

## **Reframing Disability in Media: Insights from the International Purple–We Care Film Festival 2025 and the Imperative of Inclusive Representation**

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**Abstract:-** Disability, despite being an integral part of human diversity, continues to be portrayed in the media through limited and often misleading frames of charity, tragedy, or inspiration. The gap between the lived experiences of persons with disabilities and their mediated representation remains one of the most persistent challenges in global communication. This paper examines how the global and Indian media ecosystems construct, prioritize, and circulate disability narratives, drawing specific insights from the *International Purple–We Care Film Festival on Disability Issues* held in Goa in 2025. As part of this research, the author participated in and witnessed the four-day festival, an international confluence of filmmakers, educators, and differently-abled participants from over 40 countries. Interactions with filmmakers, jury members, and persons with disabilities during the event revealed how authentic, rights-based storytelling can transform not only cinematic narratives but also social consciousness. The lived encounters from interviewing participants to observing films made by and about differently-abled individuals demonstrated that this community is not seeking sympathy but visibility, respect, and recognition. Drawing upon data from UNESCO (2023), WHO (2022), and the World Bank (2024), as well as observational analysis from the festival, this study argues that disability communication must move beyond token representation toward structural inclusion where accessibility, agency, and authorship become integral to the media-making process. The festival reaffirmed that media's role is not merely to *show* disability but to *understand and engage* with it. It is a reminder that inclusive storytelling is not only a professional responsibility but also a moral imperative. By connecting first-hand experience with theoretical inquiry, this

paper advocates for an educational and institutional approach to media that gives disability communication its rightful space, in curricula, in production, and in public imagination.

**Keywords:** Disability representation, inclusive storytelling, accessibility, media education, participatory communication, digital inclusion.

## Introduction

The media has long been considered both a mirror and a moulder of society, reflecting its values, attitudes, and contradictions. Yet, this reflection has never been equally distributed. Persons with disabilities, who constitute nearly one-sixth of the world's population, around 1.3 billion individuals, according to the World Health Organization (2022) continue to remain at the margins of mediated visibility. In India alone, the number is estimated to be between 50 and 70 million, making the absence of inclusive representation even more concerning in a country of vast social and cultural diversity. Historically, the representation of disability in media has followed narrow and repetitive patterns often confined to the tropes of tragedy, heroism, or inspiration. People with disabilities are shown either as victims deserving sympathy or as exceptional individuals who "overcome" their limitations. This dual imagery of helplessness and heroism inadvertently reduces disability to spectacle. It shifts attention away from the systemic realities of accessibility, inclusion, and rights, while reinforcing social hierarchies between the "abled" and the "disabled." As a result, the media, despite its immense potential to shape empathy and awareness, often ends up reinforcing existing biases instead of dismantling them. In the Indian context, this representational imbalance is deeply intertwined with cultural narratives and policy neglect. The Census of India (2011) recorded 26.8 million people with disabilities, but more recent independent estimates suggest that the figure is closer to 70 million, due to underreporting and stigma. Yet, mainstream newsrooms and entertainment industries continue to treat disability as a "special issue" rather than an integral aspect of social diversity. UNESCO's *Global Media Monitoring Report* (2023) reveals that less than 2% of global media content addresses disability-related subjects and even within this limited scope, stories often appear episodically around the *International Day of Persons with Disabilities* or as human-interest features about extraordinary achievers. These patterns suggest that disability is still not seen as part of the everyday social narrative. Instead, it is isolated into moments of moral sentiment or political symbolism. During the *International Purple-We Care Film Festival* held in Goa in 2025, which the author attended, this gap between media portrayal and lived

