

VELGA POLINSKA

Latvian Language Institute of the University of Latvia

ORCID id: [0000-0002-5459-1382](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5459-1382)

FIELDS OF RESEARCH: sociolinguistics, Easy language.

DOI: doi.org/10.35321/bkalba.2023.96.07

DITE LIEPA

Latvian Language Institute of the University of Latvia, Stradiņš University

ORCID id: [0000-0002-3458-5890](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3458-5890)

FIELDS OF RESEARCH: sociolinguistics, language culture.

DOI: doi.org/10.35321/bkalba.2023.96.07

CONSTRUCTION OF THE IMAGE OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN LATVIAN MASS MEDIA¹

KEYWORDS: mass media, people with disabilities, reality construction, content analysis, linguistic analysis.

ABSTRACT

Reality construction on the Internet is an inseparable part of human lives. On one hand, many people choose to construct their own (fake) realities. On the other hand, several groups of society are affected by the realities built by the mass media. Not everything published online can be considered journalism; however, professional journalism has an important role in moulding public opinion. Thus, the functions of the media should not only be considered but also exploited deliberately and purposefully. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

The article is devoted to the analysis of the contents and linguistic features of the articles about people with disabilities published on one of the most popular news websites in Latvia – *jauns.lv*. The results show that both content and linguistic choices, although they are mainly unintentional, can produce and propagate misconceptions about people with disabilities. Yet the solutions targeting this issue are to be determined.

¹ For Velga Polinska, this work is supported by the Sylff – Ryoichi Sasakawa Young Leaders Fellowship Fund. For Dite Liepa, this work is supported by the state research programme “Letonika – Fostering a Latvian and European Society” project “Use and Development of Contemporary Latvian” (№ VPP-LETONIKA-2022/1-0001).

ANOTACIJA

Tikrovės kūrimas internete – neatsiejama žmonių gyvenimo dalis. Viena vertus, daugelis žmonių patys renkasi konstruoti savą (netikrą) realybę. Kita vertus, ne vienai visuomenės grupei turi įtakos realybė, kuriama žiniasklaidos. Ne viską, kas skelbiama internete, galima laikyti žurnalistika, tačiau profesionali žurnalistika atlieka svarbų vaidmenį formuojant visuomenės nuomonę. Taigi, žiniasklaidos funkcijas reikėtų ne tik svarstyti, bet ir sąmoningai bei tikslingai panaudoti. Deja, taip daroma ne visuomet.

Straipsnyje analizuojamas straipsnių apie žmones su negalia, skelbiamų viename iš populiariausių Latvijos naujienų portalų *jauns.lv*, turinys ir kalbos ypatybės. Analizės rezultatai rodo, kad tiek turinys, tiek kalbiniai sprendimai, nors ir nesąmoningai, gali formuoti ir skleisti neteisingą asmenų su negalia sampratą. Tačiau būdai, kaip spręsti šią problemą, dar neiškūs.

INTRODUCTION

In the last 8 years, online users have spent an average of 6.5 hours on the Internet every day (Statista 2023). Considering that, it is clear that the new realities nowadays affect almost all industries and facets of human life.

Language is usually viewed as a means of communication, and it is also a powerful tool for social reality construction or communicating reality. In digital media, rumours, misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information are common challenges (Sadiq, Saji 2022). Fake news has existed since royal times and has been used for different purposes; however, the technologies have rocketed its spreading (Muqsith et al. 2021). Often, the means of language have been used deliberately to manipulate the reader to affect election results, to achieve the desired action, e.g., during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, to mislead or to confuse society during the war, and for many other reasons. On the other hand, disinformation and malformed perceptions can be produced intentionally due to poor journalism or lack of knowledge (Wardle 2017).

One will more and more often hear about fake realities on social media negatively affecting young adults, especially those who already have limited possibilities due to their social or economic status or other circumstances (Fardghassemi 2022; Patwari 2022). While adolescents and young adults immerse themselves in living in false realities, there is another vulnerable group of society that is exposed to misleading perceptions, which

are often constructed due to a lack of knowledge and poor communication skills. Thus, the aim of the article is to analyse how disability as a social reality is reflected in digital mass media in Latvia and how that might affect the attitudes of society.

