



Disability in the Media - Mirroring Perceptions

Findings from the Media Monitoring
on the Representation and Coverage of
People with Disabilities in the Republic
of North Macedonia

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, social policies aimed at improving the lives of persons with disability (PwD) have changed substantially around the world. The principle of social inclusion and equal participation in everyday life for all people irrespective of disability is a key advancement in existing legislative and institutional frameworks at the European and Republic of North Macedonia (RNM) level. Likewise, fair representation of PwD in the media and greater public awareness about the issues they face are crucial for fostering a better understanding of disability in our societies.

Today, the dominant frame for advancing and articulating the rights of people living with disability is human rights. Existing human rights legislation at the European level and in Macedonia guarantees the right of any person with or without disability to participate fully in the social, cultural, political and economic life of their community. To ensure they uphold this fundamental right, states must develop strong social inclusion policies that explicitly address the concerns and needs of persons with disabilities. Key among these is the need to raise public awareness about their rights and to change unfair negative perceptions about disability in society at large. Media that cover disability issues, such as the daily human rights violations faced by people living with disability, play a vital role in this process. Nevertheless, PwD remain one of the most marginalized groups in the RNM: many do not have equal access to health care, education, employment or lack access to adequate social services that meet the needs of their disability. Societal prejudice is an additional factor that complicates PwD's position in society.

In recent years, a number of initiatives have sought to promote the rights of persons with disabilities in RNM, focusing on three key sectors: social care; deinstitutionalization (re-integration of people living with disability into mainstream society); and education sectors. The obligations undertaken by RNM with the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2011 were integrated into state programmes for the development of audio and audio-visual content, deinstitutionalization, education and non-discrimination. In September 2019, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities submitted an initial country assessment report on the implementation of this Convention to competent RNM authorities. The Committee underlined its concerns about the following: lack of a coherent national policy and strategy for raising public awareness about disability issues; insufficient government efforts to combat stereotypes about disability; lack of adequate measures to prevent and counter discrimination based on disability. The report found that RNM's efforts were limited to ad-hoc activities intended to raise awareness about various rights violations suffered by people living with disability, instead of explaining these rights themselves. Such a strategy reinforces the status of people with disability as objects of pity. To address these concerns, the Committee recommended that the state should adopt a coherent national policy and strategy for raising awareness about disability in order to prevent and combat discrimination experienced by PwD. The Committee suggested integrating the following aspects in the national strategy: active participation of persons with disabilities in any action aimed at combating the stigma and stereotypes they face; developing and running continuous campaigns about the Convention in the public and private sectors, and among persons with disabilities, their representative organizations. In addition, the Committee recommended that the state should consider the passing a law on information access right in order to remove any restriction that prevents persons with disabilities from freely seeking, receiving and imparting information and ideas on an equal basis with other citizens, offline and online.

In 2019 and in response to these recommendations, the RNM's National Coordinating Body for the Implementation of the UN Convention set-out a number of measures to be implemented in cooperation with the Ministry of Information Society and Administration, the Agency for Electronic Communications, the Broadcasting Agency and the Association of Journalists of Macedonia. The proposed measures include: educating media regulators about the legal rights and social needs of persons with disabilities; educating broadcasters about the rights of people with disabilities; continuous campaigns for raising awareness about the rights of persons with disabilities in society at large; advising the media how to make their website accessible.

To date, RNM government has taken a number of steps towards achieving this.

In 2019, the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services published the Regulatory Strategy for the Development of Audio and Audiovisual Activities (2019-2023), a statutory document that sets out the Agency's media development strategy for the near future. "Protection of Human Rights in Media Content" section dedicates a whole chapter to "Expanding the Accessibility of Media Services and Content". This chapter explicitly refers PwD, especially people with sight or hearing problems.

Also in 2019, the new Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination broadened the list of groups and/or identities protected against discrimination, defined what constitutes discrimination more clearly and formally established the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, tasked with working on prevention of, in addition to protection from, discrimination. This law directly refers to disability as one ground for discrimination and includes inaccessible and/or unavailable infrastructure, goods and services in its definition of what can constitute discrimination.

The earlier 2018-2027 National Strategy for Deinstitutionalization "Timjanik" calls for the transformation away from the current system of disability services provisions based on institutional care to a system of social care in the family and the community with the support of social services. Simultaneously to institutions being closed, community-based social services that meet current human rights standards should be developed.