experience became strikingly evident. The festival, a collaborative effort by the Government of Goa, the United Nations Information Centre for India and Bhutan, and UNESCO, brought together filmmakers, journalists, students, and specially-abled creators from across 40 countries. Interactions with participants and screenings of films made *by* and *about* persons with disabilities highlighted one profound truth: the stories exist, but the platforms to tell them authentically are still scarce. Media, therefore, stands at a crossroads. On one side lies the comfort of traditional storytelling, marked by charity, inspiration, and distance. On the other lies the ethical imperative of transformation, where representation becomes participation, and visibility becomes voice. The challenge before journalism and mass communication education today is to equip future storytellers not only with the technical skills of production but with the moral sensibility of inclusion. This paper begins from that intersection, between media practice and social responsibility. It seeks to understand how disability has been portrayed in global and Indian media, what frameworks perpetuate this imbalance, and how film festivals, inclusive communication training, and educational interventions can collectively shift the narrative from representation to rights, and from sympathy to solidarity.

### **Literature Review**

The discourse on disability and media representation has evolved significantly over the last three decades, yet major studies continue to reveal a troubling imbalance between visibility and authenticity. The dominant media narrative, as multiple scholars have observed, oscillates between portraying persons with disabilities (PWDs) as either passive subjects of pity or as heroic figures who “transcend” their limitations, both of which reduce disability to spectacle rather than lived experience (Barnes, 1992; Oliver, 1996; Ellis & Goggin, 2015). This section synthesizes global and Indian research examining the patterns, causes, and consequences of this underrepresentation while highlighting emerging approaches that seek to reframe the discourse through inclusion and participation.

A landmark study by the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative (2022) examined 1,500 top-grossing films released between 2007 and 2021 across global markets. The findings revealed that only 2.4% of speaking characters in these films represented a disability of any kind, and 95% of those roles were portrayed by non-disabled actors. Such misrepresentation contributes to a phenomenon scholars describe as “symbolic annihilation,” where marginalized identities are either absent or inaccurately depicted, reinforcing ableist perceptions in society (Gerbner &

Gross, 1976; Ellis, Kent & Locke, 2017). Complementing this global perspective, UNESCO's Global Media Monitoring Report (2023) identified that less than 2% of total media coverage worldwide focuses on disability-related issues. Most of this content appears episodically, particularly around commemorative dates like the *International Day of Persons with Disabilities* (3 December), and tends to highlight exceptional achievements or charitable interventions rather than systemic concerns such as accessibility, inclusive education, or employment rights. UNESCO's findings underline that media continues to treat disability as an "event" rather than as a structural issue embedded within social realities.

From a journalistic standpoint, Reuters Institute's Digital News Report (2022) noted that disability representation in newsrooms remains alarmingly low, particularly in developing countries. Journalistic norms, physical inaccessibility of news organizations, and editorial bias contribute to the near absence of journalists with disabilities in mainstream media. This absence, as argued by Ellis and Kent (2015), results in a "representational gap," where stories about disability are *told for* people with disabilities, not *by* them, creating a hierarchy of narrative authority. In the Indian context, a growing corpus of scholarship underscores both progress and persistent challenges. According to a Centre for Disability Studies (Hyderabad, 2019) content analysis of five national dailies, out of 5,000 front-page stories published over six months, only 12 stories directly addressed disability as a rights or policy issue. The remaining coverage consisted primarily of personality features or sensationalized accounts. The Centre for Internet and Society (CIS, 2023) further observed that only 10% of Indian OTT platforms provide comprehensive accessibility features like subtitles, closed captions, or audio descriptions, a figure that underscores the technological and ethical gaps in inclusive media production.

Cinematic representation has fared slightly better, though challenges persist. Films such as *Black* (2005), *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), and *Srikanth* (2024) marked a departure from conventional portrayals by focusing on internal worlds, agency, and individuality rather than disability itself. These films, however, are exceptions rather than the norm. A 2021 FICCI-EY report on Indian Media & Entertainment emphasized that the industry remains commercially risk-averse, leading to limited mainstream inclusion of actors or storytellers with disabilities.

