

RE-FRAMING IMPAIRMENT?



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Representations of Disability through the Paralympic Games

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**Re-framing Impairment? Continuity and Change in Media
Representations of Disability through the Paralympic Games**

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Abstract

This study, which examines key features of contemporary media representations of disabled athletes in the context of the Paralympic Games, engages with established literature on representations of disability in order to critically interpret recent trends in journalistic inquiry. The analysis of media coverage of the 2012 and 2014 Paralympic Games identifies salient themes concerning the representation of disability. This, along with an investigation of documentary evidence concerning attempts by key stakeholders including the International Paralympic Committee to influence the nature of representation, contributes to an interrogation of the disability narrative emerging from the Paralympic Games and a consideration of the extent to which media coverage has shifted significantly from previous representations of disability.

Keywords: Content Analysis, Disability, Media, Paralympics, Representation

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This paper engages with a number of inter-related themes and issues concerning ways in which the media represent the Paralympic Games. It commences with a brief overview of the increasingly media-driven global context of the Paralympics. This is followed by a consideration of the key controversies, identified in the existing critical literature regarding media representations of disability across a range of genres and formats. This is used as a means of situating issues of sport, disability and representation in the wider context of media representations of disability. Identifying a range of key concerns historically offers a good starting point from which to consider the evolution of such representations and how they relate to wider social discourses around disability (beyond the domain of sport and paralympism). Of equal importance is a consideration of how the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) as a key stakeholder has attempted to influence, through media accreditation and the production of guidelines for reporters, the style and substance of reporting on the Paralympic Games and in so doing addressing its mission as an advocacy body for the interests of persons with disabilities. The qualitative study that follows this contextualisation explores media representations of disability as they relate to the London 2012 and Sochi 2014 Paralympic Games from the approach of content analysis of a sample of two prominent and contrasting British newspapers. This analysis is linked back to the key themes identified in the literature regarding ways in which disability is represented in a range of media - namely as *transformation*, *tragedy*, *normalisation*, and *spectacle* (Pointon, 1997). Drawing on key findings, the paper discusses their implications in the context of wider representations of disability.

Mega-events such as the Olympic and Paralympic Games are increasingly media-driven spectacles that capture the attention and imagination of audiences around the world while being purported to benefit host cities by leaving a positive economic, infrastructural, and social legacy (Brittain, 2010; Howe, 2008b). In recent years, the Paralympic Games have

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expanded and their international profile has been enhanced considerably (Brittain). The broad narrative underpinning sport and disability suggests that (at least in the context of the resource rich Global North) the rights and opportunities relating to people with disabilities across society, are being enhanced through a process of empowerment and changing attitudes toward disability (DePauw & Gavron, 2005). Successive legislative and policy shifts (nationally and internationally) which have enshrined the rights of people with disabilities (e.g., US Rehabilitation Act 1972, Americans with Disabilities Act 1990, Australian Discrimination Act 1992, UK Disability Discrimination Act 1995, UK Equality Act 2010, UN Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Disabled Persons 1993 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006) are integral to this. In relation to sport, reference to more inclusive practices adopted by a range of organizations and agencies engaged in the administration of sport and physical activity (in the case of the UK this includes coach education packages provided by Sports Coach UK and the more inclusive practices promoted by national sports federations, in part as a response to funding criteria linked to their Whole Sports Plans) also forms part of the narrative. At the same time, organizations, in particular the IPC have increased in prominence as self-styled advocacy bodies, promoting disability rights internationally (Beacom, 2012) while National Paralympic Committees (NPCs) alongside sports agencies such as the Youth Sport Trust in the UK, engage in sporting and educational initiatives to encourage participation and enhance talent development pathways for young people with disabilities. Indeed the IPC as a disability advocacy body has engaged in a variety of measures in an attempt to ensure that the portrayal of disability through elite competition promotes a positive perception of people with disabilities within international society (Brittain). This has included developing its media relations in response to recognition of the key role of the media in the cultural construction of disability. When considered collectively, such national and global governmental and non-governmental activities suggest a

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trajectory for disability rights toward liberation, empowerment, and enablement, facilitated by the experience of sport.

The London 2012 Paralympic Games were played out against this backdrop, with a commitment, as part of the legacy objectives, to promote disability rights, to enhance sport and active recreation opportunities for people with disabilities and to contribute to the evolving infrastructure for long-term athlete development. For Channel 4, coverage of the Paralympics was, in part, perceived to be an opportunity to re-engage with their core public service broadcasting values after their long association with the (often controversial) reality television show *Big Brother*. Channel 4's Paralympic's Editor Deborah Poulton emphasized that in light of recent criticisms Channel 4 had lost sight of its original public service remit as a broadcaster. The Paralympics presented an opportunity to reconnect with Channel 4's core values (Gibson, 2012a). In addition to this strategy, Channel 4 made it clear that the 150 hours of live coverage of the London 2012 Games was also about altering perceptions of disability. This point was emphasized in a speech given at the Media Guardian International Television Festival by Channel 4 executive David Abraham who claimed that the decision to cover the 2012 Paralympics was based on what was perceived to be a real chance to change wider public perceptions about disability. Reporting for *The Guardian*, Sweney (2012) noted Abraham's comment that "we saw it is an opportunity to change attitudes and minds about disability. It is about stimulating progress and change. It plays to the core of Channel 4's public service broadcasting remit".

Coverage of the 2014 Sochi Paralympic Games by Channel 4 can be seen as an extension of this theme. It should be noted, however, that the Winter Games operate on a much smaller scale in terms of numbers of athletes and countries competing and this will impact on the nature and extent of coverage. Athlete numbers totalling 547 from 45 countries competed in the Sochi Games, compared with nearly 4300 athletes from 164 countries at the

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London Games (“Overview of London 2012,” n.d. ; “Overview of Sochi 2014,” n.d.).

