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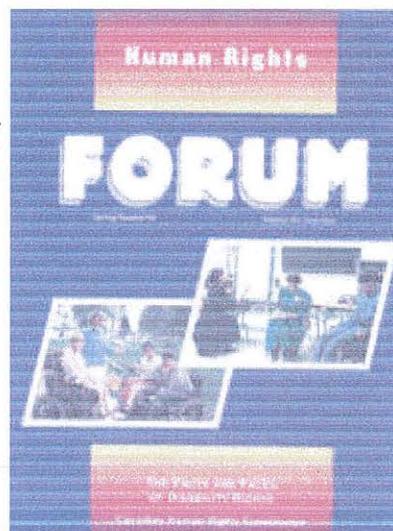
CURRENT ISSUE

Content & Character

Disability Publications in the Late 1990s

By Beth A. Haller, Ph.D.

Disability publications fit with other types of alternative or dissident media in U.S. society because they advocate on behalf of a distinctive U.S. group, which has come together to form a political and social community. These publications cover the issues that affect that community vigorously. They also fall into this category of media because of the historic discrimination and exclusion people with disabilities have faced in society, as well as the negative stereotyping they have received from the mainstream news media.



Many people with disabilities have been isolated throughout U.S. history because of the architectural, occupational, communication, and educational barriers in society, but they still have played an integral part in the social and political development of the country. Their publications illustrate this. However, the publications of this community have never received much attention in mass media studies, even though many disability publications have a long history in the United States, with some that have been ongoing since 1907. Few mass communication scholars have analyzed disability publications at all or in any systematic way. Therefore, this exploratory study fills that void by content analyzing a sample of the disability magazines, newspapers, and newsletters currently being produced (N=134). By assessing demographic characteristics of the publications, as well as looking at content issues, this study hypothesizes that many disability publications fall into Kessler's alternative press model of dissident media.(1)

The Alternative Press Model

Lauren Kessler theorizes that minority groups or alternative groups

The following tables are referred to throughout article:

[table 1](#)[table 2](#)[table 3](#)[table 4](#)[table 5](#)[table 6](#)[table 7](#)[table 8](#)

in society have historically had three typical forms of presentation by the mainstream press, which caused them to develop their own media. One is that they are excluded completely from coverage by the mainstream press; the second is that only their events/demonstrations are covered by the press, not their ideas or issues; and third, that they are covered within the context of negative stereotypes and are held up to ridicule and insult.(2)

For example, in ethnic press history, the first African-American newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, developed in the mid-1800s because the black community was not allowed to respond to anti-black editorials that were being run in the mainstream newspaper. In another instance, the *Ram's Horn*, an early African-American newspaper, developed because Willis Hodges, a black man, tried to get his letter to the editor published in the *New York Sun*. He was made to pay \$15 and the letter ran as an advertisement. He was told, "The Sun shines for all white men, not for colored men." Hodges was thus inspired to begin his own newspaper, *Ram's Horn*.(3)

A comparable modern example from the disability community occurred in 1998 when nationally syndicated *Washington Post* columnist William Raspberry complained that a blind man asking for the Bay Area transit system's Web site for bus and train schedules to be accessible under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was "a clear violation of common sense. Raspberry, who is African American and considers himself a "civil rights liberal, says he is angry with people with disabilities who insist "their disability be accommodated to and that we take no notice of it.i@j.

As elite mainstream press, *The Washington Post* column reached hundreds of thousands of readers; however, Randy Tamez, the blind man who sued the transit authority, was never allowed to respond in a letter to the editor in the *Post*. The disability rights publication, *The Ragged Edge*, had the only ongoing coverage of the Raspberry column in three issues. Tamez full response to the column could only be found on the Internet as a reprinted Electronic Mail message.(5) There, Tamez confronts Raspberry's anti-disability and segregationist rhetoric with a civil rights narrative and reminds everyone that "it is obvious that the biggest obstacle to access is the attitudinal barrier.(6)

Therefore, in line with Kessler's alternative press model, the modern disability press is reacting to the same kind of exclusion, stigmatization, and misunderstood consumer standing that other non-mainstream groups have experienced. The development of the disability press also fits with Erving Goffman's theory of stigma. These publications allow people to pull themselves together as a community with similar goals and aspirations. Goffman says people with a stigmatized status in society develop their own

publications because they allow them to debate the societal issues related to them that rarely make the mainstream press. These publications allow them to define the friends and enemies to their community goals, both inside and outside the community. They allow them to set expectations of behavior for the members of its community.(7) In the 1990s Jeffrey Alan John confirmed the place of disability magazines in bolstering disability community unity and culture.(8)

These factors have caused disability groups, just like other community, activist, or disenfranchised groups in society, to form their own publications.(9) Charlie Winston, who keeps track of the disability press annually with his *America's Telability Media* guide, estimated that in 1998-99 there were at least 1,200 mass media resources for the disability community in the form of magazines, newspapers, newsletters, radio/TV programs, and recurring newspaper columns.(10)

Winston says the disability media range from an individual creating a 2-4 page newsletter at a very low cost to a glossy lifestyle magazine such as *WE*, which is directed toward people with disabilities with mid- to high incomes. However, page numbers and financing are not indicators of the quality of these publications' content, Winston says. Many small newsletters report excellent and much needed information, he says, giving the example of a tiny newsletter from a nursery school for deaf children, which has two pages of useful information for parents of deaf children.(11)