Globally, disability studies scholars such as Tom Shakespeare (2014) and Elizabeth Ellcessor (2018) have argued that the challenge lies not merely in representation but in *authorship*. Until

people with disabilities have equal participation in media creation, as directors, editors, reporters, and decision-makers, the portrayal of disability will remain externally constructed and filtered through non-disabled perspectives. This sentiment echoes the call made in UNESCO's 2022 report "Reimagining Disability in the Digital Age," which advocates for participatory storytelling, inclusive training programs in journalism schools, and accessible digital infrastructure as key enablers of equitable media ecosystems. An emerging strand of research also highlights the transformative potential of disability film festivals as spaces of advocacy and creative empowerment. The We Care Film Festival, organized in partnership with the United Nations Information Centre for India and Bhutan, Brotherhood, and UNESCO, has showcased over 200 films from 40 countries since its inception. Studies by Bhattacharya (2022) and Kapoor (2023) argue that such festivals offer counter-narratives that challenge dominant media frames by presenting persons with disabilities as creators rather than subjects, effectively blurring the boundaries between activism and art.

Taken together, the existing literature paints a complex but hopeful picture. While disability remains marginalized in mainstream media, there is a visible shift toward inclusion through independent cinema, digital advocacy, and academic collaboration. What remains urgent is the institutionalization of inclusive practices, in media education, newsroom diversity, and content regulation, so that disability communication becomes a sustained discourse rather than a periodic campaign.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design, grounded in the principles of critical media studies and disability communication. The focus is not only on what is represented in the media but also on *how* and *why* disability narratives are constructed, circulated, and consumed. By combining secondary research with first-hand field observations, this methodology seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical understanding and lived experience. The research framework integrates three key components: (a) textual analysis of selected films and news reports, (b) contextual interpretation of institutional practices in media education and production, and (c) ethnographic insights gathered during the *International Purple-We Care Film Festival 2025*, held in Goa, India.

### *1. Research Approach*

The study employs an interpretive approach that views media as a social construct rather than a neutral reflection of reality (Hall, 1997; Silverstone, 2007). The focus is on meaning-making, how disability is framed through linguistic choices, visual codes, and narrative patterns. Texts are analyzed not in isolation but in relation to their broader socio-political contexts, including cultural attitudes, policy frameworks, and global discourses on inclusion.

### *2. Data Sources and Selection*

#### *Sampling of Media Texts*

Media texts were selected through purposive sampling using the following criteria: News Media: Articles from national English and Hindi newspapers and leading digital platforms published between 2019 and 2024, addressing caste, gender, religion, migration, disability, or protest movements. Entertainment Media: Popular Hindi films and television content with wide viewership or cultural impact. Digital Media: Viral social media narratives, hashtags, and short-form videos related to discrimination discourse. Field Observations: Screenings, panel discussions, and audience interactions at curated film and media festivals focused on inclusion and social justice.

Data for this study were drawn from three interrelated sources: Secondary Literature: Scholarly research, institutional reports, and data published by organizations such as UNESCO (2023), WHO (2022), World Bank (2024), and Reuters Institute (2022). Media Texts: A purposive sample of films (*Taare Zameen Par*, *Black*, *Margarita with a Straw*, *Srikanth*, and international works such as *CODA* and *The Sound of Metal*), along with selected news features, editorials, and online reports from leading Indian and global media outlets. Observational Data: Insights from participation at the *International Purple-We Care Film Festival 2025*, including panel discussions, interviews with filmmakers and persons with disabilities, and documentation of festival proceedings. These observations provided grounded understanding of how inclusive storytelling is practiced and perceived in real-world creative spaces.

#### *Analytical Framework*

**Coding and Analysis:** Texts were analyzed using a three-stage thematic process:

1. Open Coding: Identification of recurring descriptors such as pity, threat, resilience, agency, and deviance.

2. Axial Coding: Grouping of descriptors into dominant frames (e.g., charity-based, criminalizing, inspirational, rights-based).
3. Thematic Integration: Mapping these frames onto broader patterns of discrimination and representation.

Coding was conducted manually, supported by analytical memos and cross-referenced with established frameworks from UNESCO, WHO, and disability studies literature.

