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“Disability Porn”: A CBS Sunday Morning News Special

Tahlia Little

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A rhetorical analysis seeks to explain the effect a piece has on its audience and if this was successful by examining the visual and textual choices an author made to achieve this goal. This kind of analysis focuses on the importance of rhetoric in writing and prompts the reader to consider how an author writes utilizing rhetoric. The following essay is an example of a rhetorical analysis of a multimodal artifact. This analysis of the CBS Sunday Morning News special “A quadriplegic mother on raising twins: Having a disability is not the end of the world” examines the American cultural thinking that disability is a negative thing.

This episode of CBS Sunday Morning News, narrated by Lee Cowan, was aired on June 11, 2023. This is about one year after the release of the documentary “Dani’s Twins” on May 28, 2022. The hit documentary prompted the news story following a young mother, Dani Izzie, and her family consisting of her husband, Rudy, and their twin daughters. The news story, targeted towards the typical Sunday Morning News audience, is a heartwarming piece that serves to inspire its audience to adapt and overcome their own challenges. In this video, CBS News interviewed Rudy and Dani, who, at the age of 23, slipped and fell on a bathroom floor, sustaining injuries that left her paralyzed from the chest down. The interviews mainly focus on Dani and how she has adapted to her disability to get married and raise twin girls. The news story shifts between interviews and clips of Dani adaptively living her everyday life, including working from home, doing household chores, and playing with and raising her children. Dani shares that throughout her life with disability, she has experienced a high level of scrutiny, as she has not shied away from sharing her story. Despite strangers questioning her, Dani and her husband, Rudy, are determined to change the mindset that living with a disability is inspiring. Dani’s mission is not to be a marvel to others but to be seen on the same level as everyone else.

While Dani states that she sees herself as an ordinary mom, the video repeatedly emphasizes that she is far from the typical parent and that experiencing motherhood with a disability is an extraordinary feat. This is accomplished through rhetorical choices made by the video’s producers to contrast the interviewee’s message that disability is not inspiring by telling the story in an inspiring way. This opposition overshadows the message of the disabled individual, thus furthering the societal norm of thinking of disabilities as anything but normal.
To begin, the CBS news story highlights Dani as extraordinary through the development of different segments that together logically tell Dani’s story in a setup that portrays her as an inspiration. The video begins with news anchor, Jane Pauley, introducing the story, followed by Lee Cowen introducing Dani and her family. The first segment displays images of a “normal” functioning family: a husband and wife reading and playing with their children. The narrator explains that Dani and her husband Rudy are raising twin girls, Lavinia and Georgiana. However, the next segment of the video shows what makes this family so interesting: Dani’s disability. The narrator explains that Dani is a quadriplegic. This is paired with images of Dani in her wheelchair, still taking care of her children, but with the help of her husband, Rudy. Following this, CBS includes background information about Dani’s injury and the hardships she faced immediately following it. The news story displays past images of Dani before, during, and after her accident, as well as interview segments. This is paired with Cowan’s description of her accident and disability that ensued. The remainder of the video includes where Dani is now with her personal, work, and family life. The CBS narrator updates the audience on Dani’s life by sharing how she manages to take care of her family and herself, as well as work a full-time job with a disability. The choice to organize the video in this specific way is an example of logos, a rhetorical strategy that appeals to the audience’s sense of logic and reasoning. This is achieved by logically transitioning between ideas, as each section focuses on a different aspect to portray the life of a normal family, the difficulties of disability, and the success of overcoming them. Overall, these sections work together to set up the video’s storyline to highlight how Dani surpassed challenges and thus, is inspiring for doing so much with her life while living with a disability.