Similarly, the 2018 – 2025 Education Strategy obliges the state to strive towards ensuring comprehensive, inclusive and integrated education for all students. One priority area is increasing the enrolment of children with disability in mainstream pre-school, primary, secondary and higher education.

2. “Disability: A Matter of Perception” Project

“Disability: A Matter of Perception” is a project run by the [Media Diversity Institute](#), together with the [Macedonian Institute for Media](#) and [National Council of People with Disabilities Organisations](#). Its aim is to strengthen the visibility of PwD in the media. This project views media visibility as both a means and a necessary precondition for ensuring PwD's active participation in public life and ensuring they receive equal treatment in exercising the rights and freedoms. The project was designed to address two context-specific challenges: the media's diminished role as protectors of public interest in RNM, on one hand; and the hostile socio-political climate in which Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) operate, on the other. Together, these had contributed to the shrinking of media space available for the discussion of the pressing needs of disadvantaged groups. In turn, this has allowed citizens' misperceptions that make them unable to recognise existing discrimination to go unchecked.

In the absence of quality reporting, public perception of PwD and their needs remains highly arbitrary, susceptible to prejudice and often harmful to PwD's interests. PwD's invisibility in media hampers their ability to exercise fundamental human rights and participate in public life on an equal footing with other citizens. “Disability: A Matter of Perception” identified key steps necessary for reducing PwD's unfair and harmful media invisibility:

- PwD CSOs need to assume a more assertive and persistent approach in their communication with the media;

- Improving media's understanding of PwD concerns and teaching inclusive journalism skills;
- Establishing sustainable CSO-media communication mechanisms to foster PwD's cooperation with the media, their inclusion and participation in the creation of sensitive media content;
- Placing media invisibility of PwD higher on the policy-makers' agendas.

Implementors of the project on the ground took the participatory approach: sensitizing and strengthening capacities of all stakeholders involved; providing sustainable multi-stakeholder cooperation platforms; and, raising general awareness. Through our comprehensive approach, we tried to influence all target groups and actors, encouraging the pooling of scattered resources, sharing of organisation-specific strengths and know-how and facilitating cooperation.

In the end, this project contributed to improving knowledge and practical skills of two key stakeholders by:

- Helping and encouraging **journalists** to report on disability, embracing an inclusive and participatory model of journalism;
- Teaching **PwD CSOs** how to communicate with media more effectively, raise the latter's awareness about PwD Rights, use both new and traditional media to reach the public.

At the same time, the project fostered long-term sustainable cooperation between the two stakeholder groups. All project activities have lead to increased **public** awareness about the PwD needs and rights trough media content production, social media activities and grass-root initiatives in local communities. In addition, the project addressed policy makers, mainly through policy advice for improvements related to PwD rights. More specifically, our policy recommendations focused on tackling the underrepresentation of PwD and their concerns in the media. We communicated these recommendations directly to high-level policy makers at the Conference held to mark the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. Finally, **PwD** benefited from project activities that were intended to increase public awareness and understanding and/or enable the CSO sector and individuals to be more effective in their PwD rights advocacy.

Project partners developed Disability: Out in the Open, a visibility handbook for PwD organisations. Finally, this study also contributes to the understandings of the current state of people with disabilities representation in the media and can help guide further activities after the end of this project.

This and all the other resources and documents created for this project can be found on aktiv.mk.

"Disability: A Matter of Perception" is a project funded by the Delegation of the European Union to North Macedonia for the period January 2018 to January 2020.



3. Research Goal and Methodology

This analysis investigates the representation and coverage of PwD and their issues in major RNM media. We monitored nine media outlets in the Macedonian and Albanian language: Sloboden pechat daily, TV Sitel, TV Telma, TV Tera, SDK.mk, TV Alsat-M in Albanian, TV Koha, the Koha daily and Portalb.mk from 1 to 30 September 2019. We selected these media based on their viewership/followers figures and impact they have on the audience.¹ Our monitoring of TV outlets focused on their principal news programmes. For newspapers and online outlets, our research investigated all sections, except for international news, entertainment and sports. In addition, we conducted 18 in-depth interviews with representatives of state institutions, civil society organizations and the media in order to gauge their attitudes, experiences and uncover existing cooperation networks between different stakeholders. We did this in order to identify areas for improvements in existing mechanisms of cooperation with the overall goal of increasing the representation of PwD in the media.

