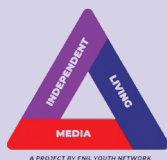




Guidelines on Media Representation of Persons with Disabilities





The Guidelines presented here are part of the “Independent (Living) Media” project, carried out by the ENIL Youth Network with funding from the European Youth Foundation of the Council of Europe.

This document has been produced by the ENIL Youth Network with the financial support of the European Youth Foundation of the Council of Europe. The opinions expressed herein are the responsibility of the authors and do not reflect the official opinion of the Council of Europe.

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About ENIL and the ENIL Youth Network

The [European Network on Independent Living](#) (ENIL) is a user-led network of disabled people with members all over Europe. ENIL represents the disability movement for human rights and social inclusion based on solidarity, peer support, deinstitutionalization, democracy, self-representation, cross disability, and self-determination.

The [ENIL Youth Network](#) is uniting young persons with disabilities and their allies. It was created in 2012 and has over 300 active members. The aim of the Youth Network is to provide a space for young disabled people to engage with youth and disability rights issues at the European level. Through the Network, ENIL provides various learning opportunities to young people, encourages them to actively advocate for their rights, and supports them to address policymakers and to represent the organisation at important events.

Any individual between 18 and 35 years of age can become a member of the ENIL Youth Network, as an individual member or an associated individual member. If you are interested, you can join the ENIL Youth Network [here](#).

About “Independent (Living) Media”

“Independent (Living) Media” is a project implemented by the ENIL Youth Network from January to December 2025.

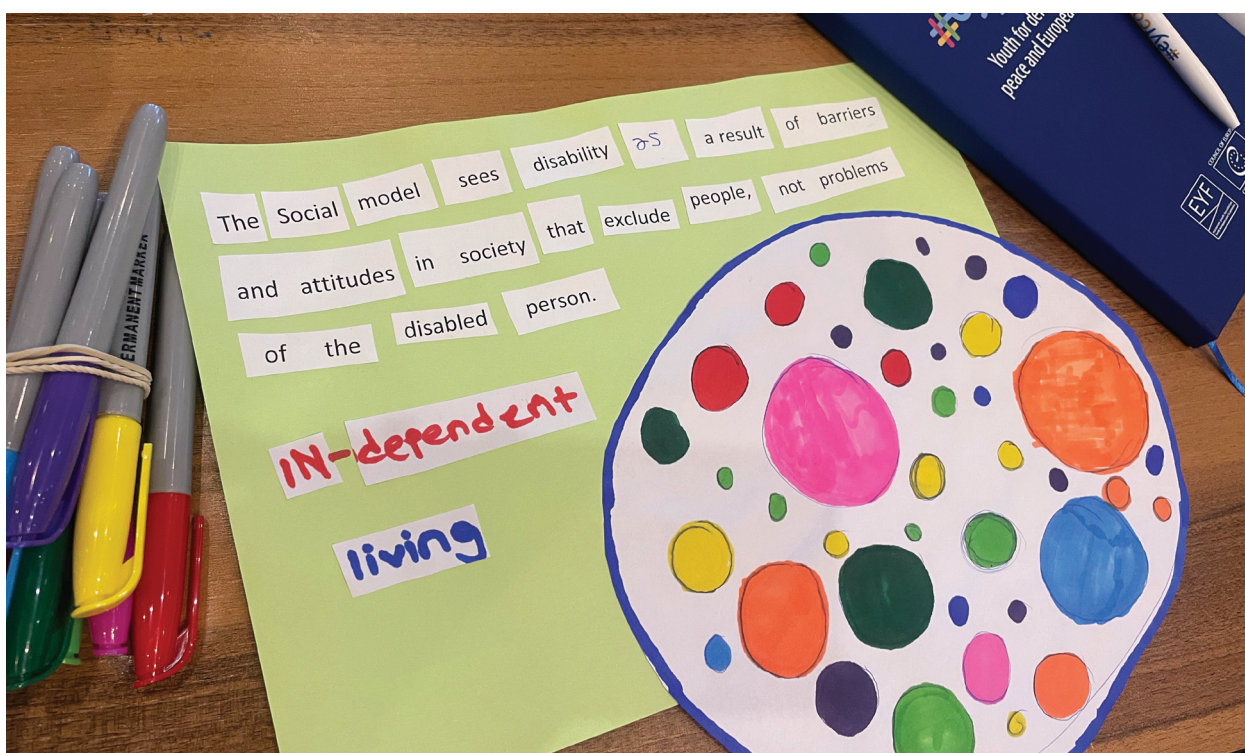
The project was created in response to the experiences of young persons with disabilities being underrepresented or facing misrepresentation, stereotyping, and harmful narratives when interacting with the media. It aimed to provide tools, community, and a platform for young people with and without disabilities to discuss existing narratives and work together to reshape them, while deepening their understanding of human rights, advocacy, democratic principles, active participation, and the Independent Living philosophy.

