

## Perception of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities on How the Media Treats this Community in Information Spaces

Percepción de las organizaciones de personas con discapacidad sobre el tratamiento mediático del colectivo en espacios informativos

Percepção das organizações de pessoas deficientes sobre o tratamento que a mídia dá às pessoas deficientes nos espaços noticiosos

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## Abstract

The media's treatment of people with disabilities is an important issue for their associative movement, which seeks inclusion and active participation for people with disabilities in all areas of society. Although progress has been made in media reporting of disability, there is still concern in the group about the type of news and the perspective from which it is approached. The qualitative methodology of the study is the semi-structured interview with federations and confederations associated with the Spanish Committee of Representatives of People with Disabilities (Cermi). The results point to the persistence of paternalistic or ableist perspectives that distance the image portrayed from the reality of the collective. Discrepancies are observed between the cases of blind people or people with Down's syndrome, who are more accurately represented, and people with psychosocial disabilities, who are still stigmatised. Organisations put the focus on improving the training and specialisation of professionals, as well as on working with the associative movement to improve media reporting of disability. Clearly media space dedicated to them is still insufficient, stereotyped and uneven between different types of disability.

**Keywords:** media representation; informative treatment; people with disabilities; stereotype; media; inclusion

## Resumen

El tratamiento que los medios de comunicación dan a las personas con discapacidad es un asunto importante para su movimiento asociativo, que busca la inclusión y participación activa de las personas con discapacidad en todos los ámbitos de la sociedad. Aunque se ha avanzado en el modo en el que los medios informan sobre la discapacidad, persiste la preocupación en el colectivo por el tipo de noticias y los marcos desde los que se abordan. La metodología cualitativa del estudio es la entrevista semiestructurada a federaciones y confederaciones asociadas al Comité Español de Representantes de Personas con Discapacidad (Cermi). Los resultados apuntan a que persisten las perspectivas paternalistas o capacitistas que alejan la imagen mostrada de la realidad del colectivo. Se observan discrepancias entre los casos de las personas ciegas o con síndrome de Down, con una representación más ajustada, y las personas con discapacidad psicosocial, cuyo caso sigue estando estigmatizado. Las organizaciones ponen el foco en la mejora de la formación y la especialización de los profesionales de la información, así como en la colaboración con el colectivo para mejorar el tratamiento mediático. Se puede concluir que el espacio informativo dedicado sigue siendo insuficiente, estereotipado y desigual entre los distintos tipos de discapacidad.

**Palabras clave:** representación mediática; tratamiento informativo; personas con discapacidad; estereotipo; medios de comunicación; inclusión

## Resumo

O tratamento da pessoa com deficiência na mídia é uma questão importante para seu movimento associativo, que busca a inclusão e a participação ativa das pessoas com

deficiência em todas as esferas da sociedade. Embora tenham sido feitos progressos na forma como a mídia reporta sobre deficiência, ainda há preocupação entre o grupo sobre o tipo de notícias e os quadros a partir dos quais elas são abordadas. A metodologia qualitativa do estudo é uma entrevista semi-estruturada com federações e confederações associadas ao Comitê Espanhol de Representantes de Pessoas com Deficiência (Cermi). Os resultados apontam para a persistência de perspectivas paternalistas ou fortalecedoras que distanciam a imagem mostrada da realidade do grupo. Observam-se discrepâncias entre os casos de cegos ou pessoas com síndrome de Down, com uma representação mais precisa, e pessoas com deficiências psicossociais, cujo caso ainda é estigmatizado. As organizações se concentram em melhorar o treinamento e a especialização dos profissionais da informação, bem como em colaborar com o grupo para melhorar a cobertura da mídia. Pode-se concluir que o espaço de informação dedicado a esta questão ainda é insuficiente, estereotipada e desigual entre os diferentes tipos de deficiência.