¹ Sloboden pechat (www.slobodenpechat.mk) is a newspaper in the Macedonian language with the largest circulation among daily newspapers in the country. Koha newspaper (www.koha.mk) is the newspaper with the largest circulation in the Albanian language. TV Sitel is the national Macedonian-language television channel with the largest viewership (24.24%, according to the Media Sustainability Index (MSI) 2018); TV Alsat M is the national television channel with the largest viewership that broadcasts both in Albanian and Macedonian (5.44% according to the MSI for 2018). TV Thelma is a national television channel with a consistent and neutral editorial policy (viewership 3.57% according to the MSI for 2018). TV Koha is a regional Albanian-language television channel with a 5.07% share of regional viewership and a 0.58% of national viewership. TV Tera is a Macedonian-language regional television channel with a 2.85% share of regional viewership and 0.46% of national viewership. Data about regional television channels is taken from the Research of the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, 2019. SDK.mk and Portalb.mk are portals in the Macedonian and Albanian language respectively that offer informative content and have a substantial reach.

4. Media Monitoring: Lack of Representation of Persons with Disabilities in North Macedonian Media

Analysis of data gathered during media monitoring was done in two phases:

- 1. 1-15 October 2019 – analysis of articles and news reports that address issues pertaining to vulnerable and marginalized groups and/or content addressing disability, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation or age.
- 2. 15 October-1 December 2019 – in-depth analysis of Phase I content that focuses specifically on disability.

Table 1	Macedonian-language media	Albanian-language media
Phase I (Disability, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age)	96	80
Phase II (Disability only)	38	6

In Phase I, we found that all five Macedonian-language outlets published and/or broadcast a total of 96 articles and news reports relating to disability, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation and/or age. For Albanian-language outlets, the total was 80 texts.

In Macedonian-language media, most stories pertaining to marginalised groups in Macedonian-language media appeared on the national TV Sitel (23) and the regional TV Tera (22). TV Sitel usually leaves room in its news bulletins for social stories from across the country, many of which cover topics that are the focus of analysis. By contrast, TV Tera's bulletins frequently covered stories from the specific region where TV Tera broadcasts. The following national outlets ran a slightly lower number of relevant stories: SDK.mk (19), the national TV Telma (17) and Sloboden Pечат (15). In addition to disability, most of this content focused on age, ethnic affiliation and gender.

In Albanian-language media, most relevant stories appeared in Koha daily (28), TV Alsat-M (21 news reports), Portalb.mk (20). In contrast, TV Koha broadcast 11 news reports. The majority of broadcast and published stories alike were on the topics of ethnic affiliation, gender, age and religion.

Phase II focused on stories pertaining to disability only. These were analysed in greater detail, in terms of: topic; source of information; framing (the manner in which persons with disabilities were described); whether there was a quote from a person with disability; and, what was the tone of the news report/article/text.

In both Macedonian- and Albanian-language media, the number of news reports, articles and other types of content on disability specifically was low.

Each Macedonian-language outlet ran an average of five stories, while some media ran over ten stories.

Albanian-language outlets ran one to two stories.

How does this compare to other types of diversity content?

In Macedonian-language outlets, 38 out of 96 stories covered disability, 43 covered age, eight covered ethnic affiliation, seven covered gender.

In Albanian media, a mere 6 of the 80 stories covered disability.

Table 2	Macedonian-language Media	Albanian-language Media
Disability	38	6
Age	43	12
Ethnicity	8	42
Gender	7	19
Religion	0	1
Total	96	80

4.1. Health and Education -
Common Concerns for Persons with Disabilities

Our research found that RNM media do not run stories pertaining to disability frequently.

When such stories appear on TV, they are relegated to the second half of the news bulletin, after the 20th minute and the daily politics. During our monitoring period, a number of current high-politics topics (the pending accession negotiations with the EU; the scandal surrounding the former Special Public Prosecutor, Katica Janeva; the negotiations of the Joint Committee between Macedonia and Bulgaria; the Law on the Public Prosecution; and, the negotiations between the European Union and the Ministry of Education and Science) dominated prime-time news coverage at both Macedonian- and Albanian-language television. In terms of content, news reports pertaining to disability in Macedonian-language media usually focused on health and education issues, followed by social welfare, sports, culture and politics. Albanian-language media mostly covered health, entertainment, politics and education.