Ransom also found in her study of 56 disability publications and interviews with disability publication editors that the disability press development fits with Kessler's alternative press model of being oppressed, having a different self perception than mainstream presentations, and exclusion from mainstream media. However, she did not find that the disability press was as thematically unified as the feminist press and black press are. She identified three patterns among the publications: Activist/Political, Mainstreaming/Assimilationist, and Special Interest. She argues that a publication such as *The Ragged Edge* is imbedded within the disability rights social movement, making it an Activist/Political model publication; *The Arc and the Dove*, a publication for the Association of Retarded Citizens of Maryland, fits within the Mainstreaming/Assimilationist model because they want people with mental retardation to be accepted in the mainstream community; and a publication such as *The National Amputee Golfer* is described as a Special Interest model.(12)

As diverse as these models of publications are, however, I argue that they all serve the disability community as the disability press and have one common over-arching theme that functions within the very stratified disability community. Each publication has the

commonality of serving people who are outsiders and who face societal barriers due to physical or mental difference. Regardless of the orientations of the disability publications, they all share this quality.

Lathrop explains that the disability press reflects that people with disabilities now think of themselves as a "community."

In the last couple of decades – particularly since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 – more and more people have begun to see themselves not just as isolated individuals, but as members of a larger ‘disability community,’ with a set of common experiences, a common culture, and a common struggle for civil rights facing them. Like other minority communities did in the past, it has begun to build upon this common ground through the written word – through publications such as *New Mobility*, *Mouth*, *Mainstream*, and *The Disability Rag*, as well as others at the national and local or regional levels – reporting news, providing role models, exploring important issues, and otherwise covering the concerns of the community.(13)

In addition to giving a voice to the entire community of Americans with disabilities, disability publications also remind us that people with disabilities are a multi-community community. Because different disabilities make for different societal barriers, specific publications are based on specific disability-related issues. John found evidence of broad-based disability culture in a variety of disability magazines because they contained “tools and technology useful for the person with a disability; a largely shared value system in support of the individual with a disability; and an emphasis on events and information that promote interaction within the disability community and a subsequent empowerment through collective action. (14) The first two criteria can be found in most forms of the disability press and the third fits primarily with Ransom's Activist/Political model.

Disability Publications in the U.S. Media Environment

John Clogston illustrated in a number of studies on news media presentations of disability that historically articles about people with disabilities rarely made it into the news, and when the articles were written, they were misrepresentative and stigmatizing. His study of the *New York Times* coverage of the disability community from the 1940s to the 1990s found that before 1956 disability was most often a charity story.(15) In more recent coverage, Clogston also found that disability has yet to be covered in the beat structure of news reporting, meaning that it may only get covered in an

event-oriented story or feature story.(16)

In the early 20th century, as having a disabling condition became a source of stigma, people were excluded from many of the activities of U.S. society. They were, in essence, silenced because of the stigma of disability. Manning-Miller says this inability to speak for themselves on issues affecting them caused different disability groups to begin their own publications.(17) Clogston and Manning-Miller's findings support Kessler's alternative press model as explaining the development of the disability press.

For example, the deaf community has a long history of publications in this country. The North Carolina School for the Deaf began the first publication for deaf persons in 1848 with its school newspaper, *The Deaf Mute*.(18) The American deaf community is unique by being tied together not only by lack of hearing, but also by a linguistic tradition, American Sign Language.(19) Although the deaf community only rarely identifies itself as part of the disability community, its publications fit within the commonality of the disability press by serving people who are outsiders in U.S. society and who face societal barriers due to a physical difference.

Deafness-related publications started when states began building residential schools for deaf children in the mid-1800s. These schools used sign language to teach and employed many deaf teachers. Thus, these schools became a location for the transmission of deaf culture to deaf children, and they began their own newspapers at these schools to help cement their community. After the North Carolina school published the first school newspaper, soon each school followed suit. These were known as The Little Paper family. They exchanged items of interest and stories and generally transmitted the deaf community back to itself.(20) Fay reported in 1893 that there were 50 of these residential school newspapers and they generously exchanged each others news.(21) Haller studied the Little Papers and found that they provided a significant cultural forum for the deaf community to discuss important political events affecting the community, as well as small news events such as a new stained glass window at a school.(22)

The blind community also has a long and vibrant publication history, and in terms of physical accessibility to news, the blind community was at the forefront with its growing number of Braille publications in the early 20th century. *The Matilda Ziegler Magazine for the Blind* began its Braille publication in 1907 to allow blind persons to read information accessible to them and is still being published today. *The Matilda Ziegler Magazine for the Blind* is the pioneering publication for blind Americans because its first editor, the former business manager of the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, figured out how to publish the enormous

number of embossed pages needed when no such printing plant existed in the United States in 1905. By 1907, the editor, Walter G. Holmes, discovered feasible modifications for a regular rotary printing press to be used to produce the embossed pages.(23) The *Braille Book Review* began in 1938 and described the newest books in Braille from the National Library Service for the Blind. Once sound technology was more prevalent, *Talking Book Topics* was founded in the 1930s to give the blind community information about the most recent recorded books at the National Library.(24)

However, as the sound technology added access to media for blind Americans, it withdrew some access to mass media, such as television, for the deaf community. Borchert explains how what was initially National Bureau of Standards technology in early television, known as TvTime, was reinterpreted as a way to make television accessible to the deaf community. In 1971 ABC tested TvTime on its network and an executive there suggested the technology would be a good way for deaf persons to watch television. The idea was quickly embraced, and deaf community leaders were contacted to help with the development of what is now known as closed captioning.(25) This is another unique aspect to many forms of disability media, when compared to the mainstream media. Disability media are cognizant of the varied physical differences of their audience, and many make the effort to provide their publications in alternative formats such as large print, Braille, or on audiotape.

