[MT] Code of Practice on Disability and its Portrayal in the Broadcasting Media

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On 6 December 2002, the Malta Broadcasting Authority published a Code of Practice on Disability and its Portrayal in the Broadcasting Media on its web-site. The document contains an analysis of the situation of disabled persons and their portrayal in the media, as well as recommendations for broadcasters and the Broadcasting Authority itself.

The Preamble addresses overarching issues, such as the right of disabled persons to be treated with dignity and respect; stereotyping and designations. The Preamble concludes by rejecting the so-called "medical model" of disability, which "holds disabled persons themselves responsible for any difficulties they may encounter during the course of their daily lives" and which at the same time "totally ignores the restrictive environments and disabling barriers created, not by the disabled persons, but by society in general".

The section, "Misrepresentation of Disabled People", addresses the issue of negative terms and the resulting negative images of disabled persons. It describes the "hero" or "victim" approach and criticises a patronising Cologne attitude towards disabled persons for reinforcing stereotypes, even when they are presented positively, for example, when disabled persons "are praised for achieving something that would be unremarkable if done by others". More than just criticising particular forms of portrayal of disabled persons in the media, this section highlights the lack of consultation with disabled persons and their organisations about issues affecting their lives.

Broadcasters are called upon to be sensitive to the problems outlined and to avoid them. The Code calls for positive steps to ensure a more inclusive representation of disabled persons in programming. It is interesting to note that the document lists the inclusion of disabled persons among broadcasting staff and acting casts, as well as physical access to broadcasting facilities, before it makes policy recommendations regarding programme content.

The Code prescribes a number of measures to be taken by the Broadcasting Authority. A key feature is the inclusion of the National Commission Persons with Disability in the process of raising awareness about disability issues. Specific measures include the preparation of a handbook containing all the main elements

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of the Code, along with a glossary, which is to guide broadcasters.

The concern behind this Code is obviously to heighten public awareness of persons with disabilities. Reporting is to follow acceptable standards; disabled persons should first and foremost be included in the broadcasting process, or at least be consulted. The tone of the Preamble and of the subsequent sections is fairly strong and they read very much like a manifesto. Activism by this group of citizens is a relatively recent phenomenon in Malta and reports about disabled persons' concerns are still rare in a society in which charitable activity is held in high regard and events such as a recent telethon raise impressive amounts of donations. The practical issues affecting persons with disabilities, however, are sometimes forgotten. Practically speaking, much needs to be done to improve access to buildings and government departments. It is for this reason that these practical considerations have found such a prominent place in the Code.

Code of Practice on Disability and its Portrayal in the Broadcasting Media, Broadcasting Authority of Malta, 6 December 2002

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