(Re-)presenting the Paralympics: Affective Nationalism and the 'able-disabled'

Emma Pullen, Daniel Jackson and Michael Silk

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Corresponding author: epullen@bournemouth.ac.uk

Abstract

The relationship between media, sport, nations and nationalism is well established, yet, there is an absence of these discussions at the intersection of communication, Paralympics and disability studies. This omission is particularly significant considering the rapid commodification of the Paralympic spectacle, exacerbated by the entry of Channel 4 (C4) as the UK Paralympic rights holders, that has seen the games become an important site of disability (re-)presentation. In this article, we focus on the construction of national, normative, disabled bodies in Paralympic representation drawn from an analysis of three integrated datasets from Channel 4's broadcasting of the Rio 2016 Paralympics: interviews with C4 production and editorial staff; quantitative content analysis, and qualitative moving image analysis. We highlight the strategic approach taken by C4 to focus on successful medal winning athletes; the implications this has on the sports and disability classifications given media coverage; and the role of affective high-value production practices. We also reveal the commercial tensions and editorial decisions that broadcasters face with respect to which disabilities / bodies are made hyper-visible - and thereby those which are marginalized - as

national disability sport icons that inculcate preferred notions of disability and the (re)imagined nation.

Introduction

The complex relationships between media, sport, nations and nationalism have been well established in academic debate (see e.g. Bairner, 2001; Andrews & Jackson, 2001; Silk et al., 2005). A particular focus has been the role of sport mega-events (SME) in mediating national narratives and imagined communities around normative discourses of race, ethnicity and citizenship (e.g. Robins, 1997; Silk et al., 2005). However, there has been a relative absence of these discussions at the intersections of communication and disability studies. Here, debate about the mediation of nationalism in Paralympic sport has been all but absent, a particularly telling omission given the recent, but significant, shift of the Paralympics from past-time to global spectacle (Silva & Howe, 2012). Given the accelerated commodification of the Paralympic spectacle (Silva & Howe, 2012) and the shift to what we have previously termed a 'hyper-visibility' of disability (Pullen et al., 2018), our focus herein is on the media's role in the social construction of disability and the production of Paralympic media texts as those through which political/ national discourse can be traced (Whannel, 2013).

Critically engaging with representations of disability and disabled Paralympic bodies raises important questions, especially when held relational to a celebrated and 'normative' national body politic, one derived and cultivated from enhanced forms of neoliberal embodiment (sculpted, healthy, fit, sexual, heteronormative, and attractive) (Turner, 1996). With death, age and disability often positioned as the antithesis to such a normative body politic, media depictions of disability have, for the most part, drawn on a limited number of stereotypes, including: helpless, passive victims; vulnerable and pitiable and childlike dependents; and

'supercrips' predicated on inspirational stories of determination and personal courage to overcome adversity (Barnes & Mercer, 2010). Yet, the hyper-visibility and celebration of disability in and through the Paralympics that intends to provide a global sporting spectacle for the empowerment of disabled people for a more equitable society (See, Howe, 2008) could challenge such dominant narratives.

In this paper, our interests centre on the very particular and specific construction of national, normative, disabled bodies in, and through, Paralympic representations. Building upon extant media and disability scholarship, we draw on three integrated datasets (interviews with production and editorial staff, quantitative content analysis, and qualitative moving image analysis) to develop an empirical basis for enhancing understanding of Paralympic bodies, the contemporary neoliberal nation, and disability politics. In so doing, we highlight the implications of a focus on successful medal winning athletes with respect to which para-sports and perhaps more important, which disabilities/ bodies are made *hyper-visible* — and thereby those which are marginalized — through production practices that present productive, neoliberal, national disability icons whom inculcate particular, preferred, notions of disability and the (re-)imagined nation.

Sport, the Nation, Nationalism

The staging initially of exhibitions, expositions and later sporting events—what Roche (2000) calls event ecology—paralleled the growth and spread of modernity and nation-state consciousness; they were (and still are) cultural occasions in which to tell the story of a country, a people, a nation. With Roche (2000), they offer a space in which to construct and present ideological images of self for recognition in relation to other nations and the eyes of the world; they offer space for contouring a national past, present and future and for reaffirming common

tradition and community (see also, Gellner, 1983). With Anderson (1991), it is perhaps sport, as a cultural form par excellence, that represents a compelling and seductive agent of cohesive commonality, a (symbolic) collective glue, that creates the imagined community of nation. That is, sporting events, national teams and the hosting of SMEs are particularly 'lustrous' and affective cultural forms (see Silk, 2012) constituting part of what Stuart Hall termed 'narratives of nation'. They are discourses, practices and experiences often mobilized and appropriated by dominant groups to (re)define the parameters of the sanctioned identity (e.g. Tomlinson & Young, 2006), the people and the nation: they are mediums for the promotion of particular 'selected' (Hobsbawm, 1983) versions of national discourse. Thus, and as an element of the cultural terrain within a wider cultural politics, critical interrogation of the national — as writ large on the bodies of Paralympians — can aid understanding of which discourses are mobilized, and by whom, in regard to the organization and discipline of daily life in the service of particular corporo-political agendas (Giroux, 2001; Grossberg, 1992).

Focusing on sporting practices in the delineation of particular national sensibilities is, not in and of itself, new. There exists a sizeable amount of scholarship on the articulations between corporate capitalism, the media, and the discursive (re)production of specific national cultures, national nostalgia and select sporting practices (e.g. Bairner, 2001; Tomlinson & Young, 2006), such that corporatized sport has become arguably the most emotive — specifically in peacetime — vehicle for harnessing and expressing bonds of national cultural affiliation (e.g. Bairner & Molnar 2009; Silk 2012). Sporting discourse is inextricably articulated with what Hall (1981) referred to as the "state of play" in cultural and power relations. Concretely grounded in material relations of the temporal juncture, (mediated) sporting forms and spectacles often simplify, amplify, (de)politicalize, and (re)invent nation; acting as spaces for the assertion and affirmation of particular discursive constructions of nation that readily reflect

and reproduce social hierarchies, are often highly gendered, and, offer particular constructions of the character, culture and the historical trajectory of people—constructions that by their very nature are acts of inclusion and exclusion (cf. Bairner & Molnar, 2009; De Cillia, Riesgel and Wodak, 1999; Silk, 2012).