In addition to the guidelines presented here, which are the main output, the project’s objectives included analysing how existing narratives in the media influence dignity and equal access to rights of young persons with disabilities through an online survey, and mobilising persons with disabilities and media workers through a series of three online workshops with a global audience.

The main activities of the project were:

1. The Independent (Living) Media online survey for youth
2. The “Bound To The Script” online workshops
3. The “Crip, Cut, Rewrite!” international summer school on disability representation in the media

A full report of the survey findings and an article on the workshops are available separately on the ENIL website (enil.eu), with a brief overview of survey results given below.



About the Independent (Living) Media Survey for Youth

A survey on young persons' experiences with the media was conducted in February and March of 2025. It was aimed at young respondents (aged 18-30) with and without disabilities, including those in media fields, and was designed to explore their experiences and attitudes toward disability, representation, and stereotypes. It shaped the next steps of the project, giving responders an opportunity to select the topics for the workshops they find the most interesting, and share their experiences working or engaging with the media through interviews being published throughout the year.

The survey responses showed that:

- Young people with and without disabilities view media representation as a tool for visibility, authentic storytelling, shifting perceptions, fostering inclusion and empowering future generations.
- Young people with and without disabilities agree that representation of disability in the media is still dominated by stereotypes, and both young persons with disabilities and media professionals agree that disability-related narratives are severely underrepresented.
- Young persons with disabilities have negative feelings when seeing stereotypical representations and narratives about disability in the media.
- Young media professionals agree that they do not sufficiently involve and represent young persons with disabilities in their work. The most common reasons were lack of knowledge, resources, and training, fear, or pressure to stereotype.
- Young media professionals rarely received training on disability representation, and those who did characterised it as insufficient.
- Both young persons with disabilities and young media professionals with and without disabilities would like to see more representation of disability in different portrayals of ordinary life, and prioritise authentic casting in television and film.
- Young persons with and without disabilities think digital media strongly impacts the public's view of disability, and the vast majority of responders were interested in learning more by taking part in online workshops.

About the “Crip, Cut, Rewrite!” International Summer School

The “Crip, Cut, Rewrite!” International Summer school on disability representation in the media was part of the Independent (Living) Media project and took place in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, on 25-30th of August, 2025. It gathered 15 young people (aged 18-30) with and without disabilities travelling from Albania, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Serbia, and Spain.

The **main aim** of the summer school was to empower young people to challenge existing narratives and stereotypes in the media and reshape how disability is portrayed.

The **objectives** of the summer school were:

- Learning about Human Rights and mechanisms of protecting them, especially when it comes to youth and the disabled community.
- Exploring how narratives in the media influence our perceptions about disability, impact dignity, and access to Independent Living and Human Rights.
- Learning how to use media to challenge stereotypes and to create and tell inclusive, accessible, authentic stories.
- Designing and implementing a plan for individual or group media campaigns that foster positive change and improve media representation on a local or European level.
- Co-creating guidelines for media professionals, based on the UN CRPD and lived experiences of young disabled people and young emerging media professionals.

