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***Journalism and Mass Communication Textbook  
Representations of Verbal Media Skills:  
Implications for Students with Speech Disabilities***

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**Abstract**

This study examines representation of disabilities by conducting a qualitative content analysis of how 41 journalism/mass communication textbooks frame the ideal standards of verbal communication for media professionals. Textbooks are integral to students' understanding of professional norms and may influence career decisions. Results show that textbooks rarely address the topic of speech disabilities, describing them as "roadblocks to success." Instead, authors often address best practices in broadcast voicing and the value of projecting confidence in interviews and press conferences. What are the explicit and implicit messages for students with speech disabilities such as stuttering? We argue that such framing is a critical media literacy issue because it addresses media diversity and access.

**KEYWORDS:** *speech disabilities; voice; vocal performance; stuttering; content analysis; disability; framing; journalism; mass communication; media literacy; textbooks*

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Through their treatment of topics such as broadcast voicing, interviewing techniques, and press conference etiquette, journalism and mass communication textbooks frame the ideal standards of verbal communication for media professionals. As agents of socialization, media are a part of culture and "media and media messages can influence beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors" (NAMLE, 2007). This study is based on the premise that textbooks are socialization agents that are integral to students' understanding of professional norms and may influence their career decisions.

Media literacy education promotes critical thinking about messages and their embedded values and points of view (NAMLE, 2007). In this study, we analyze representation of speech disabilities by conducting a qualitative content analysis of how journalism and mass communication textbooks (n=41) address the verbal skills needed to succeed in the workplace. What should media professionals sound like? How should they present themselves? When examining these texts, we attempt to uncover the explicit and implicit messages for students with speech disabilities such as stuttering and those who use speech devices because of a disability that affects verbal speech. Specifically, we ask the questions: Is there recognition of such students and, if so, in what context? Are there specific references to university or employer accommodations? Are students with speech disabilities subtly being advised to avoid certain jobs? Answers to these questions illustrate the extent to which textbooks frame the mass communication field as welcoming to those with nontraditional speaking patterns and practices.

Just as important as analyzing what is in media messages is asking what is left out and what might be important to know (Rogow & Scheibe, 2007). Thus, this study highlights the frequent cases in which speech disabilities are ignored or inadequately covered in textbook chapters that reference the public-facing, performative aspects of media careers such as speaking on air, interviewing sources, and asking questions at live events. Such topics provide a natural opening to discuss students with speech disabilities. Omissions are noteworthy given that textbooks provide selective access to ideas and information (Hardin & Preston, 2001), often ignore alternative viewpoints (Taboas-Pais & Rey-Cao, 2012), and “confer legitimacy to certain groups and reinforce marginal status for others” (Hardin, Dodd, & Lauffer, 2006, p. 429).

Media literacy education encourages diverse voices and seeks to address stereotyping and other issues of representation (NAMLE, 2007; Rogow & Scheibe, 2007). We argue that framing of the ideal standards of verbal communication by textbook authors, who are primarily media educators, is a critical media literacy issue because it addresses media diversity and access. This study examines the framing of this important diversity issue and recommends language that authors can include that increases the likelihood that students with disabilities will view media careers as accessible to them.

## Literature Review

### Textbooks as Agents of Socialization

Textbooks are essential to college courses and help set the agenda for classroom discussion (Hardin, Dodd, & Lauffer, 2006; Hardin & Preston, 2001). They play a critical role in shaping students’ consciousness and their perception of knowledge (Hardin & Preston, 2001; Provenzo, Shaver, & Bello, 2011). Textbooks are often viewed as consensus documents that avoid controversy (Provenzo, Shaver, & Bello, 2011), but they are not value neutral. Rather, they “reflect the values and beliefs of the cultural and historical period of which they are a part” (Provenzo, Shaver, & Bello, 2011, p. 1) and “present apparently

indisputable ideas and legitimize a specific version of society” (Taboas-Pais & Rey-Cao 2012, p. 313) that are interpreted by students as natural (Hardin & Preston, 2001).

