Framing Analysis of the Paralympic Games

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Introduction and Significance
The media serves as one of the most influential structures concerning the perceptions, opinions, and attitudes of the public (McCann, 1996), and the relationship between sport and the media reinforces and reproduces the dominant societal ideologies of participation (Trujilo, 2001). Research in the last decade on the topic of Paralympic sport in the media has looked not just at the frequency of coverage but also the trends and representations of disability (Bruce, 2014) that construct the discursive sporting contexts. First held in 1960, the Paralympic Games are the largest sporting competition for individuals with disabilities (International Paralympic Committee, 2013) and continue to grow and evolve with each quadrennial. This research contributes to the discussion regarding the role of media in fashioning public perception of Paralympic sport and athletes with disabilities. In so doing it prompts additional questions regarding our ability to shift from an able-bodied paradigm in defining sporting feats to one where disability is not the framing narrative of the Paralympic Games. The managerial significance of this research is most salient when considering the participation barriers that formulate as a result of the representations of disability in mainstream media.

Objectives of the Study
The objective of this study is to provide an analysis of the print media coverage of Paralympic sport in the United States, by qualitatively analyzing articles from The New York Times and USA Today between the years 1996 to 2013. A qualitative perspective is warranted in order to clearly depict the ways in which the Paralympics are discussed and framed for readers. This study seeks to provide a thorough examination of the existing research in the field concerning the inclusion of Paralympic sport in mainstream media in order to draw conclusions about the narrative framed by US print media, a prevalent gap in the literature to date.

Review of Literature
Researchers deconstruct the image of the Paralympic Games through the representation of athletes with disabilities on an international scale (Schantz & Gilbert, 2001; Schell & Rodriguez, 2001; Smith & Thomas, 2005) and contribute to the narrative surrounding disability and sport. In the media, people with disabilities are often framed as supercrips, disadvantaged and ill victims of misfortune (Clogston, 1990; Haller, 1999; Zhang & Haller, 2013) and these negative depictions perpetuate stigmatizing narratives. The supercrip model of disability representation views disability as a misfortune, while individuals that seek normality within this tragedy are extraordinary (Charlton, 2000; Kama, 2004). Silva and Howe (2012) view this candid glorification of achievements as a means of undervaluing the actual extraordinary and calls into question the legitimacy of Paralympic sport. There are relatively few heroes in mainstream sport and these exceptional individuals are thought to shine above the rest, whereas in disability sport, the label of ‘exceptional’ and ‘super’ is used in a seemingly arbitrary fashion (Peers, 2009).

Performance expectations and results seemingly contribute to the legitimization of Paralympic sport (Schell & Duncan, 1999). However, Schantz and Gilbert (2001) indicate that, more often than not, news sources focus on the human interest story of overcoming adversity rather than results. Furthering this discussion, Thomas and Smith (2003) argue that comparing Olympic and Paralympic performance is a means of offering a contextual setting for understanding Paralympic results and the media is attempting to make people with disabilities “appear as normal as possible” (p. 175).

DePauw (1997) describes the progression of exclusion to inclusion in three ways: invisibility of disability in sport, visibility of disability in sport, and (in)visibility of disability in sport. Within these categories, the evolution of the presence of disability in sport is transpired. As scholars continue to look at disability and sport, there is need for a
model of integration across the sporting landscape.

Methods and Data Analysis
The media emphasizes specific ideas and issues that influence consumer’s beliefs (Croteau & Hoynes, 2000) and this emphasis creates frames that are pivotal in the meaning derived by consumers (D’Angelo, 2002). These frames are considered “conceptual tools which the media rely on to convey, interpret, and evaluate information” (Neuman, Just & Crigler, 1992, p. 60) and media institutions control the angles presented to the public.

This study qualitatively examines Paralympic media coverage from 1996 to 2013 in both The New York Times and USA Today using a framing analysis technique. This time-frame adequately encompasses the development of Paralympic sport in the United States from the Atlanta Paralympic Games until present day. 545 relevant newspaper articles were analyzed in this study using a framing analysis technique adopted by previous research (Billings & Eastman, 2003; Santos et al., 2013; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2009). Analysis begins with the “long preliminary soak” (Hall, 1975, p. 15) by two coders, which serves to offer an overall understanding of the articles being looked at in this study. Next, the articles are examined more closely and dominant frames and messages are identified (Richardson, 2007). From these dominant frames, the coders create independent lists of narratives and discuss them to appropriately label and combine those that are similar, creating a comprehensive list.

The findings of this study suggest three major thematic narratives of the Paralympic Games in The New York Times and USA Today. The first theme found was the growth of Paralympic sport versus the frustrations with the lack of progress, illustrated by the milestones achieved since the first Games in 1960 as well as the shortcomings and levels still to be reached. The second frame identified was the legitimacy of Paralympic sport versus the differences noted from traditional sport, highlighted by the status as a serious competition and equity to able-bodied competition, as well as the variations that differ from mainstream sport. The final frame was overcoming obstacles versus maintaining victimhood, which was exemplified through the perceived struggle of not being able to triumph over a disability in comparison to those seen to be successful in spite of a disability.

Discussion and Implications
The media coverage of the Paralympic Games analyzed in this study confirm the visibility of disability within sport (DePauw, 1997) and while this has noticeably increased, the categorical nature of Olympic and Paralympic coverage still indicates a separation of the two sporting entities. According to Goetsch and Davis (2000), benchmarking is defined as the way in which organizations use the successes of others in the industry to imitate in their own execution. The Olympic Games, an established organization and leader within sport, have historically influenced much of the planning and organization of the Paralympic Games. Even the name ‘Paralympic’ is derived from the word ‘Olympic’ (International Paralympic Committee, 2013), thus inviting the comparison of the two while simultaneously establishing them as distinct. This study shows a direct comparison of Paralympians to Olympians in mainstream media providing a context for consumers to relate to and support the movement while also placing an Olympic qualifier on Paralympic success in order to be thought of as legitimate. Questions are also raised surrounding the equity of competition if athletes with and without disabilities were to compete on the same stage. Additionally, the language used to describe disability and adaptation within sport seeks to further the portrayal that the same sport played by people with and without disabilities is in fact different. This problematic portrayal depicts Paralympic athletes as not simply participating in sport, but rather participating through the use of technology and specialized equipment. Taking this one step further, the portrayal of Olympians from the same sport is of competing or smashing a world record, emphasizing the active performance expectation, results and competitive nature of the athlete.

DePauw (1997) argues for an (in)visibility of disability within sport and this study has contributed in saying that this is most effective when drawn from the inessential, where disability is no longer the most talked about factor in the narrative surrounding sport and a person with a disability. This inclusion comes with removing the “struggle” of disability, whereas the “triumph over tragedy” does not have as much significance as the success found in sport. In this manner, media outlets will seek to promote accomplishment, or even defeat, within sport with no regard to how able or disabled someone is because that is how sport is traditionally reported on. This is not to say that disability is not an important marker of identity, in the same way that race and gender may be components of a larger individual identity. However, performance outcome should not be veiled by whether the accomplishment was Olympic or
Paralympic in nature, and this conversation begins to confront the question of where athletes that participate in one rank over athletes that participate in another. The findings of this study are a series of conflicting narratives that ultimately inhibit the growth and development of the Paralympic movement into a mainstream sporting entity. In deconstructing these representations and recognizing the participative barriers that result, these narratives present the opportunity to effectively manage the gap between disability and able-bodied sport.