The first section of the CBS news story functions as an introduction to the Izzie family and what the video is about. Although the audience becomes aware that the video is about a person with a disability, the first minute of the CBS story gives no indication of who is disabled or what their disability is. The very first line the audience hears is that “to have a child, it’s one of life’s biggest decisions, made immeasurably more difficult if a parent is disabled” (Cowan, 00:0:00-00:00:09). From the start of the video, CBS uses logos to set up the idea that while motherhood itself is challenging, this, paired with disability, is a new level of immense difficulty. Jane Pauley’s introductory comment introduces disability as a negative thing and establishes the idea that disability makes everyday tasks that are normal to society much harder than they are for
the able-bodied. The statement lets the audience know that the video includes a disabled individual but does not yet reveal who this is. Following this statement, CBS includes images and an interview with Dani, a mother of twins. These two aspects introduce the audience to what seems like a “normal” family: a mother, a father, and their two young daughters. This normalcy is reinforced by images of Dani and her husband, Rudy, reading and playing with their children, Lavinia and Georgiana. Furthermore, the CBS producers include the following interview statement from Dani: “I’ve had periods over the past two and a half years where I’ve been very tired, just like any other new mom, you know” (Cowan, 00:00:40-00:00:47). The inclusion of this statement further demonstrates the normal family dynamics of the Izzie household. Throughout the clips shown of the parents, the camera angle always shows Dani and Rudy at the same level (Figure 1). This establishes the parents as equals and leaves the audience wondering how disability comes into play in this CBS news story. Overall, highlighting Dani and Rudy as a “normal” family helps the audience to connect to the story and set up the later logic that disability contrasts the idea of “normal.”

![Figure 1](image)

Although the first section portrays an “average” family, the next minute of the video announces how disability plays a role in the Izzie family in that it alters the way Dani must adjust to care for her children. The switch from displaying normalcy to contrasting this with disability suggests the idea that disability is anything but normal. CBS utilizes a downward camera angle and appeals to logic and emotions to portray this message. To begin, the narrator explains that “alongside their parenting challenges, are their personal challenges. Dani’s especially” (Cowan, 00:00:54-00:01:01). This comment explains that Dani is the one who is disabled, which we are shown through the video clips of her in her wheelchair and being helped by Rudy. The word “especially” establishes Dani as the outlier of the family because she is the only one who is disabled. Furthering this logic, the video claims, “But thankfully, her paralysis isn’t complete” (Cowan, 00:01:07-00:01:10). This quote serves as both an appeal to emotions and logic.
Specifically, the word “thankfully” suggests that having full paralysis would be the worst thing that could happen to a person. Additionally, the word “thankfully” in this quote has a very positive connotation and appeals to emotion based on the logic it establishes. Because it sets up the logic that full paralysis is the worst possible outcome, this word evokes some emotions of hope or positivity, making it seem like Dani’s life is still worth living because she maintains some bodily movement. In addition to the use of rhetorical appeals, the video utilizes camera angles to further develop the idea that disability is not normal. This is done by capturing footage with a downward angle (Figure 2). The video clips change from being shot at eye level to looking down on Dani. This downward camera angle implies that disability makes a person weaker and inferior to able-bodied individuals, which supports the message in this section that disability is abnormal and negative.

Additionally, the middle of the video serves to give the audience background information on Dani’s disability. It does so through dark images of Dani after her accident that left her disabled. These images are an example of pathos, an appeal to emotions, that demonstrate the dark, difficult time Dani went through when her life drastically changed. After explaining that Dani became disabled when “she slipped on a bathroom floor and snapped her neck, paralyzing almost everything from her chest down,” the video displays images of Dani in the hospital immediately following the accident (Figures 3-4). These images are all very hazy, with dark color hues, contributing to a more serious, somber mood shift. These shadowy visuals function as emotional appeals, evoking sympathy by displaying Dani in such a vulnerable state. The images make the audience think about what a hard and awful time Dani went through, thus appealing to the audience’s emotions. While these images portray the overall background story of Dani’s accident, they also serve a deeper meaning. They work to support the overall message of overcoming obstacles. They serve as evidence of Dani at her lowest point in life, creating the base that her life turns up from here. The images contribute to the video’s inspirational message.
by showing the darkness Dani will later emerge from as she chooses to continue with her life and overcome adversity. Overall, this section of the video provides information about Dani’s disability and sets up for the future sections of the video that play off of this to demonstrate hope and inspiration.

Even though the previous section of the CBS news story portrayed Dani’s disability as negative, the next three minutes of the video reflect a happier time in Dani’s life by demonstrating her journey to finding a partner, marrying, and starting a family. This is portrayed through appeals to pathos and a change in the color value of images. Lee Cowan begins this section of the video by stating, “that tenacity in part is perhaps what led her to putting herself out there on dating apps. That’s where she met Rudy in 2016” (Cowan, 00:03:32-00:03:37). Through the use of the word “tenacity,” the narrator makes the claim that Dani is a warrior for finding the strength to pursue the dreams she always had: to have a family. This idea of strength evokes emotions of hope and optimism because Dani was able to overcome her obstacles and come out the other end successfully pursuing her goals. While the narrator discusses Dani’s tenacity, the video displays images that, compared to those from the previous section, are clearly much brighter (Figure 5). These brighter images further support the message that Dani is strong; thus, the audience feels pride and hope because the video clips have also shifted from dark to light. This shift demonstrates Dani’s strength to overcome the darkest parts of her life.

