

Watching disability: UK audience perceptions of the Paralympics, equality and social change

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Abstract

Despite the social change ambitions of Paralympic governing bodies and National broadcasters, there is still a shortage of evidence of where public social attitudes stand with respect to disabled bodies, and how these respond to the changing nature of Paralympic broadcasting. Based on a large-scale qualitative audience study across England and Wales, we aim to address this empirical gap. Our findings demonstrate how audiences internalise socially progressive ideas towards disability in line with Channel 4's broadcasting strategy. These include a greater appreciation of Paralympic sport as an elite sporting event, the 'normalisation' of the technologically enhanced disabled body and an awareness of emerging cultural citizenship concerning disability rights-based discourses. Yet, at the same time, we evidence new, potentially damaging stigma hierarchies of disability preference framed by 'ablenational' sentiments. Findings are discussed within ongoing debates around mega sporting events, media audiences and disability biopolitics.

Keywords

Broadcasting, disability, media audiences, Paralympics, sports mega events

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Introduction

The accelerated commodification of the Paralympic Games has seen it move from pastime to global sporting spectacle marking it as a hyper-visible space of disability representation (Pullen et al., 2018; Silva and Howe, 2012). Indeed, the Rio 2016 Paralympics saw its largest global audience of 4.1 billion – an increase of over 127% since 2004 – and over 500 hours of live coverage across a number of digital platforms (International Paralympic Committee (IPC), 2017). However, despite its media profile, the Paralympics maintains a distinct role compared with other commercial sporting mega events; that is, as a vehicle to achieving a more equitable and inclusive society by breaking down social barriers and regressive disability stereotypes (Howe, 2008).

This context creates tensions when it comes to Paralympic media content and disability representation. For the most part, scholarly attention has been directed towards a critique of disability discourses across Paralympic media coverage (Beacom et al., 2016; Misener, 2013; Silva and Howe, 2012) – predominantly newspaper and online platforms – identifying problematic depictions of disability (Rees et al., 2018). More recently, studies have focussed on analysis of live broadcasting content (Pullen et al., 2018, 2019), given it continues to remain the dominant medium in which Paralympic sport is delivered and consumed by audiences. Despite this important work, however, there remains an empirical dearth relating to the way audiences perceive, connect and interpret representations of disability through Paralympic sport (Hodges et al., 2015). Indeed, our knowledge base in Paralympic media scholarship is concentrated around *what* is communicated through Paralympic broadcasting and the inherent tensions *within*, and much less about *how* such content is perceived and internalised by audiences.

Outside of addressing this lacuna, there exists a compelling case to better develop this knowledge base. First, the Paralympic games provide perhaps the single most dominant mediated representation of disability for popular consumption. This is important in a context where disability continues to remain largely excluded from everyday public life and where, for a large proportion of the population, encounters of disability are through mediated content (Ellis and Goggin, 2015). Second, while media content may construct cultural knowledge around disability, audiences remain important social actors in the (re-)production and internalisation of such knowledge in shaping their everyday understandings of disability. As such, a nuanced understanding of audience perceptions of the Paralympics offers an important indicator of the wider cultural knowledge and public discourse of disability with implications for disability policy, legislation and advocacy groups working to improve inclusion of disabled people in public cultural life. Finally, there has been a significant shift in Paralympic representation in the United Kingdom since the entry of Channel 4 (C4) in 2012 as Paralympic rights holders that has changed the way Paralympic sport is brought to audiences. C4 sought a bold approach not seen in the history of Paralympic broadcasting that intended to elevate the visibility and profile of the Games at the same time as challenging public attitudes towards disability through new forms of disability representation. As a public service broadcaster with a remit that includes reflecting cultural diversity and inspiring social change, the ambition in the words of their former Disability Executive, Alison Walsh (2014), centred on ‘chang[ing] attitudes to disability and disability sport’ and creating ‘a nation at ease with disability’ (Walsh, 2014: 27).