**Palavras-chave:** representação na mídia; tratamento informativo; pessoas com deficiência; estereótipo; mídia; inclusão

## 1. Introduction

The media is seen as a strategic space from which to project a more inclusive, fair, representative and green modern society. In the current context of global crisis and inequality, it is important to generate debate and reflect on the processes, platforms, networks, media or other practices that help to “Transform Our World,” as stated in the motto of the United Nations 2030 Agenda (2018), which outlines the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the international community in the period 2016-2030 to ‘eradicate poverty and promote equal and sustainable development’.

Important reports such as that of Hutchins (1947), in the USA, or that of McBride (1980), in charge of UNESCO, have strived to recover the social function of journalism, linking communication to processes of sociopolitical justice and eco-social transformation (Vaquerizo-Domínguez, 2020).

The McBride Commission (1983) highlighted the importance of creating deontological codes developed by media professionals themselves, as already recognised in the UNESCO Declaration on the contribution of the media to the bolstering of peace and human rights. More than 40 years ago, this report included a series of goals closely linked to the idea that communication is a fundamental right of citizens and varied social groups; that the media should work to reduce inequality, and the distortions that occur during presentation.

According to the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, representation in the media must be respectful of the diversity and complexity of the group, avoiding perpetuating stereotypes (United Nations, 2006). In this sense, disability

should not be represented as a homogeneous group, but should be represented in a diverse manner, while using appropriate language to refer to them, avoiding euphemisms and discriminatory or paternalistic approaches (Vázquez-Barrio *et al.* 2021). However, journalists acknowledge that they do not have the training or enough time to address these issues (Díaz-Aledo, 2007).

In this area of interest, persons with disabilities and the organisations representing this group, previously focused on obtaining minimum services despite having few resources, have spent years attempting to ensure that the media treat disability in an inclusive, equal and normalised way, given the social consequences of inadequate media representation.

Disability has acquired more visibility in the media in recent years due to the important work carried out by a range of institutions, federations and associations of persons with disabilities, in addition to journalists and information professionals themselves. How the media determines the discourse and social representations in public opinion has already been widely studied and, therefore, their role in achieving visibility and awareness is essential (Orero *et al.*, 2017; Álvarez-Villa and Mercado-Sáez, 2015). However, organisations continue to claim that they receive little media attention and are poorly represented (Vega-Fuente and Martín, 1999), considering the information shared is sensationalist, biased and stereotyped (Sterba *et al.*, 2022; Díaz-Aledo, 2007). In the same vein, Asper *et al.* (2022) claim that the media tend to represent them as subjects who deserve pity or as sources of inspiration, instead of as full-fledged citizens. They are also sometimes shown as “weak” people who constantly require help (Lin *et al.*, 2022).

## 2. Agenda setting and framing

The media influence how opinion in society is formed in at least two aspects, which would explain their influence and the informative treatment that news about disability receives in Spain (Vázquez-Barrio *et al.*, 2021). One of them refers to the selection of the news they broadcast, as addressed by the theory of “agenda setting,” and the other, to the framework in which this content is presented.

Following this formulation, Bouza (1998) considers that frames are understood as the organisational structures of the social world, providing meaning to social events. This author asserts that the process of construction of meaning is mediated and begins when social actors transfer their message and focus onto the media. The media then present it to the public, which then interprets the content that it has received.

The media coverage and informational treatment of persons with disabilities is a matter that has been widely addressed by scientific studies and by reports from associations and institutions such as Cermi, Fundación A La Par or Fundación ONCE, which, in 2007, even set up a Committee of Support for Persons with Disabilities in Audiovisual Media (*Comité de*

*Apoyo a las Personas con Discapacidad en los Medios Audiovisuales*), in order for the various organisations to join together and work to improve the image of this group as portrayed in the media.

The journalistic coverage of persons with disabilities has gone through different phases. First, Soto-Rosales (2015) points out that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century we went from a compassionate or philanthropic stage to that of the recognition of collective rights, which allowed us to move towards another that promoted labour and social integration. The first study on the social image of disability offered by the media in Spain (Del-Río, 1986) showed, on the one hand, a tendency towards generalisation, institutionalisation and bureaucratisation of concepts related to disability. And, on the other, disability was presented from negative or limiting perspectives.

