From awww to awe factor: UK audience meaning-making of the 2012 Paralympics as mediated spectacle

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Abstract

This article considers UK audiences' meaning-making of television coverage of the London 2012 Paralympic Games. As an elite sporting event, the Paralympics has been categorized alongside other high-profile media spectacles. Yet, an analysis of the 'spectacle' has further significance here in relation to what Mitchell and Snyder conceptualize as 'fascination with spectacles of difference', which encourages audiences to view the disabled person through their impairment, rather than as a human being. Inspirational 'supercrip' stories that glorify 'special achievement' fuel perceptions that disabled athletes have extraordinary, heroic qualities, and coverage of the 2012 Paralympics was no different. The spectacle is created through everyday talk. Therefore, we utilize in-depth interviews supported by netnography-inspired methods to consider to what extent media representations appropriated disability into 'spectacle', consequently perpetuating ablest discourses, whilst also addressing the intended social agenda by facilitating greater understanding. Our findings suggest an unexpected emotional engagement with the (mostly) sporting spectacle, with audience narratives moving from 'awww' to 'awe' as sporting achievement was celebrated. The disabled sporting 'hero' as 'superhero' is, we argue, further evidence of the influence of discourses that attempt to transform a stigmatized identity, i.e. disability, into a revered one – athleticism, thus reinforcing existing hierarchies of ability/disability.

Keywords

audience

disability

Paralympics

spectacle

sport

television

Introduction

Televisual representations of disability and disability sport, in particular, have largely been a space where spectacle and storytelling overlap (Silva and Howe 2012). The purpose of this article is to consider the ways in which UK television audiences constructed meaning of the London 2012 Paralympic Games as a spectacular sporting mega-event aimed at 'inspir[ing] and excit[ing]' audiences and enabling Paralympic athletes 'to achieve sporting excellence' (International Paralympic Committee [IPC] 2008). In the region of 2.75 million tickets were sold, making the London Games virtually a sell-out. In addition to those spectators who experienced events live, an audience of nearly 40 million people (70 per cent of the UK population) watched some of the Paralympics on television (Hodges et al. 2014). The competition was broadcast in the United Kingdom by Channel 4, a publicly owned, commercially funded public service broadcaster, and it was the first time this station had covered the event. The London 2012 Candidate File proposed that the Paralympic Games would 'build respect […] for disabled people by changing society's perceptions' and motivate young people to become more involved in disability sports at the level of "elite" professional sport' (LOCOG 2007: 189). The Games were lauded as a celebration of human achievement and home audiences were encouraged to engage with the 'thrill' and 'excitement', and to take pride in Britain's successes, as Paralympians made the front and back pages of daily newspapers and featured on television news bulletins, as well as during prime time viewing hours, for the first time in the United Kingdom in the history of the competition.

As Andrews argues, sport, as a cultural industry and commercial enterprise of magnitude,

provides significant opportunity for the accrual of capital by 'delivering entertaining products designed to maximize profit margins' (1999: 76). The sporting 'mega-event' is characterized as having mass popular appeal, contributing to the shared meaning of public culture, citizenship and identity (Roche 2000: 1); (re)producing commodity culture and seducing the spectator through a 'consumerist union' of commerce, sport, celebrity and television (Rowe 1996: 566; Whannel 2012; Silk 2011) in order to keep the emotional ethos of competition high and feed society's contemporary obsession for records and sporting heroes (Silva and Howe 2012: 182). Sport in this context becomes a substitute for experience and is instead incorporated into the world of entertainment in which the attention of audiences is vied for by the host nation, the media and advertisers (Real 2013). In the lead up to 'London 2012', the emphasis placed upon elite sport encouraged public perceptions of the Paralympics as the 'poor cousin of the Olympics' (Ellis 2008: 28). Media coverage of the Games was, therefore, anticipated by scholars and critics alike to be a key indicator of the dominant public representations of and attitudes towards disability (Schantz and Gilbert 2001).

Literature review

Guy Debord argues that '[The notion of] the spectacle has never before put its mark to such a degree' on social practices, attitudes and behaviour ([1988] 1990, theses 2 and 9). He proposes that an important characteristic of the televised spectacle is the coalescing of various media formats and genres, including information, entertainment and promotion. It has long been understood that the media have the power to capture audiences' imagination and to shape the representation of social issues to effectively manage public understanding (Howe 2008: 135). The international sporting 'spectacle', it might be argued, is concerned with 'recuperating' (Debord [1988] 1990) socially and politically divergent ideas and images, and commodifying them in order to present them back to audiences as reflective of the dominant 'narratives of the [host] nation' (Hall 1995: 613). In the case