Importantly, we are also able to identify a shift in those with responsibility for contouring nation in the present moment. For rather than just national governing elites (states) as auteurs of national sensibilities, we are increasingly subject to nationally resonant discursive systems and materialities dictated by the impulses of transnational capital (Silk & Andrews, 2001). In this respect, the context and the processes through which national cultures are produced and reproduced are being transformed (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt & Peraton, 1999); internal political/state forces previously responsible for harnessing and contouring national cultural identity have not been rendered exclusively obsolete, however, their position of influence has been eroded by often external, corporate forces (see Silk & Andrews 2001). As such, the locus of control in influencing the manner in which the nation and national identity are represented becomes exteriorized through, and internalized within, the promotional strategies of transnational corporations and the economic trajectories of neoliberalism. With Hardin (2014), whose work explicates the specificities of contemporary forms of neoliberalism, we are privileging the form, position, ethos, structures and sensibilities of corporations (what Hardin calls corporism[1]) as a defining mechanism through which national identities and popular cultural products, forms and experiences — such as the Paralympics — become infused, intertwined and embedded. We have previously termed this process, corporate nationalisms (Silk, Andrews & Cole, 2005), as transnational organisations seek, quite literally, to capitalize upon the nation as a source of collective identification and differentiation through negotiating with the local. Somewhat updating Eric Hobsbawm's classic tome (1983, p. 11), the "badges

of membership" have been increasingly bought under the control of corporate entities (e.g. sport broadcasters and global sporting brands) who have deployed symbolic campaigns and cultural products as part of their negotiation with specific (sporting) locales.

Importantly, we hold together our understandings of the corporate nation and the negotiation of sporting locales with that of the role of 'affect' in mediating sources of collective identification. Affect can be understood as a feeling of existence where 'things become significant and relations are lived' (Anderson, 2016, p. 735). Not just a property of the material body, affect works through the sites, networks, articulations and representations of neoliberalism as dispersed qualities, sensibilities, climates and atmosphere. In such a way then, nationalism can be described as 'affective nationalism' and 'felt' through SMEs as an 'atmosphere' that is both directed and orchestrated as well as working passively through micropolitical circulations (Stephens, 2016). As the primary vehicle for delivering SMEs to national audiences, television broadcasters - as major corporations in their own right - semi-conduct affective nationalism through spectacularized, commercial production practices and transnational corporate marketing.

Bringing an understanding of affective nationalism – alongside more established discussions of sport, corporate nationalism and nation – to representations of para-sport bodies offers a potentially important lens through which to address the social construction of national and normative disabled bodies. Indeed, in other domains, affective nationalisms have been used to theorize how bodies previously deemed 'other' (at the intersection of discourses of race, ethnicity and ability) can become (re-)signified and 'naturalized' and folded into the imagined community of the nation; what Puar (2007) defines as a 'national attractor'. One emblematic exemplar is Mohamed 'Mo' Farah, a black, Muslim, British athlete born in Mogadishu,

Somalia (see Black, 2016; Stephens, 2016). Farah's body is corporeally encoded in the context of cultural tensions within the national (British) community regarding immigration and multiculturalism (Skey, 2010), largely viewed as 'other' against a nationally normative body politic. Yet, the celebration of Farah's athletic success within the highly affective national context of sport – such as wrapping himself in the Union flag during post-race celebrations and media coverage that lauded him as representing successful multicultural Britain – displaced ideas of 'otherness'; instead he embodies ideas of a new Britishness, a new kind of national icon (Black, 2016).

In this paper, we develop this lens, explicating whether 'national attractors' can be applied beyond those bodies racially 'othered'. To do so, we draw on Mitchell and Snyder's (2015) ablenationalism; the inclusion of certain disabilities in the cultural sphere that provide an acceptance of the 'right kind of disability'. Mitchell and Snyder (2015) theorize that disabled bodies that most closely align to normative neoliberal frameworks of nationalism and ableism though their ability for hyper-capacitation via mobility enhancing technologies, and thus reflect the corporeal characteristic of the nationally normative body politic, are invested with citizenship and become accepted into cultural economies. Termed as the 'Able-disabled', they are disabled bodied bodies that reflect the logics of ableism and aesthetics (Mitchell and Snyder, 2015) and most successfully displace ideas of 'otherness'. Ablenationalism then, is the extent accepted able-disabled bodies are celebrated within the cultural sphere as national icons of successful disability inclusion and integration and thus perform 'representational work' (Mitchell and Snyder 2015, p.116) on behalf of disability.

Whilst ablenationalism as a conceptual tool has gained much traction in the field of disability and cultural studies, to date it has yet to be applied to empirical research on sports broadcasting,

disability and nation. This is surprising given that sport is an important constituent of popular culture in which political discourse can be traced (Whannel, 2013); a powerfully persuasive space that communicates and (re-)produces a 'naturalized' version of the world (Jhally, 1989) and a normative body politic. Given ablenationalism's utility in drawing together and articulating the conceptual affinity between contemporary disability discourse, neoliberalism and nationhood, that work in and through popular representational spaces, we can begin to apply it to Paralympic broadcasting to further enhance our understanding of disability, sport and nationalism.