Against this backdrop, our intention in this article is to address the gap in knowledge in Paralympic scholarship by providing a critique of audience perceptions of Paralympic broadcasting in the context of C4's socially progressive broadcasting strategy. Based on a large-scale audience study utilising focus groups across England and Wales with 216 members of the public, we present evidence of dominant audience perceptions and attitudes towards Paralympic sport. We highlight the extent such perceptions demonstrate seemingly socially progressive ideas towards disability in line with C4's broadcasting strategy, and yet, at the same time, may construct new, potentially damaging stigma hierarchies of disability preference. The evidence offers an insight into whether apparently transformative media approaches to disability can act as powerful and pedagogic cultural agents in progressive social change that attempt to elevate disabled voices and provide more inclusive (increased participation within) disability discourses.

Media, disability and the Paralympics

Disability has been viewed as problematic in a commercial media culture that celebrates the pleasure derived from cultivated and enhanced embodiment (healthy, fit, sexual, heteronormative, attractive), wherein the principal challenge to the production of an idealised aesthetic comes from ageing, death and *disability* (Turner, 1996). Unsurprisingly then, historically disability has been largely 'invisible' across the media industry often predicated on limited stereotypes that include the portrayal of disabled people as vulnerable, pitiable and childlike; as less than human, often presented as villain, freak show, or exotic; and as unable to participate fully in everyday life (Ellis, 2008). In recent years, however, the Paralympic movement has gained significant momentum and has become an important hyper-visible space of disability representation in a media landscape where disability is still largely underrepresented (Pullen et al., 2018). In the United Kingdom, this has been exacerbated in the last decade since the entry of C4 as rights holders, where televised coverage has gone from an evening highlights show to 16 hours of live broadcasting per day, bringing a huge increase in audience numbers (Pullen et al., 2018; Channel 4, 2016).

Given that media texts are important sites in which political discourse can be traced (Whannel, 1992), the Paralympics has provided a unique context in which to address the tensions inherent in the media representation of disability as it connects to a wider disability politics. Studies investigating this area (e.g. Beacom et al., 2016; Bruce, 2014; Pappous et al., 2011; Purdue and Howe, 2013; Silva and Howe, 2012) have pointed to the reinforcement of often medicalised, individualised and heroic portrayals of disability. In particular, coverage has been critiqued for its framing of para-athletes as 'supercrips' (Silva and Howe, 2012); a disability stereotype, grounded in a discourse of ableism, where achievements by disabled people are seen as especially heroic in a culture privileging able-bodied norms of success and where disability is viewed as a culturally devalued body politic (Kama, 2004). In Paralympic coverage, the 'supercrip' has been used to theorise the extent the presumed incompatibility of the disabled body (as less valued, functional and productive) with the ableist material and discursive conditions of elite sport leads to the heroic positioning of para-athletes across the coverage. This is especially the case for certain para-athletes – typically those who use mobility-enhancing

technology and are viewed as more functional – who receive greater coverage given their approximation to more normative (ableist) standards of sporting success (Howe and Silva, 2017). Such bodies have often been termed ‘cyborgs’ with Paralympic sport seen as the new cultural space for a contemporary and mediated disability spectacle (Peers, 2012). Indeed – and in part relational to the IPC’s own classification system (see Howe, 2008) – this has been seen to reinforce disability preferences or hierarchies of disability acceptance (see Westbrook et al., 1993). Framed by a non-disabled aesthetic inherent within normative media practices, technologically enhanced para-athletes – the ‘supercrips’ – are often positioned at the pinnacle of disability hierarchies given their palatability to non-disabled sporting audiences (Howe, 2008). Scholars argue that hierarchies operate to position difference as ‘other’ and as a distancing mechanism for bodies deemed severely disabled and socially undesirable (Silva and Howe, 2012).