Other disability-related publications continued a tradition of fostering solidarity within the different sub-cultures of the disability community. After World War II, soldiers who had been disabled in war came home, which led to the Paralyzed Veterans of America's development of the magazine, *Paraplegia News*, in 1946.(26) Many disability publications target similarly distinctive audiences, from people with a specific disability to parents to health care professionals. For example, *Future Reflections* is a quarterly National Federation of the Blind (NFB) publication directed toward parents of blind and visually impaired children. However, the editor Barbara Cheadle explains that the "disability community that informs the publication's philosophy is the blind movement of the 1960s and 1970s, not agencies or professionals.(27)

In terms of overt disability rights activism, disability publications such as *The Ragged Edge*, *Mainstream*, and *Mouth* have helped fuel the disability community's civil rights agenda. Although many oppressed groups such as women, African Americans, Native Americans, etc. fought for their civil rights in the late 1960s, the disability community did not begin to assemble a strong disability rights movement until the mid- to late 1970s. After the Rehabilitation Act was passed in the 1970s but not given entitlements, the disability community began to organize protests

and activism. Publications grew from these activities such as the beginning of *Mainstream* magazine in 1975 and the beginning of *The Disability Rag* in 1980. *Mouth* began in 1990 after its founder Lucy Gwin "escaped from what amounted to a nursing home. *Mouth* originally started to serve the community of people with neurological impairments but evolved into a general all-disability rights advocacy publication.(28)

Lathrop explains that these rights-based publications sprung up because many in the disability community were tired of the persistent negative media stereotypes of people with disabilities as inspirational or courageous. "In light of this persistent reliance on oppressive stereotypes, the disability press fills the void," Lathrop said.(29) Lucy Gwin, the editor of *Mouth*, explained: "Nobody [in the nondisabled media] is going to cover the disability-rights movement, so we're just going to have to cover it our own damn selves."(30) The activist disability publications fit squarely with what Kessler has termed the dissident press, which has thrived on the fringes of society and has even helped redefine and expand the American marketplace of ideas.(31)

Methodology

Numerous historical disability publications still exist. However, with the advent of new desktop publishing technology and new laws to allow more people with disabilities access to all aspects of society, the focus of this exploratory study is to understand the character and content of the publications of the modern disability community and their current fit with Kessler's alternative press model.

Using Winston's 4th edition of the *Telability* guide (1998-99), which lists all U.S. disability media,(32) a mailing was sent to approximately 260 disability publication editors in July 1999. The mailing list was selected from three sections of the *Telability* guide, the magazine listings, the newspaper listings, and the independent living listings. These were chosen because most cut across specific disability type and were focused on the general disability community and its issues. The only exclusions from the sample were academic journals, most of which were directed at health care service providers, rather than people with disabilities. The mailing requested two copies of the publication, preferably from the fall of 1998. (The end result of this effort toward internal consistency in the publications was that 72% of the publications were from 1998 and 28% were from 1999. About 54% were from October 1998 or Fall 1998.) The resulting sample reflected the population centers of the United States, as well. New York was represented with the most disability publications (12%), California with 11.2 percent, and Texas with 7.5 percent. The only anomaly in terms of a larger number of publications in a lower population state was Maryland,

but this can be explained by the large number of disability organizations surrounding the D.C. area. About 119 publications were received from the mailing; an additional 15 publications were added through library and web versions, creating a total sample of 134 publications.

Using the *Telability* guide, which lists circulation figures and origin years for the publications, and the first publications that arrived, a code sheet was devised that would assess a variety of demographic information such as circulation size, year of origin, type of publication, use of photographs or color, number of pages, and a variety of content information about the types of disabilities covered and the types of issues pertaining to the disability community covered. The disability issue list was developed in a previous content analysis in fall 1998 of mainstream media coverage of disability issues.⁽³³⁾ The detailed code sheet assessed these 90 different disability issues in the disability publications, which were then compared to mainstream media coverage.

Content & Character of Disability Publications⁽³⁴⁾

Using the *Telability* guide and content analyzing the disability publications, this study found the following general characteristics about the sample used: That disability publications have small circulations, rarely use color photos (22%) but do use much black and white photography (68%), typically come out quarterly or bi-monthly, are many times provided in alternative formats such as audiotape or Braille (42.5%), and were primarily founded in the 1980s and 1990s.

Tables 1 through 5 present the general format and content findings. The circulation figures should not mislead one to think that only a few people see disability publications. Many of the circulations are a function of the organizational constraints of the independent living centers or disability service centers that publish them. Many are not well-funded and can only publish the number within their means. In addition, some of these centers are in areas of low population so a small circulation is all that is needed, such as *Focus*, a publication of the Montana Independent Living Project, which has a quarterly circulation of 2,200, in a state with a low general population. It is suspected, however, that due to the high salience of disability information for people with disabilities that these publications are probably well-read and passed along to other people who may not be on the subscription list.