The most covered education topic was the opening of a new primary school, “Kiro Gligorov” at the beginning of the academic year in Skopje. The new school operates a day centre for children with cerebral palsy. This story ran in most Macedonian-language outlets. In Albanian-language media only one story appeared in “Koha” newspaper. But this story’s frame placed greater emphasis on the terrible state of schools in many Albanian villages.

There was greater variety in health topics. It should be underlined that some media outlets successfully and consistently ran stories about PwD’s health on a daily basis. For example, TV Sitel ran 8 stories about the problems PwD face when trying to apply for disability pensions and various health issues they face. The channel covered these topics from different perspectives: interviews with concerned citizens; statements from relevant politicians and authorities; by inviting them to respond and initiated discussion over currently disputed claims to a disability pension.

Several outlets ran stories concerning PwD’s social rights and protections. SDK.mk ran an interview with the opera singer Vesna Ginovska Ilkova, whose brother has a disability and offers at home singing lesson to other PwD. TV Telma and TV Sitel ran stories about PwD who have artistic talents - painting, playing an instrument. TV Telma also ran a reportage on the lack of sign language interpreters.

Only a few news stories pertained to sport. All of these referred to PwD’s performance or the opportunities offered for them to participate in certain recreational activities.

In the whole of September, only one news report/article pertained specifically to the intersection of politics and disability. It focused on the visit of the Mayor of one RNM municipality. During his visit to Ankara in Turkey, the Mayor was greeted by a delegation that included a child with a disability.

There were only two stories from the area of culture in the entire monitoring period. One single report about road safety for PwD. Likewise, a single story dealt with the opportunities for social inclusion that would open with the country’s accession to the European Union.

In Albanian-language outlets, the content covered above appeared in a number of short informative media formats. The topics in the news reports, articles and texts related to health, entertainment, politics and education, however none of them stood out in relevance treating chronic problems and challenges faced by persons with disabilities, which would place people with disabilities higher on the agenda of daytime events covered by the media outlets.

Table 3	Macedonian- language Media	Albanian- language Media
Topics	Soc. Protection (5) Education (11) Sports (6) Policy (1) Health (11) Culture (2) Other (2)	Health Urban development (2) Policy Education (2)
Sources of information	Politicians (8) Other (13) Doctors (2) Person with disabilities (14) CSO (1)	CSO (2) Medical Doctor Municipality National Agency Other (1)
Language Used to Describe PwD	Persons/children with special needs, invalids, handicapped/ disabled people Age and place of residence Profession, talent, ability (painting, performers on different instruments, mountain climbers etc.).	Disability
Quotations	Quote by the person with disability in 13 contents (out of a total of 38)	Quote by the person with disability in none of the news reports/ articles/texts (out of a total of 6)

4.2. Lack of First-Hand Sources in Media Content on Disability

During the monitoring period, the most common sources of information in Macedonian-language media stories on disability were PwD themselves and members of their families. However, it should be noted that there were only 13 direct quotations by PwD across the 38 disability-related stories in Macedonian-language media. In Albanian-language outlets, there was not a single quote in the six articles pertaining to PwD. The decision to include quotes by PwD in news reports, articles and texts has always depended on the type of disability in question. This might be one reason why only one third of the stories featured such quotes. But, in many cases, it was evident that the journalist did not take the initiative to take a statement from a PwD.

After PwD and their families, the most commonly-used sources in Macedonian-language media were politicians. They were cited frequently in stories about violations of PwD's right to acquire disability pensions and about the opening of the "Kiro Gligorov" primary school. Four stories used information from state institutions. Medical professionals were interviewed in two articles. Lawyers, economists, citizens, civil society organizations, teachers and unions were each consulted only once by different outlets.

Albanian-language media cited the following sources: a humanitarian civil society organization, which donated for the renovation of a park for PwD; a medical doctor; a municipality; and, a national agency.

Among other things, these findings highlight the lack of a cooperation between media stakeholders and CSOs. In the whole of September, only three stories across all media outlets monitored cited CSOs as a source. This appears to suggest that RNM media do not recognize CSOs as a valid source of expert knowledge on disability issues.

