

The representation of disability in Italian media: The case of Ansa

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Abstract

The representation of disability in the media significantly influences the social perception of disability among the general population, as well as among individuals with disabilities themselves. This study focuses on the case of Ansa, the primary Italian press agency, to examine its portrayal of disability and persons with disabilities in the year 2022. Through the content analysis of a corpus comprising 1692 articles collected via keyword search, the research aims to draw a 'map' that can describe the disability narrative conveyed by Ansa. Key findings highlight Ansa's narrative as displaying a form of under-representation of disability. Physical and mobility disabilities dominate the discourse, adhering to the common mediatic 'hierarchy of disabilities'. But even more clearly, Ansa's representation tends to be generic, abstract and lacking in specificity, thus presenting disability as a depersonalised and collective label. The narratives predominantly revolve around political interventions, funding, and institutional aid, with limited attention given to personal life stories that rarely attain national news status. Ultimately, the agency's portrayal appears as a narrative of disability without the disabled persons, representing the phenomenon as a systemic issue that can be resolved through public frameworks and policies, with no direct involvement of those affected. This reinforces the notion that disability is a depersonalised problem that always needs external solutions.

1. Introduction

The presentation and narration of disability and people with disabilities in the media has a crucial influence on the social representation of this condition by the majority of the population. Despite the fact that the condition of disability is significantly widespread in all societies, the majority of the population experiences it mainly in a mediated way and not through direct life experience (Samsel and Perepa, 2013; Zhang and Haller, 2013). It has also been observed how media representation reflexively influences people with disabilities themselves, affecting the self-perception and social identity construction they enact in order to find their own 'meaningful place' within society (Ellis and Goggin, 2015; Ellis et al., 2019).

The influence of the media on these social representations appears even more relevant when we take into consideration, as in this study, the 'ubiquitous role' that news agencies play in shaping the 'news landscape' of other media, which use it as a source and main reference for the construction of their own information products (Johnston and Forde, 2011). In an information context such as the Italian one, studying the representations of disability provided

by Ansa¹, the main (and almost monopolistic²) press agency made up of an association of all the main national media, can make it possible to estimate the type of representation that will then be conveyed, as a result, by a plurality of national media, from the most widespread to the most niche.

In this paper we will therefore analyse, within a corpus consisting of one year of articles from the 'Notiziario Generale dell'Ansa'³ selected through keywords, the specific characteristics of the representation of disability and persons with disabilities conveyed in 2022 by the main Italian press agency.

2. Research questions and method of analysis

The corpus of our research consists of the entirety of articles published by Ansa containing the keywords 'disability' and its functional substitutes 'disabled' and 'disabled'⁴ in the time span between 1 January and 31 December 2022. The keyword search in the LexisNexis⁵ database revealed a total of 1702 articles. An initial recognition of the results made it possible to verify the presence of some duplicate articles and a few random results, completely off-topic and not useful for the purposes of our analysis. These articles were removed from the corpus and our analysis therefore focused on a total of 1692 articles.

The first objective of the analysis is to draw a 'map' (Gleeson, 1999) of the main themes and ways in which the phenomenon of disability is presented by Ansa. This work, conducted through a thematic analysis of the content of the articles, attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the main topics of the Ansa articles that contain the keywords disability and disabled?
2. How, and in what amount, are they divided and distributed in the various sections of the 'News'?
3. How many of these articles deal extensively with the subject of disability or, conversely, how many of these articles only mention it in passing, being primarily devoted to other subjects?

We then analyse the corpus in order to answer these further research questions:

1. Do we find an under-representation of the phenomenon (highlighted by much literature on the subject: see, among others, Aspler et al., 2018; Barden, 2018; Gleeson,

¹ 'Abbreviation for Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata, a news agency founded in Rome in 1945 to replace Agenzia Stefani; it is a cooperative of 36 members, publishers of major Italian newspapers, with the mission of collecting, publishing and distributing journalistic information and providing other related services' (from Enciclopedia Italiana di scienze, lettere ed arti, entry 'Ansa,' accessed 4/26/2023, author's translation).

² ANSA is a cooperative of all major Italian publishers and is, therefore, the principal source of information for all national media outlets.

³ Henceforth, 'Notiziario' or 'Ansa.'

⁴ The media analysed use the Italian language. Therefore, the keywords actually searched in the database were 'disabilità', 'disabile' and 'disabili', in order to cover all genders, the singular and the plural, as well as any derived terms such as 'persona disabile' ('disabled person') or 'persone con disabilità' (persons with disabilities').

⁵ The LexisNexis database can be accessed at <https://www.lexisnexis.com>.

- 1999; Goethals, Mortelmans and Van Hove, 2018; Kallman, 2017; Worrell, 2018) or do the Ansa articles reproduce, at a quantitative level, a representation that is proportionate to the prevalence of disability *c* within the Italian population?
2. Is the 'usual hierarchy of forms of disability' (see e.g. Haller, 2000; Melchior and Trevisan, 2023; Rees, Robinson and Shields, 2019) to be found in the corpus, with a prevalence of medial visibility of physical and motor disabilities, followed by sensory disabilities and a lower presence of mental and intellectual disabilities?
 3. How much of the narrative of disability is abstract or generic, thus delineating it as a collective phenomenon lacking in other specifications or personal information, and how much, instead, do we see narratives in which disabled people are presented in their entirety as a person, with their own history and specific conditions? In other words, do we find an 'abstract' or a 'concrete' narrative of the phenomenon (Melchior, 2023)?
 4. Can we trace in the corpus the presence, and with what relevance, of items that the literature indicates as typical in the presentation of the phenomenon, i.e. emphatic and sensationalised narratives of life stories (Barile and Strizzolo, 2020; Devotta, Wilton and Yiannakoulis, 2013; Di Santo, 2013; Riley, 2005) or stories of particular impact from an emotional point of view (Clogston, 1990; Haller, 1995; Jones, 2012; Keller et al., 1990)?