The year of origin of these publications is an important indicator of the character of these publications (Table 3). The fact that 70% were begun since 1979 illustrates the influence of new legislation and changing social attitudes toward people with disabilities and confirms Lathrop's argument that many sprung up from a new

sense of "disability community." (35) Legislation aimed at ending discrimination based on disabilities began with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, which forbade discrimination based on disability any place where federal dollars were received. That legislation finally began to be enforced in 1980, which led to much hope among Americans with disabilities that their issues were finally being addressed. However, enforcement was lax and by the late 1980s a bi-partisan group of advisers to the President, the National Council on the Handicapped (later renamed the National Council on Disability), saw that things were not changing for people with disabilities in United States. The Council laid part of the foundation for the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1986 report entitled "Toward Independence," which assessed the current federal laws and programs affecting people with disabilities and made recommendations for legislative change. These recommendations, coupled with lobbying from disability rights activists, became the impetus for the ADA. (36) In this changing climate for people with disabilities, many disability groups saw hope and that manifested itself in creation of publications that could give a voice on their issues. This finding is analogous to the development of feminist publications, some of which emerged from the voting rights movement. (37)

Another more technological reason plays into the surge of disability publications after 1979 – the ease of desktop publishing. Underfunded and smaller disability groups probably couldn't afford the luxury of publications when they had to pay designers and printing companies. Agee, Ault, and Emery report that by 1984 three new developments merged to allow desktop publishing – affordable personal computers that could handle graphics applications, affordable laser printers, and easier software that could design entire pages. (38) This desktop publishing revolution allowed disability publications at even the smallest disability organizations to be created if all they owned was a PC and printer.

This revolution meant that publications of all sizes could be developed – the only expense being the cost of photocopying and mailing. Table 4 illustrates that a significant segment of the publications have quite a large number of pages, with about 38% of the publications ranging from 21 to 60 pages. The large number of publications that feature black and white photos (68%) is probably due to the desktop publishing software revolution, as well. Interestingly, many of the publications, especially the newsletters, are funded from organizations, with only 36% of the sample having advertisements and 38% having paid subscriptions. See Table 5. This is probably a result of the high percentage of independent living newsletters in the sample. The four-color magazines in the sample featured numerous advertisements, many with disability-specific products. For example, *A&U*, a magazine for people with HIV or AIDS, has numerous full page ads for the varieties of new medications that are being used to treat the disease. In a like

manner, *Inside MS*, a magazine for members of the National MS Society, features many ads with medications related to multiple sclerosis, as well as wheelchair accessibility related products.

The content analysis portion of the study also determined the types of disabilities covered in the publications, either through mention in the stories or the explicit focus of the publication such as *HiP* magazine, a publication for children and teens who are deaf or hearing impaired. Table 6 illustrates the types of disabilities in the publication. The large number of the general people with disabilities category resulted from the general nature of many of the publications. The *Telability* guide segments its listings into disability types such as those that are directed at people with AIDS or people who are blind, but to achieve a more general sample, this exploratory study looked only at the general disability magazine, disability newspaper, and independent living categories.

The content of the publications was determined through an analysis of the issues covered in the articles, columns, and blurbs in the publications. The issue list was developed through an understanding of the important concerns in the disability community in the 1990s. A similar list of issues was also used to assess disability-related stories in the mainstream press in the fall of 1998. A comparison of Tables 7 and 8 shows many differences in coverage patterns. The only topic featured prominently both in mainstream and disability publications was children with disabilities. Because inclusive education for children with disabilities has been a major focus for local disability activists and parents of children with disabilities since the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) became law, it is suspected that this is the reason children with disabilities has become a prominent topic for both types of publications. Also, the disability publications report on activities related to children because they are part of the "community" they serve – primarily any person with a disability and the families of people with disabilities. Therefore, the stories in disability publications about kids cover a wide variety of topics, not just education. For instance, the California-based World Institute on Disability's newsletter, *impact!*, presented a front-page story on a youth advocacy network in Russia for disabled youth activists,⁽³⁹⁾ and *Horizons*, a newsletter of South Dakota's Prairie Freedom Center for Independent Living, presented a front page story on older teens with disabilities and a transition program in which they participated to learn independent living skills such as cooking or accessing transportation.⁽⁴⁰⁾

Although none of the disability publications in the sample is a daily, a number of publications did cover what might be deemed general news. The Brain Injury Association's *TBI Challenge!* reported in detail about a Centers for Disease Control report on the latest statistics on brain injury in the United States. The new information revealed that an estimated 5.3 million Americans,

about 2 percent of the U.S. population, has disabilities resulting from traumatic brain injury.(41) Although the story did not appear in *TBI Challenge!* until about two months after its release, a Lexis/Nexis search revealed that only one major newspaper in the United States also wrote a story on the CDC report, the *Journal-Constitution* in Atlanta, which is home to the CDC.(42) That potentially means only people with traumatic brain injury in Georgia might have been informed about the new report if *TBI Challenge!* had not done a story. This is an example of the alternative press model at work – these publications highlight stories for the disability community that the mainstream press may not have the time or interest to cover.

In another example of news coverage, the Northern Utah Center for Independent Living's *Options* proudly carried a front-page story on Judith Heumann's visit to the center to hear about problems facing people with disabilities in rural Utah.(43) Heumann is Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Education Department and oversees special education and rehabilitative services. She is also considered a pioneer in the disability rights movement in the United States. However, a Lexis-Nexis search revealed that Judith Heumann was only mentioned once in major mainstream newspapers in 1998 – in a three-paragraph blurb in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.(44)

In terms of disability-related topics covered by the disability publications, this study illustrates that they are covering much more specific issues of interest to disability community such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (45%), recreation and sports access (31%), independent living (30%), access to transportation (30%) and advocacy of disability rights (28%). Whereas, the mainstream print media covered more general issues that might have an impact on people without disabilities as well: educational mainstreaming (19%), health care access/costs (12%), and attitudinal barriers (11%). Obviously, the mainstream and disability publications have very different missions. However, the mainstream media have never understood the large number of people with disabilities (54 million Americans), their families, and disability support related professionals who comprise the general news audience. Therefore, proportionally, the mainstream news media are under-covering issues that affect at least 20 percent of the U.S. population or more.

