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# GOOGLING “DEAF”: DEAFNESS IN THE WORLD’S ENGLISH-LANGUAGE PRESS

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AN INTERNET SEARCH TOOL, Google Alert, was used to survey the global English-language press July–December 2005 for references to deaf people. The survey found that such references focus on people who are deaf rather than the disability itself, thus demonstrating how well deaf people fit into the mainstream. Derogatory terminology such as “deaf and dumb” was rare. However, when used metaphorically, the term *deaf* usually had negative connotations. Implications for the public view of deaf people are considered in this context.

Historically, deafness and deaf people have mostly had “a bad press.” It was apparently known to the Greeks that deaf people used signs to communicate: Plato has Socrates (469–399 BCE) ask, in *Cratylus*, “Suppose that we had no voice or tongue, and wanted to communicate with one another, should we not, like the deaf and dumb, make signs with the hands and head and the rest of the body?” Hermogenes responds, “There would be no choice, Socrates.” Presumably, they had seen deaf people so conversing.

Only a century later, Aristotle (384–322 BCE), in a widely quoted statement, asserted that the deaf were “senseless and incapable of reason.” A few hundred years after Aristotle, the Roman poet Lucretius (c. 99–c. 55 BCE) summed up ancient attitudes in a couplet in *De Rerum Natura* (On the nature of things): “To teach the deaf no

art could ever reach,/No wit inspire them, nor no wisdom teach.”

St. Augustine (354–430 CE) taught that the deaf could not reach heaven, on the grounds that they could not hear the word of God, citing St. Paul: “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). St. Augustine also taught that children with disabilities were the consequence of the sins of their parents, so little sympathy need be found for such people.

The Old Testament was less harsh: “Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind” (Leviticus 19:14). Rabbinical interpretations, however, followed a stricter line. Under rabbinical law, deaf people (*Hereshim*) could not inherit property or serve as witnesses and were exempt from some consequences of illegal acts, as they were deemed unable to understand these consequences, but

they could marry and divorce. In religious affairs, the deaf were limited in the ritual functions they could perform. "A heresh could not blow the shofar nor read the megillah because they must be heard. A heresh could not give the Priestly gift of charity nor perform ritual slaughter lest he invalidate the slaughter" (Golinkin, 2004, para. 5). These laws continued in force through the Middle Ages and did not begin to change until late in the 19th century. In rabbinical opinion in the 20th century, as deaf people began to be educated they were freed of the old restrictions. They now can take a full part in Jewish life and ritual. Indeed, Jewish communities were early founders of schools for deaf students. A school for Jewish deaf children opened in Austria as early as 1844, England in 1865, Germany in 1873, and Hungary in 1876 (Soudakoff, 1995).

The New Testament tells of several of Jesus' miracle cures of deaf individuals, often depicting them as possessed of demons, for example, "When Jesus saw that the people came running together, he rebuked the foul spirit, saying unto him, Thou dumb and deaf spirit, I charge thee, come out of him, and enter no more into him" (Mark 9:25). Jesus indeed cited his cures as a sign of his divinity: "Then Jesus answering said unto them, Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached" (Luke 7:22).

The codification of Roman law by Emperor Justinian in 535 CE provided that people born deaf had little status and few rights under the law; they could not marry and could neither buy, sell, nor inherit property. These proscriptions were inherited by medieval and later law in Europe, and much later became one of the motivations for the

earliest attempts, about 10 centuries later, to educate deaf people so that they could inherit property and marry to carry on noble lineages.

These sayings and laws summed up a long European history of attitudes toward people born deaf or who became deaf early in life. *Deaf and dumb* in many European languages meant, as it does in English, not only "deaf and mute" but "deaf and stupid"—incapable of speech and, hence, reason, and, a fortiori, incapable of being educated.

Understanding and attitudes only began to change in the 16th century. An Italian, Giralomo Cardono, was one of the first to challenge Aristotle's dictum and declare that the deaf were capable of learning. In the 16th and 17th centuries, two Spanish monks, Pedro Ponce de Leon and Juan Pablo Bonet, were among the first known individuals to educate deaf students; the motivation apparently being so that they could inherit property from their wealthy families and recite the Creed. In 1750, Abbé Charles Michel de l'Épée founded in Paris what is often regarded as the first school for the deaf. Over the next 150 years, schools for the deaf were established throughout the world and the foundations of modern education of the deaf were established (including the "100 years' war" between proponents of strictly oral methods and any methods involving signing; see Moores, 2001, and Van Cleve, 1993, for an overview of many aspects of deaf history).

