



BREAKING BARRIERS: A study of people with disabilities in the South African media industry

BY DINESH BALLIAH AND PALESA DEEJAY MANALENG

INTRODUCTION

In a population of more than 56 million, 3.3 million people in South Africa identify as disabled or as living with a disability^[1]. On an individual level, the disabilities within this community fall across a spectrum which is as complex as the lives of everyone. Despite continued efforts by the South African government to address the needs of this community through progressive policy interventions, and improvements in accessibility in public and private spaces, research about the experiences of this minority community remains limited.

By intentionally focusing on this relatively small group of disabled media professionals in South Africa, this study^[2] centres the voices of those with firsthand experience in the media industry. Using qualitative, semi-structured interviews the study reflects on the responses of 12 media professionals, situating their experiences within the broader context of policies and processes meant to facilitate accessibility and the development of people within the community.

BACKGROUND

A 2024 Statistics South Africa report^[3] profiling the community of people with disabilities in the period 2011 to 2022 pinned the South African national prevalence rate at 7,5% of the population, resulting in an approximate population of 3.3 million people living with disabilities in the country in 2026.

The country has a disability policy in place framed by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights both of which aim at inclusivity, equality and non-discrimination for all South Africans. While the rights of people with disabilities are constitutionally protected in the country, inclusion and accessibility is operationalised through context-relevant policies and processes.

The country's department of labour provides guidance to employers on creating more inclusive workplaces expressed in documents such as Persons with Disabilities in the Workplace and others which encourages the inclusion of more people with disabilities in formal economic activities^[4].

"South Africa is party to international laws and agreements such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)^[5] of 2006, which South Africa ratified in 2007 meaning that the country accepts all the legal obligations imposed by this instrument. The CRPD seeks to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights by persons with disabilities."

"The CRPD defines persons with disabilities as those who have long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments, which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis," (Human Rights Commission)^[6].

The South African government's National Strategic Framework on Reasonable Accommodation for Persons with Disabilities (2020) is instructive in what workplaces should be doing to support people with disabilities. The framework places the burden of reasonable accommodation on the employer to ensure that people with disabilities are able to meaningfully participate in the

labour market and not face unfair discrimination on the basis of their disabilities while employed. According to the Strategic Framework (2020:106), "Persons with disabilities share the same goals and aspirations as peers without disabilities, but at times require specific support measures to be made available to enable them to participate fully and achieve equitable outcomes." In line with this we asked the interviewees about their experiences in their workplaces.

This study explores the experiences of persons with disabilities working in formal roles in the media industry in South Africa. While the experiences of the individuals are not measured against the policies and guidelines in place, it is important to note that these mechanisms to improve the lives of people with disabilities in the workplace, exist.

METHODOLOGY

The study was undertaken through semi-structured interviews with persons with disabilities working in the mainstream and community media sectors in Johannesburg, South Africa. The interviews were conducted by Palesa DeeJay Manaleng, a journalist with a disability.

The interviewees were identified by Manaleng through her established network of media practitioners. They range in age from 27 to 48 with between 7 months and 28 years of experience in the media. A selection of the interview responses are presented according to the interview schedule.

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THE INTERVIEWEES

A brief description of the interviewees is provided below followed by a table which distills their relevant demographic information into categories. All 12 interviewees were asked their permission to use their names in the study and all but one agreed. Photographs of the interviewees are used with their permission.

