

PARALYMPIC NARRATIVES – PERCEPTIONS OF DISABILITY

› Legacy area: **MEDIA, CULTURE & TOURISM**

› Policy focus: **IMPACTS**

› **THE EVIDENCE:**

The Paralympic Games may have the potential to change popular perceptions of disability

› **THE BIG THREE DEBATES:**

1.

Is the specific legacy potential of the Paralympic Games taken seriously by politicians and Games organisers?

2.

Could stories about the Paralympic Games and disabled athletes have a negative impact on disabled people?

3.

Is it asking too much of the Paralympic Games to change people's attitudes towards disability?

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› WHAT DOES THE EVIDENCE SAY?

When politicians and Games organisers talk about legacy, they usually refer to the legacy of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. They do this because they want to be inclusive and to give the Paralympic Games the same profile as the Olympic Games. But sometimes this can mean that some of the specific legacy potential that the Paralympic Games might offer can be overlooked. Evidence suggests that there may be specific opportunities offered by the Paralympic Games to advance the social wellbeing of disabled people in all aspects of their lives, and to underpin this by enhancing positive attitudes to disability among the population as whole. However, while the evidence suggests that the social, media and political attention on disability that the Paralympic Games generates offers the potential to challenge negative perceptions by presenting disabled people as 'able' and promoting 'difference' in a positive way, this attention can also sometimes have negative outcomes, including:

- Stereotypes can be re-inforced by media stories focusing on tragedy narratives.
- Impairment and difference can be downplayed, or even hidden, by focusing only on wheelchair athletes or amputees.
- Athletes can be disconnected from the lives of the general disabled population by focusing on 'extradordinary' and 'heroic' qualities that have led to them overcoming their disability.

› HOW WAS THE EVIDENCE GATHERED?

SPEAR initially conducted [a review of data and outcomes relating to both previous Paralympic Games and broader disability research, prior to an analysis of contemporary policy and strategy documents relating to the opportunities provided by the London 2012 Paralympic Games](#). This analysis was used as the basis for interviews with four UK disability charities about their ambitions for the Paralympic Games in London.

The findings of this review of the potential of, and ambitions for, the London 2012 Paralympic Games were [explored with disabled and non-disabled young people at universities across the South East of England](#). These focus group conversations examined young people's perceptions of disability, and explored how media presentations of narratives associated with the Paralympic Games and disabled athletes influenced these perceptions.

› WHO WAS THE AUDIENCE?

Many of the initial policy documents and strategies that mentioned legacies from the London 2012 Paralympic Games [emphasised the potential of the Games to increase sport participation opportunities for disabled people, and to increase the number of disabled athletes](#). Until the publication of the government's [disability legacy plan](#) in 2010, there was very little mention of a broader social legacy for disabled people, and even since the publication of this plan, there has been very little action towards a social legacy. Consequently, the initial audience for this work was the disability community, and particularly UK disability charities, who were exploring how the Paralympic Games might make a contribution to their work.

Following the initial review of the legacy potential of the London 2012 Paralympic Games, the [Creative Campus Initiative](#), a project across universities in South East England, funded SPEAR to conduct research into perceptions of disability among disabled and non-disabled young people at university in the South East. In particular, Creative Campus wanted to know how media stories and narratives featuring the Paralympic Games shaped young people's perceptions about the creative and athletic abilities of disabled people.

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› THE BIG THREE DEBATES

The UK government published its [Legacy Plan for the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games](#) in June 2008, along with five legacy promises relating to sport, regeneration, culture, sustainability and the economy. It was not until March 2010, almost two years later, that the government published a sixth legacy promise focusing on disability, together with a [disability legacy plan](#). Although this sixth promise did include a commitment to use the Paralympic Games to influence the attitude and perceptions of people towards disability, many of the action points fell back on increasing the participation of disabled people in sport and physical activity. There was much criticism that this focus on a disability legacy was an afterthought, and that much [more could and should be done to effectively capitalise on the legacy potential of the Paralympic Games](#).

THE BIG THREE DEBATES ABOUT PARALYMPIC NARRATIVES...

- 1 Is the specific legacy potential of the Paralympic Games being taken seriously by politicians and Games organisers?
- 2 Could stories about the Paralympic Games and elite disabled athletes have a negative effect on perceptions of disability and disabled people?
- 3 Is it asking too much of the Paralympic Games to improve the lives of disabled people by influencing people's attitudes to, and perceptions of, disability?

› FURTHER RESOURCES AND READING

- Dowse, S. (2010). 'Paralympic Potential: Opportunities and Risks'. In Wellard, I and Weed, M. (EDS), Wellbeing, Health and Leisure. Eastbourne:LSA.
- Weed M & Dowse, S. (2009) 'A Missed Opportunity Waiting to Happen? The Social Legacy Potential of the London 2012 Paralympic Games'. Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events, 1(2), 170-174.
- The Creative Campus Initiative: <http://www.creativecampusinitiative.co.uk/>
- Paralympic Potential: <http://www.canterbury.ac.uk/Research/Centres/SPEAR/ResearchProjects/OlympicAndParalympic/ParalympicPotential.aspx>
- DCMS (2008) 'Before, During and After: Making the Most of the London 2012 Games': <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/2012LegacyActionPlan.pdf>
- DCMS (2010) 'London 2012: A legacy for disabled people': http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/GOE_London_2012_Disability_Legacy.pdf

CREDITS

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