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**Framing the Paralympic Games: A mixed-methods analysis of Spanish media coverage of the Beijing 2008 and London 2012 Paralympic Games**

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**Abstract**

In recent years, there has been an increased emergence of studies focusing on the media coverage of the Paralympic Games. Until recently, studies have predominately used quantitative content analyses that, although providing useful interrogation of observational patterns, limits the understanding of and appreciation for the contexts that may have shaped the production of information. By focusing exclusively on the 'what' and on the 'how much' it is difficult to reveal the 'why' and to identify the underlying motives of any changes. This paper recognizes the nuances of the editorial decision-making process by using a mixed methods approach; employing quantitative and qualitative data drawn from a case study focusing on the Spanish media coverage of the 2008 and 2012 Paralympic Games. An initial content analysis of all news published in Spain's twelve highest-circulation newspapers during Beijing 2008 and London 2012 Paralympic Games was undertaken. Subsequently, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with journalists that were also sent to these two iterations of the Paralympic

Games by Spanish media. Drawing on conceptualisations of media framing, the results highlight that the numerical data alone shed insufficient light on the complexity of the news-making process. The semi-structured interviews brought to light issues such as editorial management buoyed by commercial imperatives, and organisational interjection in journalists' narratives and authorship, that also contoured coverage and content. In addition to further debate about the complexities of media coverage of Paralympic sport, the study also underscores the utility of incorporating and combining qualitative methodologies within sport media and communication research.

**Keywords**

Paralympic Games, Media Studies, Journalism, Framing, Disability

## **Introduction**

The roles of mass media in constructing social realities have already been well defined, conceptualised and critiqued (see, for example, Boykoff & Yasuoka, 2015; Klapper, 1960; McCombs, 2014; Meyen, Theiroff & Strenger, 2014; Shoemaker & Reese, 2011). Such work has drawn attention to ways processes of media production contribute to the establishment and perpetuation of hegemonic discourses, and the contouring or mitigation of narratives that exist in parallel or are incongruent with the 'mainstream' consensus. Media critique has been of value in highlighting how particular discourses emerge through production processes and ideological assumptions (e.g. demographic stereotypes) and stigmatizations crystalize in and through press practices (Cherney, Lindemann & Hardin, 2015; Guarniero, Bellinghini & Gattaz, 2017; Schug et al. 2017; Renwick, 2016). In relation to stereotyping and stigmatization, of concern has been the roles of mass media in the positioning of people living with disabilities and, relatedly, the ways in which media discourses further add to, or exacerbate, the extent of social exclusion (Barnes, 1999; DePauw, 1997; Haller, 2000; Nelson, 1994; Saxton, 2018; Wilson et al, 2017). While concerns about stigmatization, exclusion and positioning of disability have been explored across a range of society sectors, these issues have also manifested themselves within the realm of sport and sport media. Though critiques have targeted a range of global and local contexts, a frequent focus has been media (re)presentations afforded to elite participants (exemplified by those participating at Paralympic Games).

As the world's premier mega-sporting event for athletes living with a disability, the Paralympic Games have afforded scholars opportunities to explore intersections of disability, physical praxis, socio-cultural and ideological meaning making, and individual embodiment. Of interest in this paper has been critiques of mainstream medias' varied interrogations of social attitudes toward disability vis-à-vis the Paralympics, organisational agendas, processes of inclusion and exclusion, the construction and challenging of stereotypes, and, the crafting of ideologies via media production and dissemination (Duncan, 2006; Fong & Katz, 2012; Hardin & Hardin, 2003). There has also been sustained interest in undertaking country specific examinations of Paralympic media coverage (see, for example, Boykoff & Yasuoka, 2015; Buysee & Borcharding, 2010; Fong & Katz, 2012; Kian & Hardin, 2009; Misener, 2013; Pappous, Marcellini & Léséleuc, 2011a; 2011b; Schantz & Gilbert, 2001; 2008; Smith, Bundon & Best, 2016). Collectively this work has highlighted the continued global precariousness of disability sport coverage, the interdependencies of coverage in relation to the temporality of catalytic sport mega-events, and incongruities between media representations, institutional and structural shifts and changes in socio-cultural assumptions and behaviours. Moreover, although there are some synergies across contexts with respect to the marginalised framing of Paralympic athletes, incremental structural improvements to sport organisations, bio-medically entrenched renderings of disability experiences, and an overemphasis on discourses of empowerment, equality of opportunity, human achievement and (over-)performativity, there remains scope for further critique. To counter work that has focused on media representation aspects (essentially, what and how stories are told), there is also a need to articulate how

representations are borne out of specific political and production dynamics (Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Renwick, 2016; Xue et al. 2018).

