

Media and the Israeli Disability Rights Legislation: Progress or Mixed and Contradictory Images?

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Abstract

This article reviews and analyzes disability rights conceptualization and policy as reflected in the Israeli media after the enactment of the Equal Rights for Persons with Disabilities Law of 1998. Media coverage is examined through review of studies conducted on the subject in Israel. A comprehensive review of the research literature reveals a discrepancy between the purposes of anti-discrimination legislation and policy and media reflections of disability, in which portrayal is primarily via a deviance lens. The discussion is based on the analysis of universal genesis of negative perceptions of disability, as well as on particularized culture-bound meaning of disability within the Israeli symbolic framework.

Keywords: disability rights legislation; media; portraits; metaphors of disability

Points of Interest

- The article reviews and analyzes disability rights conceptualization and policy as reflected in the Israeli media after the enactment of the Equal Rights for Persons with Disabilities Law of 1998.
- Persons with disabilities are often portrayed in the Israeli media as objects of pity (or victims), heroes, or as dangerous 'others'.
- Military imagery and mechanical, machinery metaphors are used to describe the physical body, disability, and medical treatment.
- Review of media-based research conducted in Israel after the enactment of the 'Equal Rights for Persons with Disabilities Law' shows that the Israeli media lags behind the global currents and progressive definitions, addressing disability primarily via the individualized traditional bio-medical model.

Introduction

What is the role of the media in reflecting or shaping societal views of people with disabilities? Altheide and Snow (1991) believe the mass media play a significant role in

shaping societal views. The mass media often also are described as a filter through which news and interpretation of events are received. The visual and verbal images, alongside the tone of coverage and the way social objects are represented and framed define the salience of a phenomenon, influence public opinion, and shape and influence public policy, legislation and research (Logan, Zengjun, and Fraser Wilson 2000a, 2000b; McCombs 2005). Thus, the media influence and reflect social values and practices.

In the USA, the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 reflects a significant change in societal views toward people with disabilities — from a frame in which people with disabilities are needy and pitiful to a frame in which they are entitled to human rights and full civic and social participation (Avrami and Rimmerman 2005a; Rimmerman and Araten-Bergman 2005). Moving away from a biomedical approach, which focuses on the person who deviates from the clinical norm of health and functioning, the ADA adopted a socio-political stance on disability. This approach parallels individuals with disabilities to other minority and socially disadvantaged groups, shifting the understanding of the origins of disability to the socio-political arena (Bickenbach et al. 1999; Hahn 1993).

The ADA's socio-political approach to disability has been embraced by other countries. In 1998, Israel enacted a similar law called the 'Equal Rights for Persons with Disabilities Law' (Avrami and Rimmerman 2005a). This law established prolonged engagement and commitment by the Israeli state to the social welfare and quality of life of citizens who are disabled, within a rights perspective (Rimmerman and Herr 2004). However, scholars have shown there remains a bewildering, at times contradictory policy approach to disability in Israel and that the new law has not been effectively practiced and implemented (cf. Rimmerman and Araten-Bergman 2005; Rimmerman et al. 2005).

The main question raised in the article is: Does the Israeli media express the nature and spirit of the 'Equal Rights for Persons with Disabilities Law' legislation? In addition, we consider what are the portraits and metaphors of people with disabilities in the Israeli media and do they reflect the expected changes and realities in terms of civic participation and inclusion in society? Media coverage is examined through an in-depth review of the scant studies conducted on the subject in Israel.

Disability Rights Legislation and Policy

The enactment of the ADA signified the beginning of a new era and a major shift from a bio-medical, individualized approach to a social-political approach (Avrami and Rimmerman 2005a; Bickenbach et al. 1999; Blanck et al. 2003). The ADA rejects the bio-medical model as the dominant model for defining disability in favor of a social- and right-based model; thus the movement from a social welfare-based approach, epitomized by the notion of rehabilitation and treatment, to a human rights approach. In this latter approach, persons with disabilities are perceived as a minority group subjected to oppression and marginalization (Bickenbach et al. 1999; Hahn 1993).

The bio-medical model defines disability in terms of a deficiency that stems from a bodily impairment or malfunction (Hahn 1993). According to this model, persons with disabilities are perceived as wanting or lacking, and their bodies are subjected to be fixed and restored to a state of 'perfect health' and 'normal functions' (Comaroff 1982; Lupton 2000). The bio-medical model, therefore, dictates practices that are meant to treat, rehabilitate, or restore the body (Foucault 1973; Lupton 2000; Young 1982). Individuals with disabilities in this model are expected to adapt themselves to the general societal expectations of full function. Disability in this model is depoliticized, viewed as an individual problem that needs to be fixed or overcome, rather than as a social construct that is laden with cultural meaning and contextualized within the social, political and the economical arenas (Blanck 2008; Conrad 1992; Conrad and Schneider 1981; Oliver 1990).