Scholars have more often studied racial and gender stereotypes in textbooks than the portrayal of disability (Sleeter & Grant, 2011), perhaps in part because people with disabilities are often not acknowledged as a minority group (Boyer, 1988; Hardin & Preston, 2001). Studies consistently find that disability is rarely referenced in textbooks used in general education college courses (Foxman & Easterling, 2010; Goldstein, Siegel, & Seaman, 2009; Sleeter & Grant, 2011; Smeltzer et al., 2010; Taboas-Pais & Rey-Cao, 2012; Taub & Fanflik, 2000), and that portrayals are often stereotypical (Goldstein, Siegel, & Seaman, 2009).

Journalism and mass communication textbooks induct students into the field’s mnemonic practices and articulate the ways in which young journalists should carry out the duties of their profession (Gilewicz, 2016). However, few studies have addressed messages about diversity in such textbooks – let alone specific messages about disability (Hardin, Dodd, & Lauffer 2006; Hardin & Preston, 2001). Hardin and Preston’s (2001) content analysis of reporting textbooks found that while many had chapters on diversity, few mentioned disability, and only in the context of reporting on disability (not journalists who have disabilities). Paradoxically, Winter (2003) found that broadcast textbooks devote little space to on-air delivery or ideal verbal communication.

### **Framing of People with Disabilities**

While few studies have specifically examined textbook depictions of people with disabilities, scholars (Haller, 2010; Haller & Ralph 2001; Naslund & Gardelli, 2013; O’Malley, 2009) have used frame theory to analyze media representation of disability. Frame theory is based on the premise that media focus attention on certain events and put them within a field of meaning (Goffman, 1974). Framing involves both selection and salience. “The text contains frames, which are manifested by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments” (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Framing analyses play a particularly important role in revealing perceptions of disabled people and their societal status (Haller, 2010; Haller & Ralph, 2001). In the case of disability issues, media are:

crucial in framing issues for the general public, who may have less contact with people with disabilities than other social groups because of continuing barriers...Therefore, media content tells us what message the public is receiving about disability” (Haller & Ralph, 2001, pp. 229-230).

Research examining news media framing of people with disabilities has long revealed problematic media representations (Zhang & Haller, 2013), such as the use of images and words that are stereotypical (Haller, 2000; Haller, 2010; O’Malley, 2009). Zhang and Haller (2013) found that media portrayals such as

the victim frame negatively impact the perceived self-identity of people with disabilities.

### **Students and Speech Disabilities**

As the lack of news coverage of disability illustrates, journalists have historically resisted considering people with disabilities as a minority group and have not devoted the same attention to their civil rights issues (Haller, 2010; Hardin & Preston, 2001) as they have to other groups. Stuttering and other speech disabilities are covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, which prohibits employers from discriminating against qualified candidates with disabilities when hiring, firing, promoting, or compensating employees (Parry, 2011).

Anxiety felt by people who stutter (PWS) has been found to impede academic performance (Klompas & Ross, 2004) and increase the chance of selecting courses that require less verbal interaction (Butler, 2013). The need to engage in unpredictable and time-pressured verbal communication may cause PWS discomfort and stress, and lead them to question their professional competence (Bricker-Katz, Lincoln, & Cumming, 2013). In one study, nearly three-quarters of respondents reported that they felt their stuttering meant certain jobs were out of bounds (Butler, 2014) – a perception that may be heightened because they are tracked into specific occupational roles that are often perceived as undesirable (Gabel, Blood, Tellis, & Althouse, 2004). This phenomenon, known as occupational stereotyping, has been found to take place in higher education. Students who stuttered were advised to avoid professions (broadcast journalism, among others) that require high levels of communication (Gabel, Blood, Tellis & Althouse, 2004).