The participants spent four days working together in a fully accessible and supportive space. Through the principles of non-formal education and engaging activities, participants gained knowledge on how to advocate for ethical and rights-based representation while working together to ensure that the future of representation is shaped collaboratively, through authentic stories, mutual understanding, and respect. They not only tried to identify and reconstruct the existing stereotypes about disabilities, but they also worked on the outcomes – social media campaigns and the guidelines for social media professionals.

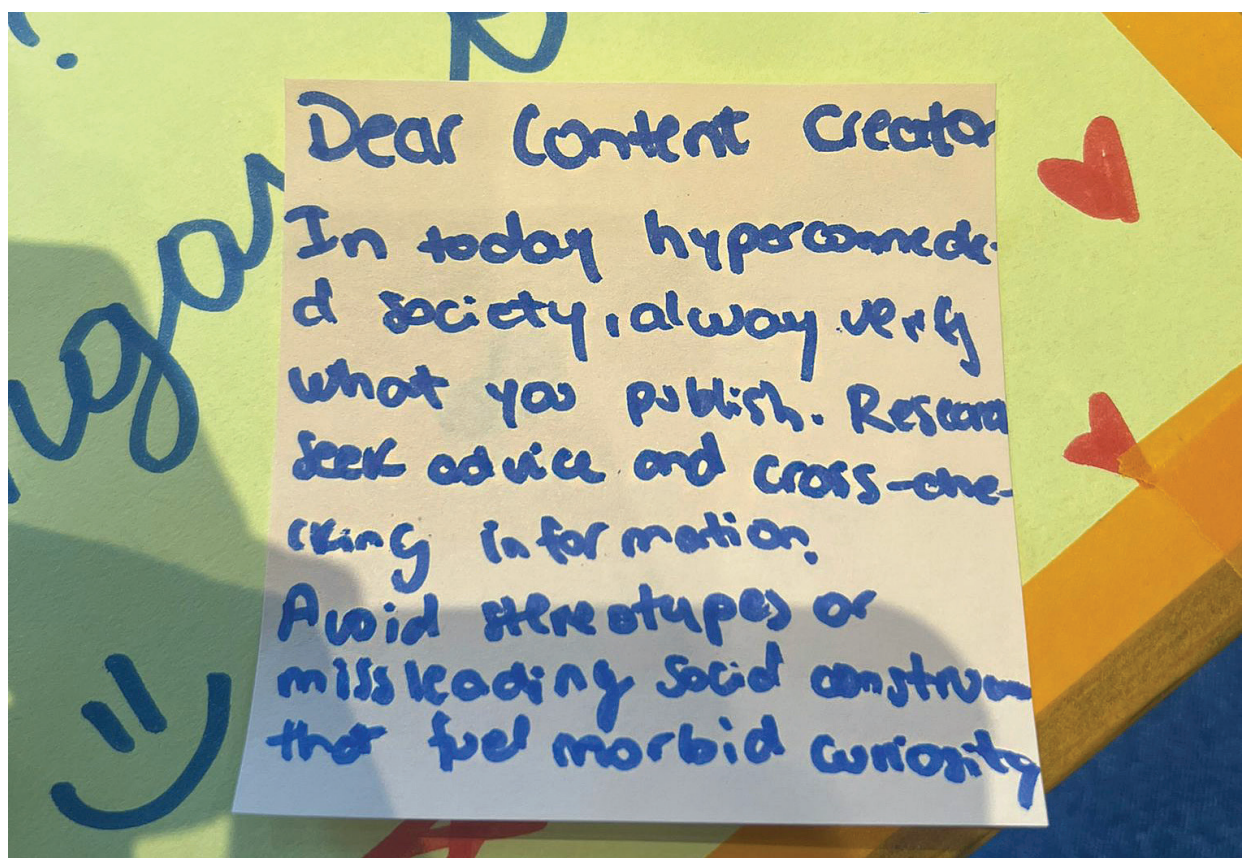


Purpose of These Guidelines

As already mentioned, these guidelines were one of the main outcomes of the “Crip, Cut, Rewrite” International Summer school. The purpose of these guidelines is to guide young professionals and stakeholders on how to portray stories of persons with disabilities in the media, based on the human rights approach and informed by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

With these guidelines, we aim for these changes:

- Ensuring that representation of disabled people is created with mutual understanding, empathy, and respect,
- Promoting authentic stories of young persons with disabilities,
- Advocating for accessible and inclusive media content,
- Providing authentic tips from young persons with disabilities and young emerging media professionals.