1. MASS MEDIA FUNCTIONS IN CONSTRUCTION OF MODERN SOCIAL REALITY

“Mass media <...> shapes, influences, and indirectly governs public affairs in a democratic setup. Although the media does not have any constitutional authority to control the affairs of a state, it is a powerful instrument for moulding public opinion <...>” (Bhatt 2020: 1). Mass media predominantly comprise newspapers and periodicals, radio and television broadcasts, and audio-visuals, and every group of persons gets something of their interest provided by mass media (Bhatt 2020: 1). “Along with the intensive entry of glossy weeklies into the Latvian print press market, the diversification of electronic media content, the operation of internet portals, the change in public reading habits, the aging of society, as well as demographic and economic processes, the number of readers of regional and national newspapers and the demand for printed press have decreased” (Uzule 2018: 164). Audiences have clearly lost interest in newspapers, especially dailies. All daily newspapers experience a decline in the circulation. Currently, the content of daily newspapers is mostly used in their Internet versions (Zelče 2018: 489).

“The readership of magazines has been relatively stable in the last decade, where the leading place take consumer magazines – weekly and monthly editions aimed at a wide audience, offering publications on current topics of interest to readers, provide lifestyle and consumption recommendations, and offer solutions to problem situations” (Zelče 2018: 492–495).

Mass media have different functions, the most important of which have been determined as (McCombs, Shaw 1972; Rozenbergs 1995: 92; Dimants, Russ-Mols 2009: 19–26; Bhatt 2020: 1; Truyens, Picone 2021: 259–160):

- **Informing.** Media are expected to prepare an adequate amount of information so that the audience can proficiently make their decisions both as market participants and as citizens. The information should be national and international as correct social, political, and economic influences are of paramount importance for the development of the society.

- **Articulation.** Media highlight specific circumstances and issues, and this so-called watchdog action reveals wrongdoing or wrongsaying that is initially invisible or unknown to the general public.
- **Agenda setting** or in other words, focusing public attention on separate events, which then determine the agenda for society as well – if an issue is of importance at that moment, journalists look for different facets of the particular issue instead of offering a diversity of topics.
- **Entertainment.** The significance of this function continues to increase, and over time it has also ensured that media reached mass audiences. Yet, it is debatable whether entertainment is a function of journalism or a side effect of the successful work of journalists. Besides, this function also blurs the boundaries of journalism.
- **Education.** Although education primarily is the task of schools and universities, the media proliferates education, instructs people, and sometimes even teaches them basic skills, developing their standard of living. Media leaves a long-term impact on our views and behaviours.
- **Integration.** This function is less discussed, although its importance rises – mass media builds bridges between different individual and social worlds.

“Media and culture industry attracts our attention, shapes our consciousness, ways of thinking and acting, thus crucially affecting our socialization. However, media often distracts attention from problems and real life; sometimes they create mass hysteria and sometimes act as a tranquilizing pill” (Dimants, Russ-Mols 2009: 28–29).

Nevertheless, not everything that media offers is to be considered journalism, and often it is complicated to differentiate between journalism and other activities of the media enterprise. Besides that, considering freedom of speech, everyone can name themselves a journalist (Dimants, Russ-Mols 2009: 19). “In the digital media era, and in the context of the creative industries, the latter engagement <...> deserves the most scrutiny, for it has become an increasingly contested space for media workers who specialize in creating, filtering, and distributing information, and for whom professional identity, authority, and expertise are linked to their central role in directing those (mass) media production and circulation processes” (Lewis 2012: 837). However, journalism tries to differentiate itself from other content creators (e.g., bloggers or politicians) through professional

norms, which can be written or sometimes unwritten and broadly fall under three categories: being informative, acting autonomously, and scrutinizing power (Truyens, Picone 2021: 259).