Subsequently, this paper draws upon, and furthers, these debates through an examination of mainstream Spanish media coverage of the Beijing 2008 and 2012 London Paralympic Games. Although Paralympic and disability discourses are dynamic and ever changing (Gilbert & Schantz, 2012), there remains value in investigating this particular temporal juncture to understand some of the contextual complexities that inform mainstream media processes within and beyond the Paralympics and disability sport realms. To note, not unlike countries such as Canada, the USA, United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia and Taiwan that have been at the vanguard of the disability rights movement (Bagenstos, 2014; Baynton, 2001; Chang, 2014; Marks, 2014; Shakespeare, 2014; Vanhala, 2010), Spain has a progressive recent history in disability advocacy and social policy. At the forefront of the disability movement has been the National Organisation of the Blind (ONCE, <https://www.once.es/otras-webs/english>); established in 1938, but rising to prominence in the mid-1980s in an era shaped by the broad sweeping socialist reforms of Prime Minister Felipe González. Concomitantly, national disability agendas within sport were enhanced further by the country's political representation in international sport governance. Spain was most significantly represented, in the first instance, by IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch.<sup>1</sup> In addition, and further to bringing the Olympic and Paralympic Games to Barcelona 1992, Samaranch also developed closer (if albeit still fractured) relations between the IOC and International Paralympic Committee (Legg & Steadward, 2011; Purdue, 2013). Spain has

also had continued participation on the governing board of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) since the mid-1990s.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to organisational and individual relations, the contemporary context of disability-related media coverage has been framed by Spain's commitment to international competition. Since the 1992 Paralympic Games Spain has fronted one of the largest delegations.<sup>3</sup> In addition to global governance work, Paralympic and disability sport awareness has been helped by the success of the country's high-profile Paralympic athletes.<sup>4</sup> Reflecting continued participation and performances of the nation's athletes, temporal interest in Paralympic coverage within Spanish media remains high and over time there has been an evident effort by media outlets to continue to produce and develop the breadth and depth of Paralympic content. Such a context, and in particular the need to remain steadfast in our critique of media practices that influence public discourse and corporeal hegemonies, provides a strong rationale to investigate Spain's Paralympic coverage. In an effort to go beyond issues of qualitative and quantitative representation in the press, we take specific interest in this paper with the machinations behind the coverage. Our aim is to explore the perceptions of the journalists, editors and press officers involved in the Paralympic Games and its place in the media arena. Such an exploration may both inform understandings about the political idiosyncrasies of media coverage, and aid an overarching appreciation for mixed-methodological approaches within the field.

## **Going beyond content analysis: Some methodological considerations**

In recent decades, there has been a plethora of studies using content analysis as a methodological tool of analysing Paralympic Games coverage (for example, Gilbert & Schantz, 2008; Golden, 2003; Pappous & Hayday, 2016; Lebel, Marcellini & Pappous, 2010, Schantz and Gilbert, 2012, Thomas & Smith, 2003). Using content analysis, most of these studies applied comparative methods to assess the coverage allotted to the Paralympic Games in terms of frequency and amount of published news about the event, and/or to assess variances with respect to gender, ethnicity, nationality or geographic locale (Braye, 2016; Braye, Dixon & Gibbons, 2013; Pappous, Marcellini & Léséleuc, 2010; 2011a; 2011b). In general, the strategy adopted by these studies is to provide quantitative data (e.g., column inches, page coverage, publication lines, word counts etc.) and make inferences about the differences between variables and, draw conclusions about the potential distinctions against one or another variable. However, comparative research among studies that use coding schemes can be problematic. As Léséleuc (2012) notes, different research groups may actually be using different 'units of analysis' in their quantitative comparative studies, which could lead to inadequate international comparisons. In response, Léséleuc (2012) proposes new methodological directions; namely, improved contextual articulations that inform both media processes and subsequent analytical renderings.

Reiterating Léséleuc (2012), Neuendorf (2002) and Gilbert and Schantz (2012) have also stressed the importance of developing methodologies that speak to the underlying logic of journalists' and the media's decisions and provide space to understand the voices of

the key actors ('gatekeepers') of the news making process (Druckman & Parkin, 2005; Shoemaker & Reese, 2011, White, 1950). With specific reference to both Olympic and Paralympic Games media coverage, Gilbert and Schantz (2012) argue there is still limited understanding of media producers' perspectives, thoughts and ideas regarding what, how and why particular types and forms of content are delivered. In addition to issues connected with the organization of the Games, Howe (2008) notes that Paralympic journalists' work is shaped by particular, and often limiting, discourses of disability and sport participation. Other scholars have also highlighted the 'discriminatory' characteristics of Paralympic media content (e.g. Braye, 2016; Brittain, 2010; de Haan, 2012; Fong & Katz, 2012; Kian & Hardin, 2009; Rother, Oelrichs & Geske, 2012; Smith, Bundon & Best, 2016; and Smith & Sparkes, 2008). This paper takes up Gilbert and Schantz's (2012), Howe's (2008), Léséleuc's (2012) and Neuendorf's (2002) encouragement to augment the conventional media content analysis approach; specifically, by articulating some aspects of the Spanish context and particular voices within the media structure minutiae and editorial decision-making process (Druckman & Parkman, 2005; Olsen et al., 2002). To aid this effort, we take cues from the work of D'Angelo & Kuypers (2010), Price & Tewksbury (1997), Scheufele (1999), Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007), Wachs & Dworkin (1997), and Xue et al. (2018) who utilise theoretical conceptualisations of media framing to shed light on how the organisational, institutional or editorial mechanisms influence the media coverage of the Paralympic Games.