To be sure, a share of PWS would opt to avoid high-stress media careers with or without the support of educators and textbook authors. However, those on the fence about pursuing such a career may be influenced greatly by professional advice. If PWS are not informed about the range of jobs, including those that do not involve interviewing or on-air speaking – such as editing, production or photography – they are not receiving crucial information that journalism skills textbooks should provide. If they are not exposed to PWS who have succeeded in the field – such as a *People* magazine writer who said she knew the career would be challenging but she loved journalism enough to pursue it anyway (Adams, n.d.) – they cannot make well-informed professional choices.

Media career opportunities have increased for people who use speech devices because communication apps are built into many smartphones and tablets (Goodnet, 2015). For instance, an app called urTalker allows people with disabilities such as autism and cerebral palsy to speak using their iPad (Ward, 2012). A husband figured out a way for his wife, who was losing her ability to speak, to continue doing her job that was mostly on the phone by developing a text-to-speech device (Blocksom, 2012). Australian Marlina Katene, who has cerebral palsy and uses a speech device, calls herself The AAC Journalist and has interviewed many people, especially celebrities, since she received her journalism degree in 2014 (Reimold, 2014).

This study extends existing literature by examining how journalism and mass communication textbooks address students with speech disabilities and frame the ideal standards of verbal communication for those entering media careers.

### Method

**Context of the Study.** For this study, speech disabilities refer to stuttering or people who use speech devices because of physical or neurological differences that affect their vocal cords (e.g. cerebral palsy, autism, or stroke). This study follows in the mass communication tradition of qualitative content analyses, in which researchers interpret texts by systematically coding data and identifying themes and patterns (Christians & Carey, 1981). Specifically, this study uses a summative approach to qualitative content analyses that begins with identifying and quantifying words in the text with the purpose of understanding their contextual use (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Studies that examine the content of textbooks often use the summative approach, which explores usage of words in an inductive manner (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Our study is not a textual analysis because there was no focus on intertextuality, such as considering the texts of people with speech disabilities discussing their journalism jobs or journalism in general.

Content analyses in mass media attempt to answer the questions: “Who says what, to whom, why, to what extent and with what effect?” (Lasswell, 1948). For the purpose of this study, those questions are amended as: “Which textbook authors write what, to what extent and with what effect?” This study examines both the manifest content – directly observable attributes of communication – and latent content that requires inferences about the underlying meaning (Lasswell, 1948).

**Data Sources.** This study includes 41 English-language journalism and mass communication textbooks from 2000 to the present that are suited for skills courses such as reporting for the media, news writing, multimedia journalism, and broadcast journalism. Of the 41 textbooks analyzed, 19 are online/print journalism-focused, 19 are broadcast-focused, and three focus solely on interviewing. Table 1 lists the textbooks included in this analysis. Textbook titles were obtained by visiting the websites of major publishers and media trade groups, examining online syllabi, and using keyword searches for “broadcasting,” “journalism,” “mass communication,” “media,” “multimedia,” “news writing,” and “textbook” on search engines and university library databases.

Textbooks were purposively selected for this study. To be included in the analysis, the textbook had to cover at least one of the following topics: broadcast (audio or video) voicing on-air, interviewing sources, or asking questions during press conferences or other live events. These topics represent the main performative skills needed in some media careers and present an opportunity for textbooks to reference students with speech disabilities.

When possible, we analyzed the most recent edition of textbooks, although this is not always possible given time and resource limitations. Finally, we analyzed just one edition of each textbook because updated versions often are



highly similar to previous incarnations and we did not want to oversample one title or author(s).

**Data Collection & Analysis.** This summative qualitative content analysis of print textbooks focused on references to verbal skills needed by media professionals. With the summative approach, data analysis began by searching for manifest content (in this case, specific keywords, the unit of analysis), with researchers counting frequency of word use and attributing each statement to textbook authors (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). For this study, keywords – derived from the literature review and researchers’ own interests – included words like “stutter,” “stammer,” “speech disorder,” “speech impediment,” “irregular speech,” and “speech disfluency.” Data analysis also included tracking latent meaning of references to the ideal voice, including keywords such as “diction,” “clarity,” and “crispness” – euphemistic terms used to describe vocal qualities that PWS and others with speech disabilities typically do not possess.