2. CONTENT AND LINGUISTIC FEATURES CONTRIBUTING TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE IMAGE OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

2.1. Methodology and dataset

For this article, the bibliographic research method was applied to describe the mass media's functions and influence on society as well as to interpret the linguistic and grammatical structures from the point of construction of the meaning. For further analysis, quantitative and then qualitative content analysis was applied to the selected articles to determine linguistic and content features that contribute to the construction of the image of persons with disabilities. The linguistic analysis included lexis, morphology, syntax, and punctuation.

The dataset was collected on the online media *jauns.lv*. The website has been operating since 2009, and it quickly conquered the top of the favourite websites among readers. Since its launch, the website has had free access, which means all the content is available for every interested person without any limitations. In 2022, it was among the three most popular news websites in Latvia reaching an audience of 759,000 visitors (Gemius 2023). On *jauns.lv*, there are an average of 80–100 articles published every working day and 50–60 articles published every holiday.

The articles were selected within the timeframe from January 1, 2023, till September 16, 2023, and using the keywords: disability, functional disorder, mental disorder, movement disorder, and special needs. The keyword 'inclusion' was also entered; however, the results obtained were linked to gender issues, not people with disabilities; thus, the keyword was then dismissed. The final dataset comprises articles that were found after entering the keywords, corresponded to the timeframe, and were thematically linked to the topic of the article, which means people with disabilities were either the central issue of the article or were mentioned in the article for comparison or other purposes.

2.2. Dataset content analysis

After the application of the mentioned criteria, 57 articles were selected. Of those, 49 articles were devoted to events in Latvia, but 8 – to events around the world. The articles can be divided into several groups according to the covered topic:

- **Service descriptions and governmental decisions related to people with disabilities (10)** – these were articles about the budget priorities of the Welfare Ministry of Latvia, increase in personal assistant's wage and availability, support to cover electricity expenses, and difficulties of receiving the status of disability.
- **Personal stories (9)** – family stories about taking care of a child or adult with a severe disability, inspirational stories of achievements despite disability, and a plea for donations.
- **Transportation issues (7)** – free travel for people with disabilities, exemptions from the entrance fee in Jurmala city, increase in the transportation compensation for people with disabilities, and difficulties for persons with movement disorders in public transport.
- **Accessibility (7)** – the Ombudsman's claim against Smiltene municipality, lack of accessibility in the VEF quarter in Riga, scooters as a threat and accessibility limiters for people with disabilities, new accessible facilities for Saulkrasti post office, new accessible walkway in Vecāķi beach, and adapted clothing for people using wheelchairs.
- **Discrimination (5)** – isolation due to stoma, discrimination in the labour market, Denmark's apology for discriminating against persons with disabilities, Elon Musk's conflict with a disabled worker, writer Jurgis Liepnieks' opinion on athletes' pensions.
- **Disability as a consequence of inappropriate behaviour (4)** – a famous figure skater does not follow a physician's instructions and needs feet amputation, eating poisonous mushrooms can lead to permanent disability, ignoring stroke symptoms can lead to permanent disability, a man fails to comply with work safety requirements, falls off the roof and becomes a disabled person with movement disorders.
- **Other (15)** – two articles on successful surgeries and manipulations, the launch of the Barbie with Down syndrome, a new song to celebrate Down syndrome day, a doctor's observation on the increase in fathers' involvement in childcare, a festival for people with mental disorders,

laundry room employs people with disabilities, and the Ombudsman invites to nominate people that have supported persons with disabilities, persons with disabilities are in between those who are exempted from the duty to maintain the territory. Then there were quite a few articles with a negative message: a murderer-prosthetic runner's claim for early release was rejected, an athletics trainer disqualified after bullying persons with disabilities, propaganda uses a Russian senior who is forced to pass the Latvian language exam, the Russian soldiers mutilated in the war will become parasport athletes.