To try to answer the research questions, we used a variety of quali-quantitative methods. From a quantitative point of view, out of the total of 1692 articles we identified:

- the location of the articles within the sections⁶ of the 'Notiziario', quantified through a keyword search conducted on the metadata;
- the collocation was then used as a starting point for the subdivision of the corpus into specific sub-corpus for the various sections of the 'Notiziario';
- with the help of QDA analysis software we identified the complete list of article titles, a list which was then subjected to word frequency analysis and logical categorisation (the latter being qualitative);
- similarly, again using specialised software such as MAXQDA, we isolated and listed all the paragraphs containing the key-words in order to identify and quantify the typologies of disability mentioned in the articles.

From a qualitative point of view, the various sections of the 'Notiziario', identified with the methods described above, were subjected to an extensive reading of the articles conducted with a three-step sampling from a random number. The extensive reading thus covered 562 articles and was used to:

- categorise and subdivide the articles in the various sections into 1) articles fully devoted to the subject of disability; 2) 'off-topic' articles; and 3) 'intermediate' articles in which disability is only a secondary theme to the real topic of the piece;
- understand, describe and categorise the main topics addressed by the articles and the general connotation of the narrative that ANSA provides about disability, with reference to the subsections of the previous point.

⁶ The main sections of Ansa are 'News', 'Politics-Italy', 'Foreign Policy', 'Economy' and 'Economy-Italy', 'Regions', 'Entertainment', and 'Sport'.

More specific details on the methods used are provided in the following section, along with the presentation of the results of the analysis.

3. A first quantitative survey on the corpus of analysis: Under-representation

We asked ourselves whether the absolute number of articles found in the corpus can be considered an appropriate representation (in quantitative terms) of the disability condition in Italy or whether it reflects an under-representation of the phenomenon. Actually, answering this research question precisely is not possible at present. In Italy, there are no precise statistics on the percentage of the population with disabilities: the Istat dossier 'Conoscere il mondo della disabilità: Persone, relazioni e istituzioni' (2019) bases its survey on a single question, the 'Global activity limitation Indicator' (Gali), which quantifies people who report having 'severe limitations, due to health problems, in carrying out habitual and ordinary activities': in Italy, according to this data, the (self-reported) number amounts to 3,150,000 (5.2% of the population), but the same Institute of Statistics declares to be aware 'of the not complete adequacy of this survey method' because, treating the concepts of 'disabled people' and 'people with severe limitations' as interchangeable does not seem appropriate (Istat, 2019: 10).

The same limitation affects the Eurostat survey (2022) which, on data collected in Italy in 2015, provides data on 'persons with severe visual, hearing and motor impairments' that actually appear much higher than the 5.2% of the total population indicated by Istat.

Likewise, it is difficult to calculate exactly the total number of articles released daily by Ansa, so that the two figures can be compared. If we were to adopt a purely speculative approach to this matter, our recognition within the LexisNexis database shows us that, proceeding by sampling a limited number of days, the average number of articles published by Ansa daily seems to be around 1,200 (to be exact, the result of our average is 1180.4). Thus, by estimating using purely mathematical methods, we can assume that Ansa published a total of around 430,000 articles in 2022: our corpus, consisting only of articles containing the keywords, has around 1,700. This means that articles containing the keywords 'disability' or 'disabled' would be just 0.39% of the total. If we proceed with our hypothetical reasoning, we can say that, even without knowing precisely the percentage of disabled people in Italy, this is certainly significantly higher than 0.4% of the population. In fact, applying this percentage to the total number of the Italian population in the reference year⁷, if Ansa's representation of the disability phenomenon were in line with the number of the disabled population from a quantitative point of view, it would mean that in Italy we should have a maximum of about 175,000 disabled persons (0.39% of the total population, indeed). However, using some indirect estimates of the phenomenon published by Istat (2022) as a partial comparison, we note for example that the number of 'students with disabilities' enrolled in Italian schools in 2021/22 on its own doubles that figure (316,000 students).

It is therefore possible to conclude that, despite the absence of clear statistics and working only at the level of estimation, the number of articles we traced in Ansa's publications is an

⁷ Total Italian population which results, again from Istat data, of 50 million 983 thousand people as of January 1, 2022 (Istat, 2023).

indicator of a significant under-representation of the phenomenon compared to its real quantitative diffusion in Italian society.

We will examine this issue in more detail in the section on the qualitative analysis of the topics of the articles, where it will emerge how, among these 1692 news items, approximately 15% should hardly be considered, as they are essentially 'off-topic' (they do not speak of disability at all and only the keyword recurs) and a further 30% speak of disability only as an accessory theme, secondary to the real subject of the article. In summary, only slightly more than half of the articles in our corpus directly deal with the phenomenon of disability and disabled persons as a main, characterising theme.

4. Typology and 'hierarchy' of disability

Again from a quantitative point of view, we analysed which typologies of disability are mentioned within the 1692 articles of our corpus, in order to understand whether the usual 'hierarchy of visibility' that often emerges from the scientific literature on the subject (see for example Haller, 2000; Melchior and Trevisan, 2023; Rees, Robinson and Shields, 2019) can also be traced in the Ansa narrative.

The information that stands out, and which probably specifically characterises the media narrative of Ansa, is that in the overwhelming majority of cases disability is only mentioned as a generic keyword, without any specification or characterisation. In fact, 76.5% of the articles refer to disability as a general and abstract concept. We find mentions of the 'Minister of Disability', or of generic statements about the fact that more should be done, or that something will be done, for the 'world of disability'; that sport or other activities can be useful for the inclusion of 'persons with disabilities' or that the number of 'students with disabilities' in schools is growing, or finally that there are facilities, specific laws or funds linked to the 'condition of disability'.