of the Olympic Games, the 'leading contemporary global mega-event' (Roche 2000: 99) with the potential to 'deeply influence thought and action' (Silk 2011: 6), key messages have long been driven by political motives – those of the host country, supranational political agendas, and the consumer market (Tomlinson and Young 2006). What manifests is the consequence of complex negotiation between the official Olympic rhetoric of social good: 'unity, friendship, and cosmopolitan identities' (Whannel 2012: 310), the 'sporting habitus of physicality' (Fitzgerald 2012: 249), the capitalist logic which ascribes value to individuals based on economic productivity and physical and economic independence, and the desires of the marketers for 'big shows, simplified and consistent messages, and a passive audience content to be wowed' (MacAloon 2006: 31).

Within the context of the Paralympics, an analysis of the 'spectacle' takes on particular significance. Whilst in critical theory the 'spectacle' has a strong link to capitalism, consumerism and the commodity, when attention turns to representations of disability, 'spectacle' has additional meaning in reference to what Mitchell and Snyder (2001: 10) conceptualize as 'fascination with spectacles of difference', which emphasizes the 'unfamiliar', the 'unseen', the 'freak show', thus reinforcing the position of disabled as 'Other'. Media representations of disability have been criticized for encouraging audiences to view disabled actresses, presenters, athletes and other personalities through their impairment, rather than as people (Hodges et al. 2014). Studies (e.g. Ellis 2008; Black and Pretes 2007; Sancho 2003; Ross 2001; Barnes 1992; Cumberbatch and Negrine 1992) have identified a 'highly restricted repertoire' (Ross 2001: 427) of frequently used stereotypes, which emphasize difference and 'admiration as spectacle', and reinforce the distance between 'us' (the audience) and 'them' (the disabled person). Such stereotypes include 'supercrip' (Barnes 1992) inspirational stories of determination and personal courage, which carry the 'awww factor' (Smith and Thomas 2005: 53) and evoke sympathy from the audience; portrayals of disabled people as 'exotic' or somehow less than human, who need pity, charity and assistance from others to be able to participate fully in everyday life. Mitchell and Snyder (2000: 3) assert that disability

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typically marks the 'baseline of cultural undesirability', or the 'master trope of human disqualification'. Furthermore, Rod Michalko, citing Kleinman et al. (1997: xii–xiii), argues that 'social suffering is a feature of cultural representation both as spectacle and as presentation of the real […]. How we "picture" social suffering becomes that experience, for the observers […]' (2002: 68). The media and popular culture continuously represent lifestyles that are 'worth living' and disability is rarely presented in this way, he suggests; instead, Michalko goes on to argue, 'representations of disability simultaneously picture the "natural body" as "normal life" and thus as the only life worthy [of value]' (2002: 69). In other words, audiences are encouraged to develop expectations of disabled people that are so low that any subsequent achievement is 'somehow noteworthy or surprising' (Ross 2001: 426).

The twenty-first-century-mediated disability spectacle, it has been suggested, remains 'firmly rooted in the 19th-century freak show', with contemporary mediated versions involving a 'hybrid spectacle in which information, entertainment, public relations and ideology have fused beyond recognition' (Van Dijck 2002: 538). The 'freak' within this context becomes an ambiguous being of fascination and intrigue 'whose existence imperils categories and oppositions dominant in social life' (Grosz 1996: 56). There are many examples of how freak show practices, and their underlying discourses, were inscribed within early disability sport spectacles (Peers 2012), as physical difference became the 'hypervisible text' against which sporting achievement was evaluated (Peers 2012). Contemporary representations of disability sport, therefore, largely reflect a 'subtle interplay of mediation, medicalization, technology, and commerce' produced for the voyeuristic gaze (Van Dijck 2002: 539), as the media secures audiences' attention 'in the double bind of our fascination/repulsion with physical difference' (Mitchell and Snyder 1997: 15) and the 'unusual' story that is being told. Throughout history, society has tried to distance itself from disability due to fear and discomfort, yet, nowadays, television enables viewers to, in Mitchell and Snyder's (2006: 157) terms, 'witness spectacles of bodily difference' from the comfort of their living room 'without fear of recrimination by the object of this gaze' (Neale 1983: 5); thus offering

the spectator a degree of power over what is seen and taken notice of.