Under the category 'Other' also falls an article about the use of non-inclusive language: *Invalīds, aklais, idiots, debiliķis – vārdi, no kuriem jāatbrīvojas* (Invalid, blind, idiot, moron – words we have to get rid of). The article was prepared by an NGO that advocates for people with disabilities in Latvia, and it represents a two-year monitoring of online comments. The article suggests not to use words such as *invalīds, idiots, debils, kurls, akls* (invalid (as a noun), idiot, moron, deaf, blind). Although years ago they were used as medical terms, with the language changes these are considered slang (denoting a foolish person or a person with no desire to listen, to notice, etc.) and of inappropriate use in any context. The overall principle in describing people with limited opportunities is "person first" – i.e., instead of *invalīds*, the collocation *cilvēks ar invaliditāti* (a person with a disability) should be used. The separate attention was drawn to a collocation *mūžīgais bērns* (eternal child), which is often used by politicians to refer to people with severe disabilities who need permanent and continuous care – by using the denotation *eternal child*, we infantilize adults of a particular group of society (Barkāns 2023). However, it is noteworthy to point out that these words in journalism are of rare use with two exceptions: *invalīds*, which is a heritage still persistent in Latvian from the late 19th century (Barkāns 2023), and *eternal child*, which journalists quickly took over as a euphemism to seemingly soften the sensitive topic.

The qualitative analysis of the dataset shows that the disability topic in mass media content is included rarely – from January 1 until September 16, around 18,500 articles might be published on *jauns.lv*; however, disability-related are only 57 (0,003%). Besides, the qualitative analysis highlights the tendencies in the contents – frequently the published material concerns exemptions and reductions for people with disabilities, benefits increase, and financial gap reduction, authorities work to support people

with disabilities and subsidies in the field, and complaints addressing different disability-related issues.

It is important to point out the principle of using disability as a threat, which places disability on the same level as death and also stigmatizes all kinds of disabilities:

pastāv ārkārtīgi liela iespēja nomirt vai uz mūžu iegūt invaliditāti (there is extremely high chance of death or lifelong disability);

[insults] joprojām ir viens no biežākajiem invaliditātes un nāves iemesliem pasaulē ([stroke] remains one of the leading causes of disability and death in the world);

strādnieks gūst tik smagas traumas, ka kļūst par invalīdu un cieš no kustību traucējumiem (the worker sustains such severe injuries that he becomes disabled and suffers from impaired mobility).

Another peculiarity observed in the articles content-wise is that periodically articles contain a specific emphasis on a disability, e.g., *elektroskrejriteņu lietošana apdraud ne tikai pašus braucējus, bet arī citus satiksmes dalībniekus, tostarp cilvēkus ar īpašām vajadzībām* (the use of electric scooters endangers not only the riders themselves but also other road users, including people with special needs). This shows society's desire to treat people with disabilities with a special attitude, which subsequently testifies that people with disabilities have not yet become an equal part of society.

There are only few articles with an overall positive message – two about new, accessible facilities, two about festivities and celebrations for persons with disabilities, and one about awarding people who have supported persons with disabilities throughout the year. On the other hand, the deliberate intention of the majority of the articles is to reflect positive changes either in legislation or in society, while unintentionally the published information and context construct people with disabilities as persons whose existence depends on receiving discounts, exemptions from fees, and significant amounts of funding from the state, on specially adapted vehicles, buildings, and infrastructure. Moreover, if one exercises inappropriate behaviour, they can therefore fall within this category of people.

2.3. Use of language

“The words that must denote something, evaluate this denotable object with their hue and give direction what is the author's attitude or what should be the audience's attitude” (Dimants, Russ-Mols 2009: 90). There are nuances

in the text, called connotations or side-meanings. These might be subtle differences with significant impact; the choice of words frequently contains a message for the addressees (Dimants, Russ-Mols 2009: 92).

The use of language was analyzed on different levels: morphology, lexis, word formation, and even punctuation. There were several notable language features encountered in the dataset, and these are discussed further.

In almost every thematic group of the dataset were texts where **the oblique mood** was used:

Un ierastās atrunas par to, ka visam nepietiek naudas, tomēr esot pretrunā ar faktiem, skaidro Latvijas Reto slimību alianses vadītājs (And the usual excuses that there is not enough money for everything, however, supposedly contradict the facts, explains the head of the Latvian Alliance for Rare Diseases);

Šis esot būtisks papildu finansiālais atbalsts cilvēkiem ar smagiem gaitas un kustību traucējumiem (This is considered to be a significant financial support for people with severe gait and movement disorders);

Tajā redzama sieviete gados, kurai, par spīti invaliditātei, esot jānododas kārtot valsts valodas eksāmenu (In it, an elderly woman is visible who despite the disability is supposed to take the state language exam);

kad pakalpojums būšot pieejams, tā par to maksāšot (when the service will supposedly be available, it will be (supposedly) paid);

viņš atzinis, ka viņa grupas sportisti esot nīrgājušies viens par otru (he admitted that it is supposed that the athletes of his group mocked each other).

