**NUJ Disabled Members’ Council statement on ​​​​​​​representation of disabled people in the media**

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The DMC has called on the media industry to take action to address unethical reporting on disability issues

Natasha Hirst, NUJ president and disabled members’ rep said:

“Recent negative reporting on out of work sickness benefits has reinforced a damaging narrative that blames and punishes disabled people for situations that are not of their making.

“Disabled people are rightfully angry to be the target of inhumane and degrading rhetoric in print and broadcast media. Journalism is a crucial tool to scrutinise and hold those in power to account and there is no place for toxic reporting that undermines and further marginalises a significant proportion of the population.

“Our industry can instead use the power of investigative reporting to highlight the relationship between disability and poverty and shine a light on the worsening discrimination, inequality and human rights violations of the state against disabled people.

“Increasing diversity in the media industry is crucial to creating change. Employers should seek to improve opportunities and support for disabled journalists to enter and progress in the industry and editors can be proactive in commissioning freelances with lived experience of disability.”

The NUJ continues to call on the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), to expand Clause 12 (Discrimination) of the Editors’ Code of Practice to allow for complaints to be raised against reporting that discriminates against groups of people, including disabled people. The IPSO Code currently only allows complaints to be raised regarding individuals, which results in weak protection and does little to deter against unethical reporting about disabled people.

Ann Galpin, co-chair of the TUC Disabled Workers’ Committee, said:

“Increasing numbers are living with Long Covid and other chronic illnesses, without adequate access to specialised healthcare, or the support needed to stay in employment. Some disabled people will not be able to work and should never be demonised for that."

[TUC research](https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/equality/disability) has identified multiple barriers experienced by disabled people in employment, from the lack of reasonable adjustments, to harassment and the disability pay gap, all of which reduce opportunities for disabled people to work. We encourage journalists to explore these issues to produce well-informed journalism. It is vital to build relationships with disabled people and their organisations to include their perspective, rather than relying on verbatim quotes from Government or charity sources.”

NUJ members agree to abide by the NUJ [Code of Conduct](https://www.nuj.org.uk/about-us/rules-and-guidance/code-of-conduct.html) including clause 9, which states that a journalist, “produces no material likely to lead to hatred or discrimination on the grounds of a person’s age, gender, race, colour, creed, legal status, disability, marital status, or sexual orientation.” The NUJ will support members who challenge editorial lines that they feel would put them in breach of our code.

Meet the Disabled Members’ Council

The NUJ Disabled Members’ Council will hold an informal Zoom meeting with disabled members on 26th July at 5.30pm on Zoom. This will provide an opportunity for members to meet their NUJ and TUC representatives, find out about upcoming work and share their concerns and priorities with the union. [Register a place for the event.](https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/meet-the-disabled-members-council-tickets-648043986007)

Freelance disabled journalists are encouraged to add their details to the [NUJ Freelance Directory](http://www.freelancedirectory.org/register.php) and include reference to disability in your profile to make it easier for commissioning editors to find you.

Tips to improve reporting:

* Build relationships with Disabled People’s Organisations (DPOs) – organisations run by and with disabled people. These are often small organisations without a significant communications presence. DPOs have lived experience and expertise in disability and are best placed to understand and discuss the complex and nuanced issues that affect disabled people’s lives.
* Commission diverse disabled journalists and contributors on a range of topics to increase representation and plurality of perspectives across the industry. Don’t expect disabled people to contribute their expertise without payment.
* Take the time to understand the issues raised and be sensitive towards people who are sharing personal and often traumatic stories. Not all disabled interviewees or case studies will be experienced at working with the media.
* Language that stigmatises or devalues disabled people and their lives undermines your reporting and creates misinformation. Avoid making assumptions about disabled people’s experiences or their circumstances and backgrounds.
* Statistics do not necessarily speak for themselves. Pay attention to the systemic societal barriers that exclude and marginalise disabled people when reporting on disability issues and analysing statistics. These include lack of access to employment, education and training, health and social care, transport and all other areas of day to day life.
* Understand and seek to use the [Social Model of Disability](https://www.nuj.org.uk/about-us/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/disabled-members.html#:~:text=The%20NUJ's%20work%20is%20informed,no%20account%20of%20those%20impairments.) when researching and reporting on disability equality stories. Be aware of the [UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled People](https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/our-human-rights-work/monitoring-and-promoting-un-treaties/un-convention-rights-persons-disabilities#:~:text=CRPD%20is%20an%20international%20human,live%20independently%20in%20the%20community) and the evidenced inequalities and human rights violations against disabled people to provide context in your reporting.
* Disabled people are not a homogenous group. One disabled person’s experience is not necessarily representative of others, even those with the same impairment or health condition.