Three-fourths of the articles deal with this 'generic disability' without providing specific indications to situate the concept in concrete terms.

This is a situation that frequently recurs in media narratives on this topic, narratives that are depersonalized and inclined to treat people with disabilities as a (falsely) homogeneous group and, consequently, silent and passive (Sabatello and Schulz, 2014; Vázquez-Barrio, Sánchez-Valle and Viñarás-Abad, 2021; Williams-Findlay, 2014). But this feature is so prevalent in Ansa articles that it seems that the news agency is particularly inclined to publish news of this kind, which outlines the phenomenon in a general and abstract way⁸.

About one in four articles, however, specify what type of disability it is talking about. As is often the case, in the disability hierarchy the primacy of visibility undoubtedly goes to physical or motor disability: almost 50 % of articles specifying disability refer to this type (47.5 % to be

⁸ Compare the results of a similar analysis conducted on the Corriere della Sera publications during the year 2019 (Melchior, 2023). While maintaining the same overall form, with a large presence of disability described as a generic and abstract concept, in the Corriere there is a narrative with a greater presence of life stories and individualisations of disabled people than in the Ansa analysis. A further difference also results from a stronger presence of 'claims' aimed at denouncing the lack of accessibility or the non-compliance of institutions or regulations in this regard: this is one of the themes most present in the Corriere's narrative and, on the contrary, it is a minority in Ansa's publications.

exact). In contrast to what usually happens, however, the second place in citations does not concern sensory disability (12.8%) but rather intellectual disability (17.3%). The following table shows the hierarchy of visibility that we track.

Table 1. *Typologies of disabilities traced in the corpus (with percentage values)⁹*

<i>Typology</i>	<i>%</i>
Physical disability	47,5
Intellectual disability	17,3
Sensory disability	12,8
Psychic disability	9,5
Autism spectrum disorders	6,8
Generic 'disability condition'	3,8
Other	2,3

The fact that Ansa's narrative is strongly characterized by reference to disability as a generic and abstract concept, however, goes even beyond the data we cited above. Indeed, more than 10 % of the cases in which specific typologies of disability are mentioned (the cases we have counted and included in Table 1) indicate disability in a manner that is nonetheless generic, albeit as resulting from the listing of several specific types of disability: the typical form is to speak of 'physical, mental and sensory disabilities.'

Consequently, even if specific typologies of disability are mentioned, we can conclude that even in these cases we are in fact talking about an abstract and general disability. Apart from that, almost 4 % of cases speak of an undefined 'condition of disability' or disability is introduced as a generic consequence of the invalidating aspect of certain diseases (here the typical form is to use the expression 'psycho-physical disability').

The clearest result that emerges from this analysis is the confirmation of the primacy of physical and motor disabilities in Ansa's typologies. There is a slight difference in the hierarchy, with an increased importance placed on intellectual disabilities at the expense of sensory disabilities. However, most importantly, the fundamental aspect is the absolute prevalence of a generic and abstract discourse, wherein disability is presented as an impersonal concept, without any specificity or personalisation whatsoever.

5. Placement in the sections of the 'Notiziario'

The quantitative under-representation of the phenomenon of disability in the narrative of the 'Notiziario dell'Ansa' emerges in an even clearer way considering the placement and actual content of the articles.

On a merely quantitative level, half of the articles in our corpus are published within the 'News' section (816 articles or 48.2 % of the total). This is followed by the 'Politics-Italy' section

⁹ We are aware that the different typologies mentioned in the table are not exclusive and that they partly overlap or cross each other logically and practically. We preferred not to reorder these data but simply show them directly in the way they are made explicit in the narrative of the Ansa.

with 21.2% (359 articles). Around 10 % are the news categorized as ‘Entertainment’ (12.1%) and ‘Economy-Italy’ (8.8%).

The picture is completed by 5.1 % of articles in the ‘Foreign policy’ section, 4.3% in the ‘Sport’ section and a residual 0.2% in the ‘Regions’ section (Figure 1).

However, as we shall see, this distinction does not account for the number of pieces actually devoted to disability and cannot be used to provide us with a detailed map of which themes characterize the articles.

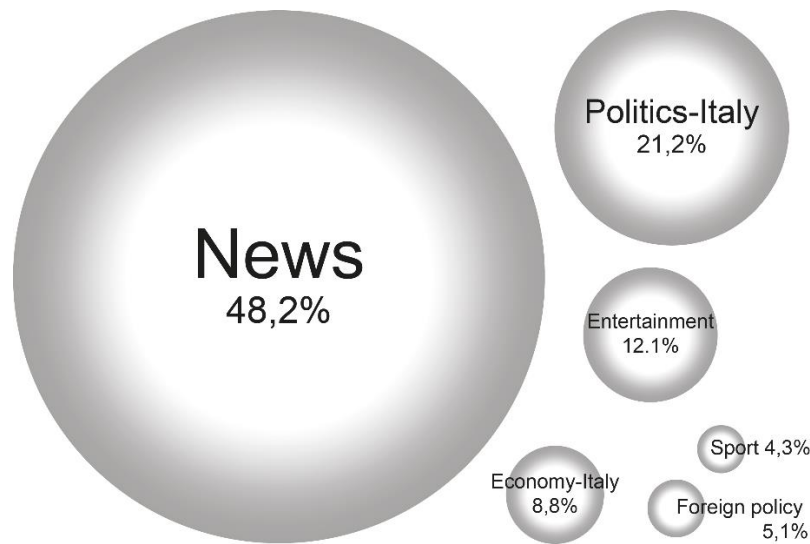


Figure 1. Distribution of the 1692 articles into the various sections of the ‘Notiziario’

For each of these sections, we therefore collected, the totality of the articles, arranging them in chronological order by publication date, and proceeded to an extensive reading of the material (title, subtitle, and full text) by proceeding with a step-3 sampling out of a random number.