Labio-Bernal (2006) and Soto-Rosales (2015) mark the announcement of 2003 as the European Year of Disability as a starting point for initiatives that try to improve media visibility of the group, and it is in that year that the long-awaited equality stage really began. The contribution of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) is also essential in this area, as it was the turning point that led to these people becoming citizens with full rights, among which are the rights of access to information and to proper representation in the media.

However, there is still concern in this community about the type of news and the perspective from which it is viewed (Sánchez-Valle *et al.*, 2019). The lack of adaptation to reality, excessive stereotyping and superficiality are some of the tendencies that cause discomfort and conflict.

Along these lines, some studies highlight the fact that despite changes at the political level, the media continues to promote clichés, thereby creating a critical perspective in government as regards financing, security and support (Winterbotham *et al.*, 2023).

Issues frequently addressed in the media treatment of disability are around the areas of technology and resources, violence against the community, problems in their daily lives, causes and consequences of disability, arts and issues related to education, the labour market, sport, family issues, events, solutions to disabilities, accessibility issues, life stories and inclusive society (Soto-Rosales, 2015). Regarding framing, it has been shown that catchy and sensationalist headlines are often used, thereby eliciting sympathy and stereotyping. Persons with disabilities are also often shown as victims. The perspective from which this information is normally represented is usually descriptive or explanatory and, in a small number of cases, tries to raise awareness in society. As an encouraging fact, information is also represented from a realist perspective, putting forward solutions and using a normalising tone.

Against this background, the leading organisations have for years been decrying the fact that media representations continue to be very sensationalist, appealing to emotion and alluding to disability as a characteristic that adds drama, arouses curiosity and increases narrative tension (Labio-Bernal, 2006).

Zalbidea-Bengoa *et al.* (2011) address this approach and state that it is necessary for the content disseminated to represent persons with disabilities in the media. In addition, it must be done in a standardised way, avoiding condescending, victimising narratives that humiliate the community. Prejudice and pejorative language must be eliminated (Labio-Bernal, 2006). In short, informative content should be provided that treats these people in a normalised and accessible manner, increasing visibility and social awareness of disability (Cermi, 2011; Observatorio Estatal de la Discapacidad, 2018). In the same manner, there is a need to create a new inclusive impulse that does not prioritise disability over people, that does not equate disability with disease, avoids sensationalism, and reinforces diversity, inclusion and its normalisation (Sánchez-Valle *et al.*, 2019).

In this sense, Cermi (2011) calls for the media to be inclusive and offer a dynamic and active image of persons with disabilities. The committee claims that the media should give informational content a context to provide a more authentic portrait, use appropriate terminology and understand the great diversity that exists in the community.

This contextualisation of the study has made it possible to determine that the analyses of media coverage have addressed the framing of information related to persons with disabilities, but only in very few cases the perceptions of the group itself on how they are represented in the media.

### 3. Goals and methodology

The goal of this study is to collect the opinion of organisations of persons with disabilities in Spain on the representation of the group in the information spaces of the media. In addition, the following specific goals are pursued:

- To describe the assessment of organisations of persons with disabilities on the media attention given to the community in information spaces.
- To inquire into their perception of the treatment received, specifically in relation to the visual representation and the language used.
- To know the opinion of the associative movement on the presence of persons with disabilities on the staff of media corporations or on the degree to which the media works with organisations representing persons with disabilities.
- To specify the causes of the coverage received according to the organisations of persons with disabilities.



- To present possible means for improvement or solutions, provided by the organisations.

To achieve this, a qualitative study was carried out, which allowed the object of study to be addressed in depth, and rich and detailed answers to be provided (Bryman, 2016). The efficiency of the qualitative method in general stands out, and of the interview technique in particular (Vallés, 1997), which is to explore and gather information difficult to observe, such as, in this case, the opinion of the associative movement of persons with disabilities about the media treatment received.

The study follows the principle of not limiting itself to observing the media representation of persons with disabilities but focuses on how the associative movement itself perceives the said representation (Benavides-Delgado, 2005). At the same time, it makes it possible to break with the ableist paradigm, which has historically been an exercise in structural violence against persons with disabilities (Robinson *et al.*, 2020).