British representation was limited to just 15 British athletes who competed in the Sochi Games winning six medals in curling and alpine skiing, compared with 288 British athletes who won 120 medals across 13 sports at the London Games (“Overview of London 2012,”; “Overview of Sochi 2014,”). From an international perspective, two days before the Sochi opening ceremony, the IPC confirmed that television pictures would be broadcast to more than 55 countries which was a record for the Winter Games (“Canadians to Benefit,” 2014). Beyond television broadcasting, Sochi was characterised by further promotion of digital platforms, already apparent at the time of London 2012. This included the further enhancement of the Paralympic website (Paralympic.org) which provided over 300 hours of uninterrupted coverage from the Sochi Games, the live-streaming of results through the Sochi homepage and biographies of all athletes (“Canadians to Benefit”) as well as increased blogging by athletes facilitated by key sponsor Samsung (“IPC and Samsung,” 2014) and daily Google Hangouts of a cross section of elite athletes (“IPC to Host,” 2014). Such activity inevitably influenced the overall exposure of the Games and in particular had the potential to promote the athlete perspective, significant when considered from the perspective of the Games as a conduit through which established perceptions of disability could be challenged.

Media Representations of Disability

Representation is an important concept in studies of the media because it foregrounds the ways in which individuals and social groups are re-presented via technological communication systems and channels in an increasingly global (and globalizing) context. As Woodward (2002) points out “representation is a key component in the construction of identities, in their presentation and reception and in the ways in which identity becomes meaningful. It is through language, symbolic systems, rituals and practices that we make

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sense of who we are, understand who others are and imagine the boundaries that contain the self and mark it off from others” (p. 100). Questions concerning who is represented and how they are represented are central to media analysis because they focus attention on the ways in which certain social groups may be either misrepresented or under-represented in media output across a range of both factual and fictional genres, formats and contexts. In comparison to studies of race and ethnicity, social class, gender, and sexuality, analyses of media representations of disability are not so prolific although where such work has been undertaken some prominent themes and issues are discernible (Barnes & Mercer, 2003; Charlton, 2010; Cumberbatch & Negrine, 1992). In the context of media research in the United Kingdom, studies have shown a general tendency across mainstream broadcast and print media to depict people with disabilities in a limited range of stereotypical roles with narratives focusing on charity, fund-raising, health and personal-tragedy stories (Barnes & Mercer). Most notably, the medical model of disability has frequently been identified as the dominant way of framing disability across a range of media representations from charity advertisements to horror films (Evans, 1999; Karpf, 1997). The dominant medical model of disability constructs disability as a medical problem, defines it through the lens of conventional medical classification systems and, in doing so, individualizes, medicalizes and pathologizes it. In contrast to the medical model, many of the researchers working in the fields of media and cultural studies have tended to favour the social (or environmental) model of disability which foregrounds the social and cultural dimensions of disability. More recently alternative approaches, for example bio-social models, recognize the impact of disability on the individual’s experience and development of self-identity, while continuing to locate this within a wider social and cultural context (Gabel & Peters, 2004).

According to Pointon (1997), there is an ongoing need for more critical studies concerning the treatment of disability across factual media output: "...when the subject of

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disability representation and stereotypes is raised, it is writers, producers and directors of fiction (film and television) who are most commonly asked to look at their practice" (p. 84). Taking the visual representation of the body as a key signifier of difference, Pointon considers the ways in which disability is represented across the sphere of documentary film and television programming. The research identified four possible subtexts (underlying themes) inherent across these factual genres of media production irrespective of their formats. The first of these subtexts is *transformation* of the disabled body wherein a transformation for the better is central to the narrative. Whilst the disabled individual is the subject in these narratives the real hero is the transformer - the doctor, surgeon, expert or technologist who enables the transformation to occur through their specialist knowledge and skills. The second subtext is that of *tragedy* wherein the progressive impairment of the body is the central narrative focus. Typically, the narrative focus is indeed the (often) de-habilitating condition but it is frequently the case that in these types of productions it is the carers and / or family members who occupy central roles in the telling of the story and it is their experiences of the burden of caring that frames the narrative. The third subtext is that of *normalisation* wherein the narrative thrust is geared around the notion that people with disabilities are not so different from non-disabled people. Such documentaries will often include footage of people with disabilities performing everyday tasks (making a cup of tea, preparing a meal, driving a car or shopping). The narrative in this context is propelled by notions of progress and adaptation - the person with a disability has overcome the problem and leads to the best of their ability, a "normal" life. In this sense individual responses to disability appear to support Le Clair's (2012) contention of the so-called hegemony of normalcy. For Pointon, such themes are problematic because "the developing narrative tells us it is all about the social skills, personality, powers of acceptance and the adaptation of the disabled person...the overcoming of disability and the denial of victimhood" (p. 89). The final subtext identified is

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that of *spectacle* wherein bodily disfigurement produces a spectacle-driven narrative along the lines of what Pointon describes as an impairment-based, disability show-case context which, historically, has its roots in the voyeuristic gazing of the 19th century freak show (see also Charlton, 2010; Peers, 2009, 2012; Silva & Howe, 2012).

Recent disability studies publications articulate related concerns. Goodley (2011) points to the practice of analysing disability by non-disabled reporters and the tendency to objectify and individualize disability, whether from a medical, social or moral perspective. This is reflected in the use of the third person plural; “they do this, they are like that, they need such and such” (Linton, as cited in Goodley, p. 22.). Channel 4’s decision to engage presenters with disabilities in reporting disability sports and other events (as well as increasingly, non-disabled sports events) can be interpreted as an attempt to achieve greater balance in reporting in this respect. Also in this context, the potential for new communication technologies to provide a voice for athletes with disabilities has been attracting increasing attention from academics and commentators for some time (Goggin & Newell, 2003). Nevertheless these developments are still relatively novel and their impact on the development of wider perceptions of disability have yet to be systematically assessed. Silva and Howe’s (2012) critique of the “supercrip” representation of Paralympian athletes also suggests a continuation of long established concerns about how disability is framed. As in the case of Pointon’s *normalisation* theory, the supercrip is considered worthy of praise as they have achieved in spite of the disability “problem”. Such narratives, while appearing to empower, can, argue Silva and Howe, have the opposite effect since it develops from the objectification of the person with the disability as different and it reflects the generally low social expectations for people with disabilities where success in some tasks becomes elevated to the status of outstanding or heroic achievement.