'The spectacle is not a collection of images', Debord suggests, 'rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images' ([1967] 1994, thesis 5). Schantz and Gilbert claim that media coverage of the Paralympics is an indicator of public representations of and attitudes towards disability and disability sport, i.e. the relationship between 'non-disabled' and 'disabled "Other"' (2001). The dominant discourse of sport has been physicality and the 'performance ethic' (DePauw 1997: 423) and the symbolic representation of the 'strong, well-formed, non-disabled, masculine body' continues to dominate as the perceived 'epitome of sporting prowess' (Hughes 2009: 400). As an elite sporting event, the Paralympics has been categorized alongside other high-profile media spectacles. Inspirational 'supercrip' stories that glorify 'special achievements', as well as 'tragedy' narratives of overcoming the odds (e.g. Barnes 1992; Ellis 2008; Alexander 2015) have fuelled perceptions that Paralympic athletes have extraordinary and heroic qualities (Hardin 2007). The mediated 'spectacle' of the 2012 Paralympics was no different. The Channel 4 promotional campaign emphasized brilliant performance that conflated a wide variety of bodies under the single 'Superhuman', 'X-Men' representation; therefore, setting athletes apart from the rest of society by their staggering ability, not their disability (Channel 4 2012). The advertising strapline was crafted to emphasize a technocentric discourse of dexterity and ('super')heroism: 'Forget everything you thought you knew about strength. Forget everything you thought you knew about humans. It's time to do battle. Meet the superhumans'. The 'supercrip' representation might be regarded by audiences as what Silva and Howe refer to as 'enlightened' (2012). However, such discourses suggest that disability sport can only be valued when evaluated from a 'mainstream' sport perspective, these scholars go on to argue, and can have a negative impact by reinforcing a culture of achievement, through which only those regarded as 'successful' are valued (2012: 178–79); thus, reinforcing dominant societal perceptions that to be accepted, an individual needs to fight against her impairment. Central to Silva and Howe's argument is that a disabled sportsperson would need to become 'super' in contexts where a professional non-disabled

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athlete would be 'elite' and that, through the sporting 'spectacle', disability is continuously 'Othered' (2012) and disabled people are, therefore, 'symbolically devalued' (Barnes and Mercer 2003: 88).

The purpose of this article is to contribute to an emerging body of knowledge regarding the impact of mediated coverage of the London 2012 Paralympics upon the UK public (Jackson et al. 2015). We consider in what ways disability as spectacle might be experienced and understood by audiences; consequently perpetuating ablest discourses within the public sphere, as well as how this international sporting mega-event might genuinely facilitate greater social understanding. As we have seen, coverage of disability sports can both resist and reinforce dominant ableist ideologies (Hardin 2007; Peers 2012). We consider how the televised coverage reinforced and/or substituted direct experience of disability (Ellis 2008) and offered a potential means to bridge the distance between disabled and non-disabled everyday experience (Mitchell and Snyder 2006: 157). As Hall argues, 'words and images carry connotations over which no one has complete control' and, sometimes, 'marginal or submerged meanings come to the surface, allowing different meanings to be constructed, different things to be shown and said' (1997: 270). Studies of 'spectacultural' (Silk 2011) representations of disability sport are themselves often the focus of criticism for failing to engage directly with real-life audience experiences (Wilde 2010). This is a criticism we address here. Previous work, such as Silk (2011) and Bush et al. (2013), has identified a 'need to explore the silences, alternative stories, and readings inherent in the sporting spectacle' as such an exploration can lead 'towards thinking about the diverse ways' (Silk 2011: 16) in which the Olympic and Paralympic Games can impact upon individuals and groups. Rather than thinking about the audience as 'scripted and passive "spectator"' (Kellner 2008), our analysis focuses on varied narratives of experience to gain critical insight into ways in which the Paralympic Games were lived in and lived through, and representative of and contested by, disabled and non-disabled television audiences (Silk 2011). Our interest is in the differing ways discourses of the Paralympics were taken up and the impact this might have upon audience perceptions of disability and existing

power relations (Sage 1993), as well as the potential of such 'representational practices' for social change (Silva and Howe 2012: 175). More specifically, we consider:

- How participants experienced the 2012 Paralympics and how they made sense of that experience; thus,
- Whether televised coverage of the Games (re)created 'spectacular' narratives of disability and disability sport;
- In what ways media discourses of the Paralympic 'spectacle' were internalized and (re)produced in audience narratives of engagement with the Games and disability sport more broadly;
- What impact the Paralympics had upon participants' attitudes towards disability and disability sports.

Methodology

The spectacle is created through everyday talk. This was a qualitative research study in which we sought to examine 'everyday talk' regarding the 2012 Paralympics and the varied ways in which people's reactions to representations of disability and disability sports on television were embedded within, and shaped through, lived experience (Wardle et al. 2009). For scholars such as Susan Wendell (2001), this approach offers a more nuanced understanding of disability, by exploring the interrelationships between language, experience and the physical, mediated and virtual worlds. We, therefore, utilized in-depth interview supported by netnography-inspired methods[1] in order to gain broader understanding of audiences from the perspective of an 'interpretive community' (Fish 1980). The research took place at four stages over a two-year period – in the lead up to, during, and immediately after the Games, to capture a range of experiences over time.