Specifically, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 organisations of persons with disabilities in Spain during the months of February and March 2023. The associative movement, through its bodies, gathered the general and community feelings of the people it represents. Federations and confederations associated with Cermi were selected as a way of integrating bodies into the study that represent the interests of various types of disabilities and that bring together a large number of regional or local associations.

The semi-structured interview format allows a prepared script to be used, which means that all the participating organisations answer the same questions, thereby making it possible to compare their answers. However, this technique avoids the risk that answers might reflect the ideology and concerns of the academic world (Ríos-Martínez, 2019), as flexibility is provided to adapt the script to the organisation being interviewed, but without falling into the doldrums of the free-interview format. This flexibility makes it possible to reorganise or expand the questions based on the responses received, thereby allowing them to go further and provide data that bodies consider relevant and that may not have been included in the initial proposal (Bryman, 2016). On occasions, the organisations found the interview script appropriate and limited themselves to responding to it, explicitly stating that all relevant aspects of the study were addressed. Others, on the other hand, contributed key perspectives that enriched the results of the study.

The interview was structured around five axes in accordance with the goals of the research. The choice of these items was based on previous studies on media representation of disability, which dealt with aspects such as media attention, language used or the image of the disability shown (Aspler *et al.*, 2022; Castán-Pérez-Gómez, 2020; Vázquez-Barrio *et al.*, 2021). Added to these aspects is the presence of staff and the manner in which the media works with the organisations, in line with the study itself and with other previous works and regulatory documents (Soto-Rosales, 2015; United Nations, 2006). The list of axes to be researched was completed with an in-depth study of the causes and possible ways in which the treatment and media representation of the community could be improved. Specifically,

the axes included in the study were: 1. Media space reserved for this issue. 2. Treatment: visual representation and language used. 3. Employing staff or working with organisations. 4. Causes of the coverage received. 5. Possible improvements or solutions.

In all cases, it was specified that the responses were detailed and once obtained, in the event that they contained generic information or unspecific terms, the organisations were asked to be more specific or to clarify. Regarding the format, the option was offered of conducting the interview by telephone, email or videoconference in order to facilitate participation and adapt the instrument to the interviewees convenience and needs. Lastly, the organisations expressed their desire to carry out the interviews via email, except the Confederation of Families of Deaf People (Fiapas) which preferred it be conducted using Zoom. To match the applied method, prior to answering the questions, contact was established with the organisations by email and/or telephone, the questions were provided in advance, doubts were resolved, and the questions were clarified or expanded to respond to the preferences of the organisations themselves. In addition, clarification was also requested, or questions were added to clarify answers that could be ambiguous or imprecise.

An interview request was sent to all the national organisations associated with Cermi, to which the following federations and confederations responded, all of which were later interviewed:



Table 1. Organisations interviewed

| NAME                                                                                                                              | DISABILITY TYPE | CHARACTERISTICS                                                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Confederación Autismo España                                                                                                      | ASD             | Made up of 163 organisations with representation in all the Spanish autonomous communities and in the autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla                          |
| Confederación de Familias de Personas Sordas (Fiapas)                                                                             | Auditory        | Made up of 47 federated organisations, which constitute the largest representation platform for families of deaf people in Spain                                      |
| Confederación Española de Asociaciones de Atención a Personas con Parálisis Cerebral (Aspace)                                     | Physical        | Made up of 85 organisations and 230 direct care centres, with 5,300 professionals and 1,700 volunteers. It represents 20,400 members                                  |
| Confederación Española de Personas con Discapacidad Física y Orgánica (Cocemfe)                                                   | Physical        | Made up of 92 state, regional and provincial organisations and 1,600 associations, and representing more than 2.5 million people                                      |
| Confederación Salud Mental España                                                                                                 | Psychosocial    | Made up of 340 associations, which represent 60,000 people                                                                                                            |
| Down España                                                                                                                       | Intellectual    | Made up of 89 associations from all the Autonomous Communities of Spain                                                                                               |
| Federación Española de Enfermedades Raras (Feder)                                                                                 | Various types   | Made up of 410 member organisations                                                                                                                                   |
| ONCE                                                                                                                              | Visual          | A national organisation that comprises 83 organisations and represents 70,500 members                                                                                 |
| Plataforma Representativa Estatal de Personas con Discapacidad Física (Predif)                                                    | Physical        | Made up of 266 federated organisations, with 57,185 members. It serves more than 2 million people                                                                     |
| Plena Inclusión España                                                                                                            | Intellectual    | An organisation that comprises 950 associations from all over Spain and more than 150,000 people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and their families |
| Unión Andaluza de Entidades de Personas Sordas (Unasord), en representación de la Confederación Estatal de Personas Sordas (CNSE) | Auditory        | The confederation comprises 13 federations and 118 associations of deaf people throughout Spain                                                                       |