The most striking contrast in coverage difference between disability and mainstream publications is found with the most important topic – the Americans with Disabilities Act. Haller has argued that the ADA is trying to shift the social paradigm of how the United States perceives people with disabilities and their issues. However, the mainstream media have yet to see this as a "big story."(45) While about 45 percent of the disability publications covered ADA information, only about 4 percent of the mainstream news media mentioned it. On this particular topic, it could be

argued that the publications have similar informational missions because of the ADA's impact on many nondisabled people, too. This makes the disparity in coverage all the more shocking. The disability publications illustrate that they are updating the impact of the 1990 Act constantly; whereas, the mainstream news media have almost forgotten it.

For instance, the Information Center for people with disabilities in Massachusetts published a front-page analysis of the ADA's impact on employment in its *Disability Issues* publication. The article cogently assesses the problems of people with disabilities, who were not previously working. The writer explains how the ADA accommodations are being experienced by employed people with disabilities, but the Act has done little to assist the unemployed to break through barriers to obtain work.(46) In a more celebratory story about the ADA, *Reach News Lowdown* of three independent living centers in Texas commemorated the 8th anniversary of the Act's passage with a front-page story.(47) This is the major anniversary for the disability community; however, no mainstream magazine covered it in 1998 and only a few national newspapers covered local celebrations, and one prestigious newspaper that did, *The Boston Globe*, incorrectly reported the anniversary year.(48) Other ADA-related information in disability publications focused on educating people, such as an article about the legal meaning of the term "reasonable accommodation" in the Act and its applicable definitions in *Setting Sails*.(49) As the alternative press model explains, this lack of mainstream coverage spurs on disability publications to write many specific and detailed articles for their community.(50)

Other crucial issues to many people with disabilities are independent living, access to transportation, housing, jobs, and advocacy of civil rights. All were heavily covered in disability publications. For example, the New Jersey Developmental Disabilities Council magazine, *People with Disabilities*, featured numerous powerful profiles of people living independently in the community after being in now-closed residential institutions. One story explains that when Bob Hartwigson left the institution, he said, "I had a smile of my face." He explained in the article his dislike of being institutionalized: "Terrible place. Staff would give you cold showers. Here you have it how you like it. Glad that place closed."(51) Hartwigson now lives in a group home in the Matawan, N.J. suburbs and happily describes how he can now go for walks and is learning to cook for himself. Other aspects of independent living merge with issues such as accessible transportation. *Inside MS* magazine reported on the successful push by the Chicago MS Society to get the city to pass an ordinance providing accessible taxi cabs.(52) Assistive technology is also important to independent living, and *The Braille Forum* presented an article about the SOS phone, which quickly connects someone

to a pre-programmed number, paratransit, or 911.(53)

Both mainstream and disability publications feature a particular article type – the personality profile; however, their execution of these articles is very different. Many mainstream magazines write profiles on people with disabilities that fall into a category known as the "Supercrip." They drip with pathos, pity or an inspirational tone, and most give no "news" about any substantive disability issue. These representations illustrate the negative stereotypes presented in the mainstream press that Kessler refers to in her alternative press model, which lead disability groups to create their own publications.

For instance, a recent of *Parade* magazine cover featured a Supercrip example, in which blind mountain climber Erik Weiheymayer is profiled for taking his father on a climb.(54) Weiheymayer fits exactly with Clogston's definition of a Supercrip: The disabled person is portrayed as deviant because of "superhuman" feats (such as a mountain climbing blind man) or as "special" because they live regular lives "in spite of" disability (i.e. deaf high school student who plays softball). This role reinforces the idea that disabled people are deviant -- that the person's accomplishments are "amazing" for someone who is less than complete.(55) Covington explains how the media's Supercrip stories cause problems. "Too often, the news media treat a disabled individual who has attained success in his field or profession as though he were one of a kind. While this one-of-a-kind aspect might make for a better story angle, it perpetuates in the mind of the general public how rare it is for the disabled person to succeed."(56)

But these inspiration-focused stories have salience with audiences, and consumer magazines know their audiences and what they like, so they give it to them by writing many profile stories about disability fit the Supercrip model. Even high school journalists realize this is what the general public wants, according to Laura Miller, whose survey of high school journalism students, found that the majority of the students said they "would treat a person's disability as a news oddity, worthy of top placement in a news story."(57)

In contrast, even when disability publications focus on inspiring members of their community, it is "in-group" communication that promotes pride among its members. Because people with disabilities understand the barriers and discrimination the profile subject faces, they can properly give context to whether the person's life actually deserves "Supercrip" treatment. In addition, personality profiles in the disability publications typically cover more than just the superficial; they have issues important to the community as a whole imbedded within them.