The Paralympics, Nation and Nationalism

Apart from the historically entrenched relationship between nation and the Paralympic movement through the rehabilitation of injured servicemen, the mediation of nationalism through the Paralympic games has been given very limited attention (see, Batts & Andrews, 2011; Bruce, 2014). This is surprising not only in the context of the rapid commodification of the Paralympics, the concomitant shift toward the dictates of the mega-event marketplace, the entry of C4 as broadcaster, and the associated shift toward athlete backstories focussing on heroic soldiers (often fast-tracked into para-sport through, for example the USA's Paralympic military programme and Battle Back programme in Great Britain), and life-changing trauma (Crow, 2014). Such representations position para-sport bodies as symbols of national, military, and sporting constituencies as a malleable site upon which contemporary cultural meanings of nation and the political and economic trajectories of neoliberalism are inscribed and mobilized (Batts & Andrews, 2011)[2].

There has been a growing body of work that has understood the mediation of disability sporting narratives relational to hierarchies of disability or acceptance hierarchies embedded within

media coverage (or stigma hierarchies, see Westbrook et. al., 1993). This has often been cast as a response to a cultural context structured by ableism - privileged citizenship based on norms of ability - from which the disabled body has been 'othered' (Mitchell & Snyder, 2015). Against a normative neoliberal body politic (healthy, fit, heteronormative, sexual), there has been a tendency to identify a hierarchy of media preference toward para-athletes with less severe forms of disability; framed through a technocratic ideology (prosthetics) (Howe & Silva, 2017) and the 'super-' prefix (superhuman, supercrip), disability becomes positioned as a personal tragedy to be 'overcome' by hard work and dedication to achieve success (Berger, 2008; Silva & Howe, 2012).

There has been a modicum of discussion that holds nation together with the Paralympics, although this has tended to be a by-product (rather than the focus of) the analysis. For instance, analysis of newspaper coverage conducted across a number of countries have demonstrated a focus on home nation medal winning athletes (see, Schantz & Gilbert, 2001; Chang & Crossman, 2009; Pappous et al., 2011; Solves et al., 2018). Through a focus on newspaper coverage in New Zealand, Bruce (2014) is perhaps the only scholar to date who has attended to the way in which nationalist discourses frame Paralympic representation. She found that dominant representational norms continue to structure coverage, yet, a number of representational devices were used to promote home nation para-athletes within a nationalist discourse. This included, for instance, storied coverage of home nation para-athletes compared to non-home nation para-athletes; use of rhetorical devices such as 'Kiwi'; coverage of home nation athletes against a backdrop of national cultural symbolism, and, presenting home nation athletes in dominant sporting positions, all of which served to align home-nation para-athletes as part of the national community.

Research Focus and Questions

Despite such important work, our understanding of nation, a normative body politic, and (neoliberal) disabled bodies remains limited. This gap is even more apparent when considering most studies addressing Paralympic media coverage are based on analyses of newspapers. Despite newspapers being an important media form, such studies neglect the importance of live broadcast sport as the predominant way in which people experience SMEs such as the Paralympics. Live sport retains a unique place in the television landscape because despite the changing nature of television consumption (increasingly personalized, streamed, non-linear), consumers still watch it live. Not only that, it is increasingly adapted to consumers' viewing habits (e.g. through multi-channel, digital delivery and highlights delivered through social media) and embedded in the global value chain model (Chalaby, 2016). Little surprise, then, that broadcast rights for live sport are some of the most valuable commodities in the media industries.

In this paper, our focus is Channel 4, the official UK Paralympic broadcaster since 2012. The entry of C4 into Paralympic broadcasting was a significant moment for a number of reasons. Firstly, C4 brought a level of ambition for Paralympic broadcasting that was in the words of their Disability Executive, Alison Walsh (2014), at 'a whole new level' from previous events. 'Our ambition was simple: two years to change attitudes to disability and disability sport. We wanted to create a nation at ease with disability' (Walsh, 2015, p. 27). They pursued this through a) unprecedented exposure of para sport, including over nine hours a day of live sport, plus extensive build-up programmes, b) a 'no-holds-barred approach to portrayal of disabled people' (Walsh, 2015, p. 49) which included 'showing the stumps' (Jackson-Brown, 2018) and talking about disability – not just elite sport c) developing disabled talent both on screen and

in production, and d) marketing Paralympians to the British public with an emphasis on athlete backstories in order to familiarize audiences with GB para-athletes.

As we argue in our previous work (see Pullen et al., 2018), C4's remit as a public service broadcaster was central to pursuing such an approach. C4 operates under a statutory remit as a sustainable social enterprise with a mandate that includes stimulating debate and education, being innovative and distinctive, reflecting cultural diversity, and inspiring social change through innovative content that challenges the status quo (see https://www.channel4.com/corporate/about-4/who-we-are/what-is-channel-4). As the biggest broadcast project in the history of the channel, the Paralympics was both an excellent commercial proposition and opportunity to meet their mandated social change agenda.

In light of its bold and ambitious approach to para sport broadcasting, C4 represents a compelling case in which to examine the politics of disability production and representation. Drawing on a wealth of empirical data, in the remainder of this article, we aim to further develop our understandings of the Paralympics through unpacking representations relational to the important theoretical advances addressed above. In holding together the productive and functional nature of the neoliberal body politic, the Paralympics as spectacle, the corporatized / affective nation and the neoliberal transcendence of disability through an ablenationalism, we engage an empirical dataset so as to interrogate how national representations of disability operate across specific cultural sites to make certain disability representations meaningful. In so doing, we focus our analysis on four related research questions.

First, moving focus away from newspapers (the site of most previous empirical research) to live broadcast sport, we ask:

RQ1: In what ways do nationalist discourses frame C4's Paralympic representation?

Second, we draw explicit attention to the role of the national disabled body in Paralympic broadcasting. Here, hierarchies of disability are well established in the para-sport literature (e.g. Howe & Silva, 2017), yet as a concept, lack empirical underpinning, particularly where they intersect with nationalist discourses. We therefore examine two ways in which hierarchies of disability may be manifest:

RQ2: Which Paralympic sports and which disability classifications are given most airtime in C4's live broadcasting of the Rio 2016 Paralympics?

