

# Breaking bad news: Making journalism accessible

## Part 1: An industry on the verge

Fewer subscribers. Declining revenue streams. A marked shift from print to online news consumers. A shift from old stately news buildings in downtowns to online newsrooms.

The media industry is shifting underneath journalists' feet – and for many the ground is collapsing. It's resulting in layoffs, buyouts, and a shift of more and more journalists choosing to freelance or leave the industry entirely.

The current journalism industry isn't ready to meet the shift of how its employees want – and need – to work when many employees are navigating a disability, chronic illness, or caregiving in their household.

Equal Access Public Media, a news organization dedicated to accessibility-first journalism, examined this issue and presents a solution.

### Reporting from America, where the newsroom is not accessible

It's no industry secret: employment in journalism is inaccessible and not diverse.

Jobs in journalism, whether in the newsroom or on the operations side, are inflexible. They are built around traditional office hours and require in-office work. And these jobs pay low salaries in many markets.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 7.3 percent of disabled adults are unemployed – twice the national average of nondisabled adults. (i) Young workers who are nondisabled are not immune from the problem: the Council on Disability Income Awareness estimates a quarter of today's 20-year-olds will become disabled during their working years. (ii)

In 2023, AbsenseSoft, an online business software platform, surveyed 6000 individuals who requested workplace accommodations from across 5000 companies in the U.S. About a third of employees surveyed waited a month or more to hear back about the accommodations request and 7 percent never heard back at all. More than half of employees expressed difficulty with the accommodations process and half said they did not feel completely supported. Meanwhile, AbsenseSoft also noted in its report that only 45 percent of requests were completing the 8-step ADA process laid out for companies who receive accommodations requests. (iii)

In 2024, Understood.org conducted a survey of people who identified as neurodivergent or who have learning and thinking differences. Understood found 6 in 10 people surveyed did not know accommodations they are entitled to at their place of employment; 49 percent of those same respondents could not identify who to talk to about accommodations at their workplace. That same survey found that those individuals who identify as neurodivergent or those with learning differences were reluctant to disclose their identity at work. About 59 percent of those with ADHD, dyslexia, dyscalculia, autism or other neurodivergent identities or learning differences said disclosing would affect their career negatively, and 1 in 4 respondents said they lost their job or were demoted when they had disclosed. (iv)

Disabilities and chronic illnesses also have an impact on the employment of caregivers as well, as shown in several studies that look at caregivers. About 53 million US adults care for a disabled spouse, elderly parent or relative, or child, according to a 2023 report from Guardian Life Insurance. (v) A 2022 study in Norway found mothers of disabled children are more likely to drop out of the workforce than fathers. (vi) Caregivers who did not hold employment outside of their caregiving responsibilities reported lower levels of social support, decreased life satisfaction, and less access to support services, according to a 2023 follow-up study in Croatia. (vii)

The industry is still lagging in diversity and presents barriers for disabled, chronically ill, and caregiver employees. Statistics show the industry is dominated by men and doesn't even survey for people with disabilities. Technology policies are not equipped to handle the nuances of assistive and augmentative communication or other adaptive technology, some of which uses artificial technology (including screen readers for those who are blind or have low vision, talk-

to-text for a variety of disabilities, grammar and spell checkers for those with dyslexia; and a number of other new adaptive technologies.)

People with a variety of disabilities may not be at the table in the newsroom or operations to help guide policy or design for end-user accessibility discussions because they are not comfortable identifying themselves as disabled, or because they are simply not hired in the first place.

For both journalists and news consumers, this lack of presence impacts people with disabilities, which includes more than 28.7 percent of U.S. adults who identify as disabled and about 50 percent who live with chronic illness, according to the Centers for Disease Control. (viii) It also impacts the 53 million US adult caregivers.

There is no industry survey of how many disabled or chronically ill people or caregivers work in the journalism industry – whether fulltime, parttime, or freelance. Therefore, we must extrapolate the employment rate using the overall employment data of people with disabilities from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In 2024, the BLS reported 7,528,000 people with disabilities were employed in 2023, including full-time, part-time, or self-employed. That’s about 22.5 percent of people with disabilities. Behind that number, the BLS reports about only 61.6 percent are employed full-time. (ix)

The BLS includes journalism in the occupation group of Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media. In 2023, the BLS counted 2,106,490 people in this occupation group. (x) BLS reports 2.2 percent of working disabled people in 2023 worked in that occupation group – about 1.9 percent of disabled working women worked in Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media and 2.4 percent of disabled men worked in that same occupation group. (xi)

That works out to be about 165,600 disabled people, or just 7.8 percent of the Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media occupation group. If that number is consistent throughout the occupation group and applies to journalism specifically, even though disabled people are more than a quarter of the U.S. population, they occupy only 7.8 percent of journalism jobs.