The sampling procedure was required to reduce the quantity of articles to a total number of articles compatible with the time required for 1) extensive reading and 2) qualitative categorization which, at the end of the work, were carried out on a total of 564 total articles.

The extensive reading first of all resulted in the categorization of the articles into three groups (articles ‘on topic,’ which actually address the issues of disability and people with disabilities; articles considered ‘off topic,’ in which the keyword results in pieces that then do not address subjects related to this topic in any way; and ‘intermediate’ articles that we consider somewhere between the previous two, in which disability is present but does not result as the main subject, of which it is only an apposition, an addition endowed with meaning but not central to the news).

For each of these sub-groups we then identified, again using extensive reading and categorization conducted with qualitative methods, the main themes covered by the articles and, consequently, the ‘map’ (Gleeson, 1999) or the ‘typicalities’ of the narrative proposed by Ansa in its different sections.

6. Qualitative analysis of the 'News' section

Slightly more than half of the 816 articles in the 'News' section actually focus on disability-related issues, either directly or as an essential element of the subject of the article itself (56.8%). On the other hand, 12.2% of the articles revealed themselves, through extensive reading, to be 'off-topic', present in our corpus because of the keyword but without dealing, in any way, with issues really related to disability. The remaining 31.1% were categorised as 'intermediate' between these two poles, where we find precise references to disability but this does not result as the main theme of the article (as we shall see, we have summarised these articles with the label 'in which also', to indicate articles devoted to other themes 'in which also' disability plays a role).

In the news articles that refer to disability or disabled people as a central theme, we find a significant presence of news items that could be defined as 'crime news' (concerning cases of aggression, cyberbullying, harassment, offence or sexual abuse suffered by disabled people; various threats, extortion or intentional acts such as 'a baby gang raid' against a 'migrant and disabled' boy or the story of a disabled person falling out of a window in a case of attempted murder, and so on). For example: 'Kicking, punching and racial slurs against a 29-year-old Gambian migrant suffering from a mental disability'; 'Both a physical and psychological assault that led the 30-year-old, who suffers from deaf-mutism, to throw himself out of a window.'

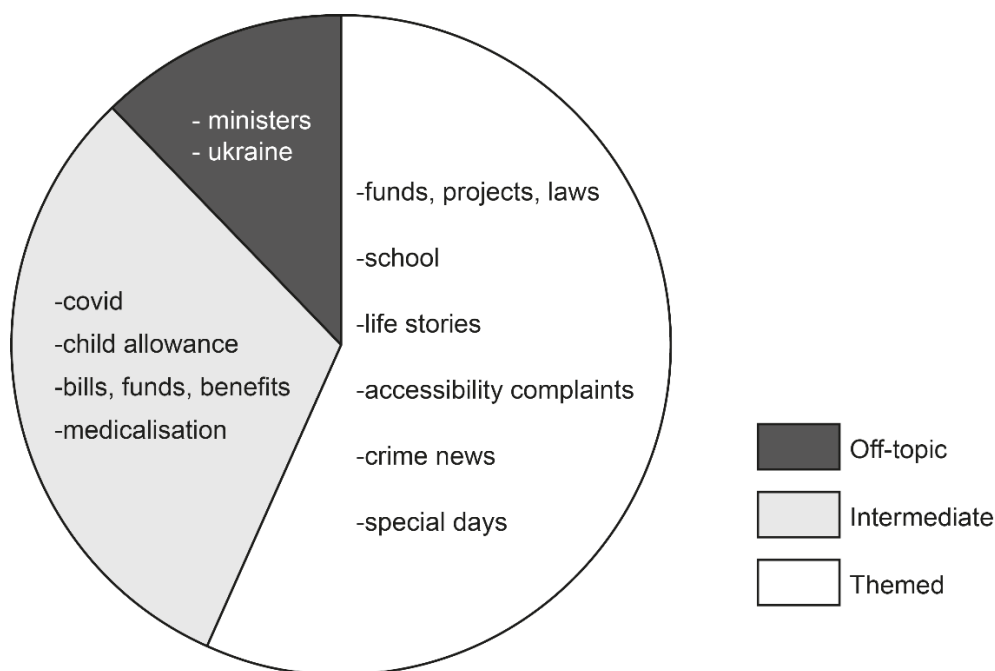


Figure 2. Main subjects of 'themed', 'intermediate' and 'off-topic' articles

Another strong thematic core concerns complaints about situations of lack of accessibility (such as the disabled person 'left stranded' by Trenitalia - 'Trenitalia, no one prevented a disabled person from boarding a train' - the disabled influencer who has expressed discontent at not having received a pass to circumvent the queue at an event. to an event, the public accusation of not being able to vote because of a broken lift, the disabled child who 'misses'

the school trip because the school cannot find a bus with a platform, and so on). Life stories considered to be successful are another consistently present thematic area. They range from the boy with Down syndrome who managed to get a diploma ('Down syndrome: Thomas's victory, he got his high school diploma'), to the disabled girl who was able to realise her dream of climbing to the top of the Leaning Tower of Pisa thanks to the assistance of a special backpack carried by her father; from the exploits of Simone Dessi, an athlete with disabilities who demonstrates that 'boxing is a sport for everyone' to the wheelchair athlete who 'conquers 'Cima Coppi' on the Stelvio'; and, to end, life stories such as those dedicated to Alessandro, 'deaf and heading towards blindness', testimonial for fashion, or to the 'first para-astronaut'.¹⁰ This thematic core of life stories is the only one that presents customised situations, including the protagonist's name, typology of disability and other useful details to describe the person as a whole.

