Spirit in ‘Motion’: An Exploration of NBC’s Broadcast Coverage of the 2012 Paralympic Games

Joshua Pate, James Madison University
Timothy Mirabito, Marist College

Media coverage of the 2012 Paralympic Games in London was widely considered to be the most extensive, in terms of reach, since the Games officially began in 1960. Yet, television media coverage in the United States was significantly lower comparatively to television media coverage across Europe. British public television network Channel 4 aired 400 hours of live coverage of the Paralympic Games, which reportedly reached 69% of the United Kingdom’s population. Television media coverage in the United States offered a stark contrast as NBC aired a mere 5.5 hours of tape-delayed television coverage. Four 1-hour highlight shows aired on NBC Sports Network on September 4, 5, 6, and 11 that showed performance recaps. A 1.5-hour highlight show aired on NBC one week following the conclusion of the Paralympic Games, September 16, that included edited versions of each of the previous 1-hour highlight shows.

Previous studies have examined television coverage of the Olympic Games with regard to ethnicity (Billings & Angelini, 2007; Billings et al., 2008), equity (Billings et al., 2008), gender (Angelini, Billings, & MacArthur, 2013; Angelini, MacArthur, & Billings, 2012; Billings & Angelini, 2007; Billings, Angelini, & Duke, 2010; Billings et al., 2008; Licen & Billings, 2013), nationalism (Angelini, Billings, & MacArthur, 2012; Billings, Angelini, & Wu, 2011; Billings, MacArthur, Licen, & Wu, 2009), nationality (Billings & Angelini, 2007; Licen & Billings, 2013), race (Angelini & Billings, 2010), and sport biases (Licen & Billings, 2012). However, there has been little examination of U.S. media coverage of the Paralympic Games. Therefore, it is a necessity to simply explore the content provided during U.S. television coverage of the Paralympic Games. This study was based upon work by Carter and Williams (2012) on television coverage of the Special Olympics, which focused on athlete portrayal and descriptions of athletes.

The purpose of this study was to explore the content of NBC’s television coverage of the 2012 Paralympic Games to an audience in the United States. A thematic analysis was conducted on the 5.5 hours of NBC’s television coverage of the 2012 Paralympic Games. The programs were recorded using a digital video recorder.

Findings showed that education, positive tone, and human interest were the themes constructed from the broadcasts. Educational moments occurred when broadcasters educated viewers on the rules and stipulations of Paralympic sport through classifications or strategies. Positive tone was a theme, with broadcaster commentary often serving as promotion of Paralympic sport, which presided regardless of the national allegiance of athletes. Finally, human interest was a component of the broadcast focused on telling athletes’ background stories, some of which included disability explanation and some which did not.

This study added to the framework set forth by the Carter and Williams (2012) study in that their research on television coverage of Special Olympics in the United Kingdom resulted in themes of positive coverage, human interest stories, and family recognition. This study found limited focus on families, but rather a heightened focus on educating the audience on sport, technique, and strategy. Such an educational piece is appropriate for a U.S. audience considering the historical dearth of media coverage of the Paralympic Games. Paralympic television coverage within the United States is in its infancy with contractual obligation for growth. NBC has partnered with the United States Olympic Committee to broadcast more live coverage for the 2014 Winter Paralympic Games in Sochi and the 2016 Summer Paralympic Games in Rio. This added coverage will allow for further exploration of the Paralympic Games that presently exists with the Olympic Games. This study offers practical application for communications professionals as U.S. media coverage expands with regards to understanding how athletes are being portrayed on U.S. television. Educating an audience on Paralympic sport is an early priority for captivation considering NBC’s commitment to greater coverage of the Paralympic Games within the United States.