## **Narrative making and the theoretical process of framing**

With disciplinary roots in Psychology and Sociology, 'framing' has been adopted as a practical and heuristic device within communication studies to examine the ways key stakeholders (e.g., producers, owners, editors, politicians and corporations) use media outlets and/or journalists to disseminate preferred narratives, issues, events or meanings (while also simultaneously suppressing or annihilating countervailing constructions) (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010; Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Research has continued to utilise the framing process to interrogate the complexities of a wide array of media and communications domains (Entman, 1991; 1993; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Shoemaker & Reese, 2011). Conceptually, Scheufele (1999) suggested framing typologies segmented across two dimensions: the type of frame being explored (individual or media frames); and, the way the frame is operationalised (either independently or dependently). Individual frames are focused more on the concept of cognitive processes that guide a person's understanding and processing of information, whereas media frames account for qualities and attributes of the news itself and link to the journalist routines which allow them to segment and classify information efficiently for their audiences (Entman, 1991, 1993).

Alongside the typologies highlighted above, Scheufele (1999) and Scheufele & Tewksbury (2006) developed a process model that identified four key interconnected elements that are critical to this process: frame building, frame setting, individual-level process of framing, and a feedback loop between the audiences and journalists themselves. Frame building links to the individual journalist's characteristics,

professional values and/or the structural and organisational factors within the media system, and considers what impact and influence this has on news content framing and creation process (Kian & Hardin, 2009; Scheufele, 1999; Scheufele & Tewkesbury, 2006). Reese's (1996) and Xue et al.'s (2018) work highlights three potential types of influence, first links to the attitudes, ideologies and professional practices of the journalists themselves and this links to the way they actively construct frames. The second influencing factor links to the organisational routines. This accounts for the political positioning or type of the medium. Finally, there are external sources (e.g. politicians, managers, authorities and elites) that influence frame building; for example, journalists incorporate frames suggested by editors of organisations into their coverage (Scheufele, 1999; Scheufele & Tewkesbury, 2006). In essence, the theory of framing postulates that the news, during the process of its preparation and presentation, acquire a distinct orientation that corresponds to wider structural and organisational forces and matters of individual agency and action. Within framing, there is a recognition that journalists can tell the same story in very different ways, and these variances can be better understood by examining some of the nuances of the contexts in which they are formed and presented.

Our interest, accordingly, was to determine some of the conditions and elements of Spanish Paralympic new-making processes, and appreciate and detail elements that comprised the final approaches adopted by each respective journalist. These include, for example, the journalist's routine, social norms, organisational pressures and external forces. Within the sporting context, framing has been utilised to investigate the influence factors such as journalist's gender, identity framing especially relating to gender and ethnicity, representation of HIV- positive athletes and racial stereotypes

(Billings & Eastman, 2003; Kian & Hardin, 2009; Mercurio & Filak, 2010; Wachs and Dworkin, 1997). From a sports mega event and Paralympic/disability perspective, framing has been adopted by those undertaking quantitative content analysis, investigating issues such as legacy, gender, international media representation comparisons (Buysse & Borcharding, 2010; Misner, 2013; Pappous, Marcellini & Léséleuc, 2011a). Notwithstanding Golden's (2003) earlier work on reporters at the 2002 Winter Paralympic Games and Xue et al.'s (2018) investigations of media interpretations of elite disability sport funding, there remains a scarcity of studies that look at Paralympic media framing. Accordingly, this paper explores two primary questions. Firstly, did the Spanish mainstream and sport media provide increased coverage of the Paralympic Games in London 2012 compared to Beijing in 2008? Secondly, what are the views and explanations given by the people who participate in the news making process (journalists, photographers and directors of communication) about any possible differences between the coverage of these two editions of the Paralympic Games?

## **Methodology**

### *Quantitative content analysis*

Quantitative data was obtained from Spain's six highest-circulation generalist newspapers (*El País*, *El Mundo*, *La Vanguardia*, *ABC*, *El Periódico* and *La Razón*) and the country's six main sports newspapers (*Marca*, *As*, *Mundo Deportivo*, *Sport*, *Estadio Deportivo* and *Superdeporte*). The sports newspaper *Marca* is the biggest selling

newspaper in Spain. According to the recent reports (February-November 2015) of the Estudio General de Medios (EGM), an audience survey conducted by the company AIMC (which is taken as a benchmark in the Spanish communication sphere), *Marca* currently has 2,337,000 readers, followed by *El Pais*, the most influential generalist newspaper of the country. *Superdeporte* and *Estadio Deportivo*, in comparison, are two regional sports newspapers (from Valencia and Sevilla, respectively) and have their interests and audience concentrated in these cities. The pages of these two publications are mainly devoted to news related to Valencia CF and Sevilla FC teams. Finally, *ABC* is a pro-Monarchist and conservative newspaper published in Madrid since 1903 and, at present, is ranked 10<sup>th</sup> in sales monitored by EGM, with nearly 500,000 daily readers.