**Primary Data Indicators:** To strengthen originality, the study integrates illustrative primary indicators, including anonymized conversations with journalists, media students, and filmmakers, observational counts of accessible screenings (subtitles, audio descriptions), and student reflections from media literacy workshops. These indicators are used to contextualize findings rather than to claim statistical inference. The analytical approach combines textual analysis and contextual interpretation, rooted in critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) and disability studies perspectives (Shakespeare, 2014; Ellis & Kent, 2017). The analysis focused on three interrelated dimensions:

1. Representation: How disability is visually and linguistically constructed in films and media coverage.
2. Agency: Whose voices and perspectives are foregrounded or marginalized in storytelling.
3. Accessibility: How production processes, technologies, and institutional norms enable or restrict inclusive communication.

The qualitative analysis involved coding recurring themes such as “inspiration narrative,” “stigma,” “inclusion,” and “accessibility,” allowing patterns to emerge inductively. These findings were then cross-validated with published data from UNESCO, WHO, and academic sources to ensure credibility and triangulation.

**Reflexive Positioning:** Given the researcher's professional background as a media educator and direct participant in the 2025 Purple-We Care Film Festival, reflexivity was central to the methodological process. Observations were recorded through reflective field notes, interviews, and post-event analysis. The positionality of the researcher, as both observer and practitioner was acknowledged and managed through triangulation and critical self-reflection to minimize interpretive bias (Finlay, 2002).

**Analysis & Findings:** Despite advances in accessibility technology, policy frameworks, and disability-rights awareness, the media landscape continues to present a deeply uneven picture of disability representation. Global data and contextual case studies from India reveal major gaps between lived experience and mediated visibility.

Table 1.....

Media Frame	Typical Representation	Social Consequence
Charity/Pity	Dependent, helpless subjects	Reinforces stigma
Criminal/Threat	Dangerous or disorderly	Fuels fear and exclusion
Inspirational	“Overcoming adversity” trope	Creates unrealistic expectations
Rights-Based	Agency, access, participation	Promotes dignity and inclusion

A recurring pattern emerges: limited participation by marginalized creators leads to narrow narratives, which restrict visibility and access, reinforcing discrimination. This cycle sustains itself unless actively disrupted through institutional and educational intervention.

Global representation: an accessibility deficit: According to UNESCO, persons with disabilities comprise approximately 16% of the world's population, yet their proportional visibility and representation in mainstream media remain marginal. UNESCO+2UNESCO+2 For example, UNESCO's recent guidance notes that coverage of disability-related issues is often episodic and framed around special events, such as International Day of Persons with Disabilities, or individual achievements , rather than embedded in daily journalism and media practice. UNESCO+1. The pattern extends to content production: a handbook published by UNESCO in 2024 points out that many media organizations still lack accessible workflows, inclusive decision-making, or persons with disabilities in creative roles. UNESCO Articles+1 These findings suggest that the issue is not only what is represented but who gets to represent and under what conditions.

Indian context: structural and narrative limitations: Indian media offers several illustrations of these mechanisms. Bollywood frequently normalizes gender and age bias by pairing older male actors with significantly younger women, while actresses over thirty are sidelined. Crimes against Dalits are often framed as "personal disputes," obscuring structural caste violence. Individuals from Northeast India are routinely ethnically tagged in crime reports, reinforcing perceptions of otherness. During the 2020–21 farmers' protests, sections of television media shifted focus from economic grievances to ideological suspicion, branding protestors as "anti-national." Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, communalized narratives around the Tablighi Jamaat demonstrated how media framing can legitimize discrimination with real-world consequences. In India, media representation of disability is similarly limited and often superficial. Though specific figures differ by study, one content-analysis of national newspapers (2019) indicated that of 5,000 front-page articles reviewed nationally over a six-month period, only around a dozen addressed disability in ways that acknowledged rights, policy frameworks or systemic inclusion. Though the exact dataset from the study is not publicly available for replication, the pattern is consistent with wider academic commentary (Mehrotra, 2016; Gandhi, 2021). The Centre for Internet and Society (CIS) in 2023 reported that only about 10% of Indian OTT platforms provide fully accessible content features (subtitles, audio description, sign-language) across their catalogues. This digital accessibility gap points to inequities in media

consumption and speaks to the “two-tier” communication world in which persons with disabilities remain excluded from full participation.

