

Reporting it Right: how the Government got it wrong

By ABC's Stella Young

Posted 1 hour 57 minutes ago

The Victorian Government is the latest government to release guidelines "to assist journalists and communications professionals to portray people with a disability both sensitively and appropriately". Stella Young says that while it may be well meaning, the creation of a set of rules does far more damage in the end.

Earlier this week the Victorian Government released [Reporting it Right](#), a handy little instruction manual to tell us the right words to use when we're talking about disabled people. Or is it people with disabilities? People with disability? People with a disability?

I'm sure you know what I mean - us freaky looking/sounding/behaving people that make everyone so uncomfortable. It's a good thing there are rules now. There's nothing like spelling out the dos and don'ts to make people even more anxious about something they already find confronting.

Of course, some people are a little bit up in arms, dismissing it as political correctness run wild. Melbourne radio presenter Neil Mitchell is [particularly incensed](#), especially about what he's supposed to call toilets.

Disabled toilets are to be no more...And disabled car parking or disabled entry areas. All banned. All gone. They must now be accessible toilets, accessible parking space and accessible entry.

While I don't agree that talking about the language we use in relation to disability is about political correctness, I'm actually with Mitchell in my general distaste for these guidelines.

The Victorian Government is not the first to publish such a guide, and they probably won't be the last. There are already dozens of guidelines and rule-books about this stuff. They're remarkably inconsistent, which is a problem in itself.

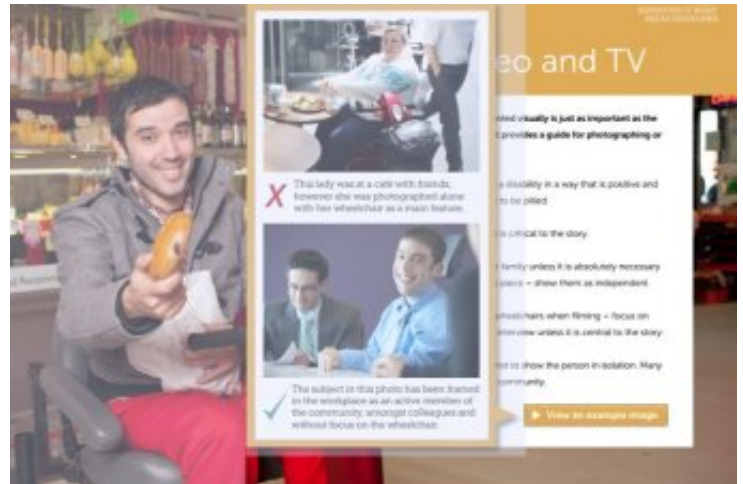


PHOTO: Is there really only one way to describe people with a disability? (dhs.vic.gov.au)

This [resource](#) from the Queensland Government urges journalists to "specify the disability" of the person they're reporting on. By that I can only assume they mean "find out the medical name of this person's impairment and insert some sketchy details you've sourced from Wikipedia". Journalists already do that at every opportunity. I am repeatedly asked in interviews exactly "what's wrong" with me and I always give them the same answer; I don't identify the name of my condition in an interview unless it's relevant to the context of the story. The fact that I'm a wheelchair user is relevant to a story about access to public transport. The long-winded medical term for my impairment is not.

Reporting it Right tells us that we must use "person first language". We must say that we are *people with disabilities* and put the focus on our personhood, lest Joe Public get confused about whether we fit in the animal, vegetable or mineral column.

Let me make this quite clear. I do not identify as a person with a disability. I'm a disabled person. And I'll be a monkey's disabled uncle if I'm going to apologise for that.

In her [latest column](#), Lisa Egan sums up why many people identify as disabled people as opposed to people with disabilities.

I just have a real problem with the phrase "person with a disability" and the notion of "having a disability."

I am disabled. More specifically, I am disabled by a society that places social, attitudinal and architectural barriers in my way. This world we live in disables me by treating me like a second-class citizen because I have a few impairments -- most obviously a mobility impairment.

Like Lisa, I subscribe to the social model of disability, which makes a clear distinction between impairment and disability. Impairment describes our physical or neurological state - like paraplegia or blindness - while disability is created by the barriers we encounter in society - like buildings with no lifts or information not being provided in formats we can access. To say that a person "has a disability" is to say that these barriers are our responsibility. My disability exists not because I use a wheelchair, but because the broader environment isn't accessible.

In my own home, where I've been able to create an environment that works for me, I'm hardly disabled at all. I still have an impairment, and there are obviously some very restrictive things about that, but the impact of disability is less. In environments that are less disabling, I'm free to refer to myself in other ways that make me feel proud. In fact, "crip" is my preferred identifying term.

I find the term "crip" an empowering way to refer to myself, in much the same way that some of the gay community, but by no means all, find the term "queer" empowering. Some of my favourite people in the world also identify as proudly crip. [Laura Hershey](#) is a fine example.

In the 10 or so years I've been identifying as a disabled person, I've been told hundreds of times that I must call myself a person first, as though the thought had never occurred to me. In fact, when I first heard about person first language as a teenager, I was fist-pumpingly excited about it. But, like many things in my life, how I feel about myself has changed.