The oblique mood in Latvian is used to re-narrate information originating from another source or to indicate that the speaker is unsure as to whether it is actually true (VPSV 2007: 55). The oblique mood forms are useful for expressing various attitude nuances or indirect presentation of an opinion. The oblique mood is used to express a guess about the possibility of something; by using the oblique mood the journalist demonstrates their negative attitude and gives information and facts they do not support. The author chooses the oblique mood if they believe the information is putative, fantasies, or simply rumors (Nītiņa 2001). In addition, the oblique mood is sometimes used to show that the speaker feels surprised at something while also being ironic or disapproving (Kalnača, Lokmane 2021: 241).

In the personal stories group, there was an article where the oblique mood was combined with **quotation marks**:

Pēc operācijas Hari, pēc viņa vārdiem, jutis, ka “dzīve beigusies”. Viņš pastāstīja, ka “tas bija smags laiks” – atrodoties depresijā, viņš dzēris un vairākas reizes mēģinājis izdarīt pašnāvību. Pēc tam aizrāvies ar sportu, tostarp golfu, slēpošanu un klinšu kāpšanu, kas palīdzējis viņam “atgūt pārliecību par saviem spēkiem”. (After the surgery, Hari, in his words, seemingly felt that “life is over”. He said that “it was a difficult time” – [it is considered that] he drank and tried to commit suicide several times when he was depressed. Then he took up sports, including golf, skiing, and rock climbing, which seemingly helped him “regain his self-confidence“.)

Quotation marks are used for quotes, and there are several rules for quoting in Latvian grammar. This example would be linked with direct speech, where if the quote is incorporated in a sentence in a complete form, quotation marks are needed (Valoda.ailab.lv). On the other hand, when quoting, the indicative mood should be used, whereas the oblique mood is linked to indirect speech. As a result, quotation marks exercise their other function – “Quotation marks are used to indicate figurative and stylistically inappropriate words” (LVR 2018), and the text obtains a tone of irony.

Quite frequently, in the texts related to disabilities, the phenomenon of **diminutives** can be observed, often in pairs with contrasting quantities or degrees:

Pēdiņa tieši tikpat liela kā mans īkšķis, papēdītis kā īkšķa gals. Tas salīdzinājumam, cik siciņš viņš bija (Footlet was as big as my thumb, the small heel – as the tip of my thumb. That is for comparison to how extremely tiny he was);

ģimenes, kurās ienācis bērniņš ar smagiem attīstības traucējumiem (families with a baby with severe developmental disabilities);

Sākumā bērniņš smuki dzima, bet pēkšņi parādījās lielas problēmas (Initially, the baby was born nicely, but suddenly big problems appeared);

Reiz kāda mammīte, kurai bērniņš piedzima ar īpašām vajadzībām, man atsūtīja ziņu, ka bērniņš spēlē klavieres. Viņam ir funkcionāli traucējumi, viņš klavieres spēlē ar dūrīti, jo nevar to izdarīt ar pirkstiņiem (Once a mommy whose baby was born with special needs sent me a message that the baby plays piano. He has functional disorders; he plays the piano with his fistlet because he cannot do this with his tiny fingers);

Nedaudz gudra atbalsta, katram piemeklēts darbiņš, kas ir pa spēkam un rada prieku (A little of smart support, and we can find a small work that can be done and creates joy to every person);

No sava maciņa jāmaksā nebūtu! (It should not be paid from [their] own small wallet!).