4.3. PwD Often Defined by Their Disability

Methodologically we defined the following 'markers' for evaluating the framing of PwD in RNM media: disability; occupation; age; and place of residence. The most common marker used in Macedonian- and Albanian-language media content we reviewed was 'disability'. Usually, the person's disability was given immediately after their name.

Instead of the commonly-accepted term – persons with disabilities, most media outlets used outdated phrases and terminology to describe PwD, such as: invalids, invalid persons, persons with invalidity, and persons/children with special needs or handicap.

The other commonly-used labels for PwD in the media were age and place of residence. These markers were usually used together, followed by the person's disability status, for example: "52-year-old citizen of Skopje, in custodial care from the end of this year", "42-year-old citizen of Resen, invalid person", "58-year-old Bane from Ajvatovci suffering from Alzheimers".

A few stories emphasise a particular PwD's profession, position, special ability or talent, for example: "president of the Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, a member of the 'Wilson Macedonia'" or "the public knows her as the woman painting with her mouth."

The news reports we analysed give the impression that PwD become the focus of media attention in two cases:

- When the media need to call attention to a problem PwD face due to their disability;
- Or, when the media want to highlight a PwD achievement.

In both cases, media frame PwD in terms of their 'extraordinary' disability status. There is no "normalization" of PwD's status in media discourse. They never appear as sources for stories about a social position, role or topic unrelated to their disability.

4.4. Media Outlets rarely Interview PwD for Content about Disability

Macedonian-language media ran 13 stories about disability that contained quotes from PwD. There was not a single PwD quote in any of the six stories in Albanian-language media.

Some content that lacked quotes by PwD, quoted other relevant sources. Other stories contained paraphrased statements from CSOs or institutions relevant to the story or did not feature any quotations at all.

Albanian-language stories did not feature any quotes at all. The stories themselves were usually short-format information pieces.

We should acknowledge that some stories in both language lacked quotes due to objective reasons. For example, PwD might not always agree to be interviewed. However, in many cases, there was an evident lack of journalistic will to hear PwD voices. For example, one story cited the social-media status of a disabled person who has achieved a sporting victory, but made no attempt to get extra information. For example, the journalist could have contacted the person in question for a statement, interview or other material for the article.

In terms of tone, 20 Macedonian-language stories were positive. 18 were neutral. None were negative. In Albanian-language media, five stories were neutral in tone and one was positive.

5. Interviews: Main Findings

5.1. Interviews with Representatives of Civil Society Organizations²

We interviewed six representatives of different CSOs, three each from national (unions) and local organizations. The CSOs in question work in the following areas: hearing impairments; visual impairments; physical disabilities; intellectual disabilities; one service provider (assistive technology) for all people with all types of disability; and, one CSOs that is not a disability organisation, but conducts some activities with PwD. Two of the people interviewed had a disability themselves. Another two had family members with disability.

From these interviews, we could conclude that the CSOs are aware of the importance of media representation and the benefits of cooperating with the media. Some organizations implement basic-level training on engaging with the media. Some of these CSOs know about and use appropriate **tools to communicate with the media and journalists: statements, press releases, interviews, guest appearances in shows, inviting journalists to events, press conferences and other.** CSOs cooperate with the media via invitations

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“... People with disabilities should be involved in all the activities society has to offer. And, their qualities and abilities should be highlighted [with examples].

This would partially break the illusion that they cannot do things that “normal” people can do.”

**Aleksandar
Panajotov,
Natura MK.**

”

² Interviewees' names are in List of Interviews, at the end of this document.



“Media coverage should contribute to raising the level of public awareness about the needs of persons with disabilities, especially among policymakers. Only then we can hope for a full inclusion of persons with disabilities in mainstream society and true recognition of diversity.”

Branimir Jovanovski,
President of the National Association of People with Physical Disabilities of Macedonia - Mobilnost Makedonija



and press releases about their events, projects and initiatives for exercising certain rights, as well as through guest appearances on TV shows (usually, morning programmes).

Often, CSOs **lack the resources to hire PR/media professionals** to manage their relationship with the media. Mostly, this work is done by the presidents, managers or other employees who are not PR professionals.