Now, I find the concept of having to clarify my status as a person extraordinarily condescending. No

one else is ever asked to qualify their status as a person. Gay men and women are not "people with homosexuality". Women are not "people who are female". Footballers are not "people who play football". I've met a lot of disabled people in my time, and not once have I ever met someone whose impairment is so profound, that their status as a person is in doubt.

I understand that some folks prefer the term "person with a disability" and that's completely fine. Over and above my own language preferences, I think people should be able to describe themselves however they choose. But I do resent being told, particularly by the Government, that there's a right way and a wrong way to talk about disability.

The "person first" principles in Reporting it Right are just one aspect of a deeply flawed, and no-doubt very expensive, document. It also contains such "rules" as using the term "person with autism" in preference to "autistic person". A great many autistic people disagree, including [Jim Sinclair](#).

While this guide might be well meaning, and the publication of such things certainly seems to be a growing trend, I think the creation of a set of rules does far more damage in the end. Encouraging people to focus more on what they call us than how they treat us is counterproductive. And the thing is, there can be no set of rules or guidelines for how to describe disability for one very simple reason; we're all different people, with different politics and identities.

I do agree that language *is* important, which is why I will always support the eradication of language that vilifies and marginalises disabled people. Campaigns like [Spread the Word to End the Word](#) should be applauded.

Putting an end to calling each other "retards" and "spastics", and generally using disability as a shortcut for [something we hate](#), is one thing. Quibbling over whether we say people with disability or disabled people is quite another.

Stella Young is the editor of ABC's [Ramp Up](#) website. Follow her on Twitter [@stellajyoung](#). View her full profile [here](#).

Comments (9)

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15 Nov 2012 9:21:53am

Alan:

Stella, I agree with your view that it is society that is disabling you, therefore I find I agree with, "they must now be accessible toilets, accessible parking space and accessible entry", because that is exactly what they are, it is an oxymoron to have a disabled entry, if it was disabled you wouldn't be able to enter, accessible means exactly that accessible.

Reply Alert moderator

15 Nov 2012 9:24:51am

groucho:

What even more pc rubbish by our ABC. P.S. its the economy stupid!

Reply Alert moderator

15 Nov 2012 9:25:43am

All:

All people suffer from disabilities. No exceptions!

Sad but true.

Reply Alert moderator

15 Nov 2012 9:26:28am

person with beard:

Thank you Stella for your wonderful insights. I have a friend who is a "person with a disability" and she HATES the term. She says that her disability is not something tacked on as an afterthought or as a punishment like a "person in jail." Instead, she defines herself in terms of her disability, having lived with it her whole life. For her, her disability is what makes her who she is. She is not saddened or feels persecuted in anyway, but she does hope that people see the whole package of herself and not use language to sooth our initial discomfort.

Reply Alert moderator

15 Nov 2012 9:37:27am

Tony Roberts:

Bugged if I'd know what to call you if we met, Stella, but I reckon you are pretty smart, gutsy, and a bit of a spunk; so I'd probably be the one with the (conversational) disability.

Reply Alert moderator

15 Nov 2012 9:43:22am

Magog:

Another wonderfully honest piece from Stella.

I am not disabled, but am still scarred from a childhood speech defect. I am also of an age at which young people ignore me. My most damning affliction however is that I am a male and use language that I learnt as a male in the fifties. That makes me a creature of revulsion in the eyes of our PM. The fact that I also believe it is a good Policy to tell the truth means that I am doubly damned in her eyes.

Thank goodness I am not a Catholic or further calumny might be heaped upon me.

Reply Alert moderator

15 Nov 2012 9:48:32am

Ms Ogyny:

'I subscribe to the social model of disability'.... what about specificity? .. give it a rest.....Pleeeeeaaaseeee!

Reply Alert moderator

15 Nov 2012 9:57:53am

Ian:

As a person living with a rheumatic arthritic disability I am aware of troubles faced by those who have a

disability that is not visible to others. I think the government has done a good thing issuing a booklet offering some guidance on this matter and I prefer the term 'person with a disability'. I haven't read the booklet though so cannot comment specifically on its content. Of course, there's nothing that is going to please all people living with a disability, especially Stella Young :->) There's always room for improvement but I can tell you one thing, I am still glad to be living in this country in today's society with a disability than I would have been 100 years ago. Try living in any part of the third world with a profound disability and see how you fare. Australia might not seem so bad after that experience.

[Reply](#) [Alert moderator](#)

15 Nov 2012 10:06:13am

Mercurius Goldstein:

Gee Stella, it's almost like you're saying that you'd like to be addressed by the terms with which you personally feel comfortable, and it's OK if other people would prefer to be addressed by different terms with which they feel comfortable.

It also seems that you're suggesting that people who want to address you should actually bother to find out how you'd like to be addressed, instead of presuming?

But if your approach takes off, we'd have to treat you like an individual with tastes, preferences and choices of your own, instead of as a category! How could unimpaired people ever cope with such heavy cognitive and interpersonal demands?

Where will it all end? It's political correctness gone mad!? ;) :P

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