Third, analyses of live Paralympic broadcast sport - especially where the home nation has medal contenders - also allow us to examine which Paralympic athletes (and which disabled bodies) are given featured status. For us, who is featured offers an important further layer to our understanding of the intersection of national and disability discourse:

RQ3: What types of disabled bodies are promoted as ablenational bodies (Mitchell and Snyder, 2015)?

Finally, despite our own recent empirical work within this field, the intention of broadcast producers has been largely excluded from analyses of Paralympic sport (see Pullen et al., 2018). Given the central importance of broadcasters (given the audiences they reach, and in C4's case the hyper-visibility they afford disabled bodies) to the Paralympic spectacle, we see this as a crucial dimension to understanding national forms of disability representations. As such, we ask:

RQ4: What was C4's production strategy towards the 2016 Paralympics as it related to the nation, and how did it intersect with the corporate, social and commercial strategies of the broadcaster?

Method

To enable a robust empirical knowledge base centred on producing para-sport and representations of disability, our methodological approach was integrative, bringing together interviews and quantitative and qualitative moving image analysis of Paralympic broadcast coverage. Taken together, our methods provide insight into Paralympic broadcasting through a 'circuit of culture' approach (see Jhally, 1989); the analysis of cultural texts as they articulate with political, social, economic and technological conditions through the connected practices of production, circulation and consumption.

Interviews (RQ4)

Between February and March 2017, the authors conducted 23 interviews with senior staff from C4 and their commissioned broadcast partners, resulting in 26 hours of interview data, which is the focus of our analysis. All interviews were conducted at Channel 4's offices in London. These interviews were of import given the position and influence of participants within either C4 or their partners, the knowledge these elites possess, and the exclusive privileges they are afforded (Delaney, 2007). Our sample included participants who held the most senior positions and decision-making power in the organisation, covering business operations (who bidded for and negotiated the acquisition of the broadcast rights to the Paralympics), marketing, advertising and PR (who were pivotal in defining the look and feel of disability representation in C4 [Jackson-Brown, 2018]), commissioning editors (responsible for setting production strategy for the Paralympics, then commissioning and working with the independent broadcast

company to achieve this), commercial partnerships (who oversee the sponsorship and advertising deals central to funding coverage), audience research (whose insights fed directly into production strategy), stakeholder relations (a pivotal role in the managing of relationships with the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), disability rights groups and local Olympic committees), and broadcast production (ranging from executive producers to junior production staff). We also interviewed on-screen 'talent' - TV presenters and pundits - who while less influential in terms of decision-making power, had first-hand insight of C4 production practices and the tensions therein.

Interviews were semi-structured with our emphasis on obtaining stories about their professional experiences of producing and promoting para-sport. Given the variety of roles our participants held, we had to develop a number of adaptations to the interview guide. Still, the core elements of RQ4 ran through all of the interviews.

Participants were recruited via a purposive sampling method based on seniority and experience of Paralympic broadcasting and promotion. In order to gain access to the key people responsible for Paralympic broadcasting (post-2012) in the UK, we required the cooperation of Channel 4. Here, whilst we set the criteria for the types of participants we required for the study, C4 led the recruitment process. This is a methodological concern with elite interviewing as access is often a process of negotiation (Mikecz, 2012) and we are reflective of a sampling bias inherent in the project design, a typical dilemma for those gaining access to organisations in order to conduct elite interviews (Mikecz, 2012).

Given the context in which access was granted to participants, it is imperative that our analytical approach to the data is situated in a critical paradigm that takes account of the self-

reflexive role of the researcher and the complex ideological and political agendas that can be hidden in one's work. Accordingly, audio recordings of interview data were transcribed then analysed using a thematic analysis that allows for the contextual development of key themes through a process of coding, broader categorisation, and conceptual mapping (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). Given the nature of a senior and powerful group of interviewees, and the crucial balance with institutional research ethics, all names and job titles have been removed.

Quantitative content analysis (RQ2)

Quantitative content analysis was conducted on 90 hours of live sport (broadcast 1-7pm and 9pm-1am GMT daily) that Channel 4 broadcast over eleven days (8-18 September 2016) on its main channel during the Rio 2016 Paralympics. This sample therefore excluded the 30 minutes daily highlights programme (broadcast 7.30-8pm GMT daily) and the Last Leg (a comedy talk show hosted live in Rio and broadcast 8-9pm GMT daily). The unit of analysis was the broadcast segment. The live broadcast data was coded into three types of segment: live sport (resulting in 274 unique segments), backstory feature (50 segments) and studio chat (229 segments), which capture the main ways in which Paralympic sport is brought to viewers.

For the latter two segment types, broadcast segments are quite discrete (e.g. backstories are high production value, pre-recorded short films), but for live sport, broadcast coverage occasionally jumps quickly from one sport to the next. Here, we coded a new entry for each unique sport with the exception of track and field live sport, where there are sometimes multiple events in the segment (e.g. long jump in between track events). On these occasions, we coded for the dominant sport in the segment (based on amount of airtime). For coding disability classifications, where multiple events within the same sport featuring different disability classifications were present (e.g. 50m S6 breaststroke followed by 100m S9 freestyle) then we coded for the dominant classification in the segment (again based on respective airtime). Where

they were relatively equal we coded them as 'multiple'. Our disability classification codes were drawn from the IPC classification system.

The coding was conducted by a team of four coders. In addition to the two coding trainers (Peter & Lauf, 2002), two coders were trained over five training sessions and assigned to code half of the sample each. The intercoder reliability test was based on a set of segments taken from a random sample of 25% of the broadcast coverage. The codebook itself was largely concerned with manifest aspects of the broadcast coverage, therefore the reliability scores for the average pairwise Cohen's kappa were very high: type of sport 0.96 (based on 17 possible categories), presence of GB competitor 1.0 (3 categories), disability classification 0.90 (9 categories), use of mobility technology 0.85 (2 categories), and race of featured athlete 1.0 (4 categories).