Along with these disadvantaging beliefs, which may not be totally overcome even today (Power, 2003, 2005), deafness has been burdened with negative analogical and metaphorical associations in many languages, which place it among humankind's undesirable attributes. Also, *dumb* in many languages has meant not only "mute" but "dull" or "stupid," so much so that

*dumb* has become a synonym for these terms. *Deaf* has common metaphorical uses in English in such phrases as "deaf to their pleas," "deaf to reason," "deaf to the righteousness of his case," and many others. The inference of such usages is that deafness in metaphorical senses is an undesirable human behavioral characteristic of not understanding a situation or not wishing to cooperate in activities that the commentator deems desirable or appropriate (or both). Perhaps these metaphorical usages feed into public views of the difficulty of a "deaf life" (Power, 2003, 2005, 2006).

On the other hand, since the International Year of Disabled Persons (1981), many nations have enacted disability discrimination legislation that may be assisting in making public views of the capacities of people with disabilities more enlightened. With increasing sophistication about disability generally and perhaps deafness specifically, one might expect to find more enlightened views being expressed in the news media. As regards deaf people, one might expect to find stories about the "normality" of their lives. To investigate whether deaf people are beginning to get "a better press," a study was conducted to determine what representations of deafness and deaf people might be found in the English-language world press.

## Method

Among the services the Google search engine has enabled is the unfiliated Google Alert service (<http://www.googlealert.com/>), whereby a user can enter a term, thus initiating a search of millions of Web pages and production of a report on occurrences of the term. The term *deaf* was entered into Google Alert and daily results saved from July 1 to December 31, 2005. The search was re-

stricted to English-language newspapers. Although the language of some of these newspapers' home countries was not English, these nations appeared in the search results because they had some English-language news publications. Analysis of the resulting mentions of *deaf* in the database was undertaken to tally the mentions during that period and the topics discussed in those mentions.

## Results

Occurrences of the word *deaf* in the Google Alert service occurred on all but one of the days in the survey period. Reporting from media outlets in 47 different countries appeared. The eight countries with the most mentions are listed in Table 1. These countries' 689 mentions represented 89% of all occurrences. Frequency among these countries ranged from 10 for Ireland to 445 for the United States. The United Kingdom and the United States accounted for 80% of all occurrences. Thirty-nine other countries were represented: 11 countries had 3 to 6 mentions, 15 countries had 2 mentions, and 13 countries had 1 mention, for a total of 774 occurrences (see Table 2).

A wide range of topics related to deafness and deaf people were mentioned in the articles. Table 3 provides data for the United States and the United Kingdom, the only countries with enough occurrences to enable a useful analysis. It can be seen that there are differences between the two countries in the relative frequency with which topics are mentioned. It seems from perusal of the returns that some differences may be explained in terms of the large number of smaller city newspapers sampled in the United States as compared to the United Kingdom, where the sample consisted mainly of national dailies. The large number of references in the categories "schools/education" and "sports" in

**Table 1**  
Top 10 Countries for News Media Mentions of the Word *Deaf*  
(Google Alert Press Survey)

Country	Mentions (N = 689)	% <sup>a</sup>
United States	445	65
United Kingdom	104	15
India	54	8
Canada	27	4
South Africa	20	3
Australia	18	3
New Zealand	11	2
Ireland	10	1

<sup>a</sup>Total exceeds 100 because of rounding.

**Table 2**  
Other Countries With News Media Mentions of the Word *Deaf*  
(Google Alert Press Survey)

Mentions (N = 85)	Countries
6	Malaysia
5	China, Nepal
4	Nigeria, Pakistan
3	Antigua, Fiji, Netherlands, Philippines, Singapore, Swaziland
2	Bahrain, Botswana, France, Ghana, Israel, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Malta, Russia, Switzerland, Taiwan, Uganda, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates
1	Bermuda, Brazil, Cuba, Egypt, Guyana, Indonesia, Iran, Lebanon, Namibia, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Tibet, Trinidad

**Table 3**  
Distribution of Mentions of Selected Topics in Google Alert Press Survey  
(by Percentage)

Topic	Country	
	United States <sup>a</sup>	United Kingdom
Schools/education	18	4
Services	15	23
Personalities	13	7
Metaphorical use	13	7
Technology	12	31
Sport	11	7
Events	8	7
Crime	8	7
Discrimination	3	7

<sup>a</sup> Total exceeds 100 because of rounding

the United States, for example, consisted mostly of reports of events concerning the local state school for the deaf.