Media Relations and the IPC

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The importance of representation in influencing the ways in which social groups are framed via media exposure is paramount to an understanding of the politics and power of some social groups to represent other groups in particular ways. From this perspective, the ways in which sport mega-events such as the Paralympic Games are framed by the media are then central to understanding not just media representations of disability but also the ways in which these representations might shape (both directly and indirectly) wider cultural understandings of disability.

As a key disability sports NGO with a global reach and a commitment to promoting disability rights, it is then, unsurprising that the IPC takes a keen interest in media representations of disability. To this end media accreditation as a tool is an important part of the Games preparation process. There has been a steep increase in the number of accredited media representatives (typically a mix of broadcasters, journalists for written press and photographers). In 1988 and 1992, numbers were generally limited to media spokespeople attached to NPCs, who relayed messages to local media in the country of origin. After 1992, interest increased markedly to 1600 at the Atlanta Games of 1996, 2400 at the Sydney Games of 2000 and 3100 at the Athens Games of 2004 (Gilbert & Shantz, 2008). Journalists, in particular sports journalists, were beginning to focus on the potential of the Paralympic Games to produce dramatic human interest stories. One journalist noted in relation to his experience of the 1996 Games that “there is absolutely no question that it was one of the highlights of my professional career as a journalist because there were just so many unusual stories and so many great stories – not just emotional stories, there were plenty of those – but all the technology stories in the equipment, chairs, legs etc.” (MacDonald, 2008, p. 71). Yet what appears to be missing from such exchanges is a recognition that focusing on such sub-text narratives inevitably directed attention of the audience away from the Games as primarily a sporting event, appearing instead to reinforce Peer’s (2012) idea of the *freakshow* or

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Pointon's earlier reference to the event as *spectacle*.

The IPC produced *Social Media Guidelines for Persons Accredited at the London 2012 Paralympic Games* ("IPC Releases," 2011) which specified how athletes should engage with social media, sharing experiences through photos, postings and videos, as well as setting boundaries for use of social media by accredited media outlets. This was in addition to the *IPC Reporting on Persons with a Disability*, which again provides a clear illustration of an attempt to influence the nature of disability representation. This latter included a table of appropriate and inappropriate phrases to use in reporting contexts, noting that "words can project images that are inaccurate and may hurt a person" ("IPC Guidelines," 2012). Unsurprisingly IPC efforts to de-medicalize reporting is reflected in their attempts to encourage a focus on the athlete first and not the disability. This was evident in other national and international guides, including the British Paralympic Association guidelines for reporters at the 2012 Games ("British Paralympic Association Guide," 2012). In certain contexts however, this provided a challenge for reporters looking for a 'good story', for example the increasing numbers of armed service personnel with disabilities emerging from conflict zones and achieving the status of Paralympic athletes after intensive rehabilitation while producing along the way, captivating human interest stories. Press coverage perhaps inevitably gravitated toward a triumph over adversity narrative which tended to draw attention to impairment and the context within which the individual became impaired (injured in the line of duty), with performance on the sporting field becoming a secondary issue. Coverage seeks to reinforce the inspirational image and the stereotypical heroic supercrip (Scheel & Duncan, 1999). This was reflected in the superhuman label that was given to the London 2012 Paralympic athletes (Silva & Howe, 2012). Ellison (2008) argues that superhuman qualities are attributed to all athletes regardless of (dis)ability, however, the effect on the disability community as a whole is more profoundly seen as audiences seek to reassure themselves that

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if the person with a disability tries hard enough they can appear normal. Media coverage of the 2012 Paralympic Games reached 115 countries and the general consensus among commentators was that disability awareness had generally been enhanced within the host country, at least in the short term. This positive response was, however, qualified. The IPC Governing Board member Miguel Sagarra noted that success would be judged by the longer term response by the international media, for example in ongoing coverage of Paraspport events and this was by no means clear (“Keep Paralympics Mainstream,” 2012). In particular there was deep concern regarding the coverage of the Games by certain sections of the international media corps. In particular, the US media corps was widely criticized for its poor coverage of the event (Gibson, 2012b). This reflected Howe’s comments on the lack of US media interest in earlier Paralympic Games where accredited NBC staff withdrew totally after the conclusion of the Olympic Games – an action that he argues, was to work against the New York bid for the 2012 Games (Howe, 2008b, p. 88). A subsequent press release (“Success of London,” 2012) noted that while the cumulated international television audience had grown from 2.48 billion at Beijing (2008) to 3.4 billion for London 2012, there was considerable potential to grow this figure further at Rio in 2016. It was felt that such growth provided the best route to promoting IPC objectives internationally.

The opening of the media accreditation process on March 12, 2013, for the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi again reflected the commitment to enhance numbers of accredited media present, while confirming the responsibilities of individual NPCs to ensure “that organizations and individuals being accredited are genuine and recognized media professionals” (“IPC Opens Media,” 2013). As with London 2012 when the IPC’s official Facebook attracted over 82 million page views, 10 million videos were viewed via YouTube.com/ParalympicSportTV, and there were over 1.5 million “Paralympic” tweets (“IPC Publishes Sochi,” 2013). There was also considerable focus on encouraging athlete

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engagement with social media as a way of publicizing the Paralympic Movement far beyond the traditional television viewing audience anticipated for Sochi in 2014. Social media it was felt enabled the Paralympic Movement to engage new audiences and broaden the reach and appeal of “the Games and the Movement” (“IPC Publishes Sochi,”). Athlete engagement provided the opportunity to provide an athlete’s perspective on a range of Paralympic experiences and to open up a new dimension of the Games to audiences. This was, however, tempered with strict guidelines concerning the use of social media to ensure that what was described as the integrity of the Games was protected (“IPC Publishes Sochi ,”).