Professor Anna Vulāne explains: “The emergence of diminutives is linked to the notion that the realia do or do not conform to the norm. The existence of such opposition is mainly related to the notions anchored in the minds of members of society about how big or small, light or heavy, tall or short, etc. an object must be. The diminutive expresses the fact that the relevant object has not reached this norm in terms of some parameters and that the intensity of these is weaker than the supposed norm. Such diminutives more or less accurately convey information about objective reality” (Vulāne 2013: 228). The features of a person with a disability – either physical appearance, abilities, or belongings – are often described with diminutives, thus pointing out the failure to reach the accepted societal standards. The juxtapositions with “large scale” complications complement these with an additional emphasis. Professor Klāvs Sedlenieks believes that “diminutives have a dose of hidden aggression” (Alberte 2009).

In the analysed articles, there are also very common disability-related **collocations** used, e.g., collocations with the word *cīnīties* (to fight) with various propositions and objects:

cīnīties ar dēla dzīvi un mācībām (to **fight with** son’s life and studies);

Vecākiem ir jācīnās par bērniem! (Parents must **fight for** their children!);

cīnīties par savu bērnu dzīvi (to **fight for** their childrens’ lives);

cīnījās par dēla veselību (**fought for** his son’s life);

cīnīties pret sabiedrībā izveidojušos stigmatizāciju (to **fight against** the stigmatization formed in society);

Tāds nu viņš mums ir – cīnītājs (That’s how he is – a **fighter**);

viņš tiek parādīts kā varoņa tēls: re, kāds malacis, kā cīnās, sevi pierādījis (he is showed in a hero image: see, how diligent he is, how he’s **fighting**, has proven himself);

and *ciest* (to suffer):

kārtība, kas ignorē ārstu lēmumus un ieteikumus, tādējādi liekot ciest bērniem ar retām slimībām (order that ignores doctors’ decisions and advice, thus, making children with rare diseases **suffering**);

kļūst par invalīdu un cieš no kustību traucējumiem (becomes an invalid and **suffers** from movement disorders).

In the Dictionary of Latvian literary language, the verb *cīnīties* has several meanings – 1. ‘To attempt to win using physical force or agility’. 2. ‘To actively participate in an armed fight, a war, attempting to win (the enemy)’. 3. ‘To resist (the element of nature)’. 3.1. ‘To attempt to destroy, to eliminate (usually parasites)’ (LLVV 1996). The meanings of the verb *ciest* are 1. ‘To feel physical pain, torture’. 2. ‘Severely feel negative mental states; to grieve deeply’. 3. ‘Severely feel undesirable circumstances’ (LLVV 1996). The continuous use of these verbs enforces the perception of people with disabilities having constant pain and despair.

On the linguistic level, in the dataset also emerged the **misuse of the terms**:

cilvēki ar kustību traucējumiem jeb ratiņkrēslos (people with movement disorders, or in wheelchairs);

transportlīdzeklis, kas piemērots cilvēkam ar funkcionāliem traucējumiem (a vehicle adapted for people with functional disorders);

personas ar ierobežotām pārvietošanās iespējām (cilvēki ratiņkrēslos) (people with limited mobility possibilities (people in wheelchairs)).

Such examples promote stigmatization of various disabilities, e.g., claiming that all people with movement disorders or limited mobility use a wheelchair or that functional disorders include only physical limitations. Such stigmatization also occurs using **unacceptable or uninclusive language** – *viņam ir tikai fiziska, ne garīga [invaliditāte]* (he has only physical, not mental [disability]); *[viņa] ir piekalta pie ratiņkrēsla, bet prāts strādā diezgan labi* ([she] is forged to the wheelchair, but her mind works pretty well).

It is worth mentioning some other tendencies encountered in the dataset:

- **double emphasis** – *Ieva ir jauna sieviete ratiņkrēslā ar īpašām vajadzībām* (Ieva is a young woman in a wheelchair, with special needs); *būvnieks kļūst par invalīdu ar kustību traucējumiem* (construction worker becomes an invalid with movement disorders);
- **exaggerations** – *ja cilvēks ir piekalts pie ratiņkrēsla, tas ir viss* (if a person is forged to the wheelchair, that's it);
- **slang** – *ratiņkrēsliņieki* (wheelchairists), *invalīds* (an invalid).