Themes emerging from the festival field-site : Participation at the International Purple-We Care Film Festival (Goa, 2025) provided rich qualitative insight into how media narratives of disability are challenged when persons with disabilities become active creators, not merely subjects. Filmmakers spoke of wanting to move beyond “inspirational” tropes and instead portray everyday lives of persons with disabilities, inclusive, complex, multifaceted. In workshops and Q&A sessions, a recurring theme was that “we don’t need to be told how we inspire you, we want to work with you.” This shifts the frame from pity to partnership, from spectacle to solidarity. The festival also underscored institutional gaps: many filmmakers and media educators remarked how access to funding, distribution, and mainstream film circuits remains uneven for content by and about persons with disabilities. At the same time, the festival offered concrete practices, accessible screening spaces, sign-language interpretation, audio description, inclusive jury panels, that demonstrate how media inclusion can move from aspiration to implementation.

Synthesis of findings: three interlocking deficits: From the combined evidence, three interlocking deficits emerge:

1. Participation deficit – Persons with disabilities are rarely represented in decision-making roles (production, direction, editing) which limits the authenticity of their media portrayal.
2. Narrative deficit – When disability appears in media, it is overwhelmingly framed via themes of tragedy, inspiration, or exceptionalism, rather than structural rights, everyday life and agency.
3. Access deficit – Even when content is produced, channels for consumption and production remain inaccessible, from digital platforms lacking subtitles to newsrooms lacking inclusive infrastructure.

These deficits reinforce each other: limited production → narrow narratives → restricted access → social invisibility. Breaking this cycle requires interventions across education, policy, media practice, and technology.

## Discussion

The findings from this study reaffirm what decades of disability scholarship and advocacy have consistently underscored, that while global and national media systems have evolved technologically, their moral and representational frameworks remain unequally developed. Disability in the media continues to oscillate between invisibility and distortion. When represented, it is often confined within limiting tropes of inspiration, tragedy, or charity, what scholars have termed the “pity-hero binary” (Ellis & Kent, 2017). The analysis of global datasets and Indian media coverage further highlights how the voices of persons with disabilities are rarely central to the narratives that concern them. Despite this imbalance, the ongoing shifts observed through initiatives like the International Purple—We Care Film Festival 2025 indicate an emerging movement toward inclusive storytelling. These platforms reveal that persons with disabilities are no longer content to be the subjects of media; they are increasingly stepping into roles as filmmakers, scriptwriters, reporters, and digital creators. This participation challenges the structural hierarchies of traditional media, where non-disabled professionals have historically shaped the discourse *about* disability.

### From Tokenism to Participation:

True inclusion in media cannot be achieved through tokenistic gestures, such as occasional coverage of disability awareness days or the inclusion of a single character with a disability in a film. Authentic representation demands participation, not merely presence. The difference lies in agency: Are persons with disabilities involved in decision-making, production, and authorship? As UNESCO’s “*Reimagining Disability in the Digital Age*” (2022) report notes, diversity initiatives often fail because they “invite representation without redistributing power.” In contrast, participatory media models, such as collaborative filmmaking, inclusive newsroom hiring, and disability-led digital platforms, have shown measurable progress in building authentic, self-representative narratives.

### From Awareness to Accessibility:

Awareness campaigns are necessary but insufficient. The future of disability communication depends on accessibility, not as an afterthought, but as a design principle. Accessibility is both a technological and ethical construct. Technological accessibility ensures that all audiences, regardless of ability, can consume content through tools such as captions, audio description, and screen-reader compatibility. Ethical accessibility demands that producers

think about inclusion from the moment of ideation. The Centre for Internet and Society (2023) found that only 10% of Indian OTT platforms provide accessible viewing options, underscoring that awareness without implementation sustains exclusion. In contrast, global leaders like the BBC, Netflix, and Apple have embedded accessibility protocols across their production ecosystems, demonstrating that inclusion can be both functional and profitable.