Numerous reports in the category "schools" appeared in local papers in

the United States. Topics included such things as the provision of sign language classes, establishment of a literacy laboratory, complaints about school communication policy, possible school closures and parent and

Deaf community complaints, hearings about the future of schools, expansion of school services and buildings, and an "audit" to improve school performance.

Media reportage in the category "services" concerned matters such as interpreting (or often the unavailability of interpreting) for deaf people for the purposes of getting access to public events and meeting private needs, captioning becoming available in theaters, the availability of British Sign Language videotapes describing local council services, the increasing availability of video relay interpreting services in the United States, the establishment by British police of a text emergency services calling number, the provision of video information screens by San Francisco International Airport, the Red Cross's development, in association with the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, of a natural disaster plan for deaf people, "Deaf awareness" programs.

Reporting in the category "personalities" focused on well-known deaf people and their lives (e.g., I. King Jordan, whose retirement as president of Gallaudet University had recently been announced, and the deaf percussionist Evelyn Glennie). The possible establishment of a "deaf town" in South Dakota (to be named "Laurent" after the deaf pioneer educator Laurent Clerc) received several mentions. The presentation of sign poetry by deaf poet Peter Cook was noted. A report was provided on a group of deaf (some signing) Catholic seminarians. A deaf people's restaurant was established in Rome. One report featured a deaf woman who would soon climb the last mountain in her campaign to scale the 50 highest peaks in the United States, and another the appointment of the first deaf linesman in a professional soccer league. There was a sudden spate of reports on whether the hip-

hop artist Foxy Brown was deaf or not, and what that might mean for her career. One enterprising person advertised to ask any deaf "pagans or Wiccans" to contact her.

"Technology" news consisted mostly of reports of advances that might make it easier for deaf people to hear (especially via cochlear implants) and to communicate via electronic means: short message service on mobile phones, interactive pagers, and other electronic text communicators. The prototype "signing Web" that would automatically provide sign language interpretation of text was flagged, as was Bill Gates's prediction that in the future computers would be implanted into the body to assist people with disabilities in all kinds of ways, including allowing deaf people to hear. There were several mentions of the danger that iPods and similar devices could deafen habitual users if used at too high a volume. The establishment by Britain's Royal National Institute for the Deaf of a "phone-in" hearing test service was mentioned. There was a complaint in the United Kingdom of the scarcity of cochlear implants for infants under the National Health Scheme that was said to be causing delays in deaf children's development of speech and language. One British report described the development of a "deaf friendly" home smoke detector. Another told of scammers disrupting deaf telephone relay services in the United States by persistently making calls.

News in the "sport" category consisted mostly of reports of the performance of teams representing local U.S. state schools for the deaf. The survey period coincided with the Deaf Cricket World Cup, and there were a number of reports on the progress of teams fielded from countries as wide ranging as the United Kingdom, Nepal, India, Pakistan, and Australia.

The advent of the first deaf professional golfer was noted. Among the sports mentioned were cricket, rugby, squash, tennis, golf, baseball, softball, and swimming.

"Events" reporting included mention of local events such as church socials, school and deaf club meetings, and a rather "Gee whiz, isn't this wonderful!" report of a deaf lumberjack competition. The Fiji celebration of International Deaf Week was noted, as was a "Deaf Seniors Week" in California. Several reports described the difficulties deaf people had in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Reporting in the "crime" category told of offenses both by and against deaf people—occurrences were about evenly divided. Crimes against deaf people included rape, sexual assault, spousal abuse, abduction, and attempted murder. Crimes by deaf people included murder, spousal abuse, and assault. One case was a report of a fleeing deaf suspect being shot by police.

Items about discrimination were few. Mentions were made of would-be deaf blood donors who needed an interpreter for their predonation interview being barred from giving blood in Canada, a deaf Pony League baseball player in Hawaii being denied a dugout interpreter, the inability of deaf people to obtain driver's licenses in Japan and Jamaica, complaints about deaf people's lack of access to television in Ukraine, and the lack of access to education and employment in a number of developing nations. One item from the U.S. press told of police mistreatment of a deaf man after an accident and his registering of a complaint about it.