We conducted 140 in-depth, unstructured interviews in the Newcastle area, the Bournemouth

area, and in London. The interviews took place at four stages over a two-year period, in the lead up to (100 interviews) and immediately after the Games (40 interviews), to capture a range of experiences over time. Over half of all participants were interviewed at least twice and each interview lasted, on average, one hour and ten minutes. Interviews were conducted at the homes of the participants. Interviews allowed for a wide range of topics to be introduced by participants, especially relating to their broader lifeworlds (family, education, hobbies and interests) and the influences upon engagement with the Paralympics and mediated experiences of disability. Participants were recruited to ensure we talked with people both with and without personal and direct experience of disability. A professional research recruitment agency was used to identify potential participants who were each offered a small financial incentive in return for their time. A series of filter questions enabled us to recruit within three distinct categories – in all cases, participants had watched at least some of the Paralympics:

1. People with direct experience of disability (disabled people; those with close family members or friends who were disabled; carers)
2. Sports enthusiasts (active participation and/or club/association membership)
3. Armchair sports fans who showed an interest in watching sporting events but did not participate in sport directly.

A detailed explanation of the research aims and intended outputs was outlined to all participants before the interview commenced. We also explained what 'category' of participant had been allocated to them from the three outlined above. University research ethics procedures were followed, including receiving informed consent from all participants before the interviews took place. At the end of each interview, participants were asked whether they wished for any of the conversation to be deleted/not used. The netnography-inspired research involved a qualitative analysis of Paralympics-related posts on Digital Spy, the largest UK online discussion forum built

around media consumption, including an active sports subforum and dedicated subforums for the Olympics and Paralympics. This forum was deliberately chosen as we sought to understand how the Paralympics permeated the lifeworlds of 'ordinary' or 'impartial' observers (see Molesworth et al. 2015). Drawing loosely from the ideas of Kozinets, we read forum posts as a member of the community, although we avoided contributing our own posts on this occasion, becoming familiar with the structure, customs and practices of the group and their localized character (2010: 125). Again, research comprised three phases: approximately one year before the Games, immediately before, during and after the event. In the first two research phases – before the Games – we qualitatively analysed every thread that mentioned the Paralympics (n=28). In the third phase (during and immediately after the Games) the number of Paralympics-related threads was considerably larger, and so we analysed half (n=59) of the 119 threads that contained 'Paralympics' in their titles. In total, our sample contained 87 threads containing over 3000 posts.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed by a team of researchers. Each interview was analysed separately by the authors using an open coding approach,[2] as were postings to the online forum, then common themes across both data sets were identified. In the analysis that follows, we mostly draw from data captured during the final wave of research in September 2012, immediately after the Paralympics had finished. All names cited in the analysis which follows have been changed to protect participants' anonymity.

Analysis and discussion

Unexpected emotional engagement with the (mostly) sporting spectacle

As a sporting mega-event, the Paralympics was categorized alongside other high-profile media spectacles. Amongst those we interviewed, the majority found themselves more caught up in the Games than they thought they would. The Paralympic Games were described both by the media and

by many of our interviewees as being as emotionally engaging as the Olympics, as if somehow exceeding prior expectations. Narratives of sympathy, human interest and the 'awww factor' (Smith and Thomas 2005), evoking 'admiration as a spectacle', emerged as dominant early in the study. Exemplifying 'fascination with spectacles of difference' (Mitchell and Snyder 2001), several participants described how their initial reaction was to 'look to see what's wrong with them [the Paralympians]', to cite one participant; explaining how such 'inevitable curiosity' (Wardle et al. 2009) was part of the initial appeal of the viewing experience. As the literature suggests, disability has, to a large extent, become a mediated spectacle for the voyeuristic gaze, as audiences are drawn in by the 'unusual' story being told (Van Dijck 2002). When first watching the Paralympics, several interviewees talked about observing different 'types' of disabled person, their personal stories, or sporting journey, and the varied technology utilized – all potentially eclipsing the Paralympics as an elite sporting event. After a period of time, some described how this intrigue receded into the background as the focus of the spectating experience became the sport and emotions associated with elite competition, influenced by media narratives of heroism and patriotism.