- **Gomolemo**, 33, works in television as a logistics coordinator. She has Tuberculosis of the spine, also known as Pott's disease and is a paraplegic and uses a wheelchair as an assistive device.
- **Charlie**, 33, is a freelance producer in the drama department at a public radio station. Charlie has been blind since birth.
- **Christaan**, 27, has been in the media industry for over 2 years and works as a travel journalist for an independent publication. He has clubfoot.
- **Nobathembu**, 31, is a radio presenter at a community radio station. She became a paraplegic at age 3 after she was involved in a car accident.
- **Mary***, 43, works in public radio as a producer and presenter. She was diagnosed with Bipolar type 2 about 11 years ago.
- **Tarryn**, 42, runs her own company called Liveable Universal Access Consultants. She uses the media for advocacy. She has Rheumatoid arthritis in all her joints and uses a wheelchair as an assistive device.
- **Princess**, 28, works in human resources and as a presenter at a community radio station. She has Muscular Dystrophy.
- **Thamsanqa**, 35, is a radio practitioner, who is currently unemployed.
- **Bradley**, 41, is a senior editor working in the technical space and a part-time DJ. He has a rare form of Muscular Dystrophy and sleep apnea.
- **Samkelisiwe**, 30, works at a community radio station as a creative writer and a presenter. She has Cerebral Palsy and astigmatism.
- **Thando**, 37, is a freelance radio presenter and runs his own business. He has been blind since birth.
- **Jean-Paul**, 48, is an amputee and runs his own photography business.

INTERVIEWEE (GENDER)	ROLE	WORKING IN -	EXPERIENCE	DISABILITY
Gomolemo (F)	Logistics Coordinator	Broadcast television	13 years	TB Spine (paraplegic)
Charlie (M)	Freelance producer	Public radio	11 years	Blind
Christaan (M)	Travel journalist	Independent media	3 years	Clubfoot
Nobathembu (F)	Presenter	Community radio	6 years	Accident survivor (paraplegic)
Mary* (F)	Producer and presenter	Public radio	25 years	Bipolar mood disorder type 2 and ADHD
Tarryn (F)	Self-employed & freelancer	Independent media	11 years	Rheumatoid arthritis
Princess (F)	HR manager and presenter	Community radio	12 months	Muscular Dystrophy
Bradley (M)	Senior editor in technical	Independent media	14 years	Scoliosis, Muscular Dystrophy and Sleep Apnea
Thami (M)	Freelancer	Unemployed	9 Years	Amniotic band syndrome
Simfisile (F)	Creative writer and presenter	Community radio	7 months	Multiple disabilities

Why did you choose to work in the media industry?

Living with a disability can be limiting in terms of the range of professional activities that disabled individuals can engage in. Additionally, the media industry, given its notorious intractability in terms of processes and production norms can appear particularly daunting to persons with disabilities.

However, the individuals interviewed for this study, seem unfazed by the possible limitations presented by their disabilities in the workplace, opting to focus on their dreams and aspirations of working in the media.

Many of the interviewees said they have always been storytellers and naturally gravitated to the media industry. Others said they found a space for their passions in the media industry.

Charlie, who is blind said he has loved the sound of the radio since childhood and this love grew into a passion for working in radio.

"I love the sound, I love radio, and I have a passion for radio. It's just been my thing since I was growing up. I always loved and now to be in the media industry and work with something that you love gives you so much passion."

Thamsanqa was inspired by South African investigative journalist Debora Patta, whom he describes as "fierce." "I really like her style, her approach to stories and how she structured her interviews. I really liked that about her so that made me fall in love with journalism," he added.

Bradley's move to the media industry took a slightly unusual route having started with videos he made of his friend, South Africa's first pro-skateboarder, Wandile Zulu.



"I used to shoot videos of him skating along with the other friends and I would edit them. I would take my dad's video camera, an old school video camera and film them skating then I would edit them."

"Then I thought maybe I should explore this and learn how to shoot properly. I went to AFDA (film school) in the late 2000s. So that's how I got into it through a love of a sport I couldn't do that I wanted to do and tried to do I got into editing."

Thando loved the idea of being able to talk to people from all walks of life despite living with blindness since birth:

"It's the love for communication, for being interactive with people, and for seeing what is happening because the media is many things. There is entertainment, news media, and all sorts of media that one can get involved in. For me, I've always been curious as a person and have loved it since I was a child. I always loved radio and everything that has to do with the media."

