Informing Future Media Approaches: The Perspective of Paralympic Athletes

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The Paralympic Games are a mega sporting event providing media outlets the opportunity to broadcast disability sport to an international audience. Media coverage of the Paralympic Games has a role in how elite athletes with impairment and disability sport are portrayed and perceived by the public (Hellwege & Hallmann, 2019; Rees, Robinson & Shields, 2019). Researchers within this field have largely focused on constructions of disability and ableism of Paralympic athletes within the media. The emancipatory nature of this research has led scholars to argue that the stereotypical discursive frames that dominate media coverage disempower athletes by framing disability as a problem that requires 'overcoming' in order to achieve success (Rees, Robinson & Shields, 2019).

Since the 2012 Paralympic Games in London, broadcasting networks such as Channel 4 in the United Kingdom and the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) in Canada have worked towards improving Paralympic media coverage. This has primarily been achieved by voicing a dedication to providing not only greater media coverage but, by providing empowering coverage that focuses on athleticism first and foremost (Beacom, French & Kendall, 2016; CBC Media Center, 2017; Pullen, Jackson, Silk & Scullion, 2018). While the judgement on the amount and/or value of media coverage has improved through the increased focus on athletic achievement, stereotypical discourses remain dominant (Maika & Danylchuk, 2016; Pullen, Jackson, Silk & Scullion, 2018).

The aforementioned literature demonstrates that both scholars and media personnel recognize the importance of foregrounding athleticism within Paralympic media coverage. What research lacks however is knowledge from those who are represented in Paralympic media. This knowledge can offer insight into informing future approaches for Paralympic media coverage where athleticism is foregrounded. The purpose of this research was to therefore explore Paralympic athletes' experiences of being represented within Paralympic media coverage.

We are conducting eight semi-structured, photo-elicitation interviews with Canadian Paralympic athletes who have been featured in at least five online media articles since the 2012 Paralympic Games. Photo-elicitation interviews are researcher-driven, meaning that the researcher will provide the photos as a tool to promote discussions (Bates, McCann, Kaye & Taylor, 2017). A portfolio of Canadian media coverage on the participant is used in the interview as a prompt for understanding participants' experiences (Hatten, Forin, & Adams, 2013). We use an inductive approach and employ a critical discourse analysis to assist the coding process.

The voices of Paralympic athletes suggest the need for alternative approaches for representing Paralympic athletes and disability sport. Results of this study will add to the body of sport management research by providing practical insights for sports media personnel from the perspective of those who are represented in coverage. The knowledge offered by this study can assist sport media personnel with the construction of authentic, credible coverage of disability sport as media personnel develop new approaches for improving coverage of future Paralympic Games. This study further contributes to sport management scholarship by providing insight into how investigations of those who are represented by media may translate across other sports media domains.