



**ENGLISH FEDERATION OF
DISABILITY SPORT –
MEDIA RESEARCH
REPORT**

AUGUST 2016



**English Federation
of Disability Sport**

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OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

Objectives

English Federation of Disability Sport (EFDS) commissioned ComRes to conduct this research in order to:

- Benchmark how sport and physical activity is currently portrayed in the media;
- Understand the views of disabled adults and non-disabled adults about how sports and physical activity for disabled people is, and should be, represented in the media;
- Understand journalists' opinions of how sport and physical activity for disabled people is, and should be, represented in the media;
- Create a best-practice guide for journalists to use when reporting on sport and physical activity for disabled people.

Media monitoring

In order to provide an understanding of current media coverage of sport and physical activity for disabled people, ComRes ran media monitoring for a period of 8 weeks throughout May and June 2016.

ComRes agreed a list of key words with EFDS which were used to identify relevant media content. Working with media monitoring partners, ComRes received print and online articles including these key words, which were then categorised by in-house ComRes researchers along a number of variables (full results on slide 8).



The pool of content gathered from the media monitoring provided examples of media coverage which was used in the in-depth interviews and online forum. Eight articles were selected to provide a good spread of different content and article types.

METHODOLOGY

ComRes conducted face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews and an online community to speak to three audiences:

Audience	Method	Number of respondents	Fieldwork dates
Disabled adults	In depth face-to-face interviews	30	12 th May – 22 nd June
Non-disabled adults	Online community	20	16 th May – 23 rd May
Sports journalists	In depth telephone interviews	12	13 th June – 19 th July



In-depth interviews with disabled adults – individuals with a range of impairment types including those with physical impairments, visual impairments, hearing impairments and mental health conditions were interviewed. Respondents were recruited to have a good spread of age, gender and socio-economic grade: all were interested in sports and approaching half participate in sports. Interviews took place across three different locations Birmingham, Manchester and London.



Online community with non-disabled adults – non-disabled adults took part in an online community over the course of seven days. Respondents were recruited to have a good spread of age, gender and socio-economic grade and all were interested in sports. The community was moderated by ComRes researchers throughout the week with tasks posted on a daily basis. Respondents were encouraged to interact with each other and comment on each others' responses.



Telephone interviews with sports journalists – interviews were conducted with journalists from national press, local press, specialist sports publications and publications with a focus on disability (three interviews within each category). All interviews were conducted in-house by ComRes researchers.

KEY FINDINGS



KEY FINDINGS

All groups interviewed believe that **current media coverage** of sport and physical activity for disabled people is **broadly of a high quality**. Despite this, there are a number of suggestions to improve coverage further: most notably, all groups would like to see more media content about sport and physical activity for disabled people. Beyond this there are subtle variations in opinion between different audiences.

Disabled adults

- A number of disabled adults express **reservation over the use of words such as “superhumans”** to portray disabled people in sport. Concern over this is greater among disabled adults than non-disabled adults.
- Disabled adults see it as a **priority for athletes to be represented how they would like to be seen** – including quotes for the athlete and consulting them on how they are portrayed are two steps suggested to achieve this.
- Disabled adults would like to see more **ambassadors for disability sport**, promoting both sport and physical activity for disabled people and “normalising” disability in a broader sense.

Non-disabled adults

- Non-disabled adults show a **preference for live reporting** of sports events over commentary and reports. This is further reflected in widespread preference for media articles which include action-shots of athletes.
- Many non-disabled adults mention that they enjoy reading about **athletes’ journeys through sport**, their training and day-to-day life. This personal connection is seen as important to build interest and capture a readers’ attention.
- Opinion is split over how much the media should **focus on disability**. Some believe it should not be mentioned at all, while others favour clearly signposting disability sport.

Journalists

- Some journalists feel there is **less demand from the public for coverage of disability sport** compared to non-disability sport, while others highlight problems with supply: for example, no clearly signposted sporting calendar for disability sports, poor quality press releases and weak relationships with sports clubs or NGBs.
- Though confident in reporting disability sports, journalists report that **more clarity and consistency over language and sports classifications** would be useful.

MEDIA MONITORING



MEDIA MONITORING



217

A total of 667 articles were identified to be relevant and analysed. This comprised of 217 print articles and 450 online articles.



450



73%

The majority of media content received was local media.



14%

National media and content without a clear audience (such as small lifestyle magazines) made up a much smaller proportion.