Tarryn saw the media as a platform to advocate for social justice issues and to mainstream the issues of marginalised communities:

"...I get to be a voice for things that matter to me. Media is such a powerful platform for the marginalised because when we can't be listened to in our governments and when corporations are trying to muscle us out of our rights to equal access to opportunities to job opportunities then the media for me is that tool that we as advocates can use to bring everything to light and hopefully receive justice via public opinion."



What is your disability and how does it impact your ability to work?

All twelve individuals confirmed that their disabilities do not hinder them from being able to work fully and productively. They shared the belief that with minor adjustments in the workplace like the installation of wheelchair ramps and appropriate accessibility software, or being allowed to work from home, they are able to enjoy productive work days.

While the more obvious adjustments appear in inclusive workplace policies, the interviewees suggested other less obvious adjustments and affordances would make their working conditions more comfortable.

Gomolemo, who uses a wheelchair at the office, said that sitting for nine hours or more at a time takes a toll on her body.



"My body can function okay, it just takes effort for me to do things that 'normal people' do, it just takes me longer. For example, sitting for more than 9 hours is not possible because I'm in a wheelchair. That's one of the things that impact working in a fast-paced industry."

Princess, who has Muscular Dystrophy, the name of a cluster of conditions which cause muscle weakness and degeneration over time, does most of her work from home, an arrangement made with her employer due to her condition.

"... I'm not really affected by the workspace because I work in my own space and I have everything I need in the house which is also something that makes me enjoy working with the station because I don't have to deal with the strenuous work of having to travel every day. As long as I have a stable internet I'm able to do my work."



Thamsanqa, who has deformed fingers and toes on all his limbs, says he has never experienced challenges to his work as a journalist.

"My disability has never hindered my work to perform as a journalist except perhaps where things are out of my control like nature. like when it's really cold and my operation (wound) acts up. But there was an alternative for that which was that I could work from home."

Jean-Paul works as a photographer with his below the knee right leg amputation.

"My disability doesn't affect me at all, for example my last gig I was walking on a corrugated roof and it was windy and scary but I did it."

Nobathembu is a T9/T10 paraplegic and has only known life from a wheelchair.



"I've been paralysed since the age of 3 so I've been in a wheelchair my entire life so for me this is my normal, I don't know life except for this."

"That's how I've been able to navigate through life with a wheelchair, it has its limitations but I've always looked at my challenges as showing myself that I'm not limited to this, there is so much more to me."

Mary's experience differed from the rest in that she encountered a colleague who did not fully understand her condition, Bipolar Type 2. Her role in public radio was complicated by long shift work and the chronic medication she received as part of her ongoing treatment.

"There was a shift where you had to be at the office at 4am and then the one where you started in the afternoon at 3 and finished at 11 or 11h30 at night ... So 3 to 11 killed me because I would get home and then I would take the medication but I wouldn't be able to sleep because the adrenaline rush"

was still there and the next day I would just be a zombie.

The combination of the long shifts, the adrenaline rush of the work and the medication resulted in several hospitalisations for Mary.

"I had my psychologist explain to my boss at the time what I could and could not do. She asked my psychologist when this will go away. When will she be cured? A woman with 40, 50 years of journalism experience asking if Bipolar can just go away."

Despite this setback, Mary believes that her colleagues are always willing to assist her.

What kind of support does your employer/manager give you?

Seven of the 12 individuals said their employers created a welcoming environment for them as people with disabilities. Three of the 12 interviewees work from home and reported no need for adaptations to their workspace in order to do their work suggesting that the work from home option is a far more viable option for some people with disabilities. Those who work from home expressed that their work life was quite comfortable and more suited to living with their disabilities.

Charlie said he, initially, had to adapt to the workplace rather than the workplace adapting to his needs.



"I had to adapt to what exists. I'm not going to lie, I had to adapt and then I had to make my own comforts at work in order for me to work there especially when I was at community radio stations.

But here at [my workplace] they are trying their utmost best in order to accommodate me as much as possible."