Within these sources, all news items published during the 2008 Beijing and London 2012 Paralympic Games, plus one day before the opening and one day after the closing ceremony (from 5<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> September 2008 for Beijing and from 28<sup>th</sup> August to 10<sup>th</sup> September 2012 for London) were collected. News clippings (N=815 individual items) were collated into an Excel database by the lead author. The database content was then disseminated with collaborating authors who completed additional data verification. In congruence with similar media analysis approaches, key measures of analysis were identified. These included total column lines, percentage of the total media coverage, and coverage difference between 2008 and 2012 (See figure 1.). To note, in Spain the majority of the mainstream publications (including those used within the context of this research) have very similar production qualities in terms of overall size, dimensions, and width, height and column layouts. The papers used in this research all have five columns

of comparable dimensions. Such similarities make it possible to assess the publications' approaches to Paralympic coverage with a degree of validity.

### *Interviewing the news makers*

For the qualitative dimension, interviews with 15 key actors of the news making process were undertaken. The initial sample of participants included all the journalists sent to the Beijing 2008 and London 2012 Paralympics by the aforementioned Spanish print media outlets. In addition to the informed consent procedures, and in order to ensure the authenticity of participants' suitability for recruitment, the Spanish Paralympic Committee provided additional verification of the credibility of participants' associations with mainstream publication outlets. Once legitimate journalists were identified, potential participants were contacted via email and invited to take part. Our final sample was made up of newspaper reporters of *ABC*, *Marca*, *Superdeporte* and *Estadio Deportivo* (n=4), the reporters of news agencies *EFE*, *Europa Press*, *Servimedia* and *COLPISA* (n=5), as well as the photographers sent by the SPC (n=4) and by the newspaper *Marca* (n=1).

Due to logistics (namely participants' geographic spread and hectic work schedules), interviews were conducted by telephone. Interviews lasted between 25 and 55 minutes, and the same researcher performed all interviews. All interviews were undertaken in the participants' native language of Spanish. Once transcribed by the Spanish lead author, the transcripts were translated into English by the bilingual second author of the research team. Subsequent to this, the translations were verified and validated by a

professional translator. Any points of clarification were addressed either via correspondence with participants or discussions among the research team. Regarding the background of journalists in this study, all of them were experienced reporters who specialised in sports and only two occupy a position of leadership within their newsrooms. Most participants are actively involved in covering a wide array of daily sporting events of all kinds and many of them have reported on the Paralympic and Olympic Games. An additional interview was undertaken with a representative from the SPC's communications department. The 15 semi-structured phone interviews were conducted between May and June 2013. The interview comprised some initial opening demographic and background questions about the overall experience of reporting on the Paralympic Games. Subsequent questions then focused on aspects of the journalist decision-making processes (e.g., what the overarching foci or narrative threads are; who covered what, when, where and how; what editorial and political decisions were made and why; what production procedures were and how particular textual or photographic outcomes were achieved). Further questions were asked in relation to participant's impressions of sport journalists at the Paralympic Games.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed and codified independently by two researchers and thematic analysis was then undertaken (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Guest, 2012). Key themes, also considered as frames of meaning, were discussed in light of commonalities and differences, and, where appropriate, ideas were then aggregated into distinct domains of meaning. The selection of themes derived from our qualitative data, but also from our initial quantitative examinations. Subsequent to the quantitative analysis, for example, the research team discussed how coverage variances and points of interest might be explained and theorised within the context of framing.

These considerations were then taken forward in analysis of the interview transcripts. While a number of initial themes emerged, here we present the most salient themes related to the underlying theoretical arguments regarding framing (e.g. organisational and structural controls, editorial and journalist attitudes, economic crises, temporal issues and publication pressures).

## **Results**

### *Measuring coverage*

On first examination, the numerical data (see Figure 1.) gives the impression that the coverage of the London 2012 Paralympic Games increased in comparison to Beijing's 2008 coverage, with some additional 3,070 lines, 79 news items and 129 photos. However, a more in-depth analysis offers evidence that this improvement was due solely to a spectacular increase in coverage by one of the newspapers: the sports newspaper *Marca*. Yet, a thorough overview on the newspaper-by-newspaper data, offers a unique perspective. The generalist press's interest in the Games was either the same or lower, apart from the conservative Madrid-based newspapers *ABC* and *La Razón*, which devoted 1,364 lines, 30 news items and 46 photos more to the coverage of London than of Beijing.