40%

A slightly greater proportion of media content focused on amateur sport as opposed to professional sport. This likely reflects the greater proportion of local content.



60%



97%

The overwhelming majority of media content focused on positive events and stories. Only 3% commented on negative events, such as funding cuts or doping allegations.



3%

Reports/
commentary



Reports and commentary focusing on an individual event and providing analysis around it were the most common type of media content seen. Articles which provided results only with little commentary were relatively less common (9%).

Pre-event
build up



Pre-event build up articles were also frequent, which was likely due to the timings of the media monitoring which began before the Invictus Games and took place in a Paralympic year.

Results



Charity
events



Content focusing solely on personal stories made up a relatively small proportion of the content seen. However, many commentary pieces provide background on individual athletes and content covering charity events often provided some background about the person fundraising or cause for which they were fundraising.

Personal
stories



NGBs



Rules /
regulations



Content about NGBs and rules and regulations was relatively rare: these also tended to be the negative articles investigating doping or allegations against senior sports officials.

DEPTH INTERVIEWS WITH DISABLED ADULTS



English Federation
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CURRENT ACCESS TO DISABILITY SPORTS IN THE MEDIA

Generally, disabled adults report seeing coverage of sport and physical activity for disabled people less frequently than they see coverage of non-disability sport. If they want to see coverage of disability sport, they report having to actively search for it, whereas non-disability sport it is difficult to avoid due to its presence on mainstream television channels and in newspapers.

There is **overwhelming support for seeing more coverage of disability sport in the media**, and most respondents mention that they would like to see the amount of coverage on par with that of non-disability sport. Although a few respondents note that there may be less interest in disability sport than non-disability sport, the overall sentiment within this group is that if **coverage were to increase, interest and readership would grow.**

Very few respondents mention seeing sport and physical activity for disabled people reported in local media, although this may in part be due to a tendency among respondents to **consume less local media** in general. This lack of experience of local media is evident in respondents' tendency to draw upon examples of national media rather than local media throughout the research.



BBC and Channel 4 are the broadcasters respondents most often mention as the channels through which they find reporting on disability sport. Channel 4 is particularly commended for their coverage around the London 2012 Paralympics, although it is noted that this event represented something of a peak in coverage of disability sport, and that there has been much less coverage since.

"It [disability sport] is not on TV as much. I get more chances to watch non-disabled sports because it's on more."

Depth interview

"People aren't interested because it's not out there much. Look at football, it's out there, and that's why so many people are interested in it. I think the more people that know about it [disability sport] and hear about it, I reckon they'll be interested."

Depth interview

"I find for the Paralympics, you have to search for it. I know Channel 4 are doing something, they're quite big on it, but even then you have to search for it."

Depth interview

CHANGES IN COVERAGE OVER TIME



London 2012 is regarded to have been a **watershed moment** for sport and physical activity for disabled people, with many disabled adults mentioning that this is the first time they have taken a real interest in sport and physical activity for disabled people, or followed the coverage in the press. The London Olympics are seen to have had a positive effect on both the *quantity* and *quality* of media coverage about disability sport. Programmes such as The Last Leg are highly regarded for their straight-forward reporting and sessions which provided detail and context around categories for different impairment types.

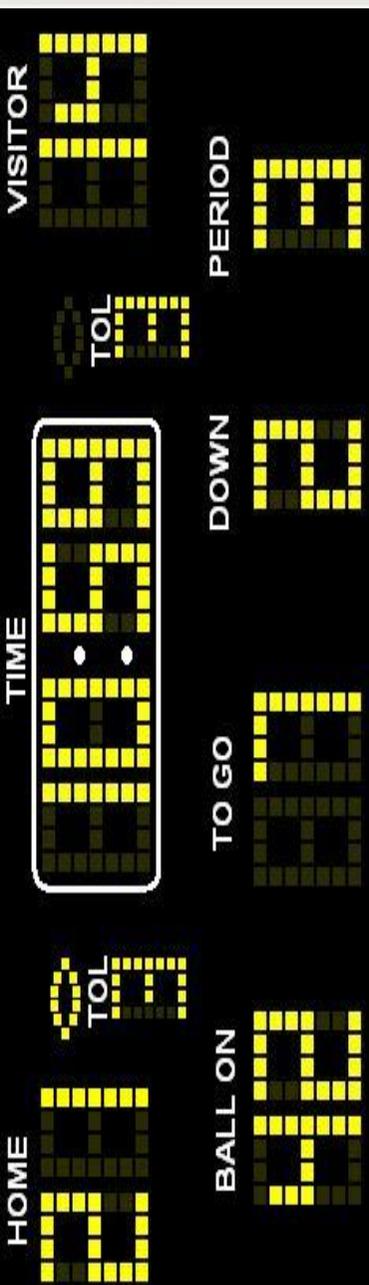
“I don’t think until London 2012 it was really put on the map. Then London came along and Channel 4 took it over...they made it really cool...They really showed it as something that was cool and something that was inspirational.”
Depth interview