Our interviewees testify that **CSOs are usually first to initiate contact with the media** in order to get coverage about their activities, projects, events. To do this, they use knowledge from their training about working with the media. CSOs believe that the media respond to them in a positive and satisfactory way. Some CSOs have established **friendly working relationships with certain journalists, with whom they are in continuous communication.**

Our interviewees believe that journalists, in general, **lack adequate understanding of the problems and challenges PwD face, unless they have personal experiences of disability or if someone close to them lives with disability.** As a result, media content is often limited, lacks substance and fails to explore the issues in depth. Journalists often come to CSO events lacking necessary knowledge to make a good story. However, a few reporters have good professional experience in reporting on disability issues. Cooperating with them is essential for CSOs. **In addition, local organizations have difficulties in communicating with the national media.** Despite CSOs best efforts to cooperate with national media, the latter remain poorly informed themselves and fail to inform the general public about activities at the local level.

5.2. Interviews with Representatives of Relevant State Institutions³

We interviewed the following representatives of relevant state institutions: two from the Office of the Prime Minister; two from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy; and, one each from the Ministry of Education and Science and local government. Three of them are PwD.

On the whole, these interviewees have a positive experience of cooperating with the media. As of late, journalists have been fair and open to cooperation. However, many remain unfamiliar with the topics pertaining to disability, which negatively affects the quality of their content. According to our interviewees, journalists are not sufficiently aware of PwD's rights, needs and problems. They use **outdated terminology, which is derogatory because it emphasizes PwD's disabilities, instead of their individual capabilities.** Much of the content adopts a "compassionate" framing, encouraging the viewer/listener to feel "pity" toward PwD. Likewise, institutions are almost always asked to show their "willingness to help" on compassionate grounds, instead of sending a clear message that PwD have inalienable rights which the state is obliged to provide for.

By contrast, interviewed officials identify **a lack of investigative journalism and public interest shows about disability. Likewise, education for journalists,** which is comprehensive and continuous, instead of one-day trainings, is currently lacking. A related concern is the inaccessibility of most studios and broadcasting centres in RNM, which further limits PwD's ability to participate in media conversations.

In general, our interviewees say that the media must cover more topics that are important to PwD in order to increase public awareness of these issues and to influence the



"Respecting the dignity and fundamental human rights of all people, including members of marginalized groups, is an obligation that journalists have. Journalists should be particularly careful when selecting terms to denote communities and groups that suffer discrimination, because one of the most widespread forms of discrimination these communities face is negative and disparaging language. The use of respectful terms for people with disabilities is an ethical obligation, because disrespectful language can cause feelings of exclusion."

**Teodor Bogoevski,
Adviser on Disability
Issues to the Office of
the Prime Minister of
the Republic of North
Macedonia.**



³ See List of Interviewees for interviewees' names.



"Inclusion in the media realm means seeing a person with [for example] Down syndrome as a news anchor on national television or as a host of a talk show or quiz, etc. Only then, can we start talking about inclusion of people with disabilities in the media environment. This is the only way we will get used to their presence as something very natural, otherwise we are talking about segregation. "Special programmes" with "special journalists" can easily get rated "only for people with disabilities, suitable for viewers aged 15 and over." In this way, such programmes reflect the general level of 'inclusion' in the Republic of North Macedonia."

Mirjana Zlatanova,
Adviser on Students
with Disabilities to the
Ministry of Education
and Science.



general perception of PwD. But, this content should not focus on pity, such as calls to "collect donations", "help the person", etc. Instead, media should write about PwD's skills, capabilities and potential. This is the only way to sensitize the public, educational institutions and employers about PwD ability to participate in society to the fullest. At the moment, there is a lack of such shows that focus on PwD's success, without emphasising the person's disability (which will be noticed by the viewer, in any case). Also, it is necessary to overcome the inaccessibility of most of the studios and broadcasters, which further limits the participation of persons with disabilities in the media.

The current approach based on compassion/pity for disability as a negative experience is commonly reflected through the framing of PwD as a group that constantly needs help. Such coverage fails to represent PwD's capabilities and capacities alike. Most news stories portray PwD as welfare recipients living in poverty. These heart-breaking stories help the general public sympathies with PwD but leave no room to stories celebrating PwD who are successful on a professional and personal level.

In addition, our interviewers complained about frequent fake news as a negative phenomenon that requires considerable CSO and government resources to disprove. Related to this, media outlets are often aligned with particular political parties, promoting these parties' political agendas through their content.