Source: Created by the author.

Lastly, as mentioned in numerous responses from different organisations, the news agency Servimedia was also interviewed, which in turn includes the specific portal on disability news *Discamedia*, and which has been used as a reference in various interviews. The view was taken that, although their answers cannot be compared with those of other news agencies, they are valuable and useful for this research.

In order to protect the data of the participants, it was decided to anonymise the interviewees, as well as the position they hold in their respective organisations. This anonymisation was also preferred by some organisations, since those who respond are not providing their personal opinion, but rather conveying the feelings of the organisation in line with its mission and values. The complete interviews can be found here: <https://bit.ly/42IOALf>

## 4. Results

The first area of the study was the media attention or time devoted to disabilities in information spaces. Various organisations such as Plena Inclusión, Down España, Confederación Autismo España and ONCE agree that progress has been made in recent years and more time has been given to disability. On the other hand, the unanimous response of all the organisations is that this media attention is still insufficient and, according to Unasord and Servimedia, when it does occur it is mainly thanks to the pressure of the associative movement through, among others, the organisations that are part of the Cermi.

Likewise, there are differences in the media attention received according to the type of disability. While ONCE considers that blind people are “probably the least stigmatised” due to their own visibility in society and the weight of their associative movement, Salud Mental España claims that psychosocial disability continues to be “taboo” and “receives practically no media attention.” This organisation clarifies that mental health treatment, although it has received more media attention recently, focuses exclusively on anxiety or depression disorders, without mentioning the disability that they can cause and without including other serious disorders around which stigma continues to exist. Lastly, organisations such as Aspace or Predif highlight that the space devoted to disability, in addition to being insufficient, tends to show anecdotal, problematic or unequal situations instead of a current, realistic image of normalisation.

On the media representation of disability in information spaces, the study focuses on two aspects: the language used and the representation of persons with disabilities themselves. In relation to the first, the organisations express a similar impression. They admit that there has been a certain degree of improvement regarding the disappearance of expressions such as “disabled” (*minusválido*), “diminished” (*disminuido*) or “subnormal,” as these have generally fallen out of use. However, they highlight that other inappropriate terms are still maintained. In particular, “blind” (*invidentes*) continues to be used instead of blind persons (*personas ciegas*), “deaf-mutes” (*sordomudos*) instead of deaf persons (*personas sordas*), or “sign talk” (*lenguaje de signos*) instead of sign language (*lengua de signos*) and, in general, “disabled” (*discapacitados*) continues to be used instead of “persons with disabilities” (*personas con discapacidad*).

Regarding the latter, the organisations agree that the most correct term to refer to the group is “persons with disabilities,” ruling out other options that arose later such as “functional diversity” (*diversidad funcional*) or “differently abled” (*capacidades diferentes*). Along these lines, several organisations, such as Salud Mental España, Feder or Predif, highlight the role of the associative movement in this area when preparing guides or providing training for communication professionals, while also expressing the view that the media are not giving sufficient weight to the question of terminology.