“The Last Leg did start off covering the Paralympics and that’s grown into a TV show in its own right...I thought the way they didn’t make disability front and centre of it, just a part of the show, was quite good.”
Depth interview

It is the **content and tone** of media coverage that is seen to have changed most, with content now celebrating achievement in disability sport for its own value more, rather than portraying it as second class to non-disability sport. Some individuals mention that the language used to talk about disability more broadly has changed over time, but that when it comes to language used in the media to talk about disability sport, this has been of good quality over the past 5–10 years.

A number of participants note that they **particularly enjoyed seeing coverage of sports which are not played by non-disabled players**; for example Boccia and wheelchair rugby. Media coverage around the 2012 Olympics was often the first time they had seen these sports and they report that this broadened their knowledge of sporting opportunities for disabled people. A few individuals mention that these are sports they would particularly like to see more media coverage of, as they are seen to be exciting in their own right, and there is no sense of comparison to non-disability sport.

CONTENT



Opinion is varied among disabled adults over preferences for what should be included within reports on sport and physical activity for disabled people. Broadly, there is appetite for **three types of reporting**: **match reports** focusing on scores and results; **personal stories** about athletes and their journeys to success; **documentary-style pieces** about athletes' training and day-to-day life.

Match reports

Some disabled adults mention that reporting on sport and physical activity for disabled people tends to focus less on the scores and results of sporting events and more on personal stories. While a relatively small proportion of the content analysed through the media monitoring had its main focus on personal stories, many articles included reference to personal background, even if the overall focus was on a match result or report. There was a feeling among some disabled adults that this is less often the case in media content about non-disability sport.

Therefore some individuals wish to see more objective factual reporting of scores and results, both in the interest of seeing disability sport represented on par with non-disability sport and because they believe that such reporting has the correct focus, on the sporting achievement.

However, this interest in match reports and scores is usually most prominent when an individual follows a particular sport or team. Some respondents note that in isolation, scores or results are not that interesting, but when considered as part of a team or athlete's season, that is when they become exciting.

"It's rare to find things where they just honestly report on the sport. There will be a bit about the sport and then it'll always be 'this is how they became disabled' or 'this is how long they've been disabled for'. You never read a football article and then it's like 'this person worked at McDonald's for four years before he did this.'"

Depth interview

"You can say fifty results and I wouldn't care unless I knew the personal stories and I thought about the implications of it. That's what makes sport interesting in my opinion."

Depth interview

CONTENT



In addition to match reports, there is overwhelming interest reported in personal stories about athletes and their journeys to success as well as documentary-style pieces about disability sport and the athletes' training.

Personal stories

Many respondents report finding the **journey of disabled people** highly interesting, and it is this progression that is often seen as **inspiring** and could **motivate people** to being more active themselves.

Additionally, some individuals display a greater interest in the athletes' as individuals and sports personalities rather than in the sports themselves – this is often the case if there is no one particular sport that they follow.

Documentary-style pieces

Respondents often say that they would like more **information to understand the classification system** as they feel it is necessary to develop a thorough appreciation of disability sport. Particular examples given for this are track events in athletics or swimming races where there are sometimes athletes with a variety of physical impairments lining up against each other – respondents mention that clear explanation of why these athletes are racing together would improve their appreciation of the sport. In addition, content providing information on athletes' training regimes, diet and lifestyle is also desired in parallel to this coverage of non-disabled athletes.

“I very much like to link the sport to personal histories. I’m impressed to see how people can have the strength to cope with difficulties and have success in sporting activities.”

Depth interview

“Sometimes you don’t know all of the athletes. There are new athletes coming up all the time. Sometimes it’s nice when they commentate and tell you a bit about where they come from, what their previous titles are.”