In relation to CSOs, representatives of state institutions we interviewed stressed that the country's overall strategy was towards the decentralization of the system of social care and protection. For example, the government strategy envisages enabling non-governmental organizations to operate within the social care system as providers of care. PwD NGOs have the potential to do this. Due to their long-term experience in the field, such organisations know the needs of PwD best. They are a "wealth of information" for the government. Already RNM has organizations that are good at what they do, that are following European trends in RNM. These provide important services for

PwD, such as day centres and individual assistance. Moreover, these NGOs provide valuable input in the processes of developing a new legal framework for disability rights. However, the interviewers stress that there are also smaller NGOs, which lack professional know-how in their interventions. Despite their good intentions, their work is unsustainable. The non-governmental organizations are very important for the system as service providers for persons with disabilities, such as the day centres and the individual assistance. Moreover, they are included and consulted in the processes of adopting new legal solutions referring to the rights of persons with disabilities.

5.3. Interviews with Media Representatives⁴

We interviewed six journalists: three work on national television channels, MTV, Alsat-M and TV24; two on national radio stations, Makedonsko Radio and Kanal 77; and, one representative of a web portal. One of our interviewees is a PwD. Another has parents with hearing impairments and works as a sign language interpreter. Three of the six journalists interviewed were directly involved in the implementation of “Disability: A Matter of Perception.”

All the interviewed journalists have experience of researching and writing content about disability issues and PwD. Some have won awards for their work dedicated to PwD. In general, our interviewees think that the media does not adequately cover topics that are important to PwD. A lack of a strategic plan in the interest of both parties is a major barrier. The journalists we interviewed think that the editors in the country must realign their priorities in order to improve PwD's visibility in the media. They must fully exploit the power of the media to inform the general public about the challenges their fellow citizens with disabilities are facing. This is especially important because PwD do not only face problems with inclusion at the institutional level, but face social exclusion more broadly. Media professionals have an obligation to educate the public about these issues.

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“Citizens with disabilities need to be encouraged to speak and given a voice.

That means that they should be able to express criticism, what bothers them in their daily lives.”

Vanja Micevska,
journalist,
Kanal 77.

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⁴ Again, see List of Interviewees for interviewees' names.

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“Organizations of persons with disabilities must be more active and try to include disability topics in the information realm by sharing their stories with journalists and editors. However, it is crucial to know how to cooperate with the media in order to ensure that media frames disability issues from the perspective of and inline with the concerns of persons with disabilities.”

Chedomir Shopkic, former journalist on Macedonian radio, programme for people with disabilities “Panta Rei”.

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Compared to other media, the interviewed journalists have a different approach to writing about disability issues. Namely, they use the human rights frame. They pay attention to objectivity. They produce content that avoids unnecessarily framing PwD as no-more than objects of pity. They are more careful about using the correct terminology. They produce positive stories about PwD who are willing to talk about their needs, rights and achievements. Good journalistic practice entails “opening” all types of media contents to PwD. It is necessary to subvert the myth that PwD involvement must be limited to content that deals directly with disability, such as “Svetot na tishinata” [The World of Silence] and “Pettiot angel” [The Fifth Angel] on MTV. RNM media must ensure their involvement in all types of content – educational, cultural and entertainment.

Our interviewees say that they have always enjoyed the support of their editors and newsrooms in covering disability issues. Likewise, they have always had the necessary journalistic freedom.

6. Recommendations

1. The amount of content pertaining to disability in RNM media, in both Macedonian and Albanian languages, is insufficient and should be increased. The problem is more pronounced in some outlets than others. Alongside increasing the quantity, the quality of coverage needs to be improved significantly, especially in Albanian-language media.
2. As a general rule, disability issues are covered either in news reports or social-interest sections, rarely in longer, analytical content. RNM media must increase its commitment and initiative when it comes to researching and reporting issues faced by people with disabilities. Consistent attention to disability issues is necessary. RNM media must seek input from all relevant stakeholder and resolve any possible problems that arise.
3. Media still use outdated terminology, such as: persons with special needs; persons with invalidities; invalid persons; invalids; persons with handicap. Persons with disabilities is the most appropriate and socially-accepted term. Journalists and editors must have greater awareness about using correct terminology when covering disability issues. CSOs should support media stakeholders in raising awareness about this.
4. Media rarely uses people with disabilities and CSOs working on disability issues as sources in reports on disability. This problem is particularly pronounced in Albanian-language media. Journalists should cite several sources in their stories on disability in order to affirm the knowledge and expertise of PwD and CSOs that work on disability issues.