Empirical studies of the supercrip and disability hierarchies have largely been conducted through analyses of news and Paralympic promotional materials (e.g. Beacom et al., 2016; Bruce, 2014; Pappous et al., 2011; Purdue and Howe, 2013). Despite being important platforms, sporting mega events continue to be dominantly consumed through televised live coverage; a medium with distinct organisational production practices, logics and media content. Developed through a contemporary biopolitical framework of disability (Mitchell and Snyder, 2015), our own work in this area has sought to advance the field and (re-)address disability representation through empirical work that documents C4’s production practices and intentions (Pullen et al., 2018) and the national, gendered and celebritised discourses evident in the broadcasting of the Rio 2016 Paralympics (Pullen et al., 2019). Utilising a circuit of culture approach (Jhally, 1989) as a tool for cultural analysis, we consider more holistically the generative properties of cultural texts and the interrelationship between production, mediation and reception in the current historical and contextual moment. While we focus exclusively in this article on reception and the internalisation of disability discourse, we are mindful of previously identified media frames that coalesce around specific Paralympic bodies in line with the broadcaster’s intentions (see, Pullen et al., 2018).

Paralympic audiences and disability perceptions

Televised sporting spectacles are powerful pedagogic sites where dominant images, discourses and narratives of the nation are commodified and communicated to audiences; a process that promulgates cultural knowledge, thoughts and action (Dayan and Katz, 1994). As studies of Olympic audiences have demonstrated, the consumption of such media events can feed into public perceptions of national identity, images of host countries (Billings et al., 2013) and gender roles (Greer and Jones, 2013). Yet, these studies tell us that audiences are not passive spectators, but rather, they are embedded actors in this process of cultural production as important intermediaries in the relationship between textual production, reception and consumption (Morley and Chen, 1996).

Despite this important context, research documenting audience reception of Paralympic broadcasting is limited to less than a handful of quantitative (see Bartsch et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2017) and qualitative studies (Fitzgerald, 2012; Hodges et al., 2015). Yet, understanding audience reception of the Paralympics is an important

indicator of public attitudes towards disability (Schantz and Gilbert, 2001), especially when Paralympic broadcasters themselves have a stated ambition to drive societal change (Walsh, 2014). Rooted in communication psychology and based on an experimental design, Bartsch et al. (2018) find that exposure to Paralympic broadcasting that emphasises empathic themes towards the athletes can stimulate both audience interest in para-sports and attitude change about disabled people in general. They also suggest that in contrast to some other media entertainment and sporting events, exposure to Paralympic broadcasting can elicit both hedonic (e.g. immediate gratification, mood regulation and arousal, or distraction from negative thoughts) *and* eudaimonic (more complex and sustainable social and cognitive experiences that foster a sense of insight, meaning and social connectedness) spectatorship practices; an important recognition given the desire of broadcasters such as C4 to be both commercially successful and an agent of social change.

Outside of the experimental setting, two studies qualitatively examined UK audience perceptions of disability sport before and after the 2012 London Paralympics. Based on focus groups with non-disabled young people in England before 2012, Fitzgerald (2012) found themes of disgust and discomfort with different, impaired bodies and a lack of acceptance of the Paralympics as legitimate sports. Based on interviews in the lead up to, and immediately after, the 2012 London Paralympics, Hodges et al (2015) document a shift in attitude by audiences from the more widely stereotypically sympathetic positioning of disability depicted in historical representations to one expressed through a ‘supercrip’ narrative. Hodges et al. (2015) highlight that, despite the critique of supercrip narratives, this marked an important step towards audiences perceived comfort with Paralympic sport, implying a more positive societal shift in developing a public dialogue around disability issues. However, Hodges et al. (2015) note that a significant proportion of the audience maintained the position that Paralympic sport was a ‘second-rate games’ and there remained limited appetite among audiences to watch disability sport beyond the Paralympics. This continues to highlight the deeply rooted ableist assumptions and perceptions of many audiences which continue to remain a barrier in generating social change beyond media representation.