It is interesting to note that the old terms *deaf and dumb* and *deaf* linked with *mute* rarely occurred in the survey. One such mention came from the United States (about a "deaf mute biker"), another from New Zealand.

There was one instance of the use of *deaf and dumb* in a news item from the United Kingdom, and three more from countries where the first language was not English.

As noted in the opening section of the present article, the use of *deaf* in a metaphorical sense is of particular interest. A detailed count of all mentions during the survey period was undertaken to investigate this phenomenon. A total of 133 uses of *deaf* as a metaphor for ignorance or disregard or the like was found (i.e., 18.5% of all mentions). Typical uses were "Calls for gender equality fall on deaf ears" (United Kingdom), "A plea to deaf ears for some drug law reform" (Australia), "Twin Cities turn deaf ear to political talk-radio shows" (United States), "OPEC deaf to pleas to pump more oil" (United Kingdom), "Oregon turns deaf ear to naysayers" (United States), "Syria deaf to U.S. warning" (Egypt), "Hostage pleas fall on deaf ears" (Canada), "China turns deaf ear to peasants' cases" (France), and "Mercy plea falls on deaf ears" (Australia).

## Discussion

Google Alert provides people interested in deafness a convenient method of reviewing and researching what is currently being said about deafness and deaf people in the world press and on the Internet. Users can receive daily, weekly, or "as it happens" e-mail reports from a variety of sources: News, the Web, News and Web, or Groups.

From the present survey, it would appear that the lives of deaf people are fairly represented in the English-language press. Few of the old derogatory terms are used about the deaf, and most stories present them as doing "ordinary" things and leading "ordinary" lives, even if, in some cases, within the Deaf community. The topics are ones that also apply to hearing people and their lives: concern for their

schools; taking an interest in and, when necessary, protesting cuts in services, and agitating to improve them; taking part in sports and social events; being affected by crimes—and committing them! Relatively few cases of discrimination against deaf people are reported, and in several cases their ability to take advantage of antidiscrimination laws is evident.

Successful deaf people are discussed without making too much of it (i.e., without discussion of deaf people succeeding "against all odds" or "in spite of their handicap"). Prominent deaf people (e.g., I. King Jordan and Evelyn Glennie) are presented as succeeding despite their deafness, but without inordinate emphasis on this aspect.

Reports on technology as it affects deaf people are mostly about how it is making their lives easier, especially as far as communication is concerned (e.g., via new methods of text communication on cell phones and computers), giving them better access to events and information in both the deaf and hearing worlds (see also M. R. Power & D. Power, 2004).

Cochlear implants are frequently mentioned as "cures" for deafness, especially for children, enabling them to lead "normal" (i.e., hearing-like) lives. Futuristic technology is forecast to enable deaf people to hear but also to make access to Web text visible to the signing deaf by automatic translation into sign language.

Considerable use of the term *deaf* as a metaphor was found. Almost 20% of reports contained a metaphorical use of the term. Invariably, the sense that a reader would get from reading these reports is negative: Deafness is something that leads to undesirable events and outcomes. I have examined such usages in more detail (Power, 2006), and have formed the view that constant repetition of such themes

does tend to form a background to public views of disability and people with disabilities—in this case, deafness and deaf people. To what extent such background feelings are countered by the generally "normal" view of the lives of deaf people examined in the present article cannot be determined at this time, though it seems possible that the normality of the lives of most deaf people may counteract any negative impressions generated by metaphorical views.

I have considered press representations of deaf people under the rubric of "medical" versus "social-cultural" models (Power, 2005). Most reports surveyed in the present study present deaf people leading ordinary lives and doing ordinary things that are also done by hearing people. While not explicitly "social-cultural" in the Deaf community/sign language-using minority community sense, these reports do not present deaf people as in need of being "cured" and so tacitly support this position. Only some technology reports could be seen as upholding the medical model, according to which deafness is a condition to be "cured" by such devices as cochlear implants or futuristic computer-human interfaces. The press seems to have a commonplace view of deafness, and it is so presented to the advantage of deaf people.

Deaf people at last may be getting "a good press."

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