Gomolemo says that, "...we have ramps, lifts, and the environment is very welcoming. Also if I have a problem I can address it with my manager and she will make sure to address it.

"...my employer is very open to things and she's very accommodating. The awareness is always there in order to help me better at work when certain things need to be done and I need to be accommodated in a certain way. It's a little bit of both and I had to adapt." - Thando.

What kind of support do your co-workers give you?

Aside from the institutional support which makes the workplace accessible to the interviewees, they were asked specifically about the support received by colleagues in the workplace. This kind of support is not specifically provided for in any of the legislative frameworks or policies

aimed at improving the experiences of people with disabilities in the workplace.

Bradley's experience reflects that of the majority of the interviewees.

"They (colleagues) are very supportive of me. Often with Muscular Dystrophy, I have good and bad days and also because I don't sleep properly and your body needs rest so there will be some days where I'm just really tired. And they will take it easy on me or tell me to go home ..."

Thando's colleagues assist him with more than just emotional support, stepping in to assist when he needs physical assistance.

"It would be physical and hands-on support when I need something to be read to me on a hard copy paper or make it available in soft copy. At the station that I'm working at I'm actually running some technical stuff especially when it comes to music compiling so when I do need eyes I do reach out to my colleagues."

Nobathembu said she feels supported by being seen and accepted through the support of her colleagues.

"I feel like the one support they have always given me is giving me the freedom to be myself and just embrace who I am. Sometimes people want you to be a certain version of yourself or whatever they think of you."

They want you to be that so they have always given me the space to be myself."

Did you face any challenges getting into the industry?

Half of the interviewees said they did not face any significant challenges in getting into the media industry despite having no previous training or media education.

Some, like Gomolemo, started on internships and went on to formally join their companies as full time staff. Others like Mary and Jean-Paul became disabled while already in the industry and continued to work in their same roles.

"I was a photographer for 10 or 11 years before my accident, so I was fortunate enough to have clients and to have established myself. My clients were loyal and were happy to continue working with me; they were happy with my work" – Jean-Paul.

The other six interviewees said they experienced significant challenges in accessing the media industry as practitioners.

Thando said he was often turned away because potential employers felt that the cost of investment in adjusting the workplace to his needs was just too high. In some cases, employers were reluctant to even apply their minds to the adjustments needed.

"... for employers, they see it as more like a liability than an actual asset. In that sense, that's the biggest challenge as well as accessible software and having the company make them available. Like with other disabilities where they accommodate them reasonably like putting ramps but with us blind people, there is always that thing that people don't know or want to accommodate us."

Charlie believes that accessing the media industry remains a challenge to people with disabilities regardless of the needs of the individual.

"Any disabled person can tell you that when you go for an interview the first thing they see is that you are a liability, it doesn't matter what they say or how they present themselves but in the forefront of their minds, you are already a liability so it's up to you to take that and change it and make them see how much of an asset you can be."

Nobathembu, despite her personal positive experience, believes that people with disabilities will always face challenges in accessing the media industry.

"Yes, I think there will always be challenges because the same opportunities other people are given are not afforded to us. We will only look at disabled people when we need them, we will only give them a voice when we feel like giving them a voice." So I always had to push and change the narrative and just show them that we are here, we exist, we want to be here and our stories matter."

What do you think about the representation of people with disabilities in the media?

Despite the strides made by the media industry in accommodating people with disabilities, the widespread representation of people with disabilities in the South African media industry remains limited rendering the community largely invisible.^[2] All interviewees said they are concerned with the low representation of people with disabilities in the media industry and in the media generally.

A majority of the participants believe that the way people with disabilities are represented by the media needs to change. The prevailing narratives about people with disabilities seem to swing between portrayals as disempowered and helpless human beings to superheroes when they do the most basic things.

Most of the participants felt that these narratives would shift if there were more people with disabilities making critical editorial decisions and if representation in the media was improved.