The next area of the study focuses on the image of persons with disabilities in media coverage and its impact on the community. All the responses from the organisations interviewed unanimously agree that the image of normalisation is anecdotal. On the contrary, organisations assert that media coverage is paternalistic or ableist, and that persons with disabilities are depicted as victims or heroes. Full Inclusion refers to the depiction of persons with disabilities as “recipients of aid” or as protagonists of “extraordinary feats, which are not common for persons with disabilities.” According to the organisations interviewed, this polarisation between the negative connotation and the extraordinary leads this group to be stigmatised. ONCE emphasises the negative consequences of this media coverage which, due to the stigmatisation and distortion of the reality of disability, makes it difficult for them to integrate into educational centres or find a job, among other issues. This is also highlighted by Salud Mental España when it recalls how mental health problems are associated with antisocial events or behaviours, generating discrimination against this group:

This treatment causes people with a mental health problem to be discriminated against and seen as dangerous, and many of them, due to the fear of this stigma and social discrimination, hide their problem, do not seek help and, ultimately, exclude themselves and give up on having an open and full social and work life.

Several interviewees expressed the view that the media should eschew morbid curiosity and sensationalism, instead portraying disability in a realistic and normalising fashion. Down España explains it as the right to appear in the media without having to be extraordinary: “For us, it is not just a question of achieving visibility, but rather an image that matches reality, free from prejudice, paternalism and negative connotations.”

In addition to their depiction in the media, the study also addresses the presence of persons with disabilities in the development of content through their incorporation into the media’s workforce or working with organisations externally. When asked about this question, the organisations recognised that the request for collaboration from media corporations is practically non-existent. The only exceptions were Autismo España and Salud Mental España, the latter with the Mediaset and Atresmedia corporations in awareness campaigns such as “#Notehagaselloco” or “#Deestohayquehablar.” The rest of the partnership initiatives stem from the associative movement itself. This is how Aspace describes the situation:

The collaboration of the media with organisations depends on the organisations themselves. Disability organisations need to connect with the media in off-the-record interviews just in order to present a true picture of their work and the media stories they can offer.

All the organisations also agree on the non-existence or scarcity of persons with disabilities in the newsrooms, and both Salud Mental España and Down España highlight the problem faced by communication professionals with disabilities in accessing the labour market. However, they highlight the value that their presence as staff in media would bring. ONCE claims that persons with disabilities employed in the media “represent a turning point and contribute to the media’s image, just as they do in any other profession or activity,” while Fiapas, comments that “in any field, persons with disabilities enrich the environment.” For its part, Salud Mental España adds that, in its case, it is difficult to know this since stigma makes it likely that journalists with mental health problems or psychosocial disabilities are unlikely to share such information in their workplace.

In this same area of the study, several organisations highlight the case of Servimedia as a news agency and communication medium that does include a high percentage of persons with disabilities in its workforce and that deals correctly with disability. This media organisation was interviewed, and it confirmed that persons with disabilities make up 60% of its workforce. Servimedia agrees with the organisations of persons with disabilities that the representation in other media is low or nonexistent, reminding us that this is illegal, as persons with disabilities must comprise at least 2% of the workforce of companies with more than 50 workers, except in the case of publicly owned media. The reason, as Servimedia points out, is that “in some cases, hiring a person with a disability requires the job position to be adapted and media managers see it as an expense and not as an investment.” Predif adds that very few media corporations hire these people “because they believe that they are not going to fulfill their tasks correctly, this being an example of the ignorance that surrounds this social group.”

Lastly, this study includes a section on researching the causes of deficient media coverage of disability and possible solutions or ways it can be improved. Among the causes of the deficiencies found, ignorance and lack of interest stand out. Also, the crisis in the media sector and the current pace of work, which reduce the time available to prepare and compare information. The lack of specialisation, which makes disability a “catch-all issue,” according to Plena Inclusión España, is another addition to the causes of the aforementioned perceived errors in the media coverage of disability.