The majority of the described examples appear to occur due to a lack of knowledge when the author of the article wants to soften the seemingly severe living circumstances of a person with a disability, often building the

perceptions on the inherited stereotypes about the topic. Moreover, the articles are often complemented with pictures that resemble lonely human beings left without any help and not being able to cope themselves, but the analysis of the pictures is a topic for another research. In future research, the tendency not to publish the author's credentials should also be analysed. However, returning to the analysis included in this article, it can be concluded that inattentive use of the mentioned linguistic features leads to strengthening the existing perceptions, which might significantly affect the attitudes of society and thus hinder the inclusion of people with disabilities.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the digital era, it is extremely easy to construct whatever reality one likes. While part of society tends to do so themselves, there are several groups of society, e.g., people with disabilities, that are exposed to the images constructed by mass media. In Latvian mass media, disabilities are reflected occasionally and often perfunctory – journalists continue to promote the existing stereotypes and perceptions. Frequently this happens due to a lack of knowledge, which in the times of freedom of speech is quite common. However, by doing so, mass media do not exploit their function of integration and education. On the contrary – by using a disability as a means to threaten society in order to change their behavior as well as promoting the image of a person constantly suffering pain, living through severe mental states, and persistently requiring bigger benefits, discounts, and exemptions, they hinder the inclusion of people with disabilities.

It is noteworthy that inclusive language is more complex, and society wants to use shorter forms. However, this should not be the case in journalism. Due to various external reasons, journalists have little or no experience in describing people with disabilities. Usually, the intent of the published articles is positive; nevertheless, the effect of the way the content is presented is the opposite. Sometimes seemingly inclusive language can enhance prejudices against a particular group of people. On the other hand, the linguistic level is the easiest to monitor and to subject to recommendations for language use. However, this is only a small part of what constructs reality.

While the solutions to the described problem are yet to be determined, the authors of the article express their hope that the observations laid out will encourage the discussion of how journalism functions could be executed more carefully considering the influence on all groups of society.

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Gauta 2023 11 18
Priimta 2023 11 27

VELGA POLINSKA, DITE LIEPA
CONSTRUCTION OF THE IMAGE OF PERSONS
WITH DISABILITIES IN LATVIAN MASS MEDIA

S u m m a r y

Reality construction on the Internet is an inseparable part of human lives. On one hand, many people choose to construct their own (fake) realities. On the other hand, there are several groups of society that are affected by the realities built by the mass media, for example, people with disabilities.

In the times when there is freedom of speech, not everything published online can be considered journalism; however, professional journalism has an important role in moulding public opinion. Thus, the functions of the media – informing,

articulation, agenda setting, entertainment, education, and integration – should not only be considered but also exploited deliberately and purposefully.

The article is devoted to the analysis of the contents and linguistic features of the articles about people with disabilities published on one of the most popular news websites in Latvia – *jauns.lv*. The articles were selected within the timeframe from January 1, 2023, till September 16, 2023, and using the keywords: disability, functional disorder, mental disorder, movement disorder, and special needs.

The content analysis of the dataset showed that that the disability topic in mass media content is included rarely (around 0,003% of the articles). Often the published material concerns exemptions and reductions for people with disabilities, benefits increase, and financial gap reduction, authorities work to support people with disabilities and subsidies in the field, and complaints addressing different disability-related issues. It is important to point out the principle of using disability as a threat, which places disability on the same level as death, and specific emphasis on a disability.

The use of language was analyzed on different levels: morphology, lexis, word formation, and even punctuation. There were several notable language features encountered in the dataset: use of the oblique mood, diminutives, disability-related collocations, unacceptable or uninclusive language, double emphasis on a disability, exaggerations, slang, and misuse of quotation marks and terms.

The results show that both content and linguistic choices, although they are mainly unintentional, can produce and propagate misconceptions about people with disabilities. Yet the solutions targeting this issue are to be determined.

KEYWORDS: mass media, people with disabilities, reality construction, content analysis, linguistic analysis.