The content from each textbook was recorded on a spreadsheet that included the following categories: author(s), textbook title, year, book category (broadcast, online/print, interviewing), description of ideal broadcast voice, advice on conducting interviews, advice on live event etiquette, specific references to speech disabilities, and type of disability referenced. Textbook language was qualitatively coded, and after an initial analysis of themes and patterns, three macro categories emerged: (1) references to speech disabilities, (2) framing the ideal broadcast voice, and (3) framing non-broadcast verbal skills. References to speech disabilities are explicit mentions of speech difficulties such as stuttering or people who use speech devices. Framing the ideal broadcast voice includes language that describes on-air performance, while framing non-broadcast verbal skills include references to off-air interviews and live event etiquette. Both are examples of latent content because textbook authors, while not directly addressing speech disabilities, send implicit messages to students with such disabilities about whether media careers are accessible to them.

## Results

### References to Speech Disabilities

Just seven of 41 textbooks reference speech disabilities or the synonyms described above. Six broadcast textbooks frame such disabilities as roadblocks to career success and in some cases disqualifiers from landing an on-air job. Of these six, two specifically mention stuttering. For example:

Some people seem to have been born with the ‘performance gene,’ and sound like old hands almost as soon as they start reporting. Others appear to struggle with their delivery; they may always retain some fear of being on the radio, consistently stutter or make other mistakes, and never become satisfied with the way they sound (Kern, 2008, p. 133).

Table 1.  
Journalism and Mass Communication Textbooks Included in Analysis

AUTHOR	TITLE	YEAR	CATEGORY
Adams	<i>Interviewing for Journalists</i>	2009	Interviewing
Alysen, Oakham, Patching & Sedorkin	<i>Reporting in a Multimedia World: An Introduction to Core Journalism Skills</i>	2013	Online/print
Barnas & White	<i>Broadcast News Writing, Reporting and Producing</i>	2013	Broadcast
Bender, Davenport, Drager & Fedler	<i>Reporting for the Media</i>	2012	Online/print
Bock	<i>Video Journalism: Beyond the One-Man Band</i>	2012	Broadcast
Boyd, Stewart & Alexander	<i>Broadcast Journalism: Techniques of Radio and Television News</i>	2008	Broadcast
Bradshaw & Rohumaa	<i>The Online Journalism Handbook: Skills to Survive and Thrive in the Digital Age</i>	2013	Online/print
Briggs	<i>Journalism Next</i>	2013	Online/print
Brooks, Kennedy, Moen & Ranly	<i>News Reporting and Writing</i>	2011	Online/print
Bull	<i>Multimedia Journalism: A Practical Guide</i>	2016	Online/print
Chantler & Stewart	<i>Basic Radio Journalism</i>	2013	Broadcast
Dear & Scott	<i>The Responsible Journalist: An Introduction to News Reporting &amp; Writing</i>	2014	Online/print
Geller	<i>Beyond Powerful Radio: A Communicator's Guide to the Internet Age</i>	2012	Broadcast
George-Palilonis	<i>The Multimedia Journalist – Storytelling for Today's Medial Landscape</i>	2012	Online/print
Gitner	<i>Multimedia Storytelling for Digital Communicators in a Multiplatform World</i>	2016	Online/print
Green, Lodato, Wilcock & Schwalbe	<i>News Now: Visual Storytelling in the Digital Age</i>	2012	Broadcast
Harrower	<i>Inside Reporting: A Practical Guide to the Craft of Journalism</i>	2012	Online/print
Hausman, Benoit, Messere & O'Donnell	<i>Announcing: Broadcast Communicating Today</i>	2004	Broadcast
Hernandez & Rue	<i>The Principles of Multimedia Journalism: Packaging Digital News</i>	2016	Online/print
Hill & Lashmar	<i>Online Journalism: The Essential Guide</i>	2014	Online/print