In 2024, Muck Rack, the Society of Professional Journalists and the American Press Institute surveyed more than 1,100 journalists in Muck Rack’s database. About 43 percent of respondents indicated a salary between \$43,000 and \$70,000 a year, but 64 percent reported working more

than 40 hours a week. (xii) According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average annual wages for reporters, news analysts, and journalists in 2023 was \$101,430. But this was bolstered by those working in Washington D.C., Los Angeles, and New York. The median salary among the 45,000 journalists identified was \$57,000, and journalists around the country in large markets reported a diverse range of salaries. Journalists in Chicago reported an average pay of just above \$57,000, while journalists in Boston reported around \$88,800. Journalists in Seattle reported just under \$86,000. Journalists in Houston reported an average pay of \$70,000 and journalists in Atlanta reported an average pay of \$92,000. (xiii)

In a survey by Pew Research Center of about 12,000 U.S. journalists, 76 percent of all reporting journalists surveyed indicated that they are White and 51 percent identified as male. The survey revealed "hard news" beats, which tend to pay better, such as sports; government and politics; science and tech; economy and business; and crime and law were all male-dominated. (xiv, xv)

### Accessible employment is the answer

Equal Access Public Media seeks to enrich the lives of the diverse disabled and chronically ill community, allies, and caregivers through accessible news, and to create accessible jobs in the news media industry.

At the heart of the second part of our mission is the idea that enriching lives through accessibility increases opportunities for employment and career growth.

EAPM proposes an accessibility-first policy in our employment strategy. Our journalists, editors, accessibility staff, and operations staff will be open to all qualified people, regardless of disability, chronic illness, or demands of being a caregiver to someone with a disability or chronic illness. We propose creating flexible, work-from-almost-anywhere jobs which will create a diverse team of workers from the newsroom to the operations side of the organization.

Such jobs may look different from a typical organization. EAPM views accessible employment as full benefits for all regular employees, whether they work 20-hours-a-week or 40-hours-a-week because a 20-hour workweek is a full-time commitment for some people with disabilities or chronic illness. We also believe flexible scheduling of an employee's 20- or 40-hour week that

works around their work commitments and their personal needs creates opportunities for people instead of creating friction between employers and potential employees.

Finally, we believe employees can work from almost anywhere. As an organization that will produce news, EAPM knows much of the work of journalists is done in the field. Visual journalists take their photos and videos where the story happens, and reporters are asking people questions on the scene. It makes little sense for any employee to be required to do their work from a brick-and-mortar office building when we have the ability to create an accessible digital office space. Likewise, we know some people may be more productive at their home office, while others may be more productive at the coffee shop. Still others may be more productive from the comfort of their sofa or their favorite bench at the park. EAPM believes wherever an employee can access a secure digital connection is an office.

The 2024 Muck Rack study findings align with EAPM's concept of work-from-anywhere and flexible schedules. While most journalists continue to work in a traditional brick-and-mortar office setting most of the time or part of the time, 32 percent of journalists would prefer to work fully remote, and 51 percent would prefer at least a hybrid situation. Meanwhile, journalists are not working a traditional 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. business workday schedule, often leading to working after hours: 79 percent report working after hours at least once a week and 34 percent are doing it most days. (xvi)

While EAPM built our accessibility policies with the needs of those with disabilities, chronic illness, and caregivers in mind, accessibility benefits everyone. These flexible policies open EAPM to a broad and diverse pool of employees and allow EAPM to hire employees across the United States, even those who may live in alternative housing situations.

### [The business case for accessibility](#)

An accessibility-first employment policy is fiscally responsible. With the right accommodations, all employees can thrive in a variety of roles leading to career advancement and greater representation in the media. A 2023 Pew Research study found half of all workers surveyed said working in a workplace accessible to people with disabilities is important to them. (xvii)

Case studies by the Web Accessibility Initiative noted that digital accessibility made business sense leading to innovation, brand enhancement, increased customer reach, and reduced legal risk. Accessibility also creates a more diverse workforce, leads to a diversity of ideas, and brings more experience to the team. (xviii) Businesses that invest in resources around accessibility and disability have a year-over-year 65 percent increase in the number of disabled applicants and are more likely to promote disabled employees according to a 2023 survey from the National Organization on Disability. (xix)

The World Economic Forum notes that employee churn is up to 30 percent lower when accessibility and inclusion includes well-run programs and accommodations processes are easy to navigate. This makes sense considering the number of people who self-identify as disabled, live with a chronic illness, and will become disabled during their working life. (xx)

While EAPM cannot anticipate every accommodation that an employee may need, we can make the process easier by creating policies and procedures that ease the process for employees. (One example is the nuanced EAPM AI policy that acknowledges adaptive and assistive communication technologies that employees may use in their daily lives as well as work.) Another is creating a clear and easy process from the outset for employees to request more specific accommodations.

A 2024 survey by the Job Accommodations Network noted that benefits from accommodations were “low cost, high reward.” More than 4000 employers were surveyed and 1,059 employers provided cost information related to accommodations. About 56 percent said the accommodations needed by their employee cost nothing, and 37 percent reported a one-time cost, averaging \$300. But the key findings included that accommodations helped keep a valued employee and there were multiple direct and indirect benefits from accommodations including: increased employee productivity; increased employee attendance; improved interactions with co-workers; increased overall company safety; and increased overall company morale. (xxi)

However, accessibility, which promotes diversity, is actually revenue positive. A study from Harvard Business Review noted that diverse workplaces had higher revenue linked to innovation. (xxii)

## Good news, good business

The journalism industry is changing and the way people work is changing. Journalism organizations must take an employee-first – and therefore an accessibility-first – approach to meet not just today’s challenges but the ever-changing seas.

EAPM can’t change the waters of the journalism industry or the challenges before us, but we can be nimble and adapt. That is a skill EAPM has learned from accessibility: learning to accommodate and learning to put people first.

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