Note on terminology:

* In line with the social model of disability, the preferred terminology of the UK Disability movement is ‘disabled people’. This identifies that people with impairments (and health conditions) are disabled by societal barriers and exclusion.
* The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities allows individual states to refer to the Convention through their preferred terminology – this is why the NUJ references the UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled People, in line with the social model of disability. ‘People first’ terminology is more widely used in the US and other parts of the world.
* Individuals may identify in different ways and it is best to check with individual interviewees how they wish to be referred to.

TUC terminology guidance:

* Use the term ‘disabled people,’ ‘disabled workers,’ in education, ‘disabled pupils/students’ (not ‘people with disabilities,’ ‘workers with disabilities’ or ‘the disabled/the deaf’).
* \*An exception: use ‘people with learning disabilities’ / ‘people with learning difficulties’ as chosen by this group of disabled people.
* Use ‘non-disabled’ people (not ‘able-bodied’ people) to describe people who are not disabled.
* Use ‘impairment’ to describe an individual’s physical, sensory, or cognitive differences. ‘Disability’ is what is caused by the barriers in society.
* Avoid 'suffering from'. Use 'person with', 'person who has' or 'person living with' an impairment. E.g., a person who has Long Covid.
* Use ‘invisible impairments’ (not ‘hidden disabilities’)
* Use ‘wheelchair user’ (not ‘wheelchair bound’)
* Avoid describing people as ‘vulnerable.’ Be more specific. Why are people in this group more at risk? Are they disabled? Are they from disadvantaged backgrounds? Are they more at risk due to poverty or isolation? With regards to Covid, use people ‘at higher risk of infection,’ for example.
* Use ‘access needs’ or ‘access requirements’ (not ‘special needs’)
* Use ‘inform’ to describe someone telling their employer about their impairment (rather than ‘disclose’)
* Use ‘mental distress,’ ‘trauma’ or ‘mental health conditions’ rather than ‘mental illness’ or other terms that pathologise mental distress.
* Use ‘neurodivergent person’/‘autistic person’/‘dyslexic person’ (not ‘person with autism’ / ‘person with dyslexia’).

Resources:

For high quality investigative reporting on a range of disability issues, visit the [Disability News Service](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5Cnatashahirst%5CDesktop%5CNUJ%202023-2025%5CDisability%20News%20Service). A range of disability and impairment-specific publications also exist.

* [NUJ’s Reporting Poverty Guidelines](https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource-report/reporting-poverty-a-guide-for-media-professionals.html) and [short film](https://youtu.be/tWTjiLeAZf0).
* Scope statement on [destructive disability narratives](https://www.scope.org.uk/news-and-stories/destructive-disability-narrative/).

The UK governments’ compliance and progress with the UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled People is currently being reviewed. Previous reviews and reports can be accessed on the [Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) website](https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/our-human-rights-work/monitoring-and-promoting-un-treaties/un-convention-rights-persons-disabilities).

The NUJ is working in partnership with Disability Wales to update reporting guidelines and develop training for journalists.

https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/nuj-disabled-members-council-statement-on-representation-of-disabled-people-in-the-media.html