VELGA POLINSKA

Latvian Language Institute of the University of Latvia
Kalpaka bulvāris 4, Rīga, LV-1050, Latvia
velga.polinska@lu.lv

DITE LIEPA

Latvian Language Institute of the University of Latvia
Kalpaka bulvāris 4, Rīga, LV-1050, Latvia
dite.liepa@lu.lv

Stradins University

Dzirčiema iela 16, Rīga, LV-1007, Latvia
dite.liepa@rsu.lv

VELGA POLINSKA, DITE LIEPA
NEGALIĄ TURINČIŲ ASMENŲ VAIZDINIO
KONSTRAVIMAS LATVIJOS ŽINIASKLAIDOJE

S a n t r a u k a

Tikrovės kūrimas internete – neatsiejama žmonių gyvenimo dalis. Viena vertus, daugelis žmonių patys renkasi konstruoti savą (netikrą) realybę. Kita vertus, ne vienai visuomenės grupei, kaip antai žmonėms su negalia, turi įtakos realybė, kuriama žiniasklaidos.

Žodžio laisvės sąlygomis ne viską, kas skelbiama internete, galima laikyti žurnalistika, tačiau profesionali žurnalistika atlieka svarbų vaidmenį formuojant visuomenės nuomonę. Taigi, žiniasklaidos funkcijas – informuoti, formuluoti, nustatyti svarbiausias temas, linksminti, šviesti ir vienyti – galima ne tik svarstyti, bet ir sąmoningai bei tikslingai panaudoti.

Straipsnyje analizuojamas straipsnių apie žmones su negalia, skelbiamų viename iš populiariausių Latvijos naujienų portalų *jauns.lv*, turinys ir kalbos ypatybės. Pasirinkti straipsniai, portale pasirodę nuo 2023 m. sausio 1 d. iki 2023 m. rugsėjo 16 d. Atrankos metu naudoti tokie esminiai žodžiai kaip negalia, funkcinis sutrikimas, psichikos sutrikimas, judėjimo sutrikimas ir specialieji poreikiai.

Duomenų turinio analizė parodė, kad negalios tema žiniasklaidoje pasirodo retai (maždaug 0,003 proc. straipsnių). Dažniausiai šiai temai skirtose medžiagoje kalbama apie negalią turintiems asmenims skirtas lengvatas, išmokų didinimą ir finansinės atskirties mažinimą, valdžios darbą teikiant pagalbą žmonėms su negalia ir subsidijas šioje srityje, taip pat apie skundus įvairiais su negalia susijusiais klausimais. Svarbu atkreipti dėmesį, kad negalia gali būti naudojama grasinti, dėl to atsiduria tame pačiame lygmenyje kaip mirtis, be to, negalia dažnai akcentuojama.

Kalbos vartojimas buvo analizuojamas skirtingais lygmenimis – morfologijos, leksikos, žodžių darybos ir net skyrybos. Duomenyne aptikta keletas reikšmingų kalbos ypatybių – vartojama netiesioginė nuosaka, mažiabūviški žodžiai, su negalia susijusios žodžių samplaikos, nepriimtina ar tam tikras asmenų grupes išskirianti kalba, dvigubas negalios akcentavimas, perdėjimas, žargonas, netinkamai vartojamos kabutės ir terminai.

Rezultatai rodo, kad tiek turinys, tiek pasirenkami kalbos variantai, nors dažniausiai ir nesąmoningai, gali formuoti ir skleisti neteisingą asmenų su negalia sampratą. Tačiau būdai, kaip spręsti šią problemą, dar neaiškūs.

ESMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: žiniasklaida, asmenys su negalia, tikrovės konstravimas, turinio analizė, kalbinė analizė.

VELGA POLINSKA

Latvian Language Institute of the University of Latvia

Kalpaka bulvāris 4, Rīga, LV-1050, Latvia

[*velga.polinska@lu.lv*](mailto:velga.polinska@lu.lv)

DITE LIEPA

Latvian Language Institute of the University of Latvia

Kalpaka bulvāris 4, Rīga

LV-1050, Latvia

[*dite.liepa@lu.lv*](mailto:dite.liepa@lu.lv)

Stradins University

Dzirčiema iela 16, Rīga

LV-1007, Latvia

[*dite.liepa@rsu.lv*](mailto:dite.liepa@rsu.lv)