

PLENARY II: “DISABILITY PORTRAYAL IN NEWS”

“A new approach to the subject of disabilities is needed so that journalists do not dramatise the issue but address it from an understanding of the problem. There are disabled journalists who know how to deal with the subject and who can open doors to expose the sort of situations encountered by this group of people.”

*Anna Diamantopoulou,
European Commissioner for Employment & Social Affairs*

News have a particular and considerable influence on general attitudes towards people with disabilities, through television & radio broadcasting just as much as through the written press. This plenary will examine how disability is covered in the news today, either as a social or medical topic –which is most often the case- or as part of the natural diversity of society. The presentations will also focus on how disability can be news as any other topic and the necessary tools to approach disability news in the most appropriate way. There is a clear lack of information related to disability in the media despite the interest this item can raise. 10% of the population in European societies are concerned by disability and they represent an important percentage of the media audience. Increasing disability in news channels, newspapers and other news media makes good business and can significantly increase the quality of the news programmes.

The panel of speakers who will intervene in this session all have significant experience in the mainstream news, and a good knowledge of disability issues. **Mr. Peter White** has a long experience in working at the BBC as a disability affairs correspondent in both radio and television since 1974. As the first blind person who produces reports for the television news, Mr. White will share his experience as a disabled journalist, and his contribution to a certain paradigm shift within the BBC.

Ms Elspeth Morrison, BBC Disability trainer, trains broadcasters to improve their portrayal of disabled people. She will discuss the use of drama to portray the issues surrounding disability, using the examples of BBC television shows.

Mr Fernando Mendía, the Communication Director of the ONCE –the Spanish National Organisation of the Blind- will present how disability news can make a good business in the mass media and how the approach towards disability issues can be improved through a close co-operation with disability organisations.

Mr Logothetis, from the ET3 television channel in Greece will evoke how disability organisations have raised the awareness within the media organisations, and the impact of this co-operation.

Key issues for discussion:

- How should disability be treated in the news? How to get away from the charitable and medical approach?
- Despite disability concerns more than 10% of the population, the presence of disability issues in news is very limited. Why? Can this be improved?
- At present, disabled people are not targeted as a potential audience. Why? How can this be changed?
- Having seen the good experiences by the BBC, the number of qualified professional with a disability should be increased within media organisations, and more work placements opportunities should be given to young disabled professionals. Can this experience be developed in other countries?
 - Medias and disability organisations should establish or strengthen co-operation for better awareness among media professionals. Good experiences exist already in some countries. Which have been the results. Which is the way forward?

- When covering disability issues, media should be in contact with disability organisations to ensure appropriate coverage. How can a permanent co-operation network between media and disability organisations be developed?