Depth interview

“You could do an hour long programme following five athletes of different classes and why they’re in those classes. Then we’d have a greater understanding.”

Depth interview

ACKNOWLEDGING DISABILITY



There is a clear preference among respondents for reporting on disability sports to **honestly and openly address the topic of disability**. This includes a preference for using clear and correct terminology to describe disability, rather than using vague descriptions such as “difficulties” or “issues”. The overall sentiment seems to be that of “say it once, say it clearly, and then move on”.

“If you’ve got the scientific name such as Autism or PTSD then use that, because that is the professional way of dealing with it.”
Depth interview

“It’s not a problem if you put on a piece ‘I met Marco. Marco got his two legs very impaired by poliomyelitis when he was a kid.’ It’s not a problem at all. It’s much better than if you try to hide that information from people. ‘Oh, Marco has a mobility difficulty, mobility issues.’”

Depth interview

Repeated emphasis on an athlete’s disability can be perceived negatively. Such repetition is seen as unnecessary and undermines their sporting achievements which it is believed should be the focus of media reporting on sport and physical activity for disabled people.

“This one mentioned disability straight away. Then again, then again, again, again, again, it’s just disabled, disabled, disabled, disability the whole way through. It was a bit of an overload.”

Depth interview

Additionally, individuals would like to see disabled people represented in the media **in the way that they would like to be seen**. One assumption is that overly focusing on their disability, reducing space for content focused on their achievements, undermines the individual as it detracts from their abilities as an athlete. **Quotes from disabled athletes themselves** are seen as a positive step towards representing individuals in their own words.

“We hear it again and again, that old thing of treat others as you would like to be treated. That’s the mantra for reporting on disabilities. If you lost your limbs tomorrow or got a mental health condition, how do you want to be treated? How do you want to be portrayed?”

Depth interview

LANGUAGE



Respondents feel that the language used around reporting of sport and physical activity for disabled people is **generally appropriate**, and that the media do a good job of reporting on this topic.

There is an assumption stated by some respondents that the language the media uses is the correct language to be using, thus **the media using certain terms legitimises them for widespread use**. This highlights the influence which words and phrases used in the media can have.

“A lot of what people think is appropriate for how to refer to disabled people is through what the media say”.
Disabled adult

When it comes to specific terms, some words such as **“inspiring/inspirational”** are almost unanimously welcomed: indeed many respondents use ‘inspirational’ of their own accord to describe disability athletes and their achievements. Other phrases such as **“victim”** and **“superhero”** receive more mixed feedback.

“Anything that says “inspiring”, “inspirational” is always a good grab”.
Depth interview

Mostly positive	Mixed opinion	Mostly negative
Inspiring	Victim	Lucky
Disabled	Sufferer	Confined
	Superhuman	Impaired
	Hero	Wheelchair-bound
	Brave	Handicapped

“‘Handicapped’ is one of those [words that should be avoided], because they could outrun me. They could probably outshoot me, out-swim me as well. So I would be the handicapped one then. Just a kind of chubby 50-year old bloke in a swimming pool.”
Depth interview

“Brave is a bit of a tricky one I think because it can border on patronising.”
Depth interview

“Sufferer, impaired, trapped, confined. They are all quite restrictive, they’re all quite negative. It’s about someone’s ability and what they can do, rather than what they can’t.”
Depth interview

HEADLINES

Headlines are reported to have a **large impact** on the media that disabled individuals choose to access and articles they select to read. When presenting disabled adults with a variety of media articles, feedback illustrated a preference for headlines which:

- Are concise
- Mention disability
- Avoid acronyms
- Do not sensationalise

Some individuals also mentioned that words such as “inspiring” being featured in the title is a draw for them as it appeals to their emotions. Given that it is often the first thing which people read when accessing media content, it is imperative that words which are liked (as detailed on the previous slide) are included in headlines, while words that are disliked are not.

“I don’t even know what that is. What’s IPC?”
Depth interview

IPC European Championships: Susie Rodgers wins fifth gold

“It’s quite short, sweet and to the point.”
Depth interview

Invictus Sitting Volleyball squad announced

“This one I had to read twice because it didn’t really make sense to me the first time I read it. I mean, ‘Earns England Deaf Rugby Call-Up,’ what does that even mean? Unless you know what a call-up is...it’s not well-explained.”