Both Bartsch et al. (2018) and Hodges et al. (2015) point towards the potential of Paralympic broadcasting to change the ways that audiences perceive para-athletes and public attitudes towards disability equality and inclusion. However, work beyond the London 2012 Games – where host nation status inevitably brings unique cultural dynamics and viewing behaviours – is all but absent. Indeed, what is apparent is the need for a wider evidence base (across different cultural moments, cultural settings and utilising a range of integrated methods) to advance understanding of these important questions. Through a qualitative inquiry of a large audience dataset, this study intends to address some of this need. Our analysis focuses on varied narratives of experience to gain critical insight into ways in which the 2016 Paralympic Games were lived in and lived through, representative of and contested by, non-disabled television audiences in the United Kingdom. Our interest is in the differing ways discourses of the Paralympics were internalised, and the impact this might have upon audience perceptions of disability and existing power relations, as well as the potential of such ‘representational practices’ for continued progressive social change (Silva and Howe, 2012). Specifically, our research

questions include: What discourses emerge in audience discussions of elite para-sport? What are the current dominant perceptions of Paralympic athletes among UK television audiences? And, how are these perceptions related to everyday cultural understandings of disability?

Method

Twenty focus groups lasting approximately 90 minutes were conducted with 216 members of the public between June and December 2016.¹ Focus group sites included London, Bristol, Cardiff, Liverpool, Bournemouth and Nottingham and were held in public accessible meeting rooms (e.g. university seminar rooms, hotel meeting facilities). Participant numbers were spread relatively equally across each location (10 participants per group at each site) and the demographic spread (age, race, ethnicity, social class, gender) and geographical spread were diverse and captured a range of experiences and voices. At each site, multiple focus groups were conducted with groups who self-identified as disabled and non-disabled with approximately half of our participants self-identifying as disabled. Recruitment involved the use of a recruitment agency through a purposive sampling technique against an inclusion criteria that required the following: for participants to be aged over 18 years; able to provide full informed consent; and have watched at least some of the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games. The dataset contained self-selection bias that resulted from the inclusion criteria. The most visible bias was an inclination towards understanding disability, including for those who self-identified as non-disabled. This ranged from a general curiosity in disability to some interest in disability sport.

The focus group guide was structured around three topics. This included (1) audience backgrounds and experience of disability; (2) perceptions and opinions of Paralympics coverage (i.e. what they thought of Paralympic sport generally, most watched events, memorable moments); (3) the impact of the Paralympics on their perceptions of disability and their wider attitudes towards disability and disability rights progress. Although questions were primarily centred on watching of the Rio 2016 Paralympics, participants often drew on memories from London 2012. Focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by a transcription service before being entered into QRS NVivo data management program. Full anonymity has been given to all participants with assigned pseudonyms with only the gender of each participant marked throughout the transcripts. Manual interpretive coding was undertaken, this included a process of open coding and identification of major thematic categories; the management of sub-categories; and the development of dominant themes. Following this, a closer reading of themes took place in a process of meaning condensation (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). Themes were discussed between colleagues as 'critical friends' providing a point of reflection of interpretations.

Findings

From 'second-rate' sport to elite sport

For a large proportion of participants, attitudes towards Paralympic sport indicate a positive shift away from viewing the games as non-elite or 'second-rate' sport; a continuation

of a theme identified by Hodges et al. (2015) from the 2012 Games. This was centred on a way of viewing that shifts the association of the Paralympics with *just* disability to a general and genuine elite sporting event. For example, one participant claimed,

I don't think disability comes into it. Perhaps before the London Paralympics I probably wouldn't have been so keen to watch it but after watching that, I thought oh there is no difference, it's sport . . . the Channel 4 coverage was excellent and before that it was put in the background I think, after watching the London one, 'hey I like the sport and if I come in I'll watch it', same with the Olympics, no difference you know.

As many participants saw it, the significant increase in C4's live Paralympic coverage moved the games from '*the background*', giving it parity with non-disabled events such as the Olympic Games. As we have identified in previous work, C4 had a strategy of focusing on the most successful, medal-winning athletes (See Pullen et al., 2019) in an attempt to capture the national audience interest. The use of this strategy clearly resonated with audiences, with many claiming their reason for watching the Paralympics was to experience another sporting event that delivered national medal success:

I look at them the same. I look at both events as opportunities to see my country do good things, so, like, yeah that's it.

