.de
	Saarländischer Rundfunk	PSB	Online texts	SR.de: Nachrichten in einfacher Sprache

	Südwestrundfunk	PSB	Online texts	Nachrichten in Leichter Sprache
	Westdeutscher Rundfunk	PSB	Online texts	Leichte Sprache - Leichte Sprache - Hilfe - WDR
	ZDF	PSB	Online texts	Einfache News - Nachrichten in einfacher Sprache
Italy	Uniamoci APS	NGO	Radio, Online videos	Web Radio Without Barriers - YouTube
Latvia	Latvijas radio	PSB	Radio, online texts	Ziņas vieglajā valodā | Ziņas vieglajā valodā | Tēma
Lithuania	Lengvai	NGO	Online texts	Lengvai
Netherlands	NOS	PSB	TV, online texts	NOS Journaal in Makkelijke Taal | NPO Start
Norway	TV Bra	NGO	TV, online texts	TV BRA - Forside
	Klar Tale	Company	Newspaper, online	Klar Tale
Serbia	Pannon RTV	PSB	Radio	
Slovenia	RTV Slovenija	PSB	Online texts, podcasts	Enostavno - RTV SLO
Spain	Basque Radio and Television	PSB	Online texts	
	Catalan Down Syndrome Foundation	NGO	Online texts	Notícies – FCSD
	Critic	Company	Online texts	Infofàcil
	Exit 21*	NGO	Online texts	EXIT21.org - Catalan Down Syndrome Foundation
	Planeta Fácil	NGO	Online texts, radio, podcast, TV	Planeta Fácil: Noticias fáciles de entender
	TEB Vist	NGO	Online videos	Inici | TEB Vist
Sweden	8 Sidor	PSB	Online texts, newspaper	8 Sidor - Lättlästa nyheter
	SVT	PSB	TV	Nyheter på lätt svenska | SVT Play

	Swedish National Radio	PSB	Radio	Klartext – nyheter på ett enklare sätt | Sveriges Radio
Switzerland	Infoeasy	NGO	Online texts, Videos	News in Leichter Sprache – infoeasy
United Kingdom	Mencap	NGO	Online texts	Easy Read library | Mencap
	People First K&C podcast	NGO	Podcast	PFKC Podcast - People First Keighley & Craven
	United Response	NGO	Online texts	Easy read - United Response
United States	WGTE	PSB	Podcast	Telling It Our Way - WGTE Public Media

** Exit 21 runs the same articles as the Catalan Down Syndrome Foundation.*
Note that some broadcasters work with third-sector organisations to produce their easy-to-understand news.

Sources: Leichte und Einfache Sprache im Journalismus, Grütjen, S., Skusa, M.,"Was geschrieben wird, ist manchmal wie so ein Gummiband gezogen". Leichte und Einfache Sprache im Journalismus aus Nutzer:innenperspektive" Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft, Vol. 73, no. 3, pp. 354 – 367, ENACT (2024) Report on current practices in easy-to-understand journalism, and Andrej Tomazin (personal communication)

Appendix 2

How to make easy news for people with a learning disability

Report

By William Kremer

January 2026

About this report

My name is William Kremer.
I am a BBC **journalist**.

A **journalist** is someone who makes the news.

There are more than 1 million adults with learning disabilities in the UK.

I wanted to find out how they get news.

So I looked at reports from the BBC and universities.

And I asked people with learning disabilities about news.

This report tells you what I found out.

The problem with the news

Many people with a learning disability are interested in the news.

But the news is often hard to understand.

They said:

- The news is too fast.
- Some words are too hard.

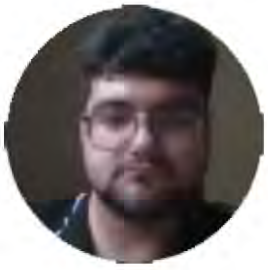
- The news does not explain things enough.
- The news can be upsetting.

3

Lucy said
I do like watching the news.
I find it quite interesting –
the whole of the world and the country, Donald Trump and the Prime Minister.