Guidelines on Media Representation of Persons with Disabilities

In line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD), particularly Article 8 (Awareness-Raising) and Article 21 (Freedom of Expression and opinion, Access to Information), media professionals, youth organisations, and content creators bear a responsibility to ensure that representation of persons with disabilities is accurate, respectful, and inclusive.

The following principles outline key areas for responsible and rights-based media practice.



1. Authenticity and Self-Representation

Persons with disabilities must be enabled to share their own lived experiences and realities. Media practitioners and content creators should refrain from framing or dismissing these narratives and instead respect the principle of self-representation, ensuring that persons with disabilities are the primary authors of their stories. Authentic voices foster trust and counter stereotypes, aligning with the UNCRPD's emphasis on dignity and autonomy.



2. Accessibility and Inclusive Communication

Accessibility is a prerequisite for meaningful participation. All media content should include captions, alternative text for images, accessible document formats, and inclusive language, thereby ensuring equal access to information as mandated by Article 9 (Accessibility) and Article 21 of the CRPD. Accessibility must not be treated as optional or supplementary but as a fundamental right.

Youth and media organisations should also:

- Use easy-to-read formats and plain language to reach diverse audiences.
- Provide sign language interpretation, Braille, or audio description when relevant.
- Design content compatible with assistive technologies such as screen readers.



3. Ethical Information Practices

Media workers and content creators are expected to adhere to rigorous standards of accuracy and reliability. Information shared must derive from credible and verifiable sources, avoiding stereotypes, sensationalism, or portrayals that exploit persons with disabilities for 'curiosity' or pity. This principle directly supports Article 8 CRPD, which requires combating prejudice and harmful practices. Responsible storytelling means respecting consent, ensuring privacy, and protecting individuals from emotional or reputational harm.



4. Respect for Mental and Emotional Well-Being

Media engagement exposes persons with disabilities to both positive recognition and negative scrutiny. It is therefore essential to respect personal boundaries, provide safeguards against online harassment. Accountability mechanisms for discriminatory comments or hate speech should be established by all organisations and platforms. The well-being and dignity of persons whose stories are shared must always come before content visibility or engagement metrics. This aligns with Article 17 CRPD (Protecting the Integrity of the Person) and Article 16 (Freedom from Exploitation, Violence and Abuse).



5. Participation and Collaboration

Media outlets and creators should actively collaborate with influencers, journalists, and advocates with disabilities and other stakeholders, ensuring that such partnerships are substantive rather than tokenistic. An interdisciplinary and intersectoral approach, including education and capacity-building opportunities for media workers, should be implemented. Collaborative approaches amplify marginalized voices, promote diversity, and uphold the CRPD's principle of participation and inclusion in society, contributing to sustainable change in how disability is portrayed.



6. Values-Driven Content Creation

Content should be guided by authenticity, values, and genuine interest rather than trends. Media professionals should empower rather than exploit, respecting differences as intrinsic aspects of human diversity, in line with Article 3 CRPD (General Principles).

The principles of accessibility and inclusion should also be promoted in formal and non-formal education, supporting the creation of inclusive public infrastructure and promoting persons with disabilities to positions of leadership.

In conclusion, media representation of persons with disabilities must move beyond superficial visibility to foster authentic, accessible, and rights-based portrayals. By integrating CRPD principles into daily practice, the media can play a transformative role in dismantling stereotypes, promoting dignity, and advancing equality.