"How they portray us carries a different message to how we live our lives. Imagine portraying disabilities as a tragedy, as something to be sorry about that you can use as an excuse to give up on life." - Nobathembu.

"... people tend to think that when you are disabled, therefore, mentally or the level of thinking or the

capacity to think must also be disabled. For me that is the real challenge. I think if we can deal with that and if we could see more of us in positions that make decisions to make executive decisions. I think that could inspire more people with disabilities to want to do journalism or to work in the media industry.” – Thamsanqa.

Simfisile, who lives with Cerebral Palsy and astigmatism, a visual impairment, takes the view that legacy media continues to operate as it did generations ago, without any intention to change its representation of people with disabilities due to the expectations of its audiences.



“I feel like mass media is what can be considered legacy media, for a lack of a better word it's old school and the people who consume legacy media are our parents and our grandparents unfortunately from what I've experienced the older generation frowns upon too much disability being displayed even in society in general seeing too much disability being displayed can be frowned upon.”

Princess believes that not much has changed in the representation of people with disabilities in the media with stigma persisting.

“I think we are still at a point where some disabilities are seen as a disease and if a person with a disability is doing something great it's still seen as that one inspiration.”

Partly disability is frowned upon because you know we come from different backgrounds and cultures so in some cultures people believe that when you are disabled something somehow went wrong with the ancestors. So partly it is frowned upon.” – Thamsanqa.

“My experience is that there is not enough representation and secondly when there is representation they (employers in the media industry) favour able-bodied people to do the job of someone with a disability so it's not a true representation or not authentic representation.” – Tarryn.

What changes do you want to see in the media industry regarding people with disabilities?

Christaan believes that specific interventions are needed to improve the representation of people with disabilities in the media industry.

"... it would be nice to see a specific initiative, let's say for example, the government would say this is a project we have, disabled people can apply and we will help you find a job."



Tarryn does not think that there is any intention of changing the status quo in the SA media industry.

"No, I don't think there is a forthright intention to increase the amount of people in front of the screen ...there is more intention and more chat about making media more inclusive for people with disabilities."

There is a lot of lobbying around trying to get media access for those who need it but I don't see lots of words or commitment or lobbying for 'we actually need to see more people in front of the camera.'"

"... if there is a role in a movie or series or soapie that is of a person with a disability. I would like to see a person with a disability playing that role than to have someone acting as if they have a disability. In terms of radio, I would like to hear more shows on disability awareness that we just focus on throughout the year." - Princess.

Thando believes that improving the limited representation of people in the media starts with inclusion and accommodation for people with disabilities.

"I want more accommodation, more inclusion. Just in general you don't get to hear or see a lot of programs on radio or TV run by people with disabilities. You see a lot of programs of people with disabilities talking about disabilities and the challenges but I always believe that first-hand knowledge is best and if you can get people with disabilities who are very much involved and hosting shows or being in a media space where they are included and it's not a thing of just words but the is action as well."

Simfisile believes that the media must be more realistic in its representation of people with disabilities and attributes the lack of factual information to an unwillingness to do the work of establishing facts.

I feel like the reason why they (media) go back to tropes such as the person has had surgery so now they are fine and now they are normal it's because they don't want to have to do the research and explain to the viewer why this person is permanently disabled. They don't want to do the research into saying this person is permanently disabled but they can still do A, B and C. They just want to push forward whatever the storyline is."

"...make it a bit more inclusive and give people with disabilities a voice to chat about the issues they have about working conditions, pay and how they are compensated for the work they do and how they fit in the work environment and how much support there is for them to be able to do their jobs well." – Christiaan.

Mary would like to see more compassion without the stigma of living with a disability.

"I would like to not be referred to as someone with a disability because somehow in my mind it makes me think that people think I am weak. I would not want that label but I would want them to understand that there will be times that I cannot get out of bed and that I would need a personal day."