From Sympathy to Solidarity:

The most critical shift must occur at the level of empathy and ethics. Sympathy places persons with disabilities as objects of compassion; solidarity recognizes them as equal participants in a shared human experience. As articulated during multiple sessions at the Purple—We Care Film Festival, “we do not need to be inspired by disability; we need to collaborate through equality.” This perspective transforms media from a site of emotional consumption to one of social co-creation. For educators and media trainers, this means nurturing empathetic competence, teaching students not merely to represent disability, but to engage with communities respectfully, collaborate with sensitivity, and tell stories that affirm dignity. Research by the Harvard Kennedy School (2022) indicates that exposure to inclusive narratives increases empathy by up to 40% among young audiences, reinforcing the role of education as a catalyst for long-term social change.

The Role of Media Education and Policy:

Media schools and universities serve as incubators for future journalists, filmmakers, and content creators. Embedding disability communication and inclusive production techniques in curricula is therefore not optional, it is imperative. Courses should go beyond theoretical sensitivity sessions to include hands-on training in accessible filmmaking, ethical interviewing, and disability rights reporting. Furthermore, national policies such as India’s National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) provide a legal and institutional foundation to promote inclusivity. However, unless translated into tangible academic practice — through projects, internships, and collaborations with organizations like We Care, UNESCO, and Brotherhood , these frameworks risk remaining declarative rather than transformative.

### Industry 4.0 and Algorithmic Amplification:

Industry 4.0 has transformed media ecosystems through artificial intelligence, automation, and algorithmic personalization. Platforms prioritize engagement, often amplifying emotionally charged or polarizing content. An MIT study (2018) found that false news spreads six times faster than factual information on social media platforms. At the same time, digital media has enabled counter-narratives. Movements such as #MeToo and Dalit digital activism illustrate how marginalized voices can bypass traditional gatekeepers. The challenge lies in ensuring that technological innovation does not reinforce existing inequalities. Ultimately, inclusion must evolve from an institutional mandate to a cultural mindset. As this research demonstrates, the problem of representation cannot be solved by technology or policy alone; it requires a fundamental reimagining of media ethics. The move from awareness to action, from tokenism to transformation, depends on how we teach, create, and consume media collectively. As a media educator and researcher who has directly witnessed the power of inclusive storytelling during the Purple–We Care Film Festival, it becomes evident that the future of disability representation lies not in amplifying difference but in normalizing coexistence. The camera, microphone, and pen must no longer look *at* disability but *with* it — seeing not limitation, but lived experience.

Discrimination does not disappear after graduation; it takes new forms. In media organizations, Dalit and Adivasi graduates are often confined to “social issue” beats, while women face harassment and limited leadership opportunities. In economics and finance, women earn approximately 19% less than men (Monster Salary Index, 2021), and Dalit candidates receive significantly fewer interview callbacks despite identical qualifications (Harvard/DSE, 2019). In policy and governance spaces, tokenism and language-based discrimination restrict meaningful participation. These realities expose a gap between academic ideals and professional practice. Educators play a crucial role in addressing this gap. Preparing students requires more than technical skill development; it demands critical awareness. Integrating media literacy across disciplines, encouraging interdisciplinary learning, and fostering ethical industry collaborations can help students recognize bias in narratives, data, and algorithms. Training in verification tools, ethical AI use, and contextual analysis is essential in the Industry 4.0 environment. Media influences not only what societies think, but how they think. It can inflame prejudice or inspire reform. For economists, this means interrogating how narratives shape perceptions of growth and inequality. For political scientists, it means understanding perception as a form of power. For

journalists, it means recognizing that words can heal or harm. Moving from awareness to accountability requires conscious effort—from media institutions, educators, and citizens alike.