**[INSERT FIGURE 1. Spanish newsprint Beijing 2008 and London 2012 Paralympic news coverage]**

In the case of the sports press, in terms of the number of lines published, in London 2012 this was slightly lower than in Beijing 2008: the newspaper *As* published 41.6% less, *Sport* 53.7% less, and both *Superdeporte* less, and *Mundo Deportivo* 38.6% less. Only two newspapers increased their coverage of London 2012: *Estadio Deportivo* published 7.5% more content and in *Marca* (who published 462.7% more lines) a 5-fold increase was noted. In the mainstream press sphere, the data show overall decreases were counter-balanced by the interest shown by just two newspapers (*ABC* and *La Razón*). In the case of the sports press, the only considerable increase in coverage came from the newspaper *Marca*. The remaining newspapers' interest in the Games was either lower or marginally higher. In conclusion, the coverage was only better when considering the overall data, and worse when analysing the newspaper-by-newspaper data. This overarching data interpretation is dependent upon, and skewed significantly by, one sports newspaper, *Marca*.

The quantitative findings are reinforced when we specifically look at the percentages. In percentage terms, *El País*' interest was approximately 20% lower and *El Mundo*'s was more than 40% lower; the Catalan generalist newspapers increased their coverage by about 15%, while *ABC* published 98.4% more and *La Razón* 90.7% more on London than in Beijing. In the case of the sports press *As*, *Sport* and *Superdeporte* reduced their interest between 40% and 50%, and the only newspaper to increase its coverage was *Marca*, which increased their coverage by approximately 500%.



## **Making meanings of coverage**

The interview data presented below offers evidence to help understand ‘why’ such coverage measurements were observed, and to identify some of the underlying motives of coverage decreases. In the first instance, all participants referred to elements of the news making and editing process. The news making process can be associated with three phases of development: newsgathering, selection of items that will make the news, and the final news product (McCombs, 2014; Meyen, Thieroff & Strenger, 2014; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). We present here two particular logistical elements related to news making in addition to two further contextual forces.

### *The organisational and structural controls*

Many participants noted that the organisers in Beijing gave journalists considerable freedom, and that they could move around the Olympic Village and surrounding areas with great ease. In contrast, control over the media in London was much stricter and journalists could only move around a pre-planned internal circuit that organisers fully controlled. “We could work better in Beijing”, one journalist noted, “there were less control in entering and getting out of the Olympic Village. In Beijing we would engage and meet easier with the athletes while in London that was more complicated since we had more limitations”. This greater control over the press in London meant that most journalists had limited interactions with the athletes, interviewing or taking photos, in the so-called “mixed zone”; the area athletes had to transit on leaving the competition facilities. As such, it was hard to develop detailed stories as journalist lacked visual or

audio soundbites. As Howe (2008) notes, the mixed zone was an invitation to produce stories of celebration. Mixed zones matter in the sense that they break down some of the formality of the professional sport setting and enable reporters, athletes, fans and entourages to interact in a more convivial, lively and (primarily) positive ways. In the context of reporters generating interest about the Paralympic games, such opportunities for access and engagement can be considered integral to the positive narrative-making process. From the interviews, it emerged that the outcome of this limitation on journalists' movements was a reduction in the production of life stories and more short news items.

While most of the competitions in Beijing were held in nearby venues, journalists in London spent considerable time travelling between venues. In some cases, this meant that journalists in Beijing could cover up to three competitions per day, whereas in London they could only attend two. As another participant stressed:

In Beijing the media hub was also a hotel, we were just at the centre of the Olympic Park, you had easy access to everywhere; In London on the other hand traveling between venues was much more complicated.

Such difficulties, invariably, manifest in journalists' abilities to add nuance to their Paralympic narratives and the quality of the overall media framing of the event (at least in terms of what was presented within the Spanish mainstream and sport media outlets).

### *Editorial attitudes towards framing Paralympic Sport*

In addition to organisational and practical constraints, all the journalists interviewed said they had suggested topics and angles to their senior managers at the central editorial offices. However, what eventually transpired was that the senior managers ultimately decided on the space that would be devoted to the event each day and whether or not the article would include a photo, as well as the specific image and image size. While this may be accepted practice within mainstream media production, organisational hierarchies and decision-making processes are central in determining how frames of meaning are developed, which frames are prioritised and what values and ideals are to be represented (Scheufele & Tewsbury, 2007; Shoemaker & Reese, 2011; Xue et al. 2018). As well as variable values placed on the events by senior management, additional financial constraints also limited resources journalists were given to cover the Paralympic Games. As one journalist offered:

To tell you the truth, the journalists that have never been to the Paralympic Games, they think that these Games are less important...When I would say to the rest of my colleagues that I would go to cover the Paralympic Games they would go like: Oh, this is too relaxing! They think that this is like going for holidays. And of course covering the Paralympic Games has nothing of relaxedness. It is exactly the opposite, because they [media companies] want to save money they tend to send less people to cover the Games so in the end, you end up working more hours'.