Do's and Don'ts for Inclusive Media Representation



DO'S

- | | |
|--|--|
| ✓ Do make your content accessible. | <p>Add captions to videos, alt text to images, adequate colour contrast for persons with visual impairments or colourblindness, and easy-to-read summaries.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> Include captions that describe sounds or atmosphere, not just speech, to make your videos fully accessible. Use online colour contrast checkers to make sure your visuals are accessible.</p> |
| ✓ Do show full personalities, not just disabilities. | <p>Include a person's hobbies, goals, humour, education, and relationships.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> Present a person as a student, professional, athlete, or artist – not defined by their disability.</p> |
| ✓ Do ask, not assume. | <p>If you're unsure how someone identifies or what terms they prefer, ask politely and follow their lead. Always ask your subjects how they want to be represented.</p> |
| ✓ Do use inclusive, respectful language. | <p>Choose words that reflect equality, dignity, and individuality. When in doubt, rely on the terminology used in the UN CRPD and its translations.</p> |
| ✓ Do research on your subjects and topics. | <p>Make sure to learn about the issue, person, or organisation you want to present. Use reputable sources, such as reports of the UN, publications of international organisations, etc.</p> |
| ✓ Do collaborate with persons with disabilities. | <p>Involve them as co-creators, not only as interview subjects. Create a supportive environment for learning, sharing, or influencing social change.</p> |
| ✓ Do ensure diversity in your teams. | <p>Include diverse members in your organizations to have more diverse and genuine perspectives.</p> |
| ✓ Do focus on reality, not stereotypes. | <p>Show their everyday life, work, activism, and creativity – not just challenges or “inspirational struggles.”</p> |
| ✓ Do protect dignity and consent. | <p>Always get permission before sharing personal stories, photos, or names.</p> |
| ✓ Do highlight accessibility and inclusion in all contexts. | <p>Show accessibility and inclusion as a part of everyday life, whenever possible, instead of “waiting” for stories that focus on disability to do so.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> Show accessible spaces, inclusive teams, or events that welcome everyone.</p> |

✓ Do create opportunities for collaboration and learning.	Network with disability rights organisations to foster an interdisciplinary approach, map allies, and provide opportunities for training of media students and professionals.
✓ Do encourage conversation and curiosity.	Invite your audience to learn more – but moderate discussions to prevent hate speech, use of derogatory language, or harmful comments.
✓ Do educate, not confront.	When facing stereotypes, focus on opening minds through dialogue and evidence, not opposition.
✓ Do add a clear call to action.	If you have an opportunity to influence communities and institutions to commit to accessibility, add a call to action to your content.



DON'TS

✗ Don't use language that is outdated, patronising, or offensive.	Always check official language guidelines or consult organisations of persons with disabilities for current terminology. <i>Example:</i> Use "wheelchair user" instead of "wheelchair bound", or "person with intellectual disabilities" instead of "mentally retarded", "person with a disability" instead of "invalid", "D/deaf" instead of "deaf-mute" (and their equivalents in other languages).
✗ Don't use hate speech.	There's no place for hate speech in storytelling. Let your words defend rights, not divide people.
✗ Don't assume someone's abilities or needs.	Ask – don't guess. Not all disabilities are visible, and every person has different needs.

✗ Don't turn people into "inspirations".	Avoid stories that treat ordinary life activities as extraordinary because of disability.
✗ Don't use pity or shock to attract attention.	Avoid emotional filters, background music, or framing that provokes sympathy instead of respect.
✗ Don't sensationalize or exaggerate.	<i>Example:</i> Instead of "defying all odds," focus on achievements, advocacy, or community change.
✗ Don't spotlight persons with disabilities only in stories about disability.	Avoid portraying persons with disabilities only in pieces focusing on disability. Instead, aim to represent them in various contexts, as professionals, leaders, and active citizens. <i>Example:</i> In a story about a new video game, one of the developers might have a disability, but that does not have to shift the focus of his interview.
✗ Don't compare disabilities.	Each experience is unique. Avoid ranking or generalizing.
✗ Don't post or publish without consent.	Never share personal or medical details without explicit permission.
✗ Don't ignore accessibility.	A post without captions, image description, or alt text excludes part of your audience.
✗ Don't make content about persons with disabilities – make it <i>with</i> them.	Representation should come from collaboration, not from the outside looking in.