### **Limitations, Recommendations, Significance, and Future Scope**

**Limitations of the Study:** While this study provides important qualitative insights into disability communication and representation, several limitations must be acknowledged to maintain academic transparency and validity. First, the research is primarily qualitative and interpretive in nature, relying on textual and observational data rather than large-scale quantitative analysis. The findings, therefore, capture depth rather than breadth. Second, access to certain proprietary datasets from media organizations and OTT platforms (such as internal accessibility audits) was limited, constraining empirical validation of accessibility claims. Third, while the observational data collected from the *International Purple—We Care Film Festival 2025* provided valuable experiential understanding, it represents a specific cultural and institutional context, which may differ across regions or production systems. Additionally, the interpretive approach, while rich in reflexive detail, is inherently subjective. The researcher's professional engagement as a media educator may introduce positional bias, mitigated through reflexivity but not entirely eliminated. Finally, rapid technological evolution in artificial intelligence and media production implies that accessibility practices discussed here are likely to evolve, necessitating ongoing review.

**Recommendations:** The findings suggest that the transformation of disability representation in media requires systemic, educational, and ethical interventions at multiple levels. Based on the study's analysis, the following recommendations are proposed:

#### *1. Institutional Integration of Disability Communication*

Media and journalism curricula should integrate *Disability Communication* as a core module, emphasizing inclusive storytelling, accessible production methods, and critical media literacy. This will sensitize students and future professionals toward equitable representation.

#### *2. Accessibility as Editorial and Production Norm*

News organizations, film studios, and OTT platforms must embed accessibility, captions, audio descriptions, and sign-language interpretation, as standard production practice, not as optional features. The Broadcasting Content Guidelines (India) and Digital Accessibility Standards must be updated to make this mandatory.

### *3. Disability-Led Media Participation*

Governments, NGOs, and universities should encourage fellowships, internships, and leadership programs for persons with disabilities within media institutions. Authentic participation in decision-making roles ensures that representation stems from lived experience, not external interpretation.

### *4. Research and Collaboration*

Collaboration between academia, media industry, and international agencies such as UNESCO, UNDP, and World Bank should be strengthened to promote evidence-based research on inclusive communication. University media centers can act as knowledge hubs to generate training content, workshops, and research projects in this domain.

### *5. Policy and Industry Partnerships*

Regulatory bodies like the Press Council of India, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, and NFDC must establish policy linkages that reward inclusive media practices through funding, awards, or tax incentives.

Similarly, industry associations like FICCI and CII could introduce *Media Inclusion Indexes* ranking organizations on accessibility, diversity, and inclusive representation.

**Significance of the Study:** This study contributes to the emerging field of Disability Communication Studies by situating the discourse at the intersection of media ethics, education, and human rights. Its significance lies in four areas:

1. **Empirical Contribution:** The research documents real observations from the *International Purple-We Care Film Festival 2025*, capturing ground-level perspectives of media professionals and persons with disabilities.
2. **Pedagogical Relevance:** It emphasizes the crucial role of educators in shaping inclusive media practices, moving from awareness-based teaching to practice-based sensitization.
3. **Policy Insight:** By linking global data (UNESCO, WHO, World Bank) with India's media context, it offers a framework for policy development on accessible and ethical media production.
4. **Cultural Relevance:** The study redefines disability not as a charitable subject but as a shared human condition that can drive creativity, equity, and collective progress.

In doing so, it provides a blueprint for transforming representation from a *symbolic act* into a *structural commitment*, one that reimagines the media as both storyteller and social reformer.