Qualitative moving image analysis (RQ1 and RQ3)

Drawing on the principles of textual analysis, moving image analysis relates to visual moving texts, paying careful attention to the production context, sequence and structure, aesthetics, textual meaning and narration of images (Markula & Silk, 2011). Qualitative moving image analysis focussed on the high production value promotional teasers and pre-recorded athlete videos that C4 produced as part of their Rio 2016 live broadcast coverage; what we term here as backstory features. These features, despite their relatively short duration (lasting approximately 1-4 minutes), were central to editorial decision making and narrative thread, providing audiences with an insight into the biographies of para-athletes. Backstories narrated stories of disability, intentionally 'showing' disability as part of C4's wider strategy of disability 'normalisation' (see, Pullen et al., 2018).

Moving image analysis was conducted on all 50 of C4's backstory features by a team of two coders. This was completed in two phases with coders working independently: phase one included a complete 'reading' of the backstory features and a familiarity with the segments. This provided a way to manage the dataset in the first instance and adapt the analytical framework to suit the textual form. Phase two included a closer reading of each backstory feature using an adapted version of Johnson et al.'s (2004) reading texts for dominance approach; this included: recording the framing and context of the text (visual representation and production aesthetics), highlighting key features of the text that organize and problematize the dominant reading, identifying underlying narrative structures and identifying discursive ideological elements and relations of power within the text. Following the two phases, interpretations were discussed between coders providing a point of reflection in the interpretive processes and establishing links with academic work.

Findings

Framing the Nation

The data reveals the extent the broadcasting was framed around GB and the pursuit of national success. When it came to live sport, only 14% of live sport segments did not have a GB athlete competing and 93% of all studio guests were British. This was an intentional broadcast strategy taken by C4 confirmed through the interview data. As one senior production executive explained:

> *I do think we are quite hard-nosed about it, we make the decisions on where is the British interest, is it a good sport and are they a big star. If there was a great big Brazilian star going then we would make a bit more of an effort on it, those were the decisions really if I'm honest.*

Clearly then, the need for 'good sport' and 'big star[s]' was of equal importance in the broadcasting strategy and one factor explaining the disparity in coverage between British and non-British athletes. For C4, this was justified by data on audience viewing numbers:

> *That's where all the peaks were. You can see the way viewing peaked, it was the same with the Olympics, same with Paralympics, those top moments were where it was live coverage of a British athlete going for a medal was where all the viewing peaked (senior executive, C4).*

The national focus is thus driven by the dictates of a commercial sport-media landscape, a form of corporism (Hardin, 2014), that informs many decisions taken by broadcasters. However, the potential tensions around such a national focus did not escape the attention of some participants:

> *In the Paralympics there is British interest every night, every hour, that's different to the Olympics. I was actually conscious that we wanted to try and get a bit more of an international flavour to it, it's an international event. Great Britain and Northern Ireland win so many medals at the Paralympics it's actually hard to do that sometimes and you want to build up the international stories. So you can't get away from them, British interest is always going to be the main focus. To be absolutely honest, as a programme maker on a major event, I'd much rather they won fewer medals because then they could have more impact when they do win them and you can concentrate on some of the other international stories. We did get other international stories in but it's packed with Britain's winning medals and I guess your starting point is you always*

want to be live when Great Britain win a gold medal... At times I felt hamstrung by the

amount of British success (senior production executive).

Focussing on British athletes, then, was a commercial strategy intended to interpolate them into national audiences. This meant positioning the Paralympics as palatable to 'major eventers' - audiences 'who might not follow any other sport for the rest of the year but they get into this event from the start to finish' (senior production executive) - where 'good sport' and 'big stars' sustain interest. Taking this editorial position meant the need for 'competitive [sport] and Brits going for medals' (senior commissioning executive) in order for the public to 'embrace para sport in the same way that they have embraced British success in able bodied sport'. Whilst this was a clear commercial strategy, it was in part connected to the C4's statutory remit to advance the cause of marginalized groups in society and challenge dominant stereotypes; a (hyper-)visibility leading to a 'normalisation' of disability (Pullen et al., 2018). Thus, the national lens was a way to position Paralympic sport so the public can 'embrace' it, generating large audiences as a pathway to a social change agenda.

Of course, the presentation of a global sporting event through an intense national lens is not unique to the Paralympics and is a staple of the prevailing logic of the mediation of sporting mega events (e.g. Bruce, 2014; Pappous et al., 2011; Silk, 2012). However, the Paralympics affords for important nuances that are not present in other events. Here, we can ask what national (disabled) bodies are given airtime, and does the emphatic focus on a national lens lead to certain sporting events and disability classifications becoming privileged over others?

The Able-Disabled and 'Good Sport'

The editorial decision to focus on GB medal success is perhaps not overly surprising, given the national context and presumed audience. However, this visibility is dominant across a limited number of events. In SMEs such as the Paralympics and Olympics where multiple events are taking place concurrently, decisions about which sport to show must be made. Which sports are given most airtime is therefore to an extent, a reflection of editorial agendas (albeit in part led by where the production team felt GB would win a medal). Table 1 shows the amount and proportion of airtime each Paralympic sport was given on Channel 4's main terrestrial channel during the 2016 Rio Paralympics[3].