The ADA embraced the social model for understanding and defining disability. It is based on the belief that people with disabilities are subjected to externally imposed inequality, prejudice and discrimination (Bickenbach et al. 1999; Hahn 1993). It relies on the perception that the negative effects of disability stem mainly from social barriers, rather than flowing inherently from the physical condition. The ADA frames the right of persons with disabilities to participate in all social activities as a basic human right. Hence, society, not the individual with disability, is the central entity that is viewed as in need of fixing. Noteworthy is the fact that this view does not deny the medical aspects of disability but rather stresses and emphasizes the process of social production of disability as a negatively labeled, stigmatized and inferior condition (Bickenbach et al. 1999).

In spite of the enactment of the ADA, still today, 20 years later, research from the USA reveals that persons with disabilities are not fully integrated in society — for example, they are one of the most economically marginalized groups in society (Ball et al. 2006; Hartnette and Blanck 2003; Schur 2002; Soffer, McDonald, and Blanck in press). Moreover, persons with disabilities have significantly lower employment levels than persons without disabilities, and lower wages among those who do work (Schur et al. 2009). Studies also report that individuals with disabilities are less educated and receive less vocational training, compared to individuals without disabilities (Cook 2006; RRTC 2007).

Disability Rights Legislation and Policy in Israel

In 1998, Israel enacted the Equal Rights for Persons with Disabilities Law 5758-1998, which went into force on January 1, 1999. The law consists of five chapters: Basic Principles, General Principles, Employment, Public Transportation, and Commission for Equal Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Central chapters addressing accessibility to public places and services, living in the community, personal assistance, education, culture and leisure, legal procedures, and special needs, were postponed to a later stage because of financial reasons. Only in March 2005, after months of lengthy discussions in the Knesset and intensive negotiations with the Ministry of Finance, the accessibility of public places and services amendment was passed (Rimmerman and Avrami 2009).

The basic and general principles of the law reflect the shift from charity to rights, from patronizing behavior to acknowledgment of autonomy, and from segregated services and institutions to universal ones. The employment chapter forbids discrimination in hiring, work conditions, promotion, etc. The public transportation chapter stresses the right of persons with a disability to accessible public transportation: public bus services, trains, planes, and boats. The chapter on the Commission for equal rights of persons with disabilities addresses the creation of the Commission as an independent entity, financed by the state, which is responsible to promote the rights of people with disabilities and the implementation of the law. The new chapter on accessibility of public places and services mandates all public places and services (such as ministries, museums, parks, hospitals) to be accessible to various types of disabilities (physical, sensory, cognitive, mental, etc.) (Bizchut 2010; Rimmerman and Avrami 2009).

Like the USA and the UK disability policy, Israel's approach is considered a piecemeal approach and reflects a mix of social welfare and civil rights models (Drake 1999; Rimmerman and Katz 2004). The state acts to some extent on behalf of disability but does so reluctantly and randomly. Such a hybrid of a policy stance may stem from the government's reactions to political pressures and circumstances.

The existence of mixed policies toward individuals with disabilities is also reflected in the actual implementation of the 'Equal Rights for Persons with Disabilities Law'. Rimmerman and Araten-Bergman (2005) argue that there is a need to differentiate between the law's actual implementation in terms of allocation of funds and compliance with its regulations, and the outcomes that derive from the law in terms of social integration of persons with disabilities. Studies and reviews from Israel report difficulties in both.

Researchers suggest and illustrate that the media defines, as well as mirrors, the normative system (cf. Brown and Potosky 1990; Hornig Priest 2005; Lantz and Booth 1998). This means that media representations of disability are either a proxy of public perceptions or, alternatively, a hegemonic force that constructs reality according to the 'norm'. Thus, a gap between media content, legislation and policy may actually mean a discrepancy between pillar values of the collective at large (as represented by the Israeli media) and more peripheral values shared by segments of society.

Images of Disability in the Israeli Media

The representation of physical disability in the Israeli media has received scant attention (see Kama 2003, 2004; Klin and Lemish 2008; Kline 2006). A thorough search of the literature yielded merely 11 publications from the years 1999–2010. The scarce amount of research may signify the status and social invisibility of people with disabilities in Israel. Despite the scarcity of studies, a review of the existing research allows us to make sense of the way disability is represented in the Israeli media. The results of all the studies located point to the enduring hegemonic view of disability as a medical condition in the Israeli media. This is true for both studies that examined media coverage of disability prior to the enactment of Israel's 'Equal Rights for Persons with Disabilities Law' of 1998, as well as those conducted a decade after.

Three categories of content were examined to provide an understanding of how disability is framed in the Israeli media:

- Portraits of persons with disabilities
- Utilization of metaphors to describe disability
- Framing of disability-related issues

Portraits of Persons with Disabilities in the Israeli Media

Persons with disabilities are often portrayed in the Israeli media as objects of pity (or victims), heroes, or as dangerous 'others'.