Important themes in the 'news' articles are also those concerning the school sphere, with the 'usual' need, reiterated by several sources, to recruit new support teachers; and more generally the administrative-institutional theme related to laws and facilities for disabled people and caregivers. Numerous articles dedicated to events such as the 'International Day of People with Disabilities', the 'National Braille Day', the 'World Down Syndrome Day', the 'European Deafblindness Day' and other similar initiatives complete the picture.

A particular theme, which recurs several times in Ansa's narrative of 2022, is that of the Istat research dedicated to surveying the school population of 'students with disabilities', both at compulsory education and university level, surveys carried out by Istat on the basis of Miur data in the year 2021 and published precisely in the year analysed by our research (Istat, 2022). On the other hand, 31.1 % of the articles in the 'news' section was categorised as 'intermediate', articles in which the theme of disability is significant but consists only of an apposition or specification to a broader subject. Many of these articles, especially in the first part of the year, present the 'tail end' of COVID's media relevance, citing the condition of disability as one of the frailties to which the address of the fourth vaccine dose and also the project of compulsory vaccination for the 'frail categories', which was later not realised. In both cases disability is included in a generic form within the various types of fragilities taken into consideration¹¹: 'we want to strengthen the field of home care, palliative care, disability and the elderly'.

Similarly, many articles deal with the rules for re-entry into attendance at school or university, after the various periods managed online for the pandemic, where specificities in the rules for students with disabilities always emerge. A very present theme, debated almost throughout the year, is that of the 'universal child allowance', in which there are specificities related to the disabled status of children. The picture is completed by the 'usual' articles devoted to the legislative proposals, funds and benefits that various politicians or institutional

¹⁰ John McFall, British Paralympic athlete, first disabled astronaut selected by the European Space Agency.

¹¹ 'The categories of fragile and very fragile patients, as indicated by the Ministry of Health circulars (...) include the following situations: solid organ transplantation under immunosuppressive therapy; haematopoietic stem cell transplantation; waiting for organ transplantation; T-cell therapies; oncological pathology; primary immunodeficiencies; secondary immunodeficiencies; dialysis and severe chronic renal failure; previous splenectomy; AIDS. Fragile categories also include people with Down syndrome, severe obesity and disabilities (physical, sensory, intellectual and mental)'. Extract from the article 'Fragile 3 mln Italians. Not vaccinated 1.2 mln over 60; Ten categories most at risk, from transplant patients to oncologists' published on 5 January 2022, author's translation.

representatives promise, or request, with specific or ‘aggravating’ features linked to disability conditions¹². There is also a series of articles in the medical field, which are in any case a minority, citing disability as a generic consequence of disabling diseases or the adverse effects of certain medicines.

On the other hand, 12.2% of the articles were substantially ‘off-topic’. Many of them are articles that simply mention the various ‘Ministers for Disability’¹³ who succeeded one another during the period covered by our corpus, without, however, the topic addressed by the Minister in the piece being in any way related to disability itself. These articles are present in our corpus simply because of the label designating the institutional title. The second strong theme is related to the events in Ukraine. The narrative formula of these articles is almost always the same: politicians, institutional representatives or prominent people recalling the importance and difficulty of welcoming so many people displaced and refugees from the war. In this type of narrative, people with disabilities are added to the list of ‘women, children, the elderly’ and so on who represent the ‘weak categories’ to be specifically protected within this context¹⁴: ‘Cornado said that Italy "is concerned about the situation of women and girls, children, people with disabilities and others in vulnerable situations as well as alleged cases of sexual or gender-based violence"’.

7. Qualitative analysis of the ‘Politics-Italy’ section

The ‘Politics-Italy’ section contains even more ‘off-topic’ articles (18.8%). Here again, the most typical content is the quotation of Stefani or Locatelli: these articles are included in our corpus because of the keyword in the official title of the Ministry. The ‘Ministers for Disability’, however, in these off-topic articles talk about or are called upon for other political issues, in no way related to the topic of disability.

¹² For example, isolating only the funds, we find numerous mentions of the various: ‘fund for assistants to disabled pupils’; ‘autism fund’; ‘inclusion fund’ for accessible tourism; ‘support fund for semi-residential facilities for people with disabilities’; ‘fund for the right to work of the disabled and on targeted placement’; the hoped-for ‘single national fund for disability’ up to the ‘non-self-sufficiency fund’ financed by the NRRP which, according to Minister Stefani, ‘will reach almost a billion in 2025 and of this billion, half is allocated to disability’ (article of May 22, 2022, author’s translation.).

¹³ A specific ‘Ministry for Disability’ was introduced in Italy in 2018 by the Conte I government, in the form of the ‘Ministry for Disability and Family’, a mandate held first by Lorenzo Fontana and then by Alessandra Locatelli. Between January 2020 and February 2021, the relevant competences were transferred to the ‘Office for policies in favour of persons with disabilities’. The ministry was then re-established by the Draghi government in 2021 in the form of the ‘Ministry for Disability’ (headed by Erika Stefani) and by the Meloni government (Locatelli again). The ministers who have succeeded each other in the ministry are all members of the Lega party.

¹⁴ See, for example, the news report of 20 June in which President Biden on the occasion of World Refugee Day emphasises that his administration is also committed to supporting the ‘most vulnerable’ refugees such as ‘women, children, members of the Lgbtqi+ community and people with disabilities’; or, on 20 October, the description of the National Plan of Action against Trafficking and Serious Exploitation of Human Beings concerning the ‘risk of serious abuse and exploitation faced by people who are also moving within European borders, particularly women, children, persons with disabilities, and serious or chronic illnesses’ (author’s translation).