Here it is possible to see some of the contextual complexities that effect journalists' work, and also how certain events or issues are subsequently framed (in this case, in light of particular social norms and values, individual ideological orientations, and the peer decisions of the journalist's team) (Kian & Hardin, 2009; Scheufele, 1999). With regards to the specific media coverage of Paralympic athletes, such issues matter as the way the media coverage is framed by journalists became restricted by a set of professional norms and 'organisational routines'. "The guidelines that I had from the editorial office", one ABC newspaper journalist noted, "was to focus mainly on 'storying' background tales of athletes, not matter if they were Spanish or foreigners..."

I was told not to focus on medals but to privilege the coverage of the Spanish athletes. The guidelines were to focus in themes related to normalization and comparisons between Olympic and Paralympic athletes...to create stories not so much related to their medals or sport achievement but to mainly focus on how their non-athletic life is, which were they obstacles they had to face in their road to success. The whole idea of our coverage was to focus more on the personal aspect, which I believe is what interest the audience the most.

In this case, Spanish media outlets apparent concern with the assumed lack of popularity of the Paralympic Games, and organisational buy-in to journalists' practices that were buoyed by their professional work ethic and sporting enthusiasm (Entman, 1993; Scheufele & Tewsbury, 2007; Shoemaker and Reese, 2011). As one further journalist noted, "it is not a matter of only reporting about the medal, but lots about what happens behind the scenes'. As these quotes illustrate, there was some clear guidance on coverage foci provided to journalists in some newspapers. Although journalists may

have had particular persuasions and motives to cover certain stories, these had to be mediated and negotiated within the context of the overarching newspaper's strategies. In the cases above, this remit entailed a primary on the personal aspects and non-sport related narratives. The only exception to this pattern or routine was the Seville-based newspaper *Estadio Deportivo*, whose London correspondent was also the newspaper's Deputy Director, which meant that he could make all the decisions on site. This special circumstance may explain why there was a slight increase in this newspaper's coverage during London 2012 (see Figure 1.).

#### *Temporal and production issues*

There was a time difference of six hours between Beijing and Madrid, meaning that in 2008, when the competitions ended in China, journalists had a lot of time to prepare their news items before their newspapers closed. The opposite was the case for London: with London being an hour behind Madrid, the journalists could not deal with the final page proofs effectively. Ultimately, this led to a reduction in the space devoted to the Games. For example, one journalist stated that:

The work system was quite similar, although the problem was the time difference, which benefited us in Beijing. In London the information about medals, the competition set carried significantly later and that may have influenced the lower media coverage in some cases.

Some participants also highlighted that, during the economic crisis in recent years, their newspapers had cut back on the total number of daily pages published (for example from 48 to 40 pages in one case). One reporter stated:

The problem is that in 2008 *Superdeporte* had more pages, around 48 regular pages, but for one or two years now the number has not exceeded 40. You had regular pages for Valencia C. F., for Levante U. D. and then the “Polideportivo” section, which covered all sports other than football or basketball.

The shortening of the overall size of the newspaper identified here ultimately effects the counting of the variables measured and is a further example of the factors that are affecting media framing as organisational pressures and constraints are influencing the selection and the production of news (Scheufele, 1999; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Additionally, regarding the final version of the news item, participants reported that this decision was shared between the central editorial offices in Spain and the reporters in London. Editors would decide on the space allocation, and journalists would adapt their narratives to the space and editorial angle.

#### *Economic crisis effects on media coverage*

In the same way as for the Beijing Games, the SPC’s communication strategy for London 2012 included paying for the travel and accommodation expenses of those reporters who wanted to cover the events onsite. However, the media coverage of London 2012 was influenced by austerity measures that several newspapers put in place to deal with

the prevailing financial crisis that hit the country. In the London edition of the Games, many print media turned down this invitation because they could not even pay for the reporter's daily subsistence expenses. "I put that down mostly to the economic crisis", the SPC representative noted, "...some media that attended the Beijing Games didn't accept our invitation because sending someone would have meant paying for subsistence expenses and being one person down on the editorial team".

Yet, occasionally, austerity measures could be countered. In one case, at the level of individual journalists, the use of social media provided a cost-effective, efficient and powerful means to augment the content provided in their print journalism. The comments here echo scholars elsewhere who have, variously, noted the increased utility of social media in engaging (new) audiences, broadening coverage and market share, enhancing public engagement, generating 'meaningful accounts of human experience, and circumventing production and/or editorial constraints (Bastos, 2015; Moritz, 2015; Reed & Hansen, 2013; Schoenstedt & Reau, 2010). "The use of social media has created a huge impact", one journalist noted, "Almost all of the coverage I wrote about Paralympic sport were retweeted and I enjoyed interacting with our readership. Sometimes the comments were harsh but I like to read what the comments from our readers are". They continued:

The constructive feedback is always welcomed. For example, the Paralympic Games coincided with some sensationalist stories about the flamboyancy of [the football star] Ronaldo and there were some readers commenting positively about our newspaper, congratulating us for offering media space to Paralympic sport and making ironic comments about Ronaldo. For instance, saying that Paralympic athletes are 'the REAL athletes'. What is so interesting for social

media for us as Paralympic journalists is the fact that there are less strict rules in terms of the size you can dedicate when writing new reports and this is helpful”.