The number of world records broken was referred to as one of the most 'impressive things' about the Games, as participants struggled to find words strong enough to express their sense of 'wonder' at the 'feats of achievements' witnessed on their screens. Those who attended the live events enthused about the 'electric' atmosphere of the Olympic Park. There were 'many emotions combined in one' as illustrated by semi-professional footballer and sports-enthusiast 'Steve', who won tickets to the Games, and described the 'thrill' of the experience:

When you first get there, I went with my family, and me and my mum were saying, you sort of look at them and think 'what's wrong with them, what disability have they got?' and then after that you don't think about it. When they're running or doing whatever in their wheelchairs, you don't think about it. It just becomes another athlete, if that makes sense. It's not like you're looking at them going 'oh he's got no leg, I hope he does well', d 'you know

what I mean? It's like, it's like you don't care what they've got, you just want the fastest one

to win. It's like watching Usain Bolt running; you just want Bolt to break the world record.

It's the same in that; you want the fastest person to win or the English person to win.

The feeling that the Paralympics was even more 'impressive' and 'inspirational' than the Olympics

was emphasized. As another participant who attended a day of live events suggested, the greatest

vexation was the way the crowds were 'warmed up', being told to 'shout louder', 'cheer' and 'clap';

' […] the athletes were there and we were full of admiration for their skills, we didn't need anyone

to tell us to cheer or clap louder'. For a minority of those we talked with, however, elite disabled

athletes were perceived as victims of exploitation with some suggesting the Paralympics had been

in 'bad taste', and 'pathetic', with coverage offering little more than a spectacularized 'freak show'

– therefore 'Othering' any challenge to dominant discourses of physical 'achievement' and

comparatively 'downgrading' the status of the Paralympics as 'not quite the real [or "normal"]

Olympics' (see Hodges et al. 2015a).

Purdue and Howe (2012) argue when disability is understood as impacting upon the rituals

and routines of everyday life, the therapeutic effects of sport are often emphasized and world-class

sporting achievement only adds to the 'admiration' felt by audiences. Such responses are, therefore,

not unexpected given the frequently contextualized representations of achievement in media

coverage of sporting events. As we have argued elsewhere (Hodges et al. 2015a, 2015b), powerful

stories of 'achievement against the odds' can leave a more lasting impression upon audiences than

cumulative exposure to portrayals that are more frequent but less 'remarkable'. 'Armchair

enthusiast' 'Keith' described his feelings of excitement when watching the Games at home:

[There] were… things that fascinated me, absolutely, yes. Many emotions combined in one, to

be honest. Admiration. Unbelievability at times, thinking 'How can they do that?' Almost

being in tears at times when you saw. Especially if they either won an event or lost an event

and were showing emotion themselves, either the joy at winning or the sheer disappointment of losing. Or even being disqualified, as some of them were. The empathy that I was feeling towards them. There was a guy who was disqualified from the cycling… he just fell on the track and began crying… It was feelings like that that just make you as a spectator, or made me as a spectator, just choke myself really. It was feeling for them… [It was] emotionally overwhelming and awe-inspiring I'd say, is how it's left me. Awe inspired […].

The dual roles of the elite athlete with a disability are at the heart of the 'Paralympic paradox' (Purdue and Howe 2012), and audiences are engaged in a form of voyeurism in watching this paradox play out, as illustrated by one of our participants: 'it was just the sheer joy of watching someone overcoming a disability and being able to do what they could do […]'. The social appraisal of an individual with an impairment and that of an athlete can be regarded as contradictory, incompatible within the same body at the same time, ultimately reinforcing existing habitus of disability as spectacle and 'Otherness' (Purdue and Howe 2012).

Overall, viewers appeared surprised by just how enjoyable, emotive and engaging the Paralympics was; supporting Ross' (2001: 426) suggestion that such enjoyment is linked to a sense of disbelief at the high standard of sport on display and, importantly, opening up the opportunity for preconceptions to be challenged. There was evidence of the transformative potential of the media coverage to challenge attitudes regarding disability sport, such as the following online discussion thread entitled 'My view of the Paralympics has changed!!' in which the individual making the post confesses that:

when i got tickets for the paralympics, i didnt think much of the games, i thought there were some second rate olympics but not a good […] BUT how wrong i was, they were amazing, i loved every second i was there, the sports were fantastic, atmosphere was also amazing, i was So SO wrong to even think that.