Table 1. Proportion of live sport airtime given to respective Paralympic sports

Live sport	Amount of live sport airtime (hours: mins: seconds)	Proportion of live sport airtime (%)
SWIMMING	12:11:17	25.34
TRACK AND FIELD	12:02:49	25.05
BASKETBALL	7:33:31	15.71
TENNIS	5:24:26	11.24
CYCLING	3:40:07	7.63
RUGBY	1:40:09	3.47
OTHER RACQUET SPORT (badminton, table tennis etc)	1:27:51	3.04
WATER SPORTS (sailing, canoeing, kayaking, rowing)	1:19:15	2.75
FOOTBALL	1:10:09	2.43
COMBAT SPORT	1:06:10	2.29
WEIGHTLIFTING	0:22:13	0.77
EQUESTRIAN	0:04:10	0.14
SITTING VOLLEYBALL	0:03:54	0.14
Total	**48:06:01**	**100.00**

The data reveal track and field and swimming as dominating the schedules, with over 50% of total airtime. For C4, athletics and swimming fitted with the broadcast strategy to provide 'good

sport' / 'big stars' in the form of British success and guaranteed familiarity (as per Olympic broadcasting), as this senior production executive explains:

> *Yes, we were unashamedly focused on Paralympics GB, we were unashamedly focused on the two biggest sports, athletics and swimming because they were going to deliver so much of the quality sport and the success for that British team and even outside that British team they tend to be the most accessible sports, people are so used to watching them at major events ... and then throw into that a few days of track cycling which just gets it off to a good start. So we did know that that would be the biggest spine of the event, following Britain in those sports and then everything weaves around that.*

Athletics and swimming would as likely form the backbone of Olympic broadcast coverage as it does Paralympic coverage. There are multiple factors that might explain this, such as their wide appeal and familiarity with audiences; the globally competitive nature of the events; their delivery of some of the most iconic Olympic events (such as the 100m sprint); alongside the more banal, production-related efficiencies of presenting from the two main venues (the aquatics centre and Olympic stadium). But with the Paralympics, there are additional dynamics related to the severity of the disability - as seen through events only played by the most disabled, and classifications ranging from the most to least disabled - that force broadcasters to make editorial decisions that their Olympic counterparts do not have to make. Here, we find that these decisions tend to go against those with the most severe disabilities.

As one senior production executive explained, this concept of 'quality sport' came from a combination of GB medal prospects, and an editorial sense how exciting the sport was within the broadcast medium:

[Boccia] is not the most exciting sport tele-visually ... I guess one makes a bit of an effort to feature boccia ... because we are good at it but I think it is because we are good at it rather than because it's the sport that probably is most suitable for the most disabled athletes at the games. I think if we were no good at it we wouldn't. We didn't do a lot with goalball because we didn't have a team.

This is reflected in the content analysis data which demonstrates that, despite the addition of extra (multilateral) cameras to supplement the (unilateral) footage provided by the host Olympics Broadcasting Service (OBS), and despite the presence of GB interest and potential medal success (excluding goalball), some (niche) Paralympic sports such as archery, boccia, goalball and shooting were almost entirely absent from C4's main channel coverage. Others, such as sitting volleyball and equestrian, were virtually invisible. One commonality between boccia, sitting volleyball and equestrian is that the athletes typically are those with more severe forms of disabilities and, by implication, are much slower.

Whilst there was a clear editorial intent evident throughout the interview data to prioritize GB medal winners over anything else, this at times was in conflict with another set of editorial priorities - to provide a) 'quality sport', that is b) 'most accessible' to the presumed audience, and c) suitable to the 'televisual' medium, that would attract and maintain audience attention. Given this tension, the content analysis data, supported by interviews, suggest a clear preference toward certain medal winning sports, with sports that require the most ability tending to prevail.

This dynamic applied to which sports were given most airtime, but also - unique to the Paralympics - which disability classifications were shown. Here, one senior production executive explained why some of the most disabled swimmers were not given more airtime:

> *Say in swimming you are aware that S1 is the most disabled so the races are going to be slower, so you are going to have to dedicate more time to it and you also know there are no British swimmers in S1 to S4. However you know that there are incredible feats at S1 ... We didn't manage to get an S1 race on the TV [during the 2016 Paralympics] and that's a regret because we never had the time because a 50m in S1 can take a minute and a half/two minutes which we don't necessarily have when there is no British interest.*

Indeed, when considering the respective airtime of each disability classification, we can arguably ascertain a continuation of this theme.

Table 2. Proportion of live sport airtime given to respective disability classifications

Disability classification of the event	Amount of live sport airtime (hours: mins: seconds)	Proportion of live sport airtime (%)
Wheelchair	21:37:05	60.06
Visually impaired	5:59:46	16.66
Limb deficiency	3:14:17	9.00
Degenerative and coordination	2:04:01	5.74
Intellectual	1:52:02	5.19
Multiple	0:59:06	2.74
Short stature	0:11:31	0.53
Unclear	0:01:42	0.08
Total	**35:59:30**	**100.00**

Note: in this table we have removed a coding category - 'mixed' - which is where athletes with different impairments compete against each other (particularly in swimming) in the same classification (e.g short stature athletes compete against those with limb deficiency). This mixed category accounted for 25% of live sport airtime, which is reflected in the lower total hours of live sport in column 2.

As Table 2 reveals, wheelchair-based events dominated the live sport schedules. Combined with limb deficiency classifications, Paralympic events featuring mobility enhancing technologies (including carbon fibre prosthetics) account for nearly 70% of all live sport. Previous research has highlighted how such technologically-enhanced disabled bodies, deemed 'cyborgs' (Howe & Silva 2017), have been the subject of most attention inside and outside of the Paralympic movement, particularly with the crossover of athletes such as Oscar Pistorius and Markus Rehm into elite able-bodied sports. Despite interviewees revealing a subtle disruption to this dynamic - for example with the suggestion that there was an 'effort to feature boccia' based on medal success – the data support the argument that the most able-disabled, technologically enhanced, athletes positioned at the top of supposed disability hierarchies are the most celebrated (Howe & Silva, 2017). Furthermore, these same athletes were also most likely to be subject to spectacularization in the form of storied narrative.