Harry said
It was too quick to understand.
Sometimes I wish the reporters could speak slowly, so there is time to understand what is happening.

Andrew said
Some parts I did not understand what they were talking about.
They used some words that I did not understand.



Mo said
A lot of news seems like it is made to make people scared.
It is not fair for some people.
Especially for people with a learning disability.

Why this matters

The news is important because it gives people information that can help their lives.

For example:

- It helps people decide who to vote for in elections.

- It helps people work together to make things better.

- It stops people getting wrong ideas, like from social media.

  This is sometimes called fake news.

5

The BBC

The BBC makes TV, radio, and online news.

The BBC's job is to make news for everyone.

In the UK, people with a learning disability help pay for the BBC.

But people with a learning disability cannot always understand BBC News.

This is not fair.

6

Easier news around the world

In Germany and Austria

- In Germany and Austria, easier news is on TV on Monday to Friday.

- The easier news looks like normal news but it is slower and uses easy words.

- Disabled people in Austria get training to help make the news.

Thomas is a trainee. He said

I just think it is very important and fair that we work here.

We make the message more inclusive.

7

In Norway

- A TV channel in Norway called TV Bra has reporters with learning disabilities or autism.

- Their reports look different and are more fun than normal news.

- They interview **politicians** and ask questions for their viewers.

  A **politician** is someone who helps decide important things for the country.

Emily is a reporter at TV Bra.
She said

I love being a reporter! I have to be very professional.

I have to follow the script and not talk about personal stuff.

8

In the UK

- In the UK, people with learning disabilities make a **podcast** at People First.

  Podcasts are recordings that you can listen to online.

- People with learning disabilities choose what to talk about.

- They interview people.

- And they record the podcast themselves.

Luke works on the podcast.
He said

I love everything that we do, not just the podcast. And we always have new people to interview.
It really makes us grow and grow.

9

In the United States of America

- Journalists worked with people with a learning disability to do an **investigation**.

An **investigation** is when journalists look closely at a problem to understand what happened.

- The journalists had meetings with people with learning disabilities.

- And said what they found out in a way that was easy to understand.

10

What do these examples tell us?

We can make news for people with a learning disability.

3 things are all very important:

1. News should be easy to understand.

2. News should show more people with a learning disability.

   It should be about things that are important to them.

3. People with a learning disability should help make and present the news.

11

But it is hard to do all 3 things in the same programme.

So people with a learning disability might need more than one kind of news programme.

Josh said
Everyone should have their own way of reading the news and understanding the news.

What do people with a learning disability want?

Over 30 people with a learning disability answered questions for this report.

They had lots of things to say.

They did not agree about everything.

They said:

- They want daily news they can understand.

- They want people with learning disabilities to present the news.

13

- News should be friendly but sometimes serious.

- News should do more than just say what is happening.

  It should give people useful information.

- They still love TV and radio but some people also like social media and podcasts.

Eliph said
I would like to be able to understand and contribute to more conversations that are happening around me.

What should happen next?

The BBC should make news for people with a learning disability.

The best way to do this is to make:

1. easy news every day
2. a longer easy news TV show every week.

The weekly programme can give more information.

This can help people with a learning disability understand.

The weekly programme can also have sport and fun things.

This can make the news feel less upsetting.

15

What can the BBC do?

The BBC could also

- make easy news stories online.

- ask people with learning disabilities what works well.

- work with a charity to train people with a learning disability.

- start a news club for people with a learning disability.

16

Easy news looks and sounds different.

The BBC needs to be brave and try new ways of making news.

This can help people with a learning disability.

But this does not mean the BBC must stop doing good reporting.

It means the BBC is doing good reporting for more people.

Harry said
It's very, very important that everyone can watch the news in a more accessible format.

17

Do you have any questions about this report?

You can contact me by email:

william.kremer@bbc.co.uk

Thank you to the Easy News Research Group and the lived experts for their help and advice.

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