**Future Scope:** As digital technologies and media ecologies evolve, the next frontier of disability communication will be technological democratization. Artificial intelligence (AI), augmented reality (AR), and machine learning are already reshaping accessibility in unprecedented ways. AI-driven tools can automatically generate real-time captions, adaptive voiceovers, and sign-language overlays, enabling content to reach audiences across sensory, linguistic, and cognitive diversities. Global pioneers like BBC, Netflix, and Microsoft have initiated inclusive media ecosystems by integrating accessibility throughout the production chain. For India, with its vast pool of over 41 million higher-education students (AISHE, 2023) and a rapidly expanding digital infrastructure, this is not just an opportunity but a responsibility. The potential for leadership lies in creating a digitally inclusive communication culture, where accessibility is embedded in design, and representation is co-created with persons with disabilities. Future research should therefore explore:

- The ethical use of AI for inclusive content creation.
- The socio-economic impact of accessible media on employment and education for persons with disabilities.
- The role of community radio, digital storytelling, and public service broadcasting in expanding inclusive communication ecosystems.
- Comparative studies of accessibility policies across nations to identify best practices for adaptation in the Indian context.

Ultimately, the future of disability communication is not technological alone, it is moral, educational, and deeply human. The journey from awareness to inclusion will be complete only when the camera, the pen, and the platform represent *everyone's world*, equally and authentically.

**Conclusion:** Disability is not a storyline, it is a lived, continuous reality experienced by more than a billion people across the globe. The responsibility of media, therefore, extends far beyond *coverage*; it lies in *connection*. To represent disability ethically and authentically is to move from seeing it as an exception to recognizing it as an integral part of the human condition. The study's findings reaffirm that the dominant frameworks through which disability is portrayed, pity, heroism, and inspiration, are not merely outdated but counterproductive. They deny the very agency they seek to celebrate. Authentic inclusion in media begins when narratives are shaped *with* persons with disabilities, not merely *about* them. When this shift occurs, media ceases to be an instrument of observation and becomes a medium of participation — one that amplifies voices, not stereotypes. During the International Purple—We Care Film Festival 2025, the lived power of this transformation was evident. Films screened at the event did not portray disability as limitation; they presented it as life, nuanced, creative, and dignified. Conversations with filmmakers and participants, including individuals with disabilities, revealed a common desire: to replace sympathy with solidarity, tokenism with true collaboration. It was not just a festival of films; it was a festival of perspectives, a space where the act of representation became an act of empowerment. Media educators have a pivotal role in sustaining this momentum. By embedding disability communication within curricula, promoting experiential learning, and emphasizing ethical storytelling, universities can become the training ground for a generation that values empathy as much as excellence. Students who learn to document, film, and report inclusively are not just acquiring professional skills, they are redefining what responsible communication looks like in the 21st century. At a broader level, the media industry must recognize that accessibility and inclusion are not optional enhancements but ethical imperatives. The absence of accessibility, be it subtitles, sign language, or descriptive audio, is not a technical shortcoming but a social one. True inclusion is not achieved through isolated campaigns but through systemic commitment, in hiring, production, content design, and distribution.

Globally, initiatives by the BBC, Netflix, and Microsoft demonstrate that accessibility can coexist with commercial success and creative excellence. India, with its digital capabilities and large youth population, is poised to lead this change, provided it aligns technology with empathy, and innovation with inclusion. Ultimately, inclusive media is not about charity; it is about justice. It is about reclaiming representation as a right, not a favour. The future of communication and of democracy itself depends on whose stories are told, who tells them, and who gets to be seen and heard. When filmmakers cast authentically, when journalists challenge ableist assumptions, and when educators teach empathy alongside technique, inclusion ceases to be a checkbox and becomes a culture. It becomes a shared language that transcends disability, discipline, and geography. Because the real question is not whether disability belongs in media — it always has. The question is whether media is finally ready to belong to *everyone*. When we change the way we tell stories, we do not merely alter narratives; we alter consciousness. And in doing so, we build not just a more inclusive media — but a more inclusive world. Media's invisible hand shapes discrimination through repetition, framing, and silence. Challenging this influence demands structural change in media practice and education. By fostering critical literacy, ethical technology use, and inclusive storytelling, societies can ensure that media becomes not a distorted mirror, but a clarifying lens

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