Clearly then, just as the social, cultural and political characteristics of society influence mediated representations of disability, so they are reflected in the culture and governance of contemporary sporting forms. For example, the Olympic (and Paralympic) Games have been presented by a number of writers as a microcosm of international society (Beacom, 2012) in that they reflect key developments - political, social and cultural – in wider social relations. Sports organizations can also, however, be agents for change. For example, the IOC, and increasingly the IPC, are considered as significant actors in the international arena, which, as well as reflecting the wider characteristics of society, can effect change (Beacom). In this sense, the IPC, as a disability advocacy body, is attempting to influence wider perceptions of disability and so is concerned with media representations of disability. The purpose of this study is not attempt to quantify the impact of such activity. Nevertheless, when considering continuity and change in media reporting within the small sample relating to 2012 and 2014, the over-arching concern of the IPC with putting the athlete first and not the disability, is echoed in debate surrounding the narrative frames that have been adopted.

Methods

This paper positions a small scale qualitative content analysis of newspaper coverage around the London 2012 and Sochi 2014 Paralympic Games, within wider discourse relating

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to representations of disability and the Games. Documentary analysis has taken account of IPC / NPC frameworks and protocols for accreditation of media as these key stakeholders seek to influence the nature of coverage, while analysis of literature has considered shifts in thinking around the topic and provided the frame of reference for identifying salient themes within newspaper coverage.

Broadly defined, the aim of content analysis in media research has generally been that of exploring the ways in which media output reflects social and cultural issues, values and phenomena (Hansen, Cottle, Negrine, & Newbold, 1998). As a method, content analysis produces data concerning broader themes and patterns in media coverage of a particular topic, event or issue so it becomes possible to identify manifest trends, tendencies and / or absences over substantially large aggregations of texts and, if necessary, over specific periods of time and cross-culturally. Misrepresentation, under-representation, stereotyping, over-representation and even non-representation of different social groups and types of individuals in society, has indeed been a central concern of content analysts since the early 20th century (Hansen et al.). Typically, content analysis is associated with quantitative analysis of media content (Altheide, 1996; Bertrand & Hughes, 2005; Hansen et al.; Weber, 2004) because the results are more often than not expressed numerically. Essentially, content analysis is concerned with frequencies and the counting of incidences (recurring images, storylines, framing devices or specific terminology) in media coverage of cultural phenomena. Historically, it has been commonly associated with print media analysis but it can also be usefully applied to a wide range of texts including photographs, TV advertisements, popular music lyrics and websites. Characteristically, content analysis as a method has clearly defined stages required to undertake analysis which involve clearly defining the sample frame, the sampling strategy to be used and the qualifying criteria of units of analysis for counting, and coding (Hansen & Machin, 2013).

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Whilst predominantly associated with quantitative research, content analysis is by no means a uniform research tool (Sarantakos, 2005). For the purpose of this study, the research design was more in-keeping with a small-scale qualitative content analysis (Bryman, 2008) with an emphasis on identifying salient themes, patterns or clusters of meanings around the topic in question which, in this case, is media representations of disability in the context of the Paralympic Games and sports journalism. Qualitative content analysis places much less emphasis on statistical analysis and frequencies but instead focuses more on detailed thematic analysis as Sarantakos indicates: "when the study is conducted within a qualitative design, emphasis will be placed not on counting but rather on identifying meanings and indicators of categories that...explain aspects of the research topic" (p. 303). Unlike quantitative content analysis, qualitative content analysis utilises both numerical and textual analysis but ultimately places much more emphasis on narrative rather than statistical evidence (Altheide, 1996). In qualitative content analysis, the data presentation and interpretation can be a combination of both tables and text (Altheide; Sarantakos) and so for this particular study some tables are included to indicate general themes in the articles surveyed before focusing in on the significance (thematically) of these themes.

For the purpose of this small-scale study, Pointon's (1997) four disability sub-texts (*transformation, tragedy, normalisation* and *spectacle*) identifiable as underlying themes in factual disability media narratives (irrespective of format) were used for considering the ways in which some sections of the British press covered the Paralympic Games. Whilst tightly organized pre-coded categories are not as necessary in qualitative content analysis (Altheide, 1996; Bryman, 2008) it was decided that Pointon's disability sub-texts would be used in the research design in order to provide a coherent framework for guiding the identification of salient themes (narrative frames) in the articles surveyed. The narrative frames represented key themes that emerged from a study of recent literature on media representations of

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disability, in particular the work of Corrigan, Paton, Holt, and Hardin (2010), Howe (2008a), Silva and Howe (2012), and Peers (2012). Articles assigned to “Freakshow References” narrative frame were identified by their overwhelming focus on the *spectacle* of disability wherein descriptions of 'disablement' are used to develop the news story or report. Articles assigned to the “Mentioning Disability First” narrative frame tended to use phrases such as 'visually impaired skier' or would typically specify and place emphasis on the disability over and above (or at least prior to) the athlete's sporting prowess or accomplishments. It is in this sense that they were aligned with the *tragedy* subtext. Articles assigned to the “Overcoming Disability” narrative frame tended to use this frame in close association with the “Personal Tragedy” frame wherein the emphasis is often on the ways in which the athlete (or athletes) has transcended disability to achieve sporting success. In terms of subtexts, these stories can be variously aligned with either *transformation* or *normalisation*. It should also be noted that it is often the case that the distinction between these narrative frames is not always clear-cut and that quite often there is considerable over-lap. For example, Owen's (2013) article published in *The Guardian* with the headline “Oscar Pistorious: Athlete who overcame disability to become a global star' with the subheading 'South African Olympian has already experienced personal tragedy in a life and career full of glory and controversy’” illustrates the ways in which Overcoming Disability and Personal Tragedy frames are often intricately conjoined in news reports.