Hyde	<i>Television and Radio Announcing</i>	2009	Broadcast
Kern	<i>Sound Reporting: The NPR Guide to Audio Journalism and Production</i>	2008	Broadcast
Lancaster	<i>Video Journalism for the Web: A Practical Introduction to Documentary Storytelling</i>	2013	Broadcast
Laufer	<i>Interviewing: The Oregon Method</i>	2014	Interviewing
Lindler	<i>The New Broadcasting Realities: Real-Life Strategies</i>	2012	Broadcast
Luckie	<i>The Digital Journalist's Handbook</i>	2012	Online/print
Maguire	<i>Advanced Reporting: Essential Skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century</i>	2015	Online/print
Mencher	<i>Melvin Mencher's News Reporting and Writing</i>	2008	Online/print
Mills	<i>The Broadcast Voice</i>	2004	Broadcast
Papper	<i>Broadcast News and Writing Stylebook</i>	2016	Broadcast
Reardon	<i>On Camera: How to Report, Anchor &amp; Interview</i>	2014	Broadcast
Rich	<i>Writing and Reporting the News: A Coaching Method</i>	2013	Online/print
Sedorkin	<i>Interviewing: A Guide for Journalists and Writers</i>	2011	Interviewing
Stephenson, Reese & Beadle	<i>Broadcast Announcing Worktext: A Media Performance Guide</i>	2013	Broadcast
Thornburg	<i>Producing Online News: Digital Skills, Stronger Stories</i>	2011	Online/print
Tompkins	<i>Aim for the Heart: Write, Shoot, Report and Produce for TV and Multimedia</i>	2012	Broadcast
Tuggle, Carr & Huffman	<i>Broadcast News Handbook: Writing, Reporting, and Producing in the Age of Social Media</i>	2014	Broadcast
Utterback & Freedman	<i>Broadcast Voice: How to Polish Your On-Air Delivery</i>	2005	Broadcast
Wenger & Potter	<i>Advancing the Story: Broadcast Journalism in a Multimedia World</i>	2015	Online/print
Wilkinson, Grant & Fisher	<i>Principles of Convergent Journalism</i>	2013	Online/print
Yorke	<i>Television News</i>	2000	Broadcast

One textbook author puts it this way:

A pleasing voice is helpful to a broadcaster, but an offensive voice is a real handicap. Voices that ‘turn off’ listeners may result from problems in quality, delivery, and breathing... Stuttering is a problem of rate and rhythm that is best addressed by a professional therapist (Hausman, Benoit, Messere, & O’Donnell, 2004, pp. 16-17).

Two textbooks specifically reference lisps, as illustrated by the passage: “Those with weak r’s or lisps are still uncommon on the radio” (Chantler & Stewart, 2013, p. 82). One mentions a cleft palate or facial paralysis as “making it impossible for speakers to pronounce words properly” (Hyde, 2009, p. 80). Three other textbooks broadly reference speech impediments, as illustrated by the following three passages: (1) “Minor speech impediments such as weak ‘Rrs,’ or ‘THs’ that become ‘Vs’ could be barriers to an otherwise promising career” (Boyd, Stewart, & Alexander, 2008, p. 176). (2) “Severe speech impediments, voice problems, or a pronounced foreign or regional accent must be evaluated realistically. If uncorrected or uncorrectable, they will limit your chance of success” (Hausman, Benoit, Messere, & O’Donnell, 2004, pp. 16-17). (3) “Unless you have a speech impediment or an unusually harsh voice, you can probably be on the radio” (Kern, 2008, p. 132).

One reference to speech disabilities, from an online/print textbook, has a more positive framing – although it still presents suboptimal speech as a career roadblock:

Not everyone is born with ‘great pipes,’ and that’s OK. Barbara Walters and Tom Brokaw, for example, had successful network television careers even though they both have minor speech impediments. Your goal should be to make the most out of the voice you were born with and to sound natural when you read a story out loud” (Wenger & Potter, 2015, p. 278).