Several sports enthusiasts used the metaphor of addiction to describe how they became 'hooked' and 'swept along' as, once engaged, the unfolding of the event gripped the spectator (Thomas and Smith 2003). The focus on the sporting spectacle is, for many, regarded a more appropriate and desirable form of engagement with such mediated coverage (Purdue and Howe 2012). As 'armchair enthusiast' 'Mick' communicated enthusiastically, rearticulating the 'superhuman' discourses presented in the Channel 4 Paralympics promotional campaign:

> I love watching the racing, whether its 60 metre sprints or… they go like hell, I don't know where they get their muscles from… them arms to pump the wheels the way they do! Basically I just like to see them go fast. They do a Paralympics marathon too, as well, don't they? The shape of some of the wheelchairs they've got now, especially the racing ones… with the elongated front, they are? getting more streamlined. They're great to watch, I admire them. The fellow, he's just lost his first race since competing on these artificial false leg sprint things – I think he's remarkable. I don't know if he does gain an unfair advantage or not… But I do admire him. His willpower… as a double amputee… the basketball, they're very manoeuvrable… they're very clever… the way they keep their balance… I've always watched the Paralympics. They're just as exciting and competitive [as the Olympics]… the spirit to get out and compete. It's probably a stronger ambition than what it is in able-bodied people. (Channel 4 2012)

In contrast, a significant minority of those we talked to articulated a deeply held belief that, ultimately, disabled people were not capable of 'proper' elite sport, and were critical of there being 'too many' Paralympic world records broken, raising doubts about the legitimacy of the events. This sentiment was also reflected in a handful of posts made online. For these observers, the Games were simply not as 'entertaining'. The following account from 'Sebastian' captures this when he attempts

to differentiate between 'sport' and 'their sport':

> I wouldn't really say I had any emotions [when watching the Paralympics]… just a bit of intrigue, erm, and if it was entertaining, like good sports then I'd feel inclined to keep it on. Because if it wasn't interesting in the first minute, it would just be… because it is like the top of their sport but it isn't like the top of sport, if you know what I mean? Erm, and therefore I'd be less… less inclined to be bothered about watching it.

The influence of television coverage in transforming social attitudes towards disability was less clear cut. Whilst many non-disabled participants lauded the achievements they had witnessed on their screens, the language of sporting success remained insufficient to deal with talking about wider disability issues. As we have seen, this was particularly apparent in reference to the term 'normal'. The majority of viewers could not avoid using this as their frame of reference, therefore positioning the Paralympics as a deviation from the 'norm' of mainstream non-disabled sport, and perpetuating disability stereotypes and a preoccupation with able-bodiedness (Ellis 2008). The following quote reflects the adoption of such a position:

> I think it's a compliment to the Paralympians really, that there's not that many differences between them and the Olympians of the main Games. Apart from the obvious physical disability itself, I guess what you have to remember is the Olympians that you're watching, the Paralympians, they are elite people. I mean they are the top of their tree, so they are very very good at what they're doing. Therefore when I compare them to normal Olympians, I hardly see any differences at all to be honest.

In such responses, the sporting achievements of Paralympic athletes and the event as a viewing spectacle is afforded less status and respect. The continued use of the terms 'we' and 'they',

meaning disabled people and non-disabled individuals, was a particular distancing strategy, therefore perpetuating the dominance of ableist discourses (Ross 2001) and reinforcing disableist hierarchies, whilst spectacularizing the competition.

The sporting spectacle as commodity

Once an experience is taken out of the real world it becomes a commodity (Law 1993). Television is one such spectacular medium through which people passively consume cultural representations of themselves and others and allow these to become active agents in shaping their beliefs (Debord [1967] 1994). The athlete as 'celebrity', i.e. 'the spectacular representation of a living human being', as Debord defines it, 'embodies this banality by embodying the image of a possible role' ([1967] 1994, thesis 60) and the aspirations of a generation. One of the lasting effects of the Paralympics, Horne and Whannel (2011: 178) argue, has been the transformation of Paralympians from sportspeople participating in 'wholesome sport' into celebrities, an integral component of the expanded commodified 'sports spectacle'. As a consequence,

> […] [s]port may become a major conduit for the production of what can be termed 'commodity disablism' or the treatment of disability as a commodity […] accompanied by changes in the representation of disabled athletes in the media in all its forms. (Horne and Whannel 2011: 178)

Disability, therefore, becomes a 'product' that can be 'sold' to the public (Howe 2008: 139). Within the context of the 2012 Paralympics, there was a deliberate attempt to garner as much publicity as possible. The more people watched, the greater the chance to influence social attitudes, and to increase sponsorship and the number of disabled people taking up sports. For the elite disabled athlete, this increases the pressure to court the media, as good press equals greater popularity, equals

greater chance of commercial sponsorship upon which one's livelihood depends.