The contents of the articles considered ‘intermediate’, again about one third of the total (31.1%) can be summarised in the formula ‘in which also’: these are articles devoted to other topics ‘in which also’ disability plays a role. The main topics are COVID-related protections; worker protection; laws or bills, such as the ‘family act’, the new law on sport, the change of rules on citizenship income and the objectives and funding of the NRRP. In all these issues, which are presented as the main focus of the article, we always find the argument that these laws, these protections, etc., are ‘also’ aimed at the disabled population, often with specific regulations that may favour their inclusion and the improvement of their living conditions.

On the other hand, half of the articles in this section focus on disability-related issues. There are several items that, in relation to the financial manoeuvre, urge various politicians to comment positively on the increase in funds for the disabled, for caregivers, for families of autistic children, for disabled students, and so on. Of particular relevance are the many articles presenting, describing and glorifying the importance of the ‘International Day of Persons with Disabilities’, and also the initiative of the Financial Police (‘Guardia di Finanza’ in Italian), which was the first to ‘include athletes with physical and sensory disabilities in the State’s military sports groups’ (‘Paralympians in Fiamme Gialle, Pancalli "dream come true"; "We celebrate this achievement by thanking Guardia di Finanza").

The rest of the articles are the echoes of those events that we defined in the previous section as ‘crime news’. These events, when narrated as they unfold, find their place in the ‘news section; the reactions and comments of politicians and institutional representatives, on the other hand, end up in this section. Here we find reactions related to the importance of extending protection against violence to women with disabilities (a debate stimulated by actual violence reported); or reactions to the regrettable fact of disabled persons not being accepted on the Albenga-Milan regional train on 18 April; or the strike that was condemned because taxi drivers refused to guarantee the service also ‘to persons with disabilities, the elderly or those in need of hospital care. An indecency’. Here too, as often happens in media narratives, disability is grouped together in a ‘list’ with other problematic conditions considered to be fragile or difficult, an association that ends up connoting it in this way: ‘a lack of attention to the needs of the most vulnerable groups (children, the elderly, people with disabilities, migrants)’.

8. Qualitative analysis of the other sections of the ‘Notiziario’

The other sections of the ‘Notiziario’ present a much smaller number of articles. The sections ‘News’ and ‘Politics-Italy’, together make up three quarters of our corpus. The remaining 25% is fairly evenly divided between the sections ‘Economy-Italy’, ‘Foreign policy’, ‘Sport’ and ‘Entertainment’.

The section entitled ‘Economy-Italy’ (except for a small number of articles on unrelated topics that recur due to the use of the keywords in the ‘Minister of Disability’ title), is monopolised for three quarters by ‘intermediate’ articles. These articles mention disability in the context of broader discourses related to issues such as: 1) the issue of smart working regulations and its ‘inclusive potential’; 2) proposed laws or INPS regulations that include specificities for people with disabilities; and finally 3) the presence of some large companies, such as Trenitalia, TIM or Prada, involved in the management of initiatives or events that, while aiming at broader objectives, also include disability-related aspects. These may include the digitisation of a

museum, or an event dedicated to the inclusion of a broad spectrum of ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘fragile’ categories.

The small number of articles in the corpus contained in the ‘Foreign policy’ section are almost equally divided between ‘intermediate’ articles (those we have labelled as ‘where also’), which make up about 60 per cent of the total, and a remaining 40 per cent devoted explicitly to the topic of disability. The ‘intermediate’ articles are dominated by news about Ukraine, where disability often recurs as an effect of the war or as an aggravated difficulty in receiving refugees: ‘They are children, young people, adults and the elderly who are unable to leave the country under attack, or very young people who have lost the aids they need to write and read, or adults or the elderly, including those with very severe or multiple disabilities, who flee to safety’. There is no lack of mention of the topic of human rights, or again of COVID and its impact on fragile groups.

The articles that are specifically dedicated to disability report, for instance, about steps forward on inclusion issues in some countries such as China, as well as the activity of the European Union that recognises some good practices implemented in local territories in terms of inclusion. However, the most interesting aspect of these disability-focused articles is that they can be summarised as a long-distance debate on the virtues, or on the contrary the shortcomings, of Italian laws and activities towards the disabled population. On the one hand, we find declarations by Italian institutional representatives who, in international and supranational assemblies, describe the steps forward made by Italy to improve management of the disability phenomenon, both in terms of laws, data collection, definition, and in terms of activities considered virtuous; on the other hand, we find instead international stances, linked to bodies such as the UN or the European Court, which instead condemn or act against Italy for non-fulfilment on the same issues.

Half of the articles in our corpus in the ‘Entertainment’ section talk about television programmes, all from RAI, which narrate various life stories of people with disabilities, the specific topics of which range from success stories of disabled people to debates on sexuality, accessibility or the disability condition in general. The lion’s share is taken by the programme ‘O anche no’¹⁵ [‘Or even not’], which is specifically dedicated to these topics.

But there are also several mentions of ‘Che ci faccio qui’ [‘What am I doing here’], ‘Le parole di Gramellini’ [‘Gramellini’s words’], ‘Nei tuoi panni’ [‘In your shoes’], more generic programmes which, however, in some episodes, deal with the subject of disability, always presenting life stories. Outside the television environment, the articles tell of awards given to artists who have acted positively ‘also’ on disability-related issues (including an Oscar and a Siae¹⁶ award, for example) and some initiatives to increase the inclusion of disabled people in the enjoyment of museums or landscapes. We also find the mention of some works of art directly on the theme of disability or protests related to the lack of accessibility for some shows.

¹⁵ The show, aired since 2020 first on Rai 2 and then on Rai 3, now in its fourth season, is presented by the Rai website as follows: ‘Or even not - Telling diversity. The program, infotainment talk, dedicated to inclusion and solidarity that tells through the protagonists their stories, their expectations, difficulties and achievements. Directed by: Gabriele Mammarella. Host: Paola Severini Melograni’ (author’s translation).