The media sources used for the research were the two UK based national newspapers *The Guardian* and the *Daily Mail*, both of which have healthy circulation figures and considerably high numbers of views online indicating that they are generally widely read. *The Guardian's* profile is associated with quality journalism with daily newspaper circulation figures (for August 2012) being 204,271. The *Daily Mail's* profile is typically associated with the tabloid news market with daily circulation figures of 1,914,126 (“National Daily

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Newspaper,” 2012). Both titles also have a significant online presence with *The Guardian’s* combined monthly audience (including print and online readers) estimated to be around 6.4 million readers. Of all the national UK newspapers the *Daily Mail* has the largest web presence in terms of readership, with an estimated 6.8 million people viewing *MailOnline* each month (Rogers, 2012). Whilst computer packages are now available for undertaking large-scale quantitative content analysis, this small-scale qualitative study was purposefully based on smaller sample frames, wherein manual coding supported with fairly extensive discussions and cross-checking of the data throughout all stages of the research process was the preferred approach. The small-sample frame is in part determined by the fact that the Paralympic Games is a specific time-limited event (Hansen & Machin, 2013) and so media coverage is, for the most part, concentrated within a limited time frame. Furthermore, it is not feasible to survey all media output (Hansen & Machin) in relation to any given topic. Alongside this and consonant with a small-scale qualitative content analysis, the objective of the research was to specify (in some detail) the extent to which certain themes, narratives and clusters of associations might be identifiable in the ways in which sports journalists report disability sport in the context of high-profile international events such as the Paralympic Games.

Findings and Discussion

The London 2012 Paralympic publication dates for the *Daily Mail* and *The Guardian* are as follows: 2012, August 31; 2012, September 1; 2012, September 4; 2012, September 5; 2012, September 6. The Sochi 2014 Winter Paralympic online publication dates for the *Daily Mail* and *The Guardian* are as follows: 2014, March 8; 2014, March 9; 2014, March 10; 2014, March 11; 2014, March 12; 2014, March 14. Dates chosen reflected the period in the lead up to the Games when there was a heightened public interest in related issues. The three narrative frames that were selected on the basis of previous research and initial enquiry into the

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discourse used within disability media representation were; Overcoming Disability/ Personal Tragedy, Freakshow References and Mentioning Disability First. Underpinning the content analysis, Pointon's (1997) four key subtexts of disability and media representation - *transformer, tragedy, normalisation* and *spectacle*- were drawn on as a guiding framework in order to identify the most prominent discourses of media representation within the content analysis. Freakshow References are closely linked with the *spectacle* driven subtext. Mentioning Disability First is aligned with the *tragedy* subtext. Overcoming Disability/ Personal Tragedy is linked with the *transformation* and *normalisation* subtexts.

Articles analysed in the sample frame on the dates specified for London 2012 coverage, revealed that both papers illustrated a high prevalence rate of the Freakshow and Supercrip references on the dates sampled. The *Daily Mail* used this narrative frame a total of 33 times across five dates with the 2012, August 31 edition being the most pronounced, where these frames of reference appeared a total of 13 times. *The Guardian* used these narrative frames a total of 30 times across five dates, with the most prominent usage evident in the 2012, September 1 edition.

For Sochi 2014 coverage on the dates specified, the analysis revealed that the Freakshow / Supercrip narrative frame was used less frequently with only the *Daily Mail* resorting to this framing device a total of six times on the two dates March 9 and 10. The Foregrounding of Disability narrative frame was also identifiable within both sources on the dates sampled. For London 2012 articles, *The Guardian* engaged with Disability First a total of 11 times across three dates which were 2012, September 1, 4 and 5, whilst the *Daily Mail* used this narrative frame six times across two dates which were 2012, August 31 and September 5. Overall then, this narrative frame was evident a total of 17 times across both publications in the sample frame.

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For Sochi 2014 coverage, the Mentioning Disability First narrative frame was discernible across both publications with *The Guardian* using this narrative frame 11 times across 2014, March 8, 10, 11, 12 and 14. The *Daily Mail* used this frame of reference five times across four dates which were 2014, March 10, 11, 12 and 14.

The Overcoming Disability / Personal Tragedy narrative frame was also identified in the sample across both titles on the dates specified. For London 2012 articles, the *Daily Mail* used it a total of ten times across the five dates August 31, September 1, 4, 5 and 6. *The Guardian* used the Overcoming Disability / Personal Tragedy narrative frames a total of five times across three dates which were 2012, August 31, September 4 and September 5. The Overcoming Disability/ Personal Tragedy frame was more prominent in the *Daily Mail* articles surveyed during the time frame of the study. In sum, the subtext was used a total of 15 times across both print media sources for London 2012 coverage. For Sochi 2014 articles surveyed for both publications, the Overcoming Disability / Personal Tragedy was much less evident in all articles surveyed on the dates specified with only the *Daily Mail* using this narrative frame a total of three times on March 10.

Given the scale of the Summer Paralympic Games relative to the Winter Games and the heightened interest within the UK media in response to 2012 as a home Games, it is not surprising that evidence of the narratives identified was much greater in the case of London 2012. The purpose here was not to compare across the two Games but rather, taken together, to identify evidence of continuity and change in particular media frames and narratives in relation to the 2012 and 2014 Games in particular.

Identifiable subtexts in relation to the narrative frames specified

Evidence of Pointon's first subtext, *transformation* associated with the Overcoming Disability / Personal Tragedy narrative frame, did then clearly feature within the London 2012

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sample frame, while there was some evidence presented in the Sochi 2014 sample frame. The *transformation* subtext seeks to reinforce a power relationship, as it details the “hero” as the surgeon who performs the transformation of the disabled body through the use of their specialist skills or knowledge. In the context of disability sport, the *transformation* subtext is closely linked with the idea of rehabilitation, where sport is used as a vehicle to rehabilitate the person with a disability. References to this subtext were reiterated within the content analysis when describing the origins of wheelchair sports. For example, Ronay (2012) for *The Guardian* suggested that “the sport was conceived as an activity for convalescent members of the armed forces: an aid to recovery but also a means of fostering self-esteem and what Guttmann saw as a sense of galvanizing physicality.” In addition, back-stories of the athletes were also used to reinforce the transformation subtext. Gibson (2012c) for *The Guardian* suggested that “athletes competing in packed venues and featuring in more than 500 hours of Channel 4 coverage will inspire both admiration of their sporting achievement and a wider shift in perceptions.” It also provided some key transformation subtexts in the form of background stories. Additionally, the limitations of Channel 4’s coverage was suggested by *The Guardian*’s reporters through use of terms “polite, amateur, interrupted”, one reporter commenting that “There’s a sense that everyone is on their best behaviour being extra careful not to offend” (Wollaston, 2012). Likewise, the *Daily Mail* also criticised Channel 4’s coverage with one reporter commenting: “[I] wasn’t stirred by all the Channel 4 devised hyperbole about ‘superhumans’, and the attempts to depict disabled athletes as ultra-cool, as if they were bionic participants in some futuristic reality TV show” (Jones, 2012).