The responsible and unbiased media representation of persons with disabilities is not only an ethical choice, but also a fundamental right, as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Authenticity, accessibility, and collaboration are the pillars of a new communication model that promotes respect, participation, and social equality. When the stories of persons with disabilities are told truthfully, empathetically, and respectfully, the media does more than just inform; it actively helps to shape social transformation.

The media is not just a mirror; it can be a force for change. It influences how people perceive disability, inclusion, and independent living. Every story has the power to challenge existing stereotypes and open minds. When storytelling is authentic, accessible, and human rights-based, it transforms society. It empowers diverse voices and fosters a culture of respect and participation. Whether you're a young journalist, influencer, or editor, the words and images you choose can make inclusion visible and real.

Key Terms in Disability Representation

Accessibility

The design of content, services, and environments so that everyone, including persons with disabilities, can access, understand, and use them. Examples include captions, screen-reader compatible text, easy-to-read formats, ramps, and inclusive websites.

Alt Text (Alternative Text)

A written description of images or graphics embedded in digital content so that people using screen readers can understand visual information. Alt text should convey meaning, not just label objects.

Captioning

The text version of speech and important sounds in audio-visual content (videos, films, livestreams) allows people with hearing impairments, or those in noisy/quiet environments, to access information. Includes descriptive captions for sound effects and music cues when relevant.

Human Rights model of disability

The Human Rights Model of disability views disability as a natural part of human diversity. It views persons with disabilities as human rights holders entitled to the same rights and dignity as all members of society. It was formalised in the UN CRPD.

Identity-first language

Identity-first language places the identity label first, such as "autistic person" or "disabled person". People may use it because they view their identity as an inseparable part of themselves, not as an extra attribute they "have". It can be a way to show disability pride and affirm a cultural identity, as with some in the Deaf community. It is aligned with the social model of disability.

Inclusive Language

Language that respects people's dignity, avoids stereotypes, and acknowledges diversity. It emphasizes person-first or identity-affirming approaches and avoids assumptions about abilities or experiences.

Intersectionality

A framework for understanding how multiple aspects of a person's identity (e.g., gender, race, disability, sexuality) intersect and influence experiences of discrimination or privilege. In media, intersectionality encourages nuanced and authentic storytelling.

Inspiration Porn

Content that portrays ordinary activities of persons with disabilities as extraordinary solely because of their disability often elicits pity or admiration rather than respect. It can reinforce stereotypes instead of equality.

Person-first language

Person-first language puts the person before the characteristic or condition, for example, "person with a disability" or "person who has autism". It emphasises the individual as a whole and not defined by a singular trait. This approach is preferred in many international contexts and within institutions. It is aligned with the Human Rights model of disability.

Self-Representation

The practice of enabling persons with disabilities to tell their own stories and represent their experiences, rather than being spoken for by others. Central to authenticity and empowerment in media.

Sensationalism

The use of exaggeration, shock, or drama to attract attention in content about disability often occurs at the expense of accuracy, dignity, or nuance.

Social model of disability

The social model of disability views disability as a product of barriers in society, rather than a person's impairment or medical condition. Society is responsible for removing physical, attitudinal, communication, systemic, and organisational barriers that create disability.

UN CRPD (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities)

An international human rights treaty adopted by the United Nations in 2006 that protects the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities. It guides governments, media, and organisations to ensure inclusion, accessibility, and equal participation in society.

Universal Design

Designing products, spaces, services, or content so that they are usable by everyone, to the greatest extent possible, without needing adaptation. Examples: websites accessible by screen readers, navigation keys and mouse, buildings with ramps, buttons to open doors, classrooms with flexible seating, packaging with braille, etc.