I don't sort of select the sport unless someone says 'oh it's the final of the women's breaststroke' because it was quite a lot and then obviously if you've got a British person in there you want to watch it.

Evident here are hedonic viewing practices, focussed on audience identification with national athletes, the celebration of national success and the enjoyment of suspense and jeopardy associated with elite sport. For others, the Paralympics provided a unique viewing experience of a sporting event distinct to the Olympics. In contradistinction to previous scholars who identified the Paralympics as a contemporary disability 'spectacle' (see Peers, 2012) that enabled audiences to view disability as a 'voyeur' (Hodges et al., 2015), here, audiences express appreciation in watching sport unique to the Paralympics and thereby something different in terms of wider sport coverage:

It is quite fascinating to just sit there and watch things like goalball, which is like . . . a kind of cross between blindfolded football and dodgeball. Like it is something that you would never normally, you know, you probably wouldn't even be aware it existed, so seeing these guys actually compete is just a really interesting watch.

I think it offers, it has offered something different from just sport before, I think Channel 4's coverage for the last Paralympics offered sports as well as something different, so it kind of combined the two, less of, for lack of a better word, a spectacle, and more of just Olympics.

Across the audience data there is a 'normalisation',² or greater social acceptance, of Paralympic sport as an elite sport event, reflective of C4's institutional strategy. While, some audience sentiments continued to imply a preference to watch non-disabled sport

– with one participant likening the Paralympics to a ‘vegetarian sausage’ and suggesting that para-athletes are ‘never going to take it to the same heights’ – the dominant attitude implies, at least on the surface, a shift away from previous dominant ableist assumptions that views the logics of elite sport as materially and discursively incompatible with disability (Silva and Howe, 2012).

Technology as a ‘normalising’ tool

While there may be a positive shift in attitudes towards Paralympic sport itself, perceptions of para-athletes continue to be centred on technologically or prosthetically enhanced disabled bodies. Indeed, for a large majority of audiences, mobility-enhancing technology has become, in the words of one audience member, ‘part and parcel’ of the Paralympics with the majority of audience members claiming they thought of ‘blades’ when asked to describe an image of a para-athlete. In broader discussions around Paralympic content, audiences implied how wider Paralympic programming was also themed around the use of mobility-enhancing technology:

I mean I have seen quite recently, I think there was an article, a programme on TV about . . . a female sprinter and she had an incredible, umm, blade, you know I have never seen anything like it before, it looked like a prototype new sports car, it looked amazing.

There was programmes I think around the time of one of the Paralympics of how they made prosthetics and sort of how they’ve progressed and the technology behind them.

While previous research (e.g. Howe, 2008; Silva and Howe, 2012) has noted that technologically enhanced disabled bodies are at the pinnacle of disability hierarchies – deemed the ‘ultimate supercrip’ – until now this has not been empirically demonstrated through audience data. Indeed, given our previous work identifies the dominance of technologically enhanced para-athletes across C4’s coverage (Pullen et al., 2019), it is perhaps unsurprising that audiences are most cognisant of this form of disabled subjectivity. Yet, our audience data highlight the extent these bodies are viewed by a large proportion of audiences as exceeding the very cultural idea of disablement. In reference to a current Paralympian, one audience member claimed,

He is like a ripped guy, athlete, but he has got prosthetic legs you know, he is still a regular person and he gets to kind of be seen as an able person, in fact as a more than able person, so I think it’s a good thing.

For many, technologically enhanced para-athletes were breaking down stereotypes around the limitations of disability, with one audience member stating that,

Before there was like this stigma for some reason that they’re not as able as fully physically able people, then you watch the Paralympics and they’re a lot better at sports than a lot of fully abled people.