One of the broadcaster's key aims was to increase the profile of Paralympians as 'super hero' sporting personalities, in turn facilitating a significant degree of comfortable, 'safe' engagement with the Games as a competitive sporting competition (Hodges et al. 2014); thus, transforming likeable sporting 'characters' into 'icons' (Costello and Worcester 2014: 85) and athletes into commodities, albeit afforded different status. The significance of sporting 'celebrities' in encouraging audience engagement appeared somewhat limited in our data, however. Such talk had to be prompted and specific sporting personalities were not the highlight of the viewing experience. The personalities of particular Paralympians, such as Ellie Simmonds and David Weir, served as 'likeability' triggers (Sancho 2003) for some. As one participant commented, they offered both him and others 'inspiration'; he had seen 'youngsters' on television who wanted to be like 'them', which was 'amazing and shows you how far our perception of disability has come in this country'. Yet, unlike the Olympics that had, as another participant referred to it, the 'pin up girl' Jessica Ennis – a likeable personality who 'fits the image' – no equivalent for the Paralympics was top-of-mind. Whilst 'mega-star' sporting heroes such as David Beckham were lauded for being able to position themselves in such a way that they were rarely far from the public eye, as one interviewee stated: 'someone with a disability you don't often see […] If we're going to change everybody's opinions we need to start changing what they see'.

The discourse of 'Paralympians as celebrity' reinforced the Paralympics as distant from everyday reality for disabled people. Stories of Paralympic 'superhuman' appearances can often divert attention away from the real issues (Alexander 2015; Dupré 2012), thus, in Stuart Hall's words, 'unconsciously confirming [the stereotype] by the very terms in which they try to oppose and resist it' (1997: 263). For many disabled people who participated in our study there was a very clear concern that the narrative of 'admiration' and the 'superhuman' discourse of 'triumph over adversity' could backfire if people came to hold unrealistic expectations (Hodges et al. 2015b), reinforcing the disjuncture between 'material and discursive elements of the [sporting] spectacle

and the harsh realities of everyday life' for disabled people (Bush et al. 2013: 644). This was reflected in a comment shared by one participant who suggested that Paralympians were 'chauffeured everywhere' and, therefore, did not have to suffer the prejudice and aggression that he had to experience travelling around London on public transport. Indeed, many referred to the temporariness of positive sentiment, claiming that there was a transitory wave of enthusiasm for disability, linked to the media frenzy, the appeal of which would quickly fade as there was always something new on television. Not all of what was shown on television was met with disapproval, however. Despite some criticism of the broadcast coverage and related programming, Channel 4's 'Meet the Superhumans' advertising campaign was described as 'brilliant', 'modern', 'upbeat' and 'shocking', creating an exciting build-up to the Games. Two of our interviewees, with direct experience of disability, talked about how much they 'loved' the associations with the 'X-Men' and becoming 'bionic' that they had so often 'dreamed about'. As another participant added, again reflective of the 'spectacultural' (Silk 2011) discourse of 'disabled as Other', there was:

> […] no more of this 'oh we're disabled feel sorry for us' – it's like we were 'X-Men' – it was different, but this time the differences were empowering. Ellie Simmons in the ad could fly, which showed her as a 'weirdo' but it didn't matter because she can fly, she doesn't need to get the bus! That was flipping it.

From 'awww' to 'awe' factor

The Paralympics has the power to change perceptions through mass media. Early on in our study, the London 2012 Paralympic Games evoked sympathetic 'admiration as a spectacle', a consequence of unfamiliarity with the event and the Games posing a potential challenge to the dominant sporting norm of physicality. However, the discourse moved from 'awww' (Smith and Thomas 2005) to 'awe' as 'superhero' sporting achievements were celebrated, which in many ways is consistent with

the familiar experience of sporting mega-event as spectacle. Disability was, it could be argued, 'compensate[d] well enough' that audiences became able to tolerate or ignore impairment (Cameron n.d.: 1), or to view it in another way, i.e. mastery of the body, by re-enforcing the 'supercrip' discourse (Barnes 1992) of the 'superhuman'. So, whilst the Olympics might have been more 'exciting' and 'extravagant', the Paralympics, after initially eliciting sympathy, provoked 'awe and wonder' reactions as the events became more familiar.

Broudehoux (2010) argues that the 'spectacle', particularly within the context of sports mega-events, might be productive, exerting pressure upon the producers to engage with the public and to facilitate the representation of diverse stories and experiences which help foster deeper understanding and bring about social change. In contrast, Bailey (2008: 86) argues that a combination of nationalist, neo-liberal, elitist discourses represent a 'discursive shift' away from more traditional 'bio-medical narratives' of Paralympism, which had previously presented the curiosity value of the Paralympics, to instead celebrate the IPC's renewed focus on 'a more profitable and empowering sport-centred model' of disability sport and 'the promotion of an increasingly palatable, [and] profitable […] spectacle' (Peers 2012: 26) At the heart of this representation are political, corporate and elite sport discourses that seek to transform a stigmatized identity, i.e. disability, into a revered one – athleticism, unremittingly reinforcing existing hierarchies of ability/disability (Hodges et al. 2014).