"Maybe if we can start with opening vacancies up to people with disabilities and encourage them to apply. Also reach out to organisations that work with people with disabilities and find out what is the need, are the people who are interested to be in the space and what do we need to do in media just to get them on board. There is still more that needs to be done really whether it be in editorial meetings." – Thando.

Despite the lack of visibility and representation of people with disabilities in the media, almost all of the interviewees felt that there has been some movement in the media industry in recent years.

Gomolemo said that she has seen significant improvement in the visibility of people with disabilities in her workplace.

"Seeing that in my workspace there is a representation of people with disabilities because I'm not the only one with a disability, we are seen. And it's not about having people with disabilities for vibes. It's about making sure that they are acclimatised to that environment."

Samkelisiwe believes that social media has shifted the needle in the visibility of people with disabilities and that mainstream media can learn a lot from social media platforms.

"Social media has been the biggest game changer in my opinion of how people view and perceive people with disabilities, it's refreshing to go on social media and see an inter-abled couple for example where one is a person with a disability and the other one isn't and they just share their lives and some couples have gotten married, have kids and just live their lives. Social media has been a positive change and I feel mass media and mainstream media need to catch up with that."

CONCLUSION

The experiences of most of the interviewees can be described as positive owing primarily to workplace accommodations and the support of managers and co-workers. Despite this encouraging feedback, almost all interviewees felt that there is too little representation of people with disabilities in the media industry and in media content generally. Where this representation does exist, a number of interviewees expressed frustration that the representation is inauthentic or unrealistic with storylines defaulting to outdated tropes which do not represent the disabled community.^[8]

The study emphasises the importance of allowing people with disabilities to determine and express how they would like to be identified. As the interviews show, many of the interviewees did not self-identify as disabled. Charlie who is blind, Mary who has bipolar type 2, Bradley who has a rare form of Muscular Dystrophy and Jean-Paul, an amputee, do not see themselves as disabled despite being classified as disabled through the lens of the relevant legislation.

The study also demonstrates the importance of the need for widespread support among people who work alongside people with disabilities. The daily support received from colleagues in the workplace has an impact on how people with disabilities experience the media industry which is in itself, is extremely demanding both physically and emotionally.

Overall, the responses from the interviewees reveal that whether the South African media industry is a welcoming space for disabled people depends on the willingness of the organisations, managers and the goodwill of abled employees. The people interviewed for this study already have a foot in the door and while their experiences have been generally positive, it is not clear what the experiences of people who have not cracked the industry have been. This is an opportunity for further study.

ENDNOTES

^[1] Statistics South Africa, 2024. "Profiling the socio-economic status and living arrangements of persons with disabilities in South Africa, 2011-2022". Accessed at <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-No-03-01-37/Report-No-03-01-372022.pdf>.

^[2] This study research is the result of support to CHARM Africa by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) as it aligns with the mandates of both organisations to expand the civic space for all marginalised groups including minorities who identify as disabled or living with a disability.

^[3] Statistics South Africa, 2024.

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^[6] South African Human Rights Commission, date unknown. "Human Rights and Persons with Disabilities". Accessed at <https://www.sahrc.org.za/home/21/files/FINAL%20Human%20Rights%20and%20Persons%20with%20Disabilities%20Educational%20Booklet.pdf>

[7] Swarts, Elsonia: 2020. Masters thesis: Disability representation and portrayal in selected South Africa soap operas: A Content Analysis. Accessed at: <https://open.uct.ac.za/items/e3d58dbb-1894-4e1a-8066-3ea42abdc569>

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Palesa DeeJay Manaleng is a distinguished journalist, renowned for her impactful reporting on women and people with disabilities in sports. Her work, often highlighting South Africa's record holders and breakers in disciplines such as basketball, swimming, racing, and boxing, addresses topics frequently overlooked in mainstream media. Manaleng's dedication to advocacy is evident through her platform, which she uses to champion disability rights and provide a voice for people with disabilities. Her commitment to these causes has earned her several accolades.