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Dr. Jack A. Nelson:  
Early Pioneer of Media and Disabilities

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#### Abstract

This personal profile was written because of the critical innovative surge Nelson made in a field that at the time was almost non-existent. His awards as a writer, both academic and professional, show his consistent concern for those in the field of disabilities. As a paraplegic, Nelson is an example for people with disabilities doing continuous research to understand the disabled person's role in the media and how technology offers them a "new world" which they can enter. Though he is retired, Nelson is still known for his concern for people with disabilities. Essentially, this paper gives recognition to a man who promoted a field of research that was in the nascent stages.

The world of computer technology significantly changed societies' way for learning. For example, a man sits at his computer and enters an entirely different world through computer innovation. He is engaged in visits and eclectic conversation with people in a variety of places. He is a wheelchair user and believes that a person who has 'limited mobility' can participate in the real world through communication in the virtual world (Nelson, 2001).

Reflecting this belief, the field of communications has experienced a "new wave" of research in the last 20 years especially in the area of media coverage and disabilities. Nelson was a pioneer in this research and he recently retired from Brigham Young University in Utah after 25 years as an educator. During his career, Nelson published 19 articles in academic journals varying from The Journal of Mass Media Ethics to Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly. He presented numerous papers over the years at the Association of Education for Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) conferences on topics ranging from new technology and disability to the early history of Mark Twain's humor in frontier Utah. Nelson made over 40 presentations at a multitude of conferences and has written over 20 chapters for books or reviews. He wrote for the California Weekly and reported for the Desert News in Salt Lake City prior to joining academia. Nelson's work has also been reviewed in such publications as Editor and Publisher magazine. Nelson is widely

known in the communications field for his work.

He is the editor and the author of two chapters in the book *The Disabled, the Media, and the Information Age* (1994b) focusing on technology and the future of people with disabilities. Nelson published three novels and served as Utah editor for *Western Outdoor* from 1982 to 1985. His love for writing started at an early age. As a 19 year old student at Fullerton Junior College he won the California prize for best short story and as a undergraduate student at Brigham Young University he was honored with the best short story award on more than one occasion (Nelson, 2001). While working on a Ph.D. at the University of Missouri, Nelson won a university-wide short story contest. Later, as a professor at BYU, he won a Utah fine arts contest in the writing category.

Nelson became a paraplegic at the age of seventeen and he now serves as a member on the board of directors for the National Center for Disability and Journalism headquartered in San Francisco, California. (For more information, contact: <suzanne@ncdj.org>.)

Nelson's research on media and people with disabilities began in the 1980s and has continued through to today. *US News and World Report* wrote a piece on the success people with disabilities have using computers in everyday life (Sussman, 1994). He was quoted in the article as saying "for the first time in their lives, many of the disabled people find that they belong somewhere, a virtual community where they can be involved in daily events, as in any other community" (Sussman, 1994: 85). Nelson also researches negative stereotypes of the people with disabilities. He explains the role of civil society in regard to people with disabilities by saying that only when people with disabilities are shown in public like the workplace, parties, and fine restaurants as a routine matter will attitudes toward people with disabilities change (Nelson, 1994a).

Nelson believes that people with disabilities need a place to turn to avoid feeling bitter or alone. He explains that those who were the most discriminated against over the years were those with serious disabilities. Society's pessimistic view of those who have disabilities actually increase feelings of dependence and powerlessness (Nelson, 2000), but with more positive depictions in movies and television, attitudes changed. Nelson's research reveals that media is allowing society to develop more pragmatic and sympathetic portrayals of people with disabilities.

In *The Virtual Community: A Place For The No-Longer-Disabled*, (Nelson, 1994c) reassured people with disabilities that "the virtual community offers a great deal for nearly everyone - but especially for those who are limited in their participation in society. . . that journey into that community can be the most rewarding part of a day and can help add to the quality of life" (Nelson, 1994c: 101). There are "chat rooms" and "discussion groups" for people with disabilities (Nelson, 1993). In *Virtual Reality: The Promise of a Brave New World* for those with Disabilities, he talked about the benefits of communications technology and the potential it holds for helping people with disabilities in the future to improve their lives:

In addition, the virtual environment allows everyone - regardless of their physical abilities - to move about, to

fly through the air, to turn somersaults, or perform other feats - regardless of the physical constraints of the human body. When one can maneuver through a virtual environment by hand motions or even voice control, it makes no difference if the user is sitting in a chair or in a wheelchair. Through virtual reality those whose mobility is limited in the real world will be able to attend virtual conferences or visit exotic places in virtual travel (Nelson, 1993: 89).

As a founding member of AEJMC's Media and Disability interest group in 1989, Nelson was cited by Beth Haller in the newsletter as "an important scholar in giving media and disability issues visibility in AEJMC and nationally" (Haller, 2000). David Sumner, chair of AEJMC's Magazine Division to which Nelson also belongs, said "I don't know of any Magazine Division member who is held in higher esteem and affection by our colleagues than Jack." (Haller, 2000: 1-3)

Nelson said he found the communications field useful because he wanted "to be a novelist." Journalism and fiction writing worked well together because journalism deals with dramatic events and human problems, said Nelson. Communications "molds society for better or worse," and it serves as a means for making a difference in people's lives. Technology and the future of disabilities "has tremendous potential for changing the lives of people." Nelson said they enter a "different world" and through technology can participate in this world of on-line communication (Nelson, 2001). Although Dr. Nelson retired from Brigham Young University, research in the area of media and disabilities is still thriving. For example, Nelson cites Beth Haller, a professor at Towson State University in Baltimore, Maryland, as an active researcher in the field of media and disabilities. This field will continue to grow and contribute to society thanks to Dr. Jack A. Nelson.

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