Just one textbook includes a separate section on disability. Yorke (2000) does not reference speech disabilities but broadly addresses occupational roadblocks: “For those already disadvantaged in some way, the barrier to success in broadcast journalism has been unfairly high.” York notes increased sensitivity to journalists who are blind, deaf, and/or in wheelchairs, highlights examples of journalists with hearing or sight difficulties who have succeeded in broadcasting, and argues that “confinement to a wheelchair should not presuppose an inability to think, write and speak” (p. 15).

### **Framing the Ideal Broadcast Voice**

Explicit references to speech disabilities are rare. However, the vast majority of broadcast textbooks (15 of 19) reference qualities of the ideal broadcast voice, and many such references imply that speech disabilities are impediments to career success. The most commonly referenced voice qualities are “vocal clarity” (n=10), which includes synonyms such as “crispness,” “diction,”

and “enunciation”; “steady tempo” (n=9), which includes synonyms such as “pace,” “speed” and “delivery”; and “pleasing tone” (n=8), which includes the synonym “pitch.”

Several authors frame suboptimal broadcast voices as problematic without offering suggestions for people who do not possess the desired qualities. Examples include the following passages: (1) “Adverts for jobs in radio frequently call for a newsreader with a ‘good microphone voice.’ This usually means a voice that is reasonably clear, crisp and resonant and free from obvious impediments” (Boyd, Stewart, & Alexander, 2008, p. 176). (2) “What is a ‘good microphone voice’? A lot of it is down to interpretation, but it is certainly one which has clarity and credibility and is free from verbal ‘ticks.’ ” (Chantler & Stewart, 2013, p. 82). (3) “You must be realistic when dealing with your voice. You don’t want to become self-conscious or embarrassed” (Reardon, 2014, p. 221).

More commonly, authors who mention suboptimal broadcast voices offer a clear suggestion to students: Seek professional help from speech/voice coaches or medical specialists. As one textbook writer puts it:

With professional guidance, almost anyone can become a competent broadcaster. How much professional guidance a voice may need is another matter...You may have to put in a lot of work and go to some personal expense before you can convince broadcasting bosses to let you on air, but if you are really determined you can do it” (Mills, 2004, p. 5).

Four authors make the case that broadcast journalism is increasingly open to different types of voices – although they stop short of noting that speech disabilities are accepted. For example:

Fortunately, it is not your voice, but the content of what you say, that matters most. Audiences will listen to people who do not have great voices, but have something to say. They will spend very little time listening to a beautiful voice saying nothing. Still, if you have ever gotten negative feedback about the sound of your voice, you know it can be hurtful, embarrassing, and frustrating. After all, what are you supposed to do about the voice you were born with? Not everyone was born with a beautiful voice, but with a little work, and some small changes, you can improve your voice, if you want to” (Geller, 2012, pp. 207-8).

### **Framing Non-Broadcast Verbal Skills**

Only six online/print textbooks – and no interviewing textbooks – reference the ideal broadcast voice. Textbooks regularly cover interviewing techniques such as phrasing questions and asking follow-ups, but there are no explicit references to the verbal skills needed to succeed in an interview or press conference setting. There are, however, plenty of implicit messages about the difficulties students with speech disabilities may face in high-pressure situations as an interviewer.

Several authors note the importance of being confident, assertive, and outgoing. A broadcast textbook advises students in a group interview setting: “Don’t be afraid to be at the front of the scrum... You and your microphone have just as much right as any other reporter (Chantler & Stewart 2013, p. 136). An online/print textbook references the need for reporters to “be bold, aggressive – sometimes even fearless. If you're shy, you can work to overcome it, but the job may be uncomfortable for you” (Harrower, 2012, p. 31). Authors offer similar advice about the importance of projecting confidence during one-on-one interviews. An interviewing textbook notes that: “First impressions count...Nerves and lack of practice handicap the beginner...However anxious you are, walking in looking worried is counterproductive” (Adams, 2009, p. 33).