Conclusion

In our analysis of audience sense-making of the London 2012 Paralympics, we were particularly interested in to what extent disability was appropriated into 'spectacle' – consequently perpetuating ablest discourses within the public sphere, as well as whether the media served as an agent of change within this context by genuinely facilitating greater social understanding of disability. The spectacle is a tautology that captivates audiences' imagination; the 2012 Paralympic spectacle

achieved this through emphasizing 'superhuman' sporting achievement, with less attention ultimately being given to stimulating collective reflection upon social issues relating to disability. 'People talk about what they see, not what they think about' (Molesworth et al. 2014: 134). Fundamentally, audiences were captivated by the 'here and now' of the summer of sporting mega-events held on home soil; their engagement with the spectacle was characterized by a cognitive state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) as 'watch and appreciate', rather than participation (psychological collaboration) and reflection, i.e. 'participate and believe in' (Beeman 1993). Debord argued that the spread of commodity-representations by the mass media produces 'waves of enthusiasm' resulting in 'moments of fervent exaltation similar to the […] miracles of the old religious fetishism' ([1967] 1994, thesis 67). As one participant suggested, the fervour and hype surrounding the Olympics was 'new'; the Games were 'at home' and 'everyone was happy […] and united'. This wave of excitement carried through to the Paralympics and people made a point of engaging with the Games. However, as the same participant intimated, the effect was somewhat diluted, the novelty had 'worn off' and it was 'less WOW'. The Paralympics were taken to the people rather than the people 'scouting it out'. The Paralympics, therefore, fit comfortably into the dominant discourse of the 2012 'UK Summer of Sport', but less prominently and less centrally than the Olympics.

Immediately after the Olympic and Paralympic Games, the conversation moved on to other events. 'London 2012' made disability more visible yet the tendency of the media was to appropriate, by 'recuperating' (Debord [1988] 1990) and commodifying symbolic and discursive representations of disability, thereby presenting disability sport as something 'worthy' of spectators' attention, rather than encouraging meaningful reflection. Several participants believed that others would be more inclined to support live disability sport after watching it on television: 'having seen that on TV now, I'm sure people will realize this is a *viable* sport' (emphasis added). Our findings do suggest some agency on the part of the audience in making sense of their viewing experience but the contrasting agendas of spectacle and social change were destined to collide.

Through television, sporting achievements, memories and experiences become reduced to highlights – a series of official events which are repeatedly mentioned and, consequently, reflected in everyday talk. We recognize that, in our analysis, we have considered one small fragment of the everyday talk that potentially could have taken place in the United Kingdom around the Paralympics. There might have been more complex, critical or reflective discussion within private conversational spaces or online forums specifically dedicated to disability issues. The challenge for future Paralympic Games will be to move 'popular memory' of the event beyond official-mediated accounts (Horne and Whannel 2011: 179) to more profoundly impact upon lived experience and everyday conversation. Being the home games, there was certainly greater media interest in ParalympicsGB. Looking towards 2016 in Rio de Janeiro, some questions remain – some of which we have already highlighted elsewhere (see Hodges et al. 2014). First, and perhaps most significantly within the context of 'spectacle', as the number of people affected by disability increases, therefore making disability more 'visible', how might broadcasters create less 'extreme' representations and yet still 'entertain' and 'educate' their audiences? As Alexander advocates, media representations of '[d]isabled people as "super-humans" are no less spectacular than disabled people as "sub-humans" (2015: 117–18); the enduring social challenge is to reach the point at which portrayals of disabled people as 'simply, human' (2015: 118) are unsurprising and unspectacular. Second, what is the potential agency of the Paralympics as 'diffuse spectacle' (Roberts 2003) enabling different agendas to work together and further encourage audiences to become critically reflective agents in its creation? Finally, how might future Paralympic Games come to be understood by UK audiences as important sporting mega-events and, therefore, a worthwhile viewing experience, when the United Kingdom is not the host nation?

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Notes

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[1] Netnography refers to a qualitative research method devised specifically to investigate the behaviour of cultures and communities present on the Internet. It is usually a written account resulting from fieldwork looking at Internet-based communications, informed by the traditions and techniques of ethnography.

[2] Open coding refers to the analytical process of generating categories of data (and understanding) from patterns and themes in the text where the researcher's starting point is to allow those categories to emerge from the text rather than from some predefined list.