Visibility vs Representation

- **Visibility:** Simply showing persons with disabilities in content.
- **Representation:** Portraying persons with disabilities accurately, respectfully, and fully – including their personalities, skills, relationships, and everyday life, not just their disability.



Resources

Source	Title	Why It's Useful?	Link
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)	Disability in the Media: Guidelines for Disability Representation in the Media	Clear and practical guidelines for inclusive representation in language, narratives, and roles.	https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-10/disability_in_the_media_1.pdf
National Center on Disability and Journalism (NCDJ)	Disability Language Style Guide	A set of guides that offer advice on terminology, framing, and ethical storytelling around disability. Perfect for anyone writing, editing, or evaluating media pieces involving persons with disabilities.	https://ncdj.org/style-guide/
The Ability Center	Disability-Friendly Media Guidelines	Hands-on tips for writing, social media, and visual content creation (alt-text, language, framing).	https://abilitycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/The-Ability-Center-%E2%80%93-Disability-Friendly-Media-Guidelines.pdf
Disability Studies, University of Leeds	Disabling Imagery and the Media	A foundational document exploring stereotypes and offering principles for fair portrayal.	https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/Barnes-disabling-imagery.pdf
Ford Foundation	Road Map for Inclusion: Changing the Face of Disability in the Media	High-level recommendations on improving systemic representation and inclusion in media industries.	https://www.fordfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/judyheumann_report_2019_final.pdf
Web Accessibility Initiative (W3C)	Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1	An authoritative global standard for ensuring digital and web accessibility across platforms.	https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG21/
Section 508 / U.S. Government	Creating Accessible PDFs	Practical steps for ensuring PDFs are accessible, including tagging, alt-text, and structure.	https://www.section508.gov/create/pdfs/
University of California, Riverside	Social Media Accessibility Guidelines	Concise guidance for creating accessible content on social media platforms (captions, alt-text).	https://documents.ucr.edu/university-relations/UCR_Social_Media_Accessibility_Guidelines.pdf
WebAIM – web accessibility in mind	N/A: a collection of easy-to-use resources and tools on digital accessibility	A series of resources and tools to check and learn about web accessibility, including tools to check contrast, layout, and more.	https://webaim.org/resources/
University of North Carolina, Greensboro	Making Design Elements Accessible	An online resource with how-to guides, lists, and explanations on making design elements of content accessible.	https://accessibility.uncg.edu/make-content-accessible/design-elements/

About the Team

The “Independent (Living) Media” project team co-authored these guidelines with the participants of the summer school, and together contributed their knowledge and expertise throughout the duration of the project.

Nina Portolan: the creator and project coordinator of the “Independent (Living) Media” project. She is a disability and human rights advocate, a trainer in non-formal education, and a para karate athlete from Serbia. She is the vice-chair of the ENIL Youth Network and started working with ENIL in 2020. Her work focuses on accessibility, inclusion, independent living, intersectionality, media, and more.

Laura Alčiauskaitė: the lead trainer for the “Independent (Living) Media” Project. Laura is a professional psychologist (currently in the final year of doing her PhD), researcher, accessibility expert, and an experienced youth trainer. She is the director of a local youth NGO “The Fifth Corner” in Lithuania, promoting inclusive activities on human rights education, youth empowerment, mental and sexual health.

Weronika Knowska: a youth worker, trainer, and researcher specializing in media literacy and combating disinformation from Poland. She has led international workshops on inclusive communication and digital resilience, initiatives addressing social polarization in different local realities, and collaborated with refugee and LGBTQI+ communities across Europe. Weronika’s work is grounded in a trauma-informed, intersectional approach, informed by her personal experience with an invisible disability.

Emmy Sefentin: a non-formal education trainer and consultant. She works with inclusive education, human rights, and intercultural learning. Emmy is also a trainer for young persons with disabilities, and a Scientific Associate with the Association of Friends of People with Intellectual Disabilities, as well as the co-founder of the “Agalide” programme, where they support adult migrants and refugees in learning the language and finding their place in a new culture.

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