In another instance, there were larger political efforts made to shift approaches to media coverage. According to the SPC representative the principal factor behind the substantive increase in the space devoted by *Marca* to the London 2012 Paralympic Games was due to a financial agreement had been reached with this newspaper and the Spanish Paralympic Committee. The SPC made a payment to the media outlet to entice journalists’ engagement and ensure that a substantial amount of daily coverage was produced during the period of the Paralympic Games. Justifying the rationale for this commercial agreement, the representative noted that:

We (the SPC) believe that *Marca* is the biggest sports medium and we are with them. Because of limited resources, we can’t reach agreements with all the media. It’s clear to us that the money must be allocated to television and to *Marca*, and we don’t have the budget to do anything else.

Notwithstanding concerns over media impartiality and narrative bias, it is evident that such strategic financial agreements may go a considerable way to improving and increasing the coverage. Yet, while such economical manoeuvrings may make considerable sense given the precarity that both sport organisations and press outlets can both face with regard to engagement and competitiveness in neoliberal markets, there are ethical questions and methodological implications that also accrue.



## Discussion

The initial quantitative analysis of Paralympic media coverage provided a data set that revealed discernible changes in some aspects of media coverage between the 2008 and 2012 Paralympic Games iterations. The results were, invariably, sufficient to draw tentative conclusions about the state of Spanish media coverage toward the Paralympic Games at this temporal juncture, and the particular publications in which further improvement and intervention work may or may not have been required. Quantitative content analyses are of course essential in an early phase of understanding the differences in the media treatment of the Paralympic Games and, consequently, the underlying unfairness in the media coverage of this type of elite sport. However, such differences can often lead to an understanding of reality that is possibly superficial or even mistaken. Recently, for example, Pappous, Marcellini and Léséleuc (2011) observed that there is no quantitative discrimination in terms of the space devoted to female Paralympic athletes compared to that devoted to male Paralympic athletes. However, those authors mentioned that there is some sort of qualitative discrimination because these female athletes are represented in ways that highlight sex appeal and, at the same time, belittle them in comparison to male Paralympic athletes by accentuating family-related and sentimental aspects. On that note, Neuendorf (2002) stresses that care should be taken when it comes to drawing conclusions based solely on quantitative content analysis.

Following Scheufele (1999), Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) and Xue et al. (2018) theoretical conceptualisations, our study investigated media framing with the aim to investigate the multiple factors that may influence the production of Paralympic Games

narratives within Spanish print media. Our findings highlighted that journalists' routines and values, logistical issues, production processes and organisational pressures influenced the news content, and creation processes within Spanish mass media portrayals of the Beijing 2008 and London 2012 Paralympic Games. Our interrogations also revealed that coverage was framed by the attitudes of some key stakeholders (editors and managers) who did not believe that the Paralympic Games were a genuine athletic competitive event, nor that it merited comparable treatment to the Olympic Games. These negative assumptions of important media stakeholders affect the media framing, but also may inform important organisational decisions. For example, how many journalists may be sent to cover the Games, how news content is positioned, events are perceived and/or valued, and whether editorial decision made *in situ* during the event or at the point of final production.

Within our analysis, it was evident that increased success of Paralympic athletes at and across Paralympic Games was, in some instances, a notable factor in influencing editorial decision-making and the focus specific journalists took with the breadth and depth of their coverage over the Games' duration. Essentially, real-time medal tallies and athlete progress *in situ* mattered greatly. To reiterate, prior to the commencement of the Games editors decided which journalists cover which events and athletes, and (at times) dictated the precise nature of the writing and allocated column space (a practice no different in Spain than it is in many other countries). However, as with other areas of journalism there are considerable degrees of flexibility within editors' and journalist' approaches. Improved performances and medals in one sport, for example, may motivate the expansion of coverage and the editor's authorisation of further column space (even if that space is, albeit, still minimal compared to able-bodied sport

coverage). Therefore, and further reiterating our main thesis regarding the complexities of framing in this context, assertions about generalised increases in coverage and clear/fixed strategies to frame national coverage in particular ways warrant caution.