Pity and Victimhood

Kama (2003, 2004) studied the recollection of mediated images of disability among 30 Israelis with disabilities. One of the central images that emerged from his analysis was that of the 'pitiful handicap' — an idiom whereby disabled people become the personification of their impairments and their existence is dependent on the feelings of pity they arouse (Kama 2004, 458). Prevalent representations of individuals with disabilities as objects of pity were also reported by Rimmerman and Herr (2004) in their study of the printed media coverage of the Israeli disability strike of 1999–2000 in three leading Israeli daily newspapers. Similarly, a recent study that analyzed 85 hours of broadcasting in the two commercial television channels in Israel revealed persons with disabilities were used primarily to raise awareness of certain disabilities or illnesses or for fundraising purposes (Liran and Kama 2007).

Soffer (2005) studied the way severe physical illnesses were covered in the Israeli press in 1999–2000. She found that more than half (56.1%) of the newspaper articles portrayed individuals with physical illnesses as tragic victims of their disease. The prevalence of pity and victim representations of disability in the Israeli press and television are reflections of bio-medical understandings of disability and disease, as they portray the impairment as lying within the person rather than in society's maladies (Kama 2003, 2004). These images stand in contrast to portraits of individuals fighting for their rights (Rimmerman and Herr 2004), as they are embedded in notions of helplessness and equate individuals with disabilities to other 'vulnerable' groups in society in constant need of protection.

'Supercrips' and Heroes

Apart from stereotypes of victims and objects of pity, another mediated image reported in studies of the Israeli press is that of the 'supercrip' (Shapiro 1993) — that is, high-achieving persons with disabilities who set standards others fail to meet (Clogston 1994). This image is not as prevalent as that of the 'pitiful handicapped' and victim in Israeli media, as it was found in 3.8% of newspaper articles covering persons with physical diseases (Soffer 2005; see also Kama 2003, 2004). However, this stereotype stems from a similar narrative to that of victimhood, as it too frames disability as an individualized issue — a matter of willpower — rather than a social construct (Clogston 1994; Gold and Auslander 1999a).

Dangerous 'Others'

The representation of persons with disabilities as dangerous 'others' — individuals who engage in violent and criminal behaviors — was shown to be a common mediated image of persons with mental illnesses in various countries (see e.g. Blood and Holland 2004; Harper 2005; Klin and Lemish 2008; Sieff 2003). There are no studies on representations of persons with psychiatric disabilities in the Israeli media (Tal, Roe, and Corrigan 2007). However, a recent study on representations of mothers who had murdered their offspring in the Israeli press implies that similar imagery may be conveyed in the Israeli media.

Cavaglioni (2008) studied six notorious cases of mothers who had taken the lives of their children between 1992 and 2001, covered in 19 articles from three major daily-national Israeli newspapers. He found that the press tended to construct these mothers as 'mad', that is, suffering from a mental impairment. This representation was argued by Cavaglioni to act as a justification for the criminal offence. Moreover, implying that persons with mental illness are victims of their illness and are thus not to be blamed for their criminal actions aligns with the bio-medical model.

The notion of the dangerous 'other' was not strictly confined to psychiatric disabilities, but was also attributed to those with infectious diseases, such as HIV/AIDS and genital herpes. Preliminary findings suggest that the Israeli press utilizes this image to portray persons with physical illnesses to a very modest extent (4.4% of the cases). The media tended to portray persons with highly stigmatized diseases as dangerous 'others' in a much larger percentage of the cases (13.6%) (Soffer 2005).

Utilization of Metaphors to Describe Disability

A study of the Israeli press shows that one third (33.2%) of the articles on serious physical diseases utilized war metaphors (e.g., 'soldiers of the immune system', 'war on HIV/AIDS') to describe the disease or the patient (Soffer 2005). Among the 428 articles that utilized various metaphors to describe illness, military metaphors were the most prevalent and were mentioned 316 times (in 73.8% of the articles). Notably, half the articles mentioning highly stigmatized diseases (HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, gonorrhoea, genital herpes, leprosy, tuberculosis, cholera, Alzheimer's disease and dementia, epilepsy) used military imagery (Soffer 2005).

It seems the Israeli media uses military imagery to address illness, particularly notoriously labeled sicknesses. The frequent use of war metaphors in bio-medicine appears to stem from aggressive treatments designated in Western medicine to treat disease (Larsen 1999). According to the bio-medicine schemata, the body is portrayed as having been invaded, while treatment for the disease is perceived as a counter-attack (Sontag 2001).