Direct references relating to the biomedical and transformation subtext were also evident within the *Daily Mail*. For example “cyclist (...), 42, collected Silver in the men’s individual 1km time trial just three years after suffering appalling injuries when he plummeted 40ft to the ground in a paragliding accident” (Williams, 2012a). Such use of

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background stories within a narrative, which emphasizes the transition from athletes' dysfunctional bodies to one that is capable of a sporting performance, suggests a transformation narrative.

Pointon's (1997) second subtext; *tragedy*, was also a prominent theme within the content analysis. For example, "if being born with achondroplasia ordained a life of looking upwards to others, in the pool she can literally and figuratively stare rivals in the eye" (Prior, 2012). Similarly, examples of the *tragedy* subtext were also presented in the Sochi 2014 content analysis. For example, "Miss McFadden, 24, left a St. Petersburg orphanage for Maryland 20 years ago and was not expected to live long. She spent the first six years of her life walking on her hands because of spina bifida." ("Re-united with Mother," 2014). Placing focus on what Pointon describes as the de-habilitating condition, seeks to reinforce the idea that, although performing at an elite level, the elite athlete is still defined as having experienced a tragedy. The *tragedy* subtext represents a narrative function used by the audience, as highlighted here; "it's more inspiring because of how they've gone so low and come back fighting and sport has completely changed their lives" and "it's harder if you're a Paralympian than a normal Olympian – having a disability makes everything a lot tougher" (Barkham, 2012). There are two significant issues represented in these two commentaries. Firstly, the use of this narrative function arguably encourages the audience to feel pity as well as admiring the athlete's performance, a subtext that was clearly evidenced within the majority of the papers analysed. Secondly, and in light of the traditional model, which portrays athletes with disabilities as disabled first and athlete second (Corrigan et al., 2010), there is reference to the medicalized conception of disability through use of the term 'normal'. According to Huang and Brittain (2006), the traditional model aligns itself with the medical model and the conceptualization of deviation from the norm. The term normal has become problematic in the representation of disability, particularly in sport as it promotes an able-

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bodied hierarchy that by extension, places athletes with disabilities in a hierarchy, dependent upon the severity of the disability. In this context, Devine (1997, p. 4) claims “that society has a prescribed set of standards by which we are all measured, and when someone’s biological make-up or function fails to meet these standards, they are assumed to be inferior and are subject to a decrease in inclusion in society.”

The third subtext of Pointon’s (1997) representation; *normalisation*, which suggests that people with disabilities are not dissimilar to people without disabilities, was also used a discursive tool. This is concerned with notions of progression and adaption. In the context of the Paralympic coverage, provided by the print media sources, progression and adaption would be associated with overcoming the disability in the attempt to be personified as normal. This particular narrative context was evident in nearly all of the print sources; the text provided below (Williams, 2012b) illustrates a key example of the subtext:

Five athletes who symbolise triumph of will over adversity. They are the images which sum up the spirit of the athletes who have been dubbed ‘The Super Humans’. Each has found their own remarkable way to overcome their disability and perform to the highest level in their chosen discipline.

For Pointon (1997) such themes are problematic because “the developing narrative tells us it is all about the social skills, personality, powers of acceptance and the adaptation of the disabled person...the overcoming of disability and the denial of victimhood” (p. 89). Devlin and Pothier (2006) argue that the achievement of overcoming personal tragedy granted by a world ruled by able-bodied individuals can present a further challenge since it perpetuates the disability as a problem. When consideration is given to DePauw’s (2005)

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conceptualisation of sport, which focuses on the socially constructed ideals of physicality, masculinity and sexuality, the normalisation subtext appears to reinforce these ideals. In relation to this, Buysee & Borcharding (2010) argue that the media tend to portray disabled athletes who most closely align to these constructed ideals. Drawing upon Pointon's (1997) last subtext; *spectacle*, evidence from the content analysis presents this as a pervasive subtext in the reporting of disability sports events. The narrative function of the term focuses on bodily dysfunction, making it a spectacle-driven narrative that showcases disability. Evidence of which was presented in a number of the paper's themes, for example, the *Daily Mail* provided a number of *spectacle* subtexts (Jones, 2012):

The swimmers who awed me most, though, were those who had no chance of a medal, and had to draw on every last ounce of willpower merely to make it from one of the pools to the other: the Thai amputee with what seemed a painfully laborious cork-screw style, and the Portuguese dwarf swimmer, whose miniature limbs made buoyancy a minor miracle.

Taking my seat for the swimming finals, for example, my attention was at first drawn to the physiques of the participants as they hopped, hobbled or were wheeled to their starting blocks, and I was preoccupied by trying to work out who might have the greatest disadvantage, whether or not it was fair for a man with no legs to swim against one without arms, and so on.

Arguably this narrative used by the print media serves as a conduit to reinforce non-disabled -disabled and normal - abnormal opposites by orchestrating a spectacle that draws

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the audiences focus to the abnormality (Peers, 2012). By applying such a focus, the print media appear to, perhaps unwittingly, be creating a comparative perspective which accentuates the difference between the bodies of the disabled athletes and those of the (able-bodied) audience. Such reinforcement appears to restore the natural body hierarchy, which places non-disabled athletes or the least severely disabled at the top and athletes with severe disabilities at the bottom (Thomas & Smith, 2003). Alongside the *Daily Mail*, *The Guardian* also provided some prominent cases of Pointon's *spectacle* subtext narrative. The content that was exhibited detailed an extensive story of how a disabled athlete had completed a number of feats, which were considered superhuman, a narrative function that was utilised during the build up to the Games and throughout the Paralympics. For example, Ronay (2012), noted:

In Athens in 2004 he took gold despite the fact that his wheelchair got a puncture 5km from the finish. He just ran on his rims for the rest of the race. He is as tough as they come. In 2009 Fearnley climbed the 1,504 steps of Sydney Tower on his hands. He took them two at a time, and finished in a little under 20 minutes. Two months later he dragged himself over the Kokoda Trail; through the mountains of Papua New Guinea. It took him 10 days. It takes most people 12 days to do it on foot. On the flight back to Australia the airline he was using forced him to check in his wheelchair and tried to get him to use one of their own as a replacement. Offended, he refused, and crawled through the airport on his hands. The backlash caused the airline to completely revise its disability policies.