¹⁶ The Italian Society of Authors and Publishers (Società Italiana degli Autori ed Editori - SIAE) is an association-based public body responsible for the protection and intermediation of copyright in Italy.

The articles in the ‘Sport’ section are all ‘on topic’. In addition to a frequent presence in ‘intermediate’ articles of small, medium-sized sporting events, which ‘also’ see the participation of inclusive practices towards persons with disabilities (understood as the audience and not as participants), the most frequent and typical contents concern the impact or planning of Paralympic events such as Milan - Cortina 2026, Paris 2024 and especially the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, held in the period covered by our research, whose sporting results achieved by Paralympic athletes (particularly Italian and Ukrainian ones) are repeatedly reported.

There is also the news (already found in the section ‘Politics-Italy’) related to the publication by the Financial Police of the notice that will allow several Paralympic athletes to join the ‘Gruppo Sportivo delle Fiamme Gialle’, described as ‘the first step of a path that will immediately allow Paralympic athletes to join the Military Sports Groups and the State Corps’, recurs several times and with great relevance within the ‘Notiziario’. Grassroots sport is hardly present in these Ansa articles, apart from a few sporadic mentions of its ‘inclusive value’: the theme of sport ‘from below’ only appears with reference to the new law on sport, which includes ‘specific allocations’ for the inclusion of students with motor disabilities in school sport activities, achieved by funding specific aids or prostheses.

9. An attempt at keyword-based quantification

The qualitative reconstruction of the previous paragraphs allowed us to provide a map, section by section, of the main themes addressed in the narrative of the articles containing the keyword in the ‘Notiziario dell’Ansa’. In this reconstruction we have not provided quantitative data, except for the percentage of articles considered ‘off-topic’, ‘intermediate’ or fully focused on the theme of disability. In fact, while this categorisation presents calculable categories, in the description of the themes the various subjects and articles overlap each other in a way that makes an attempt at quantification inappropriate in our opinion. In order to get a better idea of the ‘weight’ of certain topics and narrative attitudes in the Ansa, we have therefore derived the most frequent keywords within the titles of the 1694 articles that make up our corpus. Table 2 contains the list of words that recur a total of at least twenty times in the titles.

Table 2. List of most frequently occurring words in the corpus titles (by number of occurrences)

Word	Occurrences	Word	Occurrences	Word	Occurrences	Word	Occurrences
Rai	153	project	38	appointments	27	country	22
Stefani	134	NRRP	38	plan	26	world	22
Ukraine	90	support	37	Pope	26	fragile	22
Locatelli	85	social	36	centre	26	week	22
inclusion	84	first	36	study	26	day	22
work	76	millions	36	serves	26	hours	22
school	75	elections	36	law	26	President	22

Governme nt	62	Minister	36	EU	25	new	22
people	56	day	35	festival	25	autonomy	21
years	49	women	33	autism	25	still	21
sport	46	youth	32	commitme nt	25	dl	21
Lega	45	funds	32	Meloni	24	Inps	21
life	42	manoeuv re	30	ministry	24	fund	21
law	40	good	30	kids	24	services	21
tomorrow	40	children	30	health	24	regions	21
rights	39	children	29	year	24	do	21
million	39	Euro	28	resources	23	universitie s	20
covid	39	families	27	ok	23	thousand	20
today	38	aid	27	fact	23	Municipali ty	20

By far the most frequent word is 'Rai'. This result derives 1) from the presence of several Rai programmes that directly or indirectly also deal with the theme of disability, which we found as one of the most frequent themes in the 'Entertainment' section¹⁷; and 2) from the rather frequent habit of Ansa to issue press releases based on the presentation of the Rai television schedule, in which the programmes that talk about disability are also included; the specific keyword 'Rai' therefore recurs in these articles with great frequency (even if many of its recurrences are not actually linked to the specific programmes mentioned in point 1).

'Stefani' and 'Locatelli', recur in second and fourth place of the overall citations. This result suggests, at the level of interpretation, that the establishment of the 'Ministry for Disability', beyond the actual content of its activities about which we do not express ourselves, has indeed contributed to increasing public visibility on the subject. This visibility, however, often does not coincide with real attention to the issue, at least considering the articles in our corpus. In fact, the systematic reading of the articles we presented above allows us to point out that a significant percentage of the articles bearing the title of Minister for Disability do not then speak in any way about disability itself. These articles talk about completely different political issues in which the minister is involved in some way.

¹⁷ In future research, it might be interesting to analyse the content and narrative of disability that emerges from these RAI programmes, which often focus on emotional content and life stories.

list containing the words that in our opinion cannot be categorised in this scheme (the latter, not contained in Table 3).

Table 3. Keywords in the titles categorised by homogeneous logical fields (by number of occurrences)

The disability discourse		The political discourse		Public aid		Basic themes	
Word	N°	Word	N°	Word	N°	Word	N°
inclusion	84	Stefani	134	law	40	work	76
people	56	Locatelli	85	million	39	school	75
life	42	Government	62	project	38	sports	46
rights	39	Lega	45	NRRP	38	university	20
support	37	elections	36	mln	36		
social	36	Minister	36	funds	32		
day	35	Pope	26	manoeuvre	30		
women	33	EU	25	Euro	28		
youth	32	Meloni	24	plan	26		
children	30	ministry	24	study	26		
children	29	country	22	right	26		
families	27	world	22	festival	25		
aid	27	President	22	resources	23		
appointments	27	Municipality	20	autonomy	21		
autism	25			dl	21		
commitment	25			Inps	21		
kids	24			fund	21		
health	24			services	21		
fragile	22			regions	21		
TOTAL	654	TOTAL	583	TOTAL	533	TOTAL	217

The overall most frequent and most transversally present logical sphere in the articles is what we labelled ‘the discourse on disability’. In this sphere, after the word ‘inclusion’, we find ‘people’, ‘life’, ‘rights’, ‘support’, in addition to the presence of other categories that recur frequently associated with our theme, such as ‘women’, ‘children’, ‘babies’, ‘families’. The frequency of the word ‘day’ reminds us of the attention given to events such as the ‘International Day of Persons with Disabilities’ and the like, which we reported on earlier. These initiatives, at least from the point of view of media narration, do indeed seem to draw attention to the issue as they are frequently presented and described. Often, however, the articles that mention them are articles that refer to disability in a generic and abstract form, without any other details or specifications.