Apart from military imagery, another signifier of the bio-medical model in the Israeli media lies in the utilization of mechanical, machinery metaphors to describe the physical body, disability, and medical treatment. These were found to be dominant in the way the Israeli press portrayed, for example, heart disease. Mechanical metaphors were reported to outline the heart as a machine that succumbs, for example, to

blockages. Other images included plumbing terminology, such as descriptions of leaks in the blood vessels. Hodgkin (1985) argues that medical terminology is laden with machine metaphors portraying the body as 'fixable' by means of various engineering solutions. Leder (1992) suggests that the infiltration of machine-like imagery into modern medicine stems from the Cartesian dualism of the physical body and the mind.

Framing of Disability-Related Issues

Two studies of the Israeli press directly examined the framing of disability-related issues. The first, a comparative study of press coverage of disability in Israel and Canada which reviewed two daily newspapers and one weekend newspaper in every country between January and March 1998, showed that the bio-medical model of disability prevails in the Israeli press (Gold and Auslander 1999a; see also Gold and Auslander 1999b; Auslander and Gold 1999a, 1999b).

The second study, conducted in 1999 by Rimmerman and Herr (2004), focused on the coverage of the disability strike in Israel. The 1999 strike reflects the maturity of the leadership of previous strikes, who demonstrated that they could build a major protest movement through use of the media and the political process. The strike, which lasted 37 days, was considered the longest and the most effective in terms of outcome (Rimmerman and Herr 2004, 14).

However, in spite of the centrality of the strike historically and the fact that it marked a shift in thought and stance and was a social action for equality, the Israeli media neglected to reflect this spirit of events. Instead, the media persistently framed the strike through a narrow lens, suggesting that it was a struggle for material benefits. Rimmerman and Herr (2004) also demonstrated that public opinion about the strike, as reflected in the media, was paternalistic. Labeling the strike as a quest for economic benefits, and implying that persons with disabilities are in need of protection, aligns with notions and policies of welfare embedded in bio-medical definitions of disability.

Discussion: Progress, Mixed, or Contradictory Images?

The present article identifies a discrepancy between new disability terminology and conceptualization as appears in the Israeli 'Equal Rights for Persons with Disabilities Law' of 1998 and the media's representation of disability. This gap between the legal-policy images and the popular mediated images of disability is not an Israeli-bound phenomenon, but rather a documented phenomenon across countries (see e.g. Riley II 2005). Unfortunately, the media reflects mixed and contradictory conceptualizations — a tangle of bio-medical and welfare regulations alongside other legislation and practices that emphasize rights and equality.

Review of media-based research conducted in Israel after the enactment of the 'Equal Rights for Persons with Disabilities Law' shows that the Israeli media lags behind the global currents and progressive definitions, addressing disability primarily via the individualized traditional bio-medical model. The findings of the existing Israeli studies are strikingly similar to comparable research on media representation of illness and

disability which was conducted in other Western countries (cf. reviews by Klin and Lemish 2008; Kline 2006; Seale 2003).

However, while the Israeli media utilizes similar imagery to represent disability, the cultural meanings of such idioms are contextualized within the unique socio-political arena of Israeli society. The use of military imagery, for example, should be understood within the broader security threats that Israel as a state is faced with. Since its independence, Israel has experienced seven wars and two Intifadas (Palestinian uprisings); terrorist attacks are a part of routine life. In Israel, war is not merely a metaphor — instead it is a concrete event conveyed with existential fears. Describing disability and disease via military imagery therefore condemns them to be extremely outcast and notorious.

The medicalization of disability in Israel as evident in the media may be attributed to Zionism. One of the central symbols of Zionism was that of the 'new Jew'. According to Zionist ideology, the Diaspora Jew had been impaired by conditions in the Diaspora (Ajzenstadt and Cavaglione 2002). Disability stands in stark contrast to the epitome of health and productivity reflected in the notion of the 'new Jew', and represents instead the diseased, weak and dependent 'Diaspora body' (Boyarin 1997; Mor 2005). Disability as a pity-evoking phenomenon gains a unique meaning against this background; disability does not merely represent an unwarranted, tragic situation but rather an identity that counters the hegemonic identity.

We may speculate that in the Israeli context, the aforementioned discrepancy stems from the fact that the rights approach is still alien to mainstream society and has not assimilated and blended into the nexus of Israeli society's values. That is, it is a 'borrowed' phenomenon from countries that are much more oriented to viewing minority groups' issues in terms of human rights.

For disability to be truly perceived as a rights matter — not a malfunction which calls for pity and philanthropy — disability must divorce from the bio-medical model. This means that the new socio-political definition of disability needs to be actively incorporated into the nucleus of society's normative system. The media is not merely a disseminator of information but a moral entrepreneur that is a powerful, active social agent that defines the 'right' and the 'wrong'. This stresses the importance of the need to change the way disability is represented in the media. Only then will alternative views of disability, reflected in Israel's recent legislation, be a sincere and robust manifestation of social change.

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