National Attractors: Storying 'Big Stars'

C4's unashamed focus on Paralympics GB is itself contingent upon the able-disabled; a body that is able enough to deliver 'good sport' through approximation to ableist sporting norms and abilities. This has implications for editorial decisions relational to an additional focus on 'big stars' to further incorporate the nation — as (presumed) audience — behind Paralympics GB. As with other spectacularized sporting products, celebrity para-bodies serve to reflect literal embodiments of the competitiveness, determination, responsibility, and rationality

underpinning neoliberalism's base individualism that conjure up preferred images of nation (see e.g. Pullen et al., 2018; Silk, 2012).

The commodification of these able-disabled celebrity bodies ('big stars') was made hyper-visible through backstories. Quantitative and moving image analysis of backstories demonstrated, again, the focus on British medal winners, with those deemed 'the ones to watch' featuring heavily. Yet, editorialising seemed contingent upon the type of disability. Whilst there were 50 backstory features in total, backstories were based on a handful of para-athletes - 35 in total - with some being broadcast several times during peak viewing hours. 62% of all backstory features were based on athletes using mobility enhancing technology. Most (hyper-)visible were amputee track athletes Jonnie Peacock, Richard Whitehead and Steph Reid and wheelchair track athletes Hannah Cockcroft and David Weir; less visible were equally successful non-technologically-enhanced para athletes such as Ellie Simmonds (short-stature) and Sophie Christiansen (cerebral palsy). Equally invisible was any form of racial and ethnic diversity across featured athletes; 48 out of the 50 backstories featured white para-athletes. We would argue this is less a failure of the broadcaster to represent the ethnic diversity of Team GB - our interviews suggested C4 were well aware of a lack of ethnic diversity amongst GB athletes and within the broadcasting - and more a symptom of a wider (and troubling) problem of para sport itself. Neither the British Olympic Association nor the British Paralympic Association compile statistics on the demographics or ethnicity of their teams. However, our own analysis shows that 7% of Paralympics GB athletes in 2016 were of black and minority ethnic (BME) origin. This is an uncomfortably low figure given how in the UK, sport has been at the forefront of progressive notions of multicultural Britishness, which are regularly lauded in the media and formed an essential ingredient of London's bid to host the 2012 Olympics itself (Black, 2016; MacRury & Poynter, 2010). It can also be contrasted with the 13% of UK

citizens who identified as BME in the 2011 census and the over one third of all Team GB (able bodied) Olympic medals in 2012 from athletes born abroad or who had a foreign parent or grandparent.

The celebrated Paralympic body, bound with the cult of neoliberal individualism and technological enhancement, is suggestive of Paralympic broadcasting serving as an important site for the national celebration of disability inclusion and a form of neoliberal disabled embodiment (Mitchell & Snyder, 2015). Inclusion, however, being contingent on, and extended only to, the most privileged able-disabled bodies reflective of normative (able-)national corporeality. This assertion may well be confounded by C4 attempting to most deeply connect with their assumed able-bodied audience; a notion particularly pronounced in the production of backstories. As one of the senior production staff claimed:

> *Our view was for people to connect to it, it's good to have a bridge and Paralympic sport is unique in that it has this unique set of stories about people... epic stories of overcoming adversity that can give a lot people around the country huge motivation and inspiration.*

Indeed, what differentiated backstory features from 'live' sport broadcasting was the deliberate incorporation of compelling, highly emotive and palatable narrative representations of para-athletes. Whilst banal national markers (GB flags, colours and tracksuits) and evocative music and sound manifest an affective national dimension (Stephens, 2016), the overwhelming emphasis was embedded within the super-prefix: inspirational stories predicated on overcoming disability through technological enhancement. For example, the feature on Hannah Cockroft, a successful medal winning wheelchair athlete, narrates how wheelchair racing

'helped make [her] stronger, it helped to make [her] more confident and just more happy' against a backdrop that depicts her racing wheelchair; a clear display of technological compensation and its role in successful disabled embodiment. Similar rhetoric and production aesthetics are used in the feature of double leg amputee Richard Whitehead. Here, his use of advanced prosthetic technology becomes the dominant image as the backdrop to his claim that sport - or rather prosthetic technology - showed him 'what you can and can't do as an amputee' a way to 'leave a lasting legacy and really inspire people to be more positive'.

Both backstory features characterize what Mitchell and Snyder (2015) term as the neoliberal narrative of overcompensation, told here through the exceptional bodies of successful (in terms of medals) able-disabled bodies, they offer insight into how dominant ideas about disability are re-signified through narratives of ability that present them as particularly successful in their ability to overcome disability in pursuit of both sporting success and a more meaningful — close to able — life. Whilst this is problematic given it narrates universal ideas around disability through the exceptional bodies of para-athletes (e.g. in the claim made by Whitehead that assumes a similar level of physical ability for 'all amputees' regardless of technological capacitation), it provides a narrative frame that can draw attention to disability, hereby making it (hyper-)visible without overtly disrupting, or being incompatible with both a dominant able-bodied norm and stories of sporting success. For C4, this was important. There was a need to *mark* disability, not 'shy away' from it, and ensure a focus on high-quality 'good sport' (see Pullen et al., 2018). Equally however, this can be read as problematic given inclusion in such narratives only extends to some disabled bodies — the able-disabled — who have the 'capacity' to transform to approximate ableism and thereby become 'national attractors' (Puar, 2007).