Faced with the ignorance of which these organisations generally complain, organisations such as ONCE propose that the associative movement itself continue to raise awareness. Predif also points to training, specialisation and direct contact with organisations of persons with disabilities to solve errors in coverage. Along these lines, various responses point to the media following the indications of the organisations through their guidelines, such as those of Salud Mental España (“Words do matter: Style guide on mental health for

the media" [*Las palabras sí importan: Guía de estilo sobre salud mental para medios de comunicación*]), Cocemfe ("Inclusive Language Guidebook" [*Manual de Lenguaje Inclusivo*]) or Autismo España ("How to report on ASD in the media" [*Cómo abordar el TEA desde los medios de comunicación*]).

In addition, among the proposals received, was the need to include the community in all types of news reporting and not only those in which disability stands out as the central theme. Down España explains this in the following manner:

If we are talking about a person with Down's syndrome who has won a swimming championship, that information should be included under sport, or, if she is standing for election, it should go in the politics or national sections, and not in society. This form of classification pigeonholes them and distances them from social normalisation. To change this would be to go a step further.

Lastly, Unasord emphasises not only the question of representation, but also accessibility through sign language interpretation and subtitling, since, if the content is not accessible, the benefits of an adequate representation will not bear fruit for deaf people.

In conclusion, the interview allowed organisations to bring up those worrying or relevant aspects that they believe should be discussed in relation to media representation of disability. Among the responses obtained, what stands out is the need to expand the media field to include social networks. Salud Mental España points to the immediacy and lack of space of networks as problematic, as they favour the publication of unverified information or the use of sensationalist headlines. As a consequence, ONCE talks about how poorly focused news is spread on networks and even messaging applications such as WhatsApp, increasing stigmatisation and making integration difficult.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

This research has allowed us to become familiar with the views of the main organisations that make up the associative movement of persons with disabilities in Spain on the media representation of the group in information spaces. These organisations were able to express their views concerning common areas of debate and establish areas of common concern as well as differences.

The first area of the study showed that organisations consider the media space devoted to disability, despite having increased, to still be insufficient, with notable differences between different types of disability. Likewise, they complain that the media attention received is still linked to events, anecdotes or stereotypes, confirming that practices continue that were examined in research carried out decades ago (Díaz-Aledo, 2007; Vega-Fuente and Martín, 1999) as well as more recently (Hu *et al.*, 2023; Winterbotham *et al.*,

2023). The results also confirm the trends in terms of framing detected in works such as that of Soto-Rosales (2015), since catchy and sensationalist headlines persist and have even increased, resorting to eliciting emotions and stereotypes, especially on social networks. In light of this situation, the organisations demand a representation that matches reality and that not only makes them visible, but also promotes normalisation, in line with the work of Vázquez-Barrio *et al.* (2021).

As Bolaños-Moreno (2020) explains, we must take into account that media is crucial in the construction of meaning and in influencing public opinion on disability. For this reason, it is important that it offer persons with disabilities the opportunity to participate in information spaces, in order to increase their visibility and encourage their representation as independent citizens with full rights. In this manner, through the construction of alliances between the media and the community, the democratisation of information, freedom of expression and the right to communicate with this social movement would be promoted, thereby contributing to the achievement of media reform and the adequate representation of diversity (Barranquero-Carretero, 2019).

Concerning terminology, organisations recognised improvements, especially in the abandonment of pejorative terms. This trend can be observed in studies such as that of López Sánchez *et al.* (2020). However, other expressions that are considered stigmatising continue to be used, such as “blind,” “deaf-mute” and, in general, “disabled.” Regarding the latter, Cermi warns that this use is a mistake as well as offensive. This committee and all the associated organisations requested the term “persons with disabilities” be used, and they rejected other terms such as “functional diversity” or “differently abled,” as they consider them paternalistic, euphemistic and tortuous (Servimedia, 2023). They point to the United Nations Convention (United Nations, 2006) as a political, legislative, legal and terminological frame of reference for this reality on a global, European and national scale. The expression “persons with disabilities” focuses not on the person, but on society and the barriers generated by it, which cause the inability to participate fully and effectively in society on equal terms. For Cermi, and following the guidelines of the aforementioned Convention, this is the reference to follow, and no other nomenclature has received worldwide or European recognition or approval. Therefore, the media must be sensitised and pay special attention to the proper use of terminology, since language used can be exclusive, derogatory and even stigmatising (Bolaños-Moreno, 2020).