Just slightly lower in number of occurrences is the area that we could label ‘the discourse of politics’ (in which we have also included by extension the keyword ‘Pope’ and ‘EU’). In addition to the already mentioned keywords related to the Minister for Disability, we find ‘Meloni’, ‘EU’, ‘President’, ‘Government’ and ‘Lega’ (the party to which all the Ministers for Disability who have alternated so far since the inception of the ministry have been affiliated).

The third thematic area was labelled ‘public aid’. We find here the strong presence of abstract and generic keywords that gradually indicate the planning, legislation, events, and appropriations that are associated from time to time with the theme of disability. All these terms remind us of the frequency with which Ansa’s narrative gives an account of initiatives

implemented at an institutional and public level (and only very secondarily at a private level) to 'address the problem' of disability.

The presence in this list of keywords such as 'work', 'school', 'university' and 'sport' allows us to estimate, although in a very crude and generic way, the weight of these different themes in their association with the theme of disability. The sphere of study (school plus university) is, on the whole, the most frequent, as is also found in other research in which it emerges that the world of young people is the one in which the social impact of the theme of disability is most echoed, at least at the level of media narratives (see, for example, Goethals, Mortelmans and Van Hove, 2018, or Melchior, 2023). Prominent at the same time is the absence in this list of words of medical origin. To conclude on a positive note, the medicalisation of the topic of disability, highlighted by much research as a typical feature of disability discourse (see for example Bryant, Raphael and Rioux, 2019, or Hagood, 2017) is almost completely absent from the narrative proposed by Ansa.

10. Conclusion: 'Disability without the disabled'

Ansa's narrative of disability, analysed from a strictly quantitative point of view, indicates a form of under-representation of the phenomenon. The number of articles retrieved due to the presence of the keyword, compared to an estimate of the number of articles published by Ansa in a year, turns out to be significantly lower than the 'weight' of the community of persons with disabilities in the Italian population (and this even considering the strictest estimates possible with respect to a phenomenon that has not yet found a clear quantification).

Added to this is the fact that only slightly more than half of the articles in our corpus actually deal with the subject of disability or disabled persons. Fifteen percent of the articles were found to be completely 'off-topic' and should therefore logically be removed from the above estimates. And it is doubtful whether we can also fully take into account the approximately 30 % of articles we labelled as 'intermediate', pieces devoted to other topics 'in which' disability also plays a role, but often in the background (usually with a negative connotation, of disadvantage, fragility or 'exacerbating other conditions' described as problematic).

Physical and mobility disabilities are also the most frequent and 'visible' in Ansa's narrative, re-proposing the usual hierarchy of disabilities, albeit with some specification that sees intellectual disabilities rise in relative importance to the detriment of sensory ones. But the feature that emerges is the generic and abstract aspect of the discourse, even more so than in the normal media. Disability is presented by Ansa as a collective, depersonalised, stereotyped and faraway phenomenon.

Even the level at which issues are dealt with, e.g. legislative interventions, funding, projects that are dedicated to the issue of disability, in the Ansa narrative is almost always that of international or national projects. The local dimension is lost (which among other things suggests that local newspapers, which instead report a lot of news on the local level of management of 'disability issues', evidently build this news with direct first-hand work and not by drawing on the news agency) and this contributes to this sense of distance and depersonalisation. Life stories, although present, appear much less frequent than in newspaper narratives, and mostly recur as content descriptions in some television programmes dedicated to the topic, not thanks to the creation of a news story by the agency itself. This means that the specific life stories that are normally reported on in the newspapers

hardly ever rise to the level of general, or national, news, i.e. the target of bulletins that ANSA deals with.

Finally, we can say that the main themes by which disability is represented (and thus connoted) relate to 1) the sphere of politics (in which politicians talk about interventions, often legislative or concerning funds and aid, that have been achieved or are to be achieved) and 2) the sphere of public and institutional aid (on which the community of people with disabilities invariably seems to 'depend'). A strong core of the narrative is then the association of the concept of the person with disabilities with the thematic cores of family, youth, and school. All of this is presented against the background of a largely depersonalized and generic storytelling, in which from time to time disability becomes merely a collective label without any specification or is used as a word potentially interchangeable with the generic concept of 'frailty' or 'need for help.'

In conclusion, the picture that emerges from an overall reading of all these considerations is that the portrayal provided by the 'Notiziario Generale dell'Ansa' seems to be characterized almost as a 'narrative of disability without the disabled.' The phenomenon appears as 'general,' 'collective,' and 'systemic,' and the way to respond to this 'problem' (with obvious negative connotations and almost always used as a synonym for 'disadvantage,' 'difficulty,' or 'worsening' of other problematic situations) is that of the help provided by the public framework of laws, funds, financing, and policy at the national and international levels. A problem that is present but distant, whose 'solution' is to be sought in institutions or politics, and in which reference to concrete and real people, with their characteristics, history and ambivalences, is lost within an all-encompassing and generic label.

Keywords

Disability, Ansa, Social Representation, Media, Content Analysis, Italy

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