None sees their disability as something they have had to overcome, or struggle with, none wants to be admired for the mere fact that they have had to cope with their impairments.

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The social model of disability, with its focus on societal responses to impairment, provides the basis for critiquing such medicalized and problematized media representations of disability as identified through Pointin's sub-texts. At the same time, however, focusing solely on societal responses to impairment does have limitations when attempting to understand the lived experience of athletes with disabilities. A number of more interpretive bio-social and affirmative models of disability have evolved over the past two decades, which challenge the limits of the social model. Such alternative perspectives typically focus on the impairment as contributing in different ways to the identity and experience of the person with the disability (French & Swain, 2008). In the context of sport, for example, bio-social models would take into account the influence of the individual impairment on the whole life experience of the athlete, including their responses to adaptation and modification in order to engage with sport. Crow (1992, as cited in Shakespeare, 2010, p. 269) observes, "as individuals most of us simply cannot pretend with any conviction that our impairments are irrelevant because they influence every aspect of our lives. We must find a way to integrate them into our whole experience." Similarly Williams (2001, p. 140) argues that "placing too much emphasis on the politics of exclusion may be regarded as a way of underplaying the real effects of different impairments and the complex 'negotiated' aspects of everyday life," The alternative, he suggests, is not to reject the social model but rather to suggest that "it is appropriate to begin to look at the relationship between the individual and society rather than focus on the individual or society" (Corker, 1998, as cited in Williams, p. 139- emphasis has been added). Such perspectives present challenges for those attempting to influence reporting on disability. In some senses the process of recalibrating reporting (which recognizes the impact of the disability) is already evident with the Channel 4 "Meet the Superhumans" theme and promotional campaign which highlighted possible causes of disability as congenital,

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product of conflict and product of accident, as indicated in a hard-hitting advertisement which included shots of a mother giving birth, a car accident and an explosion in a war zone (Heath, 2012). Nevertheless these activities have produced contested narratives that, far from providing an alternative focus for media guidelines, have resulted in new tensions within the Paralympic Movement concerning its role as an advocacy body.

Conclusion

By way of pointing to some kind of overall conclusion, the aim of this small-scale study was to critically examine the claim that media representations of disability tend to reflect the broader cultural identification of 'the disabled' as 'different' (Fulcher & Scott, 2007) through an examination of press representations of disability in the context of the Paralympic Games. As indicated, our findings (based on themes – referred to as narrative frames - identified in the academic literature on media, disability and representation) would suggest that there is some evidence to support the claims that there are indeed critical issues pertaining to the ways in which the media frame disability. There are some caveats here though. Firstly, in pointing out these tendencies of media professionals and journalists to rely on or resort to certain frames of reference and narrative strategies is not to outwardly condemn the ways in which journalists provided coverage of the Paralympic Games. That would be too simplistic and inevitably involve glossing-over what is indeed a complex area characterised by contested meaning(s). As Pointon and Davies (1997) point out, it is too simplistic to talk about negative and positive images of disability because both categories are fraught with difficulties and complexity. They go on to argue that with regard to images and language and what is deemed acceptable or positive, it is wrong (indeed fallacious) to think that all people with disabilities 'think the same way' and that there is a consensus around what is (or might be) 'appropriate'. Secondly, whilst critical examinations of media representations provides valuable insights into the ways in which the media represent the social world, this

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type of analysis cannot yield much information about the audience for these representations, how they engage with and interpret these narratives, or the potential diversity and complexity of audience responses. There are then, limitations to the research findings presented here but it is hoped that it will inspire further research into media representations of people with disabilities in the context of para-sport but also beyond this in other spheres of social life. It is also important that more research is conducted with a focus on audience reception and readings of media representations of disability in order to fully understand how these representations are rendered meaningful by readers and viewers.

Media representations of disability present mixed messages when considered within the context of press coverage of the 2012 and 2014 Paralympic Games. Pronouncements from disability sports organizations, in particular the IPC, suggest significant progress in both the quality and quantity of coverage of the Paralympic Games in the lead-up to and during recent Games. The IPC and a number of NPCs have developed enhanced guidance and support for media organizations covering the Games. Assessments of some broadcasting, in particular Channel 4 in the UK, do demonstrate the increase in breadth and depth of coverage and would support the general argument of an enlightened and progressive representation of disability. However, as Purdue and Howe (2013 suggest “...there is evidence of some incompatibility between two key aspects of IPC’s mission statement, namely developing opportunities for athletes with high support needs in sport at all levels and in all structures, and seeking the continuous global promotion and media coverage of the Paralympic Movement” (p. 38).

For the purposes of this small-scale study, qualitative content analysis was deemed to be the most suitable approach because it is appropriate to identifying themes and trends in media coverage of specific events or topics but, at the same time, allows scope for more detailed analysis of representation, interpretation and meaning(s). However, all research methods have their strengths and limitations. In the case of content analysis (qualitative or

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quantitative) it can only provide answers to the questions posed. Decisions made about the choice of media to analyse, the sample frame size, categorization, and what is counted are, arguably, produced by fairly arbitrary and subjective judgements about what is relevant and the interpretative frames brought to the analysis (Deacon, Pickering, Golding, & Murdock, 2007). Whilst fully acknowledging these limitations, it is anticipated that this small-scale study might initiate (indeed inspire) further research into the ways in which the media represent disability sport and the narrative devices and discursive frames they deploy in order to render it meaningful for their audiences.