In contrast, after the birth of Dani’s twins is shown, Cowan states that Dani’s experience raising her kids was “pretty humbling” (Cowan, 00:06:36). This specific word choice delivers a more negative connotation, implying that Dani is less of a mother because of the challenges she faces raising children as a disabled person. Specifically, the use of the word “humbling” indicates a sense of inferiority and suggests that her status as a mother is lower than that of able-bodied mothers. This draws on the audience’s emotions of pity, making viewers feel sorry for Dani
because of the challenges she faces. Additionally, the images during this comment display differences in color value when they show Dani taking care of the children with Rudy versus taking care of them alone. One example of this can be seen in Figures 6 and 7, which are shown directly after one another. In addition to the specific word choice used in this segment of the video, the value of the images also supports the audience’s pride in Dani for accomplishing her goals, but also sympathy for the challenges she faces. This first image (Figure 6) is of Dani and Rudy sitting together, changing one of the twins’ diapers. The image has a lot of white and brighter shades of color. However, the following image is of Dani alone with both children (Figure 7). In this image, the colors are much more muted, and the room is much darker, with the only light coming from behind the closed drapes. This shift in color and light assumes that parenting is harder for Dani than for Rudy because she is disabled. Overall, this segment of the video suggests that although she was able to persevere, she still struggles more than others because she is disabled; thus, it is impossible to have a “normal” family if you are disabled.

The final section of the CBS news story serves to establish the takeaway message that disability is inspiring, even though Dani urges people to use any word but inspiring to describe disabled people. This logic is set up by contrasting the way Dani wishes to be described with how the narrator describes her, as well as through the use of pathos. To begin this final section, Lee Cowan states, “And she does all of this while working a full-time job” (Cowan, 00:06:51-00:06:54). This vague statement evokes feelings of motivation and inspiration by emphasizing Dani’s achievements. This is particularly inspiring to the audience because Dani is not only taking care of twins but is doing so with a disability. While the statement does not necessarily point to both of these things, it can be inferred based on the topic of the video. Furthermore, Cowan further develops the message of inspiration by stating that, “Lavinia and Georgiana, now three, have unwittingly proven Dani’s critics all wrong. She’s thriving, and so
are they” (Cowan, 00:07:27-00:07:36). Once again, Cowan’s statement evokes feelings of inspiration by highlighting Dani’s perseverance in the face of criticism. While the video describes Dani as an inspiration, it is later noted that she wishes to be described as anything but that. The video includes the quote from Dani: “I wanna be seen as normal. I wanna be seen on the same level as everybody else. I don't need to be inspiring” (Cowan, 00:08:04-00:08:10).

Dani’s personal comment starkly contrasts the ideas set forth by the video’s producers. While the video portrays Dani as an inspiration, she explains that she wishes not to be seen this way. This elicits the idea that although disabled people wish to be seen on the same level as everyone else, our perception of them as a society continues to do the opposite. Even up to the end of the video, Dani reiterates that she wants to be seen as “normal,” however, the video repeatedly contrasts this by displaying Dani’s life with a disability as a remarkable feat and accomplishment. The CBS News producers succeed in doing this by logically setting up the video to support their purpose of the video as well as utilizing additional rhetorical strategies such as pathos, logos, color value, and camera angles within each section.

The problem with the video’s message is that it perpetuates the idea that disability is not normal. This creates an issue in the sense that it reinforces the continuity of viewing disabled people in a way that separates them from the rest of society. Overall, because the video’s message rebukes Dani’s personal message, the video suggests that society will continue to ignore the pleas of the disabled to be seen and treated on the same level as everyone else. The video instead implies that the voices of the disabled are not enough to break the cycle of society always thinking of disability as a negative thing and that those who are successful despite their disability are an inspiration.

Works Cited


g-twins/