A profile in the National Down Syndrome Society's *Update* illustrates this. The article focuses on Nannie Sanchez, a woman with Down syndrome, who was the first person with Down's ever to pass a placement test for community college. She has become an education advocate after her positive experience being mainstreamed throughout school. She decided to run for the New Mexico State School Board in her home state and collected almost triple the number of names she needed on a petition to get onto the ballot. Although she lost, Sanchez received 35 percent of the vote and brought the attention she hoped for to the issues of students with disabilities. The article refers to Sanchez as a "trailblazer," and that description is completely accurate. Nannie Sanchez is an "inspirational" role model for the disability community, but this designation comes not from her status as a person with a disability, as it might in the mainstream media, it comes from her actions and advocacy on behalf of her community.(58) This type of profile fits with the type of disability images the editor of *New Mobility* said he wants to present: "disabled people leading independent and active lives, as an antidote to the prevailing stereotype of helpless, dependent victims whose lives revolve solely around their disabilities."(59)

Finally, these personality profiles bring up the issue of the writing style in the disability publications. Although the publications were content analyzed as a whole, not as separate stories, it was apparent that in many disability publications the writing style is different from mainstream magazines. It is the norm for most consumer or trade magazines to write with a perspective in mind. For example, a recent article in the *Ladies Home Journal* on today's most high-profile Supercrip, Christopher Reeve, and his wife, Dana, promoted her new book, which is a collection of all the letters to Christopher Reeve after his accident from numerous famous people and ordinary people who wrote about how courageous he was to go on living.(60) In the article on Dana and Christopher Reeve, the "slant" is that Dana Reeve is inspirational and courageous to stay with a husband who has such a serious disability.(61) The disability publications also have slants to their stories such as that Nannie Sanchez is an excellent advocate for her community and is a trailblazer.

However, something more exists in much of the disability publication writing and that is an information-heavy approach. The underlying theme to this writing style is "information is power." So even though some of articles are poorly executed in their writing style, they are information-rich, by delving past the surface and digging deep into all aspects of topic. These articles truly try to answer all the questions a reader might have, because disability publications know these articles have the highest level of salience with their audience.

For example, *A&U*, a magazine for people with HIV and AIDS, is

well written and brutally honest because its writers know they are writing for an AIDS-savvy audience. In an October 1998 article, the magazine even confronts culture clashes between gay, white people with HIV and Latinos who are HIV positive. An article about AIDS education center in the Latino community explains that one in five new cases of HIV/AIDS is Latino/a, and Latina women with HIV/AIDS are one of the largest groups of new infections. Without judgment, the article investigates the unique cultural aspects that relate to HIV infection in that community, such as silence about sexuality and the Catholic Church's stance on condoms. The article asks difficult questions but does not shy away from answering them: "So how do they even begin to educate teens when the governing culture works against such instruction, and when the prevailing attitude is 'Condoms are only for homosexuals'?"⁽⁶²⁾ The article then discusses how the center creates internal "families" of people who share the same sexuality and culture and those "families" meet at gatherings that may be social functions, rather than discussion groups.

The writing style in these types of articles is many times proactive. Members of the specific disability sub-community receive information about programs in which they can get involved or mirror in their own geographic area. Even in the smallest newsletter, many articles are imbedded with this kind of usefulness in the lives of the reader. As Winston explained: "The individual person does not have much money to supply a good looking or professional looking newsletter, but many are meaty, to the point and what the person with a disability wants to read."^{1/4j}

Conclusions

This exploratory study confirms the link between disability publications and Kessler's alternative press model. Previous research has confirmed that the mainstream media coverage of disability issues has been spotty at best, and the publications examined in this study illustrate how the disability press has stepped in to fill that void. Disability publications in the late 1990s are highlighting issues of concern to the disability community that the mainstream press may not be covering. Without malice toward specific communities, many mainstream general interest publications just don't have the time, space, staff, or interest to cover their issues. And mainstream specialty publications such as women's magazines, computer magazines, or sports magazines must focus on stories that keep their audiences subscribing.

Kessler theorized that alternative media developed because many groups are covered within the context of negative stereotypes and are held up to ridicule and insult.⁽⁶⁴⁾ In the case of people with disabilities, they may be presented as Supercrips, as pitiful or as burden on society. The disability publications in this study present a strong counter image to those stereotypes.

In actuality, people with disabilities feel more empowered today than ever before due to federal legislation that have brought down some barriers and alleviated some discrimination against them. However, even with these positive changes, stigma about disability remains, especially in mainstream media representations. As the mainstream news media continues to present hackneyed, trite images of people with disabilities and their issues, modern disability publications will continue to fight those images and to provide accurate and up-to-date information for their community.

A unique aspect of the disability press that this study highlights is that unlike some dissident media it is not a monolithic. From disability rights to disability sports to independent living information, publications fit all the segments of the disability community. And new publications continue to start, finding new slices of the disability community to write about. Winston reports that the 1999-2000 edition of his *Telability* guide contains more than 150 new entries.(65)

For instance, one of the newer disability publication launches, *WE*, a lifestyle magazine for people with disabilities, illustrates the economic stratification of the disability community. The magazine, begun in 1997, describes itself as a combination of *Town & Country*, *Vanity Fair*, and *People*. Its covers have featured people such as Sharon Stone, Andrea Bocelli, and John Hockenberry, and it has sections on travel, fashion, dining, books, and the arts. Editor Charles Riley II explains: "Isn't it time for a big beautiful magazine covering the good things in life for people with disabilities."(66) *WE*'s focus is on people with disabilities who have higher incomes. The New York city-based *WE* claims in its media kit that a reader's average individual income is \$75,000 and the average household income is \$110,000.(67) Riley says the magazine's approach to writing about disability is more subtle than disability magazines that take an overtly activist stance. "All pieces will address disability or the issues and concerns of people with disabilities, but not necessarily in an overwhelming way," Riley said.(68)