This topic often raised questions regarding the problematic issue classifying disability, with one participant raising the question as to whether the use of prosthetics could be

‘classed as a disability anymore?’ Indeed, throughout the data, discussion on technologically enhanced disabled bodies demonstrates the pedagogically persuasive effect the coverage – and the hyper-visible representation of technologically enhanced bodies – has on shifting the dominant cultural discourse concerning the legitimacy of disablement. Indeed, the perception of technological enhancement for people with disabilities can be read here as a ‘normalising tool’; one that, on the surface disrupts dominant and often singular understandings of what disability means (culturally and legislatively) for audiences, however, continues to reinforce the very physical and productive functional ability of individuals as an important indicator of a normative, accepted and neoliberal embodiment (Turner, 1996).

Here, audience perceptions clearly reflect a contemporary biopolitical management of disability through the Paralympic games as a nationally celebrated and hyper-visible site of disability discourse and representation. Certainly, following Mitchell and Snyder (2015), audience perceptions can be seen as an exemplar of ‘ablenationalism’; a discourse that promotes specific, hyper-able, nationally normative and highly successful disabled bodies as representative of a new form of disability inclusivity whereby some specific disabled subjectivities are seen as ‘normal’, included and invested with cultural citizenship. While greater media attention is given to these types of disabled bodies (Howe, 2008), our data suggest this does not go unrecognised by audiences and is beginning to disrupt able-disabled binaries in the wider cultural imagination. This is captured by the participant that describes prosthetically enhanced bodies as ‘a more than able person’ and, below, in reference to social media and a para-athlete turned model:

There’s a lot more on social media now as well isn’t it? You know, you don’t scroll past without seeing something because she’s had her arm amputated but at the end of the day she was still a model and all that . . . it doesn’t matter.

The focus on technologically enhanced para-athletes may have gone some way to ‘normalise’ (make more accepting in public discourse) *some* disabilities and raise the profile of Paralympic sport as an elite sport given that the most high-profile and commercially successful athletes are those who typically use prosthetic technology (Howe, 2008). However, our data highlight that this focus comes at the expense of knowledge and recognition of other often underrepresented forms of disability. Indeed, as one audience member suggests when discussing cerebral palsy, there is some confusion as to whether athletes with this condition take part in the Paralympics:

I think that more awareness should be done then because, like my sister has cerebral palsy and it affects the way she processes information . . . So, I’m sure there’s people in the Paralympics that actually do have that.

This continues to feed a dominant perception by audiences that the Paralympics caters only for physical disabilities (e.g. amputations, wheelchairs, short stature, physical injuries), despite the fact that para-sport disability classifications include a diverse range of intellectual and non-physical disabilities. As a result, there is a relative discomfort by audiences in discussing non-physical disabilities that do not require mobility-enhancing

technology. For example, the claim made below epitomises the discomfort that many audience members experienced when discussing other types of disability in the way they attempted to find the correct terms:

I think for me it's the difference between the physical impediment and the mental umm or you know, internal problems that you just simply weren't aware of.

The stark position in ideas of 'normal' and 'accepted' across the audience accounts demonstrates how the inclusion of some forms of disability are largely at the exclusion of other more severe, hidden forms. Indeed, these positions are dialectically and mutually reinforcing and reflect the wider problematic issue inherent in the process of ablenationalism framed on liberalised discourses of inclusivity and 'normalisation'. Here, the celebration and hyper-visibility of 'accepted' disabled bodies as representative of successful normalisation and inclusivity leaves the vast majority of disabled bodies as non-visible, seemingly non-existent or redundant (Mitchell and Snyder, 2015).

Disability awareness and social change

While the Paralympics may have stimulated a shift in the cultural public discourse around disability – reflective of an ablenationalism (Mitchell and Snyder, 2015) – the data highlight a greater concern and awareness of disability-related issues. Here, there was evidence of deeper reflection, attitude change and information seeking, all typical of eudaimonic spectatorship practices. For many, C4's Paralympic coverage from 2012 and the wider efforts of other media were perceived as an important stimulus for greater disability exposure across media platforms:

It definitely has had an impact yeah. I think just as time goes on I think this like the newer, kind of like not-so-much generation, but things just move forward progressively, I think yeah the Paralympics has probably helped it but it's like that kind of idea of just having screen time exposure.