Another implicit message is that journalists who are uncomfortable or unable to conduct face-to-face interviews may be at a disadvantage. Authors universally agree that in-person interviews are preferable to telephone or e-mail interviews because of the ability to pick up nonverbal cues (Alysen, Oakham, Patching, & Sedorkin, 2013), establish a rapport with the interviewee (Harrower, 2012; Hill & Lashmar, 2014; Papper, 2016), elicit spontaneous responses (Hill & Lashmar, 2014; Rich, 2013; Sedorkin, 2011), and ask follow-up questions (Mencher, 2008; Wenger & Potter, 2015).

E-mail or phone interviews, according to most authors, are only appropriate in cases of time constraints (Alysen, Oakham, Patching, & Sedorkin, 2013; Hill & Lashmar, 2012) or difficult-to-reach sources, or instances in which sources need to develop their thoughts in more detail (Bender, Davenport, Drager, & Fedler, 2012; Harrower, 2012; Mencher, 2008). One online/print textbook warns students: “If you're uncomfortable, unlikeable or unpleasant to be around, face-to-face interviews can go badly” (Harrower, 2012, p. 78). There are no references to alternative interview arrangements for people with disabilities who may have difficulty conducting in-person interviews.

### **Discussion**

The central question in this study addresses core media literacy themes of diversity and access: Do journalism and mass communication textbooks frame the ideal standards of verbal communication in ways that make media careers seem accessible to students with speech disabilities? The answer is a resounding no. The vast majority of textbooks (34 of 41) analyzed in this study make no mention of speech disabilities. Textbooks not only function as socialization agents that help students understand professional norms and practices; they legitimize certain groups and reinforce marginal status for others. Theorists often discuss power in terms of visibility. “To be empowered is to be visible; to be disempowered is to be rendered invisible. To be recognized is to be visible; to be misrecognized or not recognized is to be rendered invisible” (Oliver, 2001, p. 11). Students with speech disabilities are largely rendered invisible by textbook authors. This widespread omission is not surprising given the history of mass communication textbooks overlooking disability issues, and given that the textbooks under review are geared toward teaching professional skills and have much ground to cover at a time of rapid change in journalism. However, there are plenty of natural openings

to discuss disability issues as part of broader coverage of diversity, or in chapters on performative aspects of media careers.

Few textbooks explicitly reference stuttering, and none references people who use speech devices. Most common are vague references to speech impediments. Strikingly, in all but one case, the textbook author uses language such as “barrier,” “limit,” “problem,” or “handicap” to frame speech disabilities as a roadblock to a successful career as an on-air broadcast journalist. The explicit message to students with speech disabilities: The onus is on you to seek professional treatment and conform to the ideal standards of verbal communication; don’t expect accommodations from colleges or employers (neither of which are ever referenced in the texts).

Authors may be reflecting conventional wisdom about cutthroat broadcast hiring practices and the demands placed on “talent” by executives and audiences. Yet this is a missed opportunity to challenge the status quo and address how the mass communication field does – or should – accommodate people with disabilities, especially in light of the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act that prohibits job discrimination based on disability (EEOC, 2005). Additionally, there is just one reference to journalists with speech disabilities who have succeeded in the field, and just one acknowledgement that audiences will listen to people who do not have “great” voices.

Authors who do not directly reference speech disabilities send implicit messages to students through their use of language such as “crispness,” “clarity,” and “steady tempo” to describe the ideal broadcast voice. This latent content is filled with euphemisms for “impediment-free speech.” Few authors explicitly state that there is little or no hope for broadcasters with speech disabilities, and there’s no instance of occupational tracking in which authors recommend that students with suboptimal speech consider off-camera jobs. However, the implicit message is that students should manage expectations, as illustrated by the passage, “You must be realistic when dealing with your voice. You don’t want to become self-conscious or embarrassed.”