Finally, disability publications show that a modern-day technological revolution is giving alternative voices easier methods to enter the marketplace of ideas. The revolution in desktop publishing, online publishing environment, and technological advancements for disabled people themselves allow disability publications to boom. Many new technologies, such as speech synthesis, robotics, voice input systems, Braille text displays, and telephone relay systems, allow people with disabilities to access information easier both online and in print. John Hood writes that "the Information Age promises to expand the boundaries of human potential even further, as the mind – not the body – becomes the most valuable asset a worker or entrepreneur can bring to the marketplace."(69) Disability publications reap rewards from these technologically empowered disabled people because they can

create an accessible publication by posting it online. Even the smallest disability publications are beginning to put up online sites.

Therefore, disability publications in the 1990s squarely fall within the alternative press model of their predecessors in black press, the feminist press, or the immigrant press. Like the publications of these communities, the disability press seeks to "educate the 'unconverted' public by presenting a forum for ideas generally ignored by the conventional press."⁽⁷⁰⁾ As Kessler has explained, the U.S. marketplace of ideas has not just applied to the mainstream press, but for the alternative press "has meant the freedom to expand the marketplace – and ultimately, the freedom to speak."⁽⁷¹⁾ For the disability community, its publications have meant places where issues traditionally ignored can be discussed, where negative stereotypes can be challenged, and where there is still hope that societal barriers will fall.

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TABLE 1: Circulation of disability publications in the sample

	Frequency (N=256)	Percentage**
Under 1,000	12	9
1,000-4,999	42	31.3
5,000-9,999	19	14.2
10,000-24,999	21	15.7
25,000-49,999	9	6.7
50,000-99,999	1	.7
100,000-299,999	5	3.7
300,000-499,999	1	.7
500,000+	2	1.5
No circulation listed	22	16.4

Source: *America's Telability Media*, 1998-99.

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TABLE 2: Frequency of disability publications in the sample

	Frequency (N=256)	Percentage**
Quarterly	58	43.3
Six times yearly	29	21.6
Monthly	24	17.9
Twice yearly	7	5.2
9-10-11 times yearly	6	4.5
Once yearly	1	6.7
Other	9	6.7

Source: *America's Telability Media*, 1998-99.

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TABLE 3: Year of origin of disability publications in the sample

	Frequency (N=256)	Percentage**
1990-present	39	29.1%
1980-1989	55	41
1970-1979	12	9
1960-1969	6	4.5
1950-1959	6	4.5
1940-1949	2	1.5
Before 1940	1	.7
Origin year not listed	13	9.7

Source: *America's Telability Media*, 1998-99.

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TABLE 4: Number of pages in disability publications in the sample

	Frequency (N=256)	Percentage**
5-8 pages	34	25.4
9-20	31	23.1
21-40	23	17.2
41-60	14	10.4
61+	13	9.7
4 or less	64	5
Unknown	13	9.7

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TABLE 5: Type of disability publications in the sample

	Frequency (N=256)	Percentage**
Newsletters	65	48.5
Magazines	51	38.1
Newspapers	17	12.7
Other	1	.7

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TABLE 6: Type of disabilities represented in disability publications in the sample

	Frequency (N=256)	Percentage**
General -- people with physical/mental disabilities	100	74.6%
Blind/partially sighted	27	20.1
Deaf/hearing impaired	26	19.4
Major Mental Illness	15	11.2
HIV positive/AIDS	10	7.5
Mobility impairment that requires wheelchair use	9	6.7
Mental Retardation	9	6.7
Brain damage/head injury	9	6.7
Multiple Sclerosis 7 5.2 Paralysis/paraplegic	6	4.5
Amputee	6	4.5
Down Syndrome	5	3.7
Learning disability/dyslexia	5	3.7
Cancer	4	3
Allergies/Asthma	4	3
Attention Deficit Disorder	4	3
Paralysis/quadruplegic	3	2.2
Cerebral palsy	3	2.2
Epilepsy	3	2.2
Polio/post-polio	3	2.2
Diabetes	2	1.5
Autism	2	1.5
Emotional problems/Emotional disability	1	.7

Speech impediment/no speech	1	.7
Spina bifida	1	.7
Substance abuse (Drugs, not alcohol)	1	.7
Facial disfigurement	1	.7
Alzheimer's	1	.7
Lou Gehrig's Disease	1	.7
Muscular Dystrophy	1	.7
Cystic Fibrosis	1	.7

* The sample was 134 publications, but a number of disability types can appear in one publication.

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TABLE 7: Disability issues covered in disability publication sample

	Frequency (N=256)	Percentage**
Personality profile of PWD**	61	45.5%
ADA	60	44.8
Children with disabilities	41	30.6
Access to recreation/sports	41	30.6
Independent living	40	29.9
Access to transportation	40	29.9
Activism/Advocacy disability-related	38	28.4
Disability specific medical information**	36	26.9
Accessible housing	34	25.4
Access to jobs	31	23.1
Education mainstreaming/inclusion	29	21.6
Communication barriers	26	19.4
Assistive technology	24	17.9
Personal assistance services**	23	17.2
Travel**	22	16.4
Access to entertainment/arts	22	16.4
Parenting issues	20	14.9
Technology access/computers	19	14.2
Architectural Access	18	13.4
Education issues --general	17	12.7
Victimization of PWD (Crimes against)	16	11.9
Private funding for disability programs	16	11.9