I think it's that kind of like, that breakdown and showing that investment, not financially but like investment in screen time and just over time it's just beneficial. I think for a lot of people I think it is just normal, people don't really think anything of it, but there are always people who have never had that kind of exposure where like it's good to see that they can call a show 'The Last Leg' and have a host who only has one leg and that, to show that somebody who has got one leg isn't offended by that and for them to show that they kind of shouldn't be, you know it's the norm.

Furthermore, audiences described being aware of greater media representation across other UK broadcasters, in typically mainstream shows, and discussing non-disability-related issues. This is captured in the conversational extract below:

I think in addition to that though, I have noticed reporters on shows like Watchdog and The One Show, disabled reporters but not talking about a disability issue . . .

. . . Exactly yeah, in the past I think you would have expected them to only be on TV when they are talking about disabilities . . .

. . . Yeah. But now they are talking about anything and everything which is how it should be and I think that has happened since the Paralympics in 2012.

The extract above is important insofar that it provides an important marker in demonstrating social change in relation to disability media representation. For older generations, the shifts in disability representation *felt* palpable and indicate a more flexible social and cultural sphere in the inclusion of disabled people. While critically understood through the lens of ablenationalism, the greater integration of disabled voices across media platforms has been seen to have an impact on raising the profile of disability issues concerning access, legislation and equality. As one audience member claimed,

I do think there seems to be a lot more in the media now as well about rights for disabled people, I remember seeing something in the news last week about a lady who travelled on the tube quite a lot and she has, she is in a wheelchair, and she was saying how difficult it is to just use the toilets sometimes, like the struggle of getting through the gates. I think the issues that disabled people are facing on a daily basis have been highlighted a lot more through being aware, you take it in straight away when I see things like that which I think is good.

Indeed, a large proportion of audience members reflected a form of cultural citizenship in their discussion of disability issues and, while lauding increasing representation as positive and progressive, were aware of the socio-political tensions inherent in liberal rights-based discourses that include, and thus, ‘normalise’ (Mitchell and Snyder, 2015), some privileged marginal groups. This sentiment is expressed below:

I think it [media] almost over glamorises disability but other than for many of those people who feature perhaps within a more privileged position within sports, elite sports, of course there are a lot of other people out there with disability, who don’t see the same vision of themselves do they, so it’s quite a difficult, quite a difficult balance.

I think among the general public appreciation to disability issues is definitely much better than it was 10 years ago. But it’s quite interesting that the government have like introduced lots cuts for disabled people and that has caused a lot of tension amongst the disability communities. So, you have got this disparity between the general public much more accepting of disability issues, yet the government are not good.

These sentiments reflect an important critical voice by audiences and are perhaps most evident of progressive social attitudes towards disability insofar that can – *and do* – problematise the often taken for granted assumptions and acceptance of disability progress. Indeed, many audiences are cognisant of the social acceptance of some forms of disability (i.e. physical, technology-enhanced) (the normalisation of a select few disabled people) and the need to more fully understand the wider spectrum of disability for greater, more equitable, social progress:

I think I've seen a big shift in that in terms of even just in a workplace, there's so much more influence on mental health and all this type of stuff, I think we're getting better but I think we still probably stop other, well I feel as a nation we're still probably trying to understand some of those disabilities where it's not as obvious.

Indeed, audiences were resonant of their lack of understanding compared with other marginalised forms of identity politics perceived as being better understood in public discourse. As one audience member claimed,

We don't really get taught about disabilities in this country, we get taught about race and what is it, like sexual orientation, but we never really get taught about disabilities too often.

Conclusion

The audience data presented here – drawn from focus groups with over 200 members of the public – provide an important empirical contribution in enhancing knowledge concerning the impact of Paralympic coverage on everyday attitudes and understandings of disability. Here, pre-2012 research had identified themes of disgust and discomfort in watching para-sport and its status as second-rate sport (Fitzgerald, 2012; Hodges et al., 2015). Post 2012 literature had found a continuation of these threads among a minority of viewers, but with greater evidence of genuine sporting appreciation and an unexpected affective emotional engagement with the sporting spectacle (David et al., 2008; Hodges et al., 2015).

