

“We’re the Superhumans”: Print and online media representations of the Rio 2016 Paralympics

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COVERAGE

- Media representation of disability
- Media representations of Paralympics
- A note on methods
- Findings
 - Media event arc
 - Supercrip to Superhumans
 - Media and change: progressive narratives
- Conclusion



MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF DISABILITY

- Powerful ideas about disability circulated via the media (Ellis & Goggins, 2015)
- Haller (2010) identifies prevalent 'frames' that influence reporting of disability including medical model, social pathology model and supercrip model
- The media industries, historically, disability-blind, impacting on news frames and societal attitudes:

Most journalists seem utterly incapable of writing or talking about a person with a disability without using phrases like 'overcoming disability', 'brave', 'suffers from', 'defying the odds' 'wheelchair bound', or my personal favourite, 'inspirational' (Young, 2012)

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF PARASPORT

- Sporting event platforms promises opportunity for awareness raising, education and entertainment - and reach to significant audiences (McPherson, et al 2016)
- But, 'medical' and 'supercrip' discourses remain influential in media representations of sport:
 - Inspirational stories of athletes having overcome their disabilities, defying the odds to achieve great feats of athletic achievement
 - Two objections: 1. 'Super' moniker elevates athletes to 'heroic' status (Hardin, 2004) 2. Emphasises potential to transcend one's disability through hard work and effort thus marginalises those who are not able to achieve this status

By conveying the idea that all the dreams are possible depending on an individual's effort and merit, the social injustice of unequal opportunities for "able" and "disabled" people is ignored (Silva and Howe, 2012, p.188)

NOTES ON METHOD

- 500+ English language articles gathered from early August-end of September 2017: pre-, during-, post-Games
- Search terms: 'Paralympics; Rio 2016 Paralympics; parasport; para-athletes; disability sport; disabled sport
- Searched in 1. Newsbank; 2. Broadsheet and tabloid online sites; 3. Google
- Article text and (where included) associated images and their placement
- Adopted a CDA approach (Fairclough) in tandem with Foucauldian discourse analysis:
 - Focus on individual text BEFORE interpretation and explanation
 - Regularities across a number of texts, as discourses are 'systems of dispersion' (Foucault, 2002, p41)

REPRESENTING PARALYMPICS AND MEDIA EVENT ARC

- The media event arc: peaks and troughs in coverage in advance, during and after major sport events
- Pre-Rio 2016 media narrative dominated by Channel 4 “We’re Superhumans” campaign (July 2016) then ‘negative’ coverage of doping and budgetary issues:

“Paralympic ban for Russia 'one of sport's darkest days’” (Daily Telegraph, 8th August 2016)

“Rio 2016 Budget Fiasco Threatens Paralympic Athletes' Ambitions” (Bloomberg, 15th August 2016)

“With the Olympics done, it’s time for the Paralympics—which are looking like a disaster” (Quartz, 28th August, 2016)

- Post-event UK coverage quickly switched to consider the extent to which portraying para-athletes as inspirational figures merely salves the public’s conscience for two weeks but with little long terms benefit

WE'RE SUPERHUMANS: INSPIRATION OR IMPEDIMENT?

- Evidence of extensive coverage of Paralympics (positive) partly generated by Channel 4 coverage: provocation produced discussion of disability
- Frequent use of superhuman phrase in reporting:

“The world’s real-life superhumans picture-perfect at Paralympics” (News.com.au, 19th September, 2016)

- However, noticeable counter-movement from within, and outside, sport to challenge value of the ‘super’ (hero, human) moniker:

“It’s ironic ...how closely the term Superhuman is to the term Supercrip.” The irony is even more palpable given that media outlets have recently been cautioned against overusing the words “superhuman,” “brave,” and “heroes” in Paralympics reporting because they might be construed as offensive”

“The hyping of disabled athletes into superhuman status by Channel 4 only deepens our wounds, inflicted by continual assaults on our daily lives. It truly seems that the only acceptable disabled person is a Paralympian – and then only for a few weeks” (*Guardian*, 6th September, 2016).

PROGRESSIVE PERSPECTIVES: MEDIA FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

- Evidence (especially post-Games) of more progressive (and politicised) media frames emerging, drawing on minority/civil rights model, cultural pluralism model and legal models (Haller, 2010):
- Overt, sophisticated political reporting around tensions evident in glorification of Paralympic athletes and the conditions faced by most disabled people in the UK and elsewhere:

“As a disabled person, it’s my feeling that labels should be stuck onto jars, not onto people. For eleven days we all feel like we too have been invited to the ball, but before we know it, it’s midnight and the golden carriage has already begun to turn back into a pumpkin. But what about the remaining 3 years and 354 days? Most disabled people don’t want a gold medal, they want to be taken seriously and to be valued in society

(Ellie May Forrester, Huffington Post, 21st September, 2016)

CONCLUSIONS

- The media event arc produces differential coverage pre-, during, post-event, but this can be disrupted by strategic media interventions
- There remains a tendency towards reporting ‘overcoming’ and ‘inspirational narratives’ in coverage of the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games
- Some evidence that progressive, ‘political’, social change narratives emerging
- Need for further analysis of online and social media platforms and the emerging event narrative, especially in relation to athletes self representation