Social Security -- SSDI	15	11.2
Health insurance/HMO discrimination	14	10.4
Media portrayals (good and bad)	13	9.7
Government funding for disability programs	13	9.7
Job training access	12	9
Health care access and costs	12	9
Parking	11	8.2
Access to disability-related equipment	11	8.2
Aging/elderly issues	11	8.2
New technology for PWD	10	7.5
Institutionalization	9	6.7
Family support services access	9	6.7
Medicaid	8	6
Medicare	8	6
Vocational Rehabilitation Act/its issues**	7	5.2
Criminals with disabilities	7	5.2
Special education segregation	7	5.2
Access to legal services	6	4.5
Sexuality	6	4.5
Assisted suicide	4	3
Disability culture	4	3
Veterans' issues	4	3
New technology – general**	3	2.2
Organizational strategies/training**	3	2.2
Assisted living	3	2.2

Home health care	3	2.2
Unemployment numbers of PWD	3	2.2
Tax credits based on disability	3	2.2
General discrimination against disabled people	2	1.5
Universal Design**	2	1.5
Deaf culture	2	1.5
Insurance – disability	2	1.5
Housing discrimination**	2	1.5
General inaccessibility of society for PWD	1	.7
Workman's compensation	1	.7
Feared by able-bodied people	1	.7
Natural disasters/fires impact on PWD**	1	.7
Jack Kevorkian	1	.7
Pregnancy general	1	.7
Day care children	1	.7
Gay and lesbian issues	1	.7
Marriage issues	1	.7
AIDS	1	.7
Abortion of fetuses with disabilities	0	0
Attitudinal barriers	0	0
Access to religion	0	0
Cures for disabilities	0	0
Day care adults	0	0
Foster care	0	0
Gender discrimination	0	0

Isolation caused by barriers	0	0
IDEA	0	0
Lawsuits against disability discrimination**	0	0
Physical abuse	0	0
Poverty	0	0
Pregnancy of women with disabilities	0	0
Racial discrimination	0	0
Race/ethnicity issues	0	0
Repair/maintenance of disability equipment	0	0
Right to die issues	0	0
Right to life issues	0	0
Sexual abuse	0	0
Substance abuse treatment	0	0
Transportation issues – general**	0	0
Unemployment--general	0	0
Union issues	0	0

* The sample was 134 publications, but number of issues can appear in one publication.

** Denotes issues added for disability publication code sheet specifically.

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TABLE 8: Mainstream press disability story topics, October-November 1998*

	Frequency (N=256)	Percentage**
Children with disabilities	60	23.3
Government funding for disability programs	49	19.1
Education mainstreaming/inclusion	44	17.1
Health care access and costs	30	12.1
Attitudinal barriers	29	11.3
Education issues general	27	10.5
Access to jobs	26	10.1
Aging/elderly issues	19	7.4
Access to recreation/sports	19	7.4
Private funding for disability programs	18	7
General discrimination against disabled people	17	6.6
Architectural Access	17	6.6
Special education segregation	16	6.2
Independent living	16	6.2
Access to transportation	14	5.4
Family support services access	12	4.7
Victimization of PWD (Crimes against)	11	4.3
Job training access	11	4.3
Cures for disabilities	11	4.3
Health insurance/HMO discrimination	11	4.3
ADA	11	4.3
Assistive technology	10	3.9

Communication barriers	10	3.9
Accessible housing	10	3.9
Medicare	9	3.5
New technology for PWD	9	3.5
Criminals with disabilities	9	3.5
Institutionalization	8	3.1
Isolation caused by barriers	8	3.1
Disability insurance	8	3.1
Assisted living	8	3.1
Veterans' issues	7	2.7
Home health care	7	2.7
Parenting issues	6	2.3
AIDS	6	2.3
Unemployment numbers of PWD	6	2.3
Technology access	6	2.3
Social Security -- SSDI	5	1.9
Access to entertainment	5	1.9
Unemployment general	4	1.6
Access to disability-related equipment	4	1.6
Activism disability-related protest	4	1.6
General inaccessibility of society for PWD	4	1.6
Racial discrimination	4	1.6
Medicaid	4	1.6
Media portrayals (good and bad)	4	1.6
Poverty	4	1.6

Access to legal services	4	1.6
Workman's compensation	3	1.2
Day care adults	3	1.2
Deaf culture	3	1.2
Disability culture	3	1.2
IDEA	2	.8
Parking	2	.8
Feared by able-bodied people	2	.8
Right to die issues	2	.8
Right to life issues	2	.8
Jack Kevorkian	2	.8
Pregnancy general	2	.8
Access to religion	1	.4
Assisted suicide	1	.4
Day care children	1	.4
Abortion of fetuses with disabilities	1	.4
Foster care	1	.4
Gender discrimination	1	.4
Gay and lesbian issues	1	.4
Marriage issues	1	.4
Physical abuse 1 .4	1	.4
Pregnancy of women with disabilities	1	.4
Repair/maintenance of disability equipment	1	.4
Sexual abuse	1	.4
Sexuality	1	.4

Substance abuse treatment	1	.4
Tax credits based on disability	1	.4
Union issues	0	0
Access to business loans	0	0
Race/ethnicity issues	0	0

* Findings from: Beth Haller, News media coverage of disability issues, Fall 1998: A final report for the Center for an Accessible Society, (San Diego: Center for an Accessible Society, July 1999).

** More than one topic can appear in a story.

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