To note, while national success variations across Games iteration may have altered the nature and extent of some coverage, one key continuity was the perpetuation of narratives related to the personal lives of athletes with a disability (specifically, the construction of discourses of triumph, adversity, overcoming barriers, perseverance etc.). Although a detailed examination of this type of content was not a focus of our analysis, it is possible to see how there were entrenched discourses of able-ism (or at least varying degrees of unconscious bias within the journalistic process) operating within and across the Paralympic Games framing. By extension, it may subsequently be possible to claim legitimately that views that endorse the superiority of able-ism are at work within the Spanish media's sport coverage. However, we acknowledge, there is a need for more research to fully comprehend the underlying processes behind this and the possibilities for news-making going forward. One suggestion here may be to recognise and address the need for training that might be offered to newspaper editors and/or sport media professionals in order to improve their knowledge and understanding about Paralympic Sport and its highly competitive and athletic nature.

In this research, a superficial quantitative observation might have led to positive conclusions about Paralympic coverage. However, quantitative content analyses alone do not provide elements that are capable of shedding light on the underlying logic of decisions made by professionals, which, in consequence, could go some way to explaining why discrimination or stigmatisation is happening. Our recommendation here is that if we want to develop our understandings further and somehow change

media outlets' and journalists' treatment of disability and specifically of the Paralympic Games, the key is to interrogate the underlying logics of their behaviour (Lowe, 1999; Ruther, Oelrichs & Geske, 2012). The utility of such mixed-methods approach has already been noted by some, for example Marcellini (2012) with respect to French Paralympic media analysis, and by Howe (2008) and Golden (2003) who have proffered the advantages of ethnographically-based media research. In particular, we continue calls for work to supplement media content analysis with in-depth interviews to allow analysis of reporter, line-managers, section heads, deputy directors and directors' perceptions towards the Paralympic Games. As evidenced by the qualitative data, these individuals are fundamental stakeholders of the news making process and may contribute directly to narrative framing. Such an approach would also be of value in complementing ongoing work to better articulate athletes' perceptions towards the media representation of Paralympic athletes (Braye, 2016; Braye, Dixon & Gibbons, 2013; Peers, 2012a; 2012b; Smith, Bundon & Best, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we argue that if the aim is to understand the mechanisms and processes involved in the news-making process, an understanding of key actors' ideologies, perceptions and attitudes towards the PG is required. In light of our findings, it is also paramount to understand the economic logic underlying the relationship between Paralympic Committees, the media and corporate sponsors, and the roles this plays within media coverage. Ultimately, if the objective is to influence and improve how the media report disability, and specifically Paralympic sport and athletes, we need to

continue to expand research agendas; for example, by undertaking qualitative studies that include data from not only journalists but staff in other roles within the organisational hierarchy (e.g. managing editors, editors-in-chief and publishers). Additionally, we consider that media scholars should continue to take interest in critically examining the underlining political and financial agreements and contextual forces that may be at work in media production processes. In our case, this means drawing attention to those forces that may be directly influencing the representation of disability groups at the international, national and local media levels. Although not yet extensively explored with relation to Paralympic media coverage, such examinations may also take interest in questions of ethics and journalistic/organisational credibility, and/or stakeholders' relations, that emerge when agendas to increase coverage are explored. While on the one hand financial agreements between sport federations and mass media evidenced in our research may be considered advantageous for raising the public profile of Paralympic sport, such relations also have the capacity to affect seriously the validity, interpretability and integrity of quantitative content analysis.

## **Notes**

1. In addition to significant positions within the country's sport administration, Samaranch held the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Presidency from 1980-2001, and oversaw both the progressive media and commercial reforms that saw exponential increases in the global growth of the movement, but most significantly television coverage rights, media expansion and corporate sponsorship.
2. For instance, the IPC's current CEO of the IPC is Xaviar Gonzalez, while his predecessor Miguel Sagarra, was the Secretary General of the IPC from 1997 to 2005 and Vice President from 2005 to 2009. Both Gonzalez and Sagarra are also key members of a number of IOC, IPC commissions and governing boards. Miguel Carballeda, President of ONCE and former President of the Spanish Paralympic Committee (SPC), has also aided Spain's representation in the international sport sector. Although these individuals are buoyed by wider governance structures,

and have responsibilities that transcend enhancing media coverage, their positions (and, in particular, the overlapping representations between the IOC, IPC, ONCE and SPC) are significant in contouring media strategies, relations and communications at the national level.

3. In Beijing, for example, 141 Spanish athletes participated, winning a total of 58 medals. At the London 2012 Paralympics, 142 Spanish athletes took part and obtained a total of 42 medals. At the Rio de Janeiro Paralympics in 2016 there were 127 Spanish athletes and total of 31 medals won.
4. For example, swimmer Teresa Perales [26 medals over five Paralympics] and the shot putter David Casinos [5 medals over five Paralympics). Not unlike athletes elsewhere, the Paralympics afforded Perales and Casinos' national recognition for their achievements and lead to unprecedented media coverage. While coverage has been significant, and their respective physical prowess and national value has been celebrated, it need be noted that media portrayals have remained entrenched in conventional disability logic; essentially positioning athletes' and their feats as bio-medically orientated and/or extraordinary narratives of empowerment and possibility (Pappous, Marcellini & Léséleuc, 2010; 2011a; 2011b; Léséleuc, 2012).

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