In many respects, this small-scale study confirms the continuing existence of predominant frames of reference used by media professionals to make sense of disability identified in the critical literature on media representations of disability (in sport and non-sport contexts). For the most part, media coverage continues to medicalize the presentation of disability, objectify the person with the disability and sensationalize through the use of back-stories which promote a narrative of the disabled person's triumph over adversity.

The study suggests that notwithstanding the efforts of key stakeholders, in particular the IPC and NPCs, to influence representation of disability through recent Paralympic Games, the print media still prominently uses an array of stereotypical representations of athletes with disabilities. Specifically, the *transformer* and *normalisation* narratives were evident in the use of background stories to reaffirm the athlete's capacity to overcome their disability, and the use of medical experts to assist this process. The media's tendency to concentrate on the athlete's disability as opposed to the athletic ability reaffirmed the *tragedy* narrative. Lastly, the most prominent theme; Freakshow, which aligned itself with the *spectacle* driven narrative, was reiterated in a number of contexts, including as a theme within newspapers considered by the study and through use of the term superhuman by Channel 4 when describing the Paralympians. What is evident here is that mediated reports on the Paralympic

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Games are shaped by cultural discourses in wider social circulation and in turn, feed back into those cultural discourses in ways which can potentially reinforce or challenge them.

Paralympism is predicated on the notion that engagement in sport is an empowering process. This is reflected in narratives developed and encouraged by the IPC and other key stakeholders. In relation to recent games, official Paralympic media releases appeared to connect with impairment alongside athletic prowess. This could be interpreted as reflecting alternative bio-social or affirmative perspectives on disability which recognize the impairment as integral to the experience of the athlete, shaping their identity and providing a reference point for their experience within the international sporting environment (Thomas & Smith, 2009). In these senses, they recognize the sports performance of the athlete as pivotal, while not denying the lived experience of disability.

Central to this process is the voice of athletes with disabilities, bringing their perspective on the inter-relationship between the disability and the sporting experience. In this respect, expansion in the use of electronic platforms including social media, have impacted on the construction of contemporary disability identities; enabling athletes to articulate their personal perspectives as competitors with disabilities (within social media parameters outlined by the IPC) and reflecting on the sporting experience. In some senses this is fundamentally changing the process of reporting on parasport. Ultimately then, it may not necessarily be appropriate to reject ideas of *tragedy*, *normalisation* or *spectacle* as media perspectives since elements of tragedy, normalisation and spectacle may indeed be woven into the experience of athletes with disabilities. It is rather, the need to question the way these narratives are foregrounded without an understanding of how they relate to the athletic performance and the lived experience of the athletes in question.

As a study restricted to the UK context, the global dimension to disability has only received passing reference. Yet challenges facing individual disabled athletes, representation

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of disability through sport and links to the wider disability rights are accentuated in international contexts. In part this is reflected in the marked asymmetry of the athlete base in Paralympic sport. While 15 additional countries were represented at the 2012 Games, it was noted that 45 percent of the 4237 athletes came from just 10 countries and 46 countries sent only one athlete (“Keeping Paralympics Mainstream,” 2012). The IPC is engaged in a number of initiatives in an attempt to address this asymmetry and this should be seen as part of its response to its wider advocacy role. An additional dimension to the asymmetry of the Games is the continued gender imbalance which is markedly greater than that evident in the Olympic Games. Le Clair (2012) for example indicates that in 2008 the figures were 2584 men to 1367 women. At the 2012 Games, the figures were 2736 men to 1501 women (IPC, n.d.), indicating no significant shift in the gender balance of athletes. Further analysis of press coverage of the Games is necessary to identify ways in which these imbalances impact on representations of different populations of disabled athletes internationally. At the same time, the development of ParalympicsTV through Youtube has begun to address the imbalance in coverage of Paraspports events between resource rich and resource poor countries (Howe, 2008a).

Representations of disability are constructed through a network of interlocking interests, with a number of organizations (including those representing athlete’s interests) contributing to the re-shaping of how audiences understand disability through the parasport frame. Though not the sole agent, media engagement (accredited and unaccredited) is integral to that process. Media representations of disability are influential in terms of shaping wider discourses relating to disability sport specifically and representations of disability more generally. Whilst the general perception of media coverage of the 2012 and 2014 Paralympics was for the most part positive, the print media sample frame in this study indicates evidence of the use of certain narrative frames and discursive strategies underpinning the representation of parasport

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in media coverage that continue to make unhelpful generalisations and objectify athletes with disabilities as the disabled other. The wider implications of the tendency to resort to these dominant media frames are outlined by Peers (2012) who notes that ‘...such narratives divert attention from athletic accomplishments, and focus instead on freak-show-like hyperbolic and sensationalized stories of “Super Athletes” or “Super Humans” overcoming their (presumed) tragic, lesser, bodies’.

Ultimately the commitment to socially responsible journalism is balanced against the commercial imperative to sell stories. The marketability of athletes is centred on notions of athletic performance and aesthetics, which in turn is linked to media portrayal of the body. Purdue and Howe (2013) note that aesthetically pleasing sporting performances are focused on purposeful, controlled bodily movement, which demonstrates excellence and skill. This has implications for the Paralympian’s ability to access corresponding financial and other resources, including equitable media representation. It is evident that in the context foregrounding the back-stories (sub-text narratives) of triumph over adversity and the athlete as supercrip analogy, these may be seen as the most newsworthy element of parasport. Since such human interest perspectives are characteristic of much of journalistic endeavour it is difficult to envisage an environment within which such references do not form part of the reporting. For example where there is a race, social class or gender based back-story, these are also packaged as triumph over adversity. While there is the capacity to influence how disability is represented through media guidelines and through accreditation procedures, this capacity is by definition, limited (guidelines are just that, and accreditation only provides a degree of control over a small section of media). Perhaps it is through the stories of individual athletes with disabilities, told through social media that the real challenge to the objectification of disability can take place. At the same time, the emergence of counter narratives generated through emerging social media platforms does not discount the need for

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ongoing critical engagement, analysis and monitoring of mainstream media frames of reference for representing disability.

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