A Content Analysis of Television News Transcripts of the Paralympics from 1988 to 2012

Soonhwan Lee, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis
Kyoung Tae Kim, Southeast Missouri State University
John Bae, William Paterson University
Brian Krohn, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis


The nexus relationship between mass media and sports influences cultural and social trends and phenomenon (Pedersen, Whisenat, & Schneider, 2003; Sage, 1998). However, despite of the significant role and relationship between sports and media, some sporting events for people with disabilities are generally not fairly inclusive in mass media. For instance, the Paralympics which is the world’s second-largest sporting event in terms of event size and numbers of nations participated (e.g., 4,200 athletes form 165 countries in the 2012 London Paralympics; International Paralympic Committee, 2012) have been received inadequate attention in mass media. More clearly, NBC which holds the TV rights for the 2012 London Olympics and Paralympics did not broadcast any Paralympic games live at all (Levin, 2012).

Although mass media coverage of the Paralympics and athletes with disabilities has slowly increased in recent decades in conjunction with the growth of the Paralympic movements since the 1988 Seoul Paralympics, the lack of quantitative media coverage and marginality of the Paralympics and athletes with disabilities still exists. Therefore, the specific purposes of the current study were to examine (1) the types of issues on which the TV news transcripts focused; (2) the types of sources utilized in the TV news transcripts; (3) how TV news transcripts framed the Paralympics and its participants at the individual and social levels; and (4) how the ways in which the Paralympics are framed relates to the types of issues covered and types of sources cited in the TV news transcripts.

Media framing is an influential way that mass media may shape people’s belief and opinion on certain events or issues in particular ways (De Vreese, 2005). A massive body of mass media research has examined how media coverage shape the representation of social issues and control the understanding of infinite information among the public (Howe, 2008b). In addition, there have been a large number of studies exploring the effect and influence of mass media in mega sporting events like the Olympics and FIFA World Cup since these sporting events have been broadcasted on TV.

The current study conducted a content analysis involving 622 TV news transcripts, which were collected using the Lexis-Nexis Academic database, about the Paralympics and athletes with disabilities from 6 TV networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, FNN, and MSNBC) during the time period of 1988 (January 1st) to 2012 (December 31st). TV news were chosen as the medium for examination in the study because it served as one of the main and popular information sources and conveys a variety of information to the public stronger than newspapers in certain condition such as the concurrent decline in newspaper circulation and readership since TV news became a reality among the public in the early 1980s (Chaffee, Zhao, & Leshner, 1994; Eveland, Seo, & Marton, 2002; Putnam, 2000; Whittemore, 1990). After careful screening and discarding of articles unrelated to the Paralympics and redundant TV news transcripts, the sampling process produced a total of 283 transcripts for main analysis. The year of 1988 was determined as the first year of data collection because the modern Paralympic movements had begun in the 1988 Seoul Summer Paralympic Games (Legg, Emes, Stewart, & Steadward, 2004). In addition, because a main focus of the current study was to compare and find differences in the TV news contents during the 25 year period, the time span was divided into 5 time frames: 1988-1992 (Time 1); 1993-1997 (Time 2); 1998-2002 (Time 3); 2003-2007 (Time 4); and 2008-2012 (Time 5). The coders randomly chose 50 cases from the 283 TV news transcripts to determine intercoder reliability for issues, sources, and episodic/thematic frames. As a result of the process, the intercoder reliability for the issues was .89, the sources, .91, and the episodic/thematic frames, .90. Because reliability exceeding .85 indicates a sufficiently acceptable level of intercoder reliability (Crano & Brewer, 2002), the data used for analysis in the current study were ascertained to be reliable.

The findings of the current study indicate that the Paralympics was principally covered by U.S. TV news agency during the periods of Time 2 (1993-1997) and Time 5 (2008-20012). The 1994 Winter Games were the first
Paralympic Games organized by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC). It was also the first time the Paralympic Winter Games were held in the same venue as the Winter Olympics. As a result, media attention regarding the Paralympics has increased along with the Olympics. The 1996 Paralympics were held in Atlanta, a city in which major cable television news agencies broadcast. This is especially true for the CNN, the leading 24-hour television news network which, was the outlet through which the greatest number of stories about the Paralympics was published (n=245, 39.3%), supporting the suggestion that media entities may be particularly interested in such an event when it is to be held locally. In 2008, 2010, and 2012, the number of TV news stories covering the Paralympics was the highest (n=114, 40.3%). In terms of topic of the TV news transcripts related to the Paralympics, optimism prevailed through most of this time period. Such results from the Paralympic Games can be attributed to improved societal attitudes and positive views of both the Paralympics and people with disabilities in the past decades. In addition, athletes in the Paralympics were portrayed in TV and mass media news transcripts as super human or supercrip. Such a focus can be seen as consistent with previous studies on people with disabilities (Hardin & Hardin, 2004). With regard to analysis on the sources cited in TV news transcripts, Paralympic athletes (n = 202; 29.0%) were the most interviewed sources, followed by supporters (n =127; 19.1%), and reporters (n = 121; 18.1%). It is not surprising that game participants were the most common sources from which to get information in coverage of the Paralympic Games. This may be seen as typical, since reports do often interview with athletes when covering other sporting events. With regard to framing, TV news transcripts using episodic framing (n=118) were significantly greater than those using thematic framing (n=56). The presentation of optimistic image, and the super human qualities of Paralympic participants were the most commonly presented topics in the Paralympic coverage, which focused more on personal issues or people’s emotional status. In relation to the coupling of with framing and issues, the thematic frame was highly associated with the topics of competition, business, publicity, and political issues; while the episodic frame was highly correlated with fact presentation, the notion of being superhuman, optimism, interest, and publicity. The results of this study were consistent with previous study findings. Thematic framing is considered to be more relevant to the social influence of certain issues or events than is episodic framing, which focuses more on personal issues or people’s emotional status. Further, in relevance to frames and issue types, the episodic frame was more frequently related to the Paralympic participants, coaches, administrators, and reporters; while the thematic frame was more associated with politician, researchers, and supporters. TV news networks apparently prefer to use episodic framing to cover personal stories and issues, and thematic framing to develop social integration and positive attitudes toward the Paralympics and people with disabilities, by utilizing politicians, researchers, and supporters.

As discussed, the role of the media is very important to both the Paralympics and athletes with disabilities, because how issues are framed can have a significant impact on social and political support. The current study regarding media coverage of the Paralympics identifies how the TV news agencies influence their target audience using framing theory. Limitations and recommendations for future studies are also discussed.