Conclusion

The hyper-visibility of the Paralympic spectacle — at least within the UK — is framed via a national lens that serves C4's strategic approach to show 'good sport' and 'big stars' so as to interpolate audiences to their coverage. Whilst their strategy resonates with the dictates of the able-bodied sport-media landscape demonstrating a corporate nationalism, for C4, it remains essential so as to hook audiences and serve its wider social enterprise remit of 'normalising' disability through increasing visibility. To successfully achieve this strategy through editorialising and production practices necessitates a particular focus on the events deemed to be most 'accessible' to audiences. These events are where the largest proportion of GB medals were expected to be won, and those where disabled bodies that most approximate ableist sporting norms through mobility enhancing technology are present. Here, following Mitchell and Snyder (2015), we can read the Paralympics as a cultural space through which technological-enhanced disabled bodies — the 'able-disabled' — gain entrance into sporting neoliberal celebrity economy through perceived widening circuits of bodily inclusion; celebrated and valorized as symbols of successful national disability inclusion. In this sense, with celebrated and 'cyborgified' bodies as 'representative subjectivities' of nation (Marshall, 1997), the Paralympics serves as an exemplar of ablenationalism (Mitchell & Snyder, 2015); a cultural strategy that propagates equality and serves to make visible hyper-capacitated bodies (select hyper-visible para bodies) within the national cultural sphere.

Successfully displacing otherness through alignment to normative frameworks of nationalism and ableism (Mitchell & Snyder, 2015), these bodies have, following Puar (2017), the capacity to be transformed into bodies that meet the demands of a neoliberal citizenship (productive, functional, enhanced capacity and aesthetically pleasing). Yet, arguably, disabled bodies that are most visible and celebrated as national icons are exceptional disabled bodies distant to the

bodies of most 'othered' Paralympians and non-athletes living with an array of disabilities. As such, Paralympic representations may do more to reaffirm the normalcy of many ableist structures by using national attractors to ideologically serve the national disability imaginary — narrating universal ideas around disability and cultivating universal imaginaries around the nation's commitment to inclusivity — than they do make visible the wider politics of disability that have a very real impact for the vast majority of people with disabilities (see Mitchell & Snyder, 2015). Concerns thus remain over athletes with more severe forms of impairment who participate in 'inaccessible' sports, are thereby less able to 'transcend' their 'debility' (Puar, 2017), and thus become excluded from the national normative neoliberal disabled body.

Through connecting (primarily) able-bodied audiences to para-athletes to 'get behind' Paralympics GB requires displacing perceived 'otherness' and making 'national attractors' out of the most successful, palatable, disabled bodies with the capacity for transcendence. This may serve to 'create a nation at ease with disability' (Walsh, 2015, p. 27), yet problematically, extends only to a productive neoliberal disability aesthetic; those that do a sporting service for the nation (i.e. para-athletes) given their approximation to ableist abilities. This is made increasingly problematic given the invisibility/ absence of BME para-athletes; those celebrated and (assumed) sites of disability inclusion become highly exclusionary for othered, marginalized identities. Thus, whilst the Paralympics makes a hyper-visible and nationally normative privileged form of disability representation centred on the most able-disabled technologically enhanced, white, and upwardly mobile disabled body, important questions remain over how the Paralympics might serve to marginalize and disempower those at the intersections of disability, racial, ethnic and classed identity politics (see also Crow, 2014). Indeed, as in able-bodied sport, powerful and affective invocations of nation are often highly gendered (see e.g. Rowe et al, 1998). Whilst not the implicit focus of this paper, future work

needs to address the extent ablenational representations produced through para-sport broadcasting allow for the gendered inclusion / exclusion of certain disabled bodies in a national cultural sphere that seems over-determined by narratives of war, risk (as hyper-masculine) and technological transcendence through advanced prosthetics. Applying ablenationalism to Paralympic production allows scholars to more deeply consider the social (re-)production of the often contradictory relations of neoliberal power working through affective representational spaces. Here, we can begin to raise important questions for the field in dialogue with new materialist approaches to disability. For example, how can the Paralympics provide an opening for meaningful forms of disability inclusion within extant social and cultural arrangements and material conditions?

Within this paper, we have focussed on the Paralympics as an affective cultural space that positions the 'able-disabled' as celebrated and valorized symbols of successful national disability inclusion efforts: selected, hyper-visible, technologically enhanced, functional and productive neoliberal ablenational bodies. C4 has a bold and ambitious approach to para-sport broadcasting and has received widespread praise from Paralympic governing bodies, industry award committees and by the UK public at large (see Channel 4, 2016; Walsh, 2015). Whilst the Rio Paralympic Games was the most viewed in history, attracting a global audience of 4.1 billion people (IPC, 2016), its impact on disability issues in the UK has been less significant. Indeed, UK think-tank, DEMOS, suggested that the majority of people with disabilities remain untouched by its broadcasting legacy, with a report from the leading UK disability charity highlighting that over half of people in relative poverty in the UK are disabled, exacerbated by a context of benefit cuts for the disabled and increasingly polarized labour markets.

Described as 'the international benchmark for how Paralympic sport should be covered by a broadcaster' by the IPC President, Sir Philip Craven, Channel 4 is now advising broadcasters across the world on their para-sport production. Whilst C4's influence looks set to enhance the visibility of disability globally through the Paralympic spectacle, the implication of C4's ablenational focus on 'good sport' and 'big stars' may well have an unintended impact on global disability rights and policy despite its commitment to progressive social change. Indeed, in the current moment, Paralympic representation plays a potentially more troubling geopolitical role in celebrating and making hyper-visible exceptional national disabled bodies under the guise of diversity, inclusivity and social change whilst doing little to shatter dominant and increasingly corporatized national discursive disability frames.

Notes

1. Hardin (2014) discusses *corporism* as the mechanism whereby the ethos/structures/sensibilities of the corporation become infused within all aspects of life, ranging from institutional forms to the logic of understanding the individual as a micro corporation.

2. Given the historically entrenched relationship between military conflict and the Paralympic movement, the intersection of gender is particularly important in discussions of disability and nationhood. This requires critical scholarly attention in its own right and remains outside of the scope of this paper.

3. More Paralympic sport (mostly highlights) was broadcast on C4's sister channel, More4, and more live sport was shown on their website. Furthermore, with interactive TV, on C4's main channel viewers had a choice of which sport they could watch. Given the centrality of the main channel, these all fell outside of our sample.

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