Except for the exceptional case of Servimedia, the study showed that organisations consider the representation of the group in the newsrooms of the media negligible or non-existent. Although their labour inclusion has received more academic attention, the presence of workers with disabilities in the field of media communication has rarely been studied. Only recent research such as that of Viñarás-Abad *et al.* (2021) show the persistence of barriers that prevent the labour integration of these people in the media; while Sánchez-Valle *et al.* (2022) highlight that, when they are present, they generally hold positions in which they exercise little responsibility. Previous research (Trampuz and Cedeño, 2020) also show that organisations agree that the increase in workforce cuts,



the reconfiguration of media business models or changes in information dissemination are causes that foster ignorance and prevent the inclusion of persons with disabilities. However, the organisations consider the presence of these people in newsrooms to be very positive as a way of improving the media coverage of the community and, consequently, their social image.

In line with the findings of Díaz-Aledo (2007), the main causes identified by the associative movement in this study are the lack of training and specialisation, as well as the very pace of work in the media field, which prevents media corporations from delving into a deeper, more correct coverage of disability. This is linked to the scarcity of disability-oriented content, its representation and accessibility in Journalism curricula at Spanish universities (González-Perea and Gutiérrez-Lozano, 2020). Along these lines, the document "Curricular training in design for all people in journalism" (*Formación curricular en diseño para todas las personas en periodismo*) (Crue Universidades Españolas, 2016) indicates the need to include in Journalism curricula aspects such as the visibility of disability in the media space, the use of correct language and terminology, the inclusion of persons with disabilities on media staff or the integration of the user experience to improve the quality of the content.

Likewise, it becomes necessary to develop teaching practices that facilitate the training of future communication professionals, in order to promote an open, creative, fair, participatory, ethical and responsible "inclusive communication" model, which guarantees conditions of equality, promotes accessibility to the media and a true integration in the content and representations of the community (de-Andrés-del-Castillo and González-Martín, 2012). However, the organisations interviewed highlight not only the need for training, but also specialisation. For this purpose, it is of vital importance to offer optional subjects, master's degrees, expert courses and other training options aimed at journalistic specialisation in the treatment of vulnerable groups in general or persons with disabilities in particular.

In conclusion, the results confirm the starting hypothesis, which posited that the associative movement perceived the media representation of disability in information spaces as scarce and stereotyped. These findings suggest, in line with other previous research (Holton *et al.*, 2014; Poffo *et al.*, 2017), that the media representation of disability is usually limited and stigmatising, since persons with disabilities are often presented in the media as victims or heroes, ignoring the heterogeneity of the group. In addition, the representation of disability is usually focused on the limitations of people and not on their abilities and skills. This inaccurate and limited representation of disability influences public debate and the construction of social thought, which can have negative consequences on society's perception of persons with disabilities, as well as cause discriminatory situations, lack of understanding and empathy towards the community (Happer & Philo, 2013). Therefore, it is of vital importance to commit to a more accurate, balanced, inclusive and diverse media representation of disability in the media, taking into account the different



disabilities, the diverse cultures and social contexts and the intersectionality with other forms of discrimination.

The results of this study open the door for future research aimed at gaining a keener understanding of how persons with disabilities themselves perceive the way they are portrayed in the media, in information spaces or in other mediums. Another possible path for future research would be to expand the study to the social networks, as argued by the organisations interviewed.

## Authors' contribution

**Juan C. Figuereo-Benítez:** Conceptualization, Research, Methodology, Validation, Verification, Visualization, Writing-original draft and Writing-revision and editing. **Victoria García-Prieto:** Conceptualization, Research, Methodology, Validation, Verification, Visualization, Writing-original draft and Writing-revision and editing. **Mónica Bonilla-del-Río:** Conceptualization, Research, Methodology, Validation, Verification, Visualization, Writing-original draft and Writing-revision and editing. All authors have read and agree to the published version of the manuscript. Conflicts of interest: The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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