Building on this limited scholarship, we demonstrate important shifts in attitudes towards the Paralympic Games and everyday perceptions of disability that highlight both continuities and marked differences from previous work. This includes a greater appreciation of Paralympic sport as an elite sporting event implying a more general shift away from ableist assumptions in viewing disability sport; the 'normalisation' of the technologically enhanced disabled body; and, an awareness of emerging cultural citizenship concerning disability rights-based discourses through greater disability media representation. Taken together, these findings reinforce the suggestion that viewership of sporting mega events such as the Paralympics can satisfy both the hedonic and eudaimonic needs of audiences (Bartsch et al., 2018), with the latter being the key to shifting societal attitudes towards disabled people.

While the findings indicate positive and progressive social change, the 'normalisation' of disability through greater media representation of disability and the subsequent elevated disabled voices in public discourse concerning disability issues, our analysis demonstrates how social change is shaped by ablenationalism (Mitchell and Snyder, 2015). Indeed, while a large proportion of audiences implied a greater appreciation of Paralympic sport and disability issues, the celebrityisation of technologically enhanced successful para-athletes through the coverage has led to greater inclusion and appreciation of this form of disabled subjectivity by audiences. While leading to a process of 'normalisation' of these bodies (*the more than able*), it has shaped the boundaries of what is deemed 'normatively disabled' and potentially exacerbated hierarchies of disability preference. Indeed, this nuance in the data present a clear 'disruption' in disability

discourse structured through the advancement and cultural celebration of technologically enhanced disabled bodies that has led to greater palatability of this form of disabled body. At the same time, we identify a discomfort with other, more severe and ‘hidden’ disabilities, demonstrating how the inclusion and hyper-visibility of some select forms of disability are structured by the exclusion and hypo-visibility of others (Pullen et al., 2019). This audience data therefore connects to the long-standing concern that both Paralympic broadcasters, marketers and Games organisers celebrate some disabled bodies more than others (Beacom et al., 2016; Bruce, 2014; Howe, 2008).

However, it would be remiss not to consider the wider shifts in audience perceptions towards disability and the impact of C4’s Paralympic coverage on affecting disability discourse. While inherently structured by ablenationalism, there appears to be a greater appreciation by audiences towards disability-related issues and forms of inequality – an appreciation that engages a form of cultural citizenship – and that can promote a collective consciousness and a more engaged civil society. This is especially important given that disabled people continue to remain one of the largest groups to experience material deprivation and exclusion from education, employment and leisure (Beacom et al., 2016).

In a wider sense, our findings demonstrate the power of both mega sporting events and media organisations in generating and (re-)articulating social and cultural knowledge and the transformative impact of mediated representations of minority and marginalised groups (Hodges et al., 2015). They suggest that ambitious, innovative, challenging and inclusive approaches to representing disability can change societal discourses on such matters. But here, we should be reminded that there are global differences in terms of the visibility of Paralympic sport and the narrative frames utilised by national broadcasters (See, Misener, 2013). Despite being described as ‘the international benchmark for how Paralympic sport should be covered by a broadcaster by IPC President Sir Philip Craven, and C4’s advisor status to both the IPC and Paralympic broadcasters across the world, we cannot assume that the United Kingdom’s Paralympic broadcaster is generalisable to other contexts. A future research challenge, then, is whether and how this process of social attitude change – taking cues from Paralympic broadcasters – is occurring in other national contexts.

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Notes

1. The wider project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/P003842/1) integrates: elite production interviews, quantitative and qualitative content analysis of the Rio 2016 Paralympic broadcasting, archival analysis of Paralympic texts from 1960, a UK-wide

public attitudes survey; and public pedagogic forms (including a series of performances/documentary film).

2. We use the concept of ‘normalisation’ to refer to the process whereby difference (as it relates here to disability and other marginalised groups) is made unapparent through increased visibility in public life and acceptance within public discourse (see Cullham and Nind, 2003).

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