5. Journalists should foster a discourse of “normalization” in their coverage of disability. Right now, media only involve PwD in content that directly relates to disability issues. In line with the principles of “inclusive journalism”, journalists should cite and interview PwD with relevant knowledge and skills in all types of content.
6. Media must diversify the range of issues pertaining to disability in their coverage. In particular, they need to produce content that pays attention to intersectional issues faced by women and children with disabilities, alongside members of ethnic-minority communities with disabilities. This will also help the general public to view these citizens as having the same rights and needs as other members of their community.
7. Media must dedicate more space to disability issues, bearing in mind that this is not a question of pity, but human rights. All members of society have a right to fair representation in the media.
8. Media should run more stories about the positive achievement of PwD. Content about the problems PwD face should be framed in human rights and social justice terms, not pity. Media must hold state institutions and the public accountable. Media outlets themselves should ensure their premises and facilities are accessible for PwD. Even more importantly, media must ensure their content and formats are accessible for people with all types of disability.
9. Journalists and other media stakeholder will benefit from comprehensive and ongoing professional development training with a focus on disability issues. This training must provide journalists with detailed knowledge about PwD’s problems, challenges, rights and issues pertaining to disability in general. This would help media to produce more inclusive content, increasing visibility and acceptance of people with disabilities in society at large.
10. Journalism curricula at RNM universities must incorporate topics pertaining to marginalized groups, including PwD, in order to educate future journalists about these issues and how to cover them in their content. One way this can be achieved is through cooperation between universities and relevant CSOs that can use their knowledge, expertise and relevant resources to help universities develop and teach more diverse curricula.

11. Existing cooperation between media and CSOs should be promoted and developed further. Media stakeholder should draw on ideas and expertise from CSOs. In turn, the CSOs should use their media connections to generate publicity about their work, members, commitments and initiatives.
12. NGOs working on disability must appear in media coverage more often and be more “aggressive” in spreading their message. This will speed up the realisation of their goals, because media visibility can put politicians, state institutions and other stakeholder under pressure. Media must fulfil their public service role by providing objective information about the disability issues in question.

List of Interviewees

Civil Society Organizations

1. **Goran Sacevski**, civil activist at the Center for Support of People with Intellectual Disability - PORAKA Strumica
2. **Margarita Gulevska**, Director of the Association for Assistive Technology "Open the Windows"
3. **Sterja Dimov**, General Secretary of the National Association of Visually Impaired People of Macedonia
4. **Tomica Stojanovski**, President of the National Association of Deaf and Hard of Hearing of the Republic of North Macedonia
5. **Aleksandar Panajotov**, Natura MK Skopje
6. **Branimir Jovanovski**, President of the National Association of People with Physical Disabilities of Macedonia - Mobilnost Makedonija

State Institutions:

1. **Dushan Tomic**, Adviser to the Minister of Labour and Social Policy and Coordinator of Social Services Development at the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy
2. **Lidija Krstevska Dojcinovska**, State Adviser to the Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of North Macedonia and member of the National Coordinating Body for Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
3. **Teodor Bogojevski**, Adviser on Disability Issues to the Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of North Macedonia
4. **Vangel Trkaljanov**, Adviser to the Office of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy
5. **Mirjana Zlatanova**, Adviser on Students with Disabilities to the Higher Education, Adults' Education and Lifelong Learning Division at the Ministry of Education and Science
6. **Eleonora Panchevska Nikolovska**, head of the Department for Social, Child and Health Protection, Public Activities Department, City of Skopje.

Media Representatives:

1. **Hequran Akifi**, journalist, "360 Stepni" show on TV Alsat-M
2. **Zoran Andonov**, journalist, Sakam da kazam portal (www.SDK.mk)
3. **Vanja Micevska**, journalist, Radio Kanal 77, national coverage
4. **Marija Bashevska Stojanovska**, journalist and sign language interpreter at public service broadcaster Macedonian Radio-Television
5. **Sunai Sabrioski**, journalist, TV-24
6. **Chedomir Shopkic**, former journalist, Macedonian radio, programme for people with disabilities "Panta Rei"

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