Textbooks geared toward online/print journalism also commonly imply that speech disabilities are professional roadblocks. Authors focus on high-stress moments for reporters, such as hunting down an interview subject or being assertive when asking questions during press conferences. These are common situations for some journalists – and certainly uncomfortable moments for anyone who has difficulty speaking fluently under pressure. Authors do a disservice to students with speech disabilities when they use negative framing such as “looking worried is counterproductive” given that they may be reinforcing students’ fears without providing advice on how to cope. Additionally, these interactions are only a small part of job duties for many media professionals. Tasks such as researching, editing, photography, and video/audio production do not require such high-pressure interactions. Authors almost universally advise students to prioritize in-person or telephone interviews over email or other text-based interviews – another lost opportunity to acknowledge that, for people with disabilities, alternative arrangements may be preferable.

In considering the strengths and limitations of this study, we note that the sample size includes 41 textbooks that fit our criteria, but this certainly is not an exhaustive list. The decision to limit the analysis to textbooks suited for skills courses means that this study does not examine portrayal of disability issues in history, ethics, or cultural studies textbooks that may be more likely to address speech disabilities. We did not limit this study to authors based in the United States, which opens up the possibility that their use of language may differ. Because only seven textbooks referenced speech disabilities (four from U.S. authors, four from U.K. authors), it is hard to draw broad conclusions about how textbooks cover this topic. Finally, this study does not uncover the motivations of textbook authors or help answer any questions about college or employer discrimination.

Textbooks help set the agenda for classroom discussion, shape students' consciousness and perception of knowledge, and are a window into professional values and practices. Past research found that journalism and mass communication textbooks rarely mention disability issues and rely on stereotypical representations. This study, specifically examining the framing of ideal standards of verbal communication, found that few textbooks explicitly address speech disabilities and those that do frame them as career impediments. Returning to several core media literacy themes addressed at the outset, it's important to note what is left out of the messages examined: an acknowledgement in most textbooks of people with nontraditional speaking patterns and practices. Authors could do a far better job of promoting inclusivity and diverse voices in a field that prides itself on those attributes. People with speech disabilities can make significant contributions to covering the news because they have a unique perspective. Journalism is undermined when it sticks with narrow views of who can do the job.

### **Application**

We recommend that media educators who teach verbal communication use some of the following language – in the classroom and in textbooks – to increase the likelihood that students with speech disabilities will view media careers as accessible to them:

- Journalism and mass communication careers are attainable for people with speech disabilities. This includes not only behind-the-scenes jobs such as editor and producer, but also public-facing jobs such as reporter and broadcast anchor. Stuttering and other speech disabilities are covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, which prohibits employers from discriminating against qualified candidates with disabilities when hiring, firing, promoting, or compensating employees (EEOC, 2005). That means employers – and before that, colleges providing media training – should provide appropriate accommodations.
- People who have difficulty speaking fluently under pressure may find certain job requirements stressful, including in-person interviews or press conferences. However, sources and colleagues should be understanding



about your disability; this shouldn't prevent you from doing your job. These interactions are only a small part of job duties for many media professionals. Additionally, alternative arrangements such as e-mail or other text-based interviews can be made if appropriate.

- You may be encouraged or required to work with speech therapists or vocal coaches early in your career. It's natural for people with speech disabilities to feel self-conscious or embarrassed about their voice. A number of high-profile media personalities have had speech impediments (Tom Brokaw, NBC; Barbara Walters, ABC) or have overcome stuttering (Byron Pitts, ABC; John Stossel, Fox Business; and Jeff Zeleny, CNN.) Some journalists with speech differences say this has given them more empathy for sources who have challenges.
- Audiences will listen to people who do not possess the traditional broadcast voice. What you have to say should be more important than having unimpeachable delivery and clarity.
- The doors to more media careers are opening to people who use speech devices because communication devices are now built into the smartphones and tablets most people use. Many new apps allow people with communication disabilities to use iDevices to speak. In addition, the world is much more comfortable with computerized voices, because they are now everywhere.

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