Depth interview

Inspirational Jodie earns England deaf rugby call-up

IMAGES

Images are also seen as a particular draw for people when first accessing sports news. A few respondents with learning difficulties mentioned that images are **useful to them to support a story**, particularly if they have trouble reading or retaining information. The images which are received most positively are those that:

- Show the disabled person participating in sport (as opposed to in a non-sport situation)
- Are face/front on shots of the athlete
- Are high quality pictures, on par with those seen for non-disability sport

It is also noted that with high prevalence of social media usage, articles with images are more “shareable” than those without, as images can often act as a hyperlink to more detailed content.

Less liked

More liked



“You can’t really see his face and it would have been nice to see a picture of him with the club.”

Depth interview



“If they were really enjoying themselves in the picture it would be more eye-catching.”

Depth interview



“I like that. That’s quite straightforward. You see the picture and you think “Okay, she’s swimming and she’s won”...I know what the story is going to be about.”

Depth interview

AMBASSADORS AND CELEBRITIES



Media content which features **ambassadors for disability sport** is welcomed by disabled adults, and many would like to see more public figures commenting on and providing a public face to disability sport. Most likely influenced by the timing of research, which coincided with the Invictus Games, Prince Harry was mentioned as an ambassador who is **genuine and invested** in promoting sport and physical activity for disabled people. This aspect of being genuine was greatly valued by disabled adults. In contrast, an article which mentioned a local MP visiting a disability sports club was poorly received as it was assumed that the article was a publicity stunt, intended to bring the MP coverage, rather than a genuine act of interest in the disabled people participating at the club.

“I like the ambassador piece. That would catch my attention. If someone is being an ambassador to a certain club or anything of that nature, I suppose for me it adds a bit of credibility.”

Depth interview

“I’m not interested in what the shadow minister is doing – I’d be very anti that. I’d be thinking it’s more just publicity for him.”

Depth interview

In addition to figures outside of the sporting world, there is great demand to see more disabled athletes themselves become “personalities” who are well-known and identified to attract media coverage and national interest. **Ellie Simmonds, David Weir and Johnnie Peacock** are three such individuals who received multiple mentions through the research and are seen to be raising the profile of disability sport as well as inspiring athletes in their own right.

“We should be giving it to the people who have disabilities, that can actually talk about that sport and not just Claire Balding or whoever, those who are always on TV. Give it to the people who have the disabilities and let them take the show.”

Depth interview

Disabled respondents would also like to see more disabled athletes **presenting disability sport on television**. It is suggested that this could provide more insightful commentary than non-disabled presenters if the presenters had experience of the sports they are commenting on.

EFFECTS OF MEDIA REPRESENTATION



The way that disability sport is portrayed in the media is noted to have **wide-ranging effects**. While it may have a proximal impact on how individuals see disabled athletes, respondents also cite broader impacts on their own attitudes and motivation both in sport and in day-to-day life.

Motivation

Multiple respondents mention that they find it **inspiring** to read about or watch disability sport. Generally the sentiment is that if individuals with severe disabilities can play sport at a high level, then anybody can at least have a go at being active and participating in sport.

There are a few exceptions to this – some individuals see themselves as too old, or as prohibited by their own disability from participating. They still report finding sport and physical activity for disabled people inspiring, but say this would not translate into action themselves.

A number of respondents also report that there is a **wider impact on their motivation in day-to-day life**, mentioning that disability sport often imparts a message of overcoming difficulties, which can be transferred to inspiring them to overcome difficulties they experience on a smaller scale. This is particularly true of individuals who see themselves as disabled who often mention that seeing coverage of sport and physical activity for disabled people helps them to “put things in perspective” and motivates them to overcome their own disability.

“A lot of what people think is appropriate for how to refer to disabled people is through what the media say.”

Depth interview

“I’m too old, but I think young people would think ‘Oh my God, I’m doing nothing here. I’m sitting on this social media iPad here and look what he’s doing.’”

Depth interview

“It [reporting on disability sport] puts an element of positivity in you. You think ‘If they can do it and they’ve got what is classified as a genuine disability and I have a slight niggle...’”

Depth interview

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE INFLUENCING OPINION



Generally, opinions on media coverage of sport and physical activity for disabled people are consistent among individuals with different impairment types: issues such as the positioning of articles, the use of images and the tone of reporting seem unaffected by an individuals' personal experience of disability. To an extent, this may be because many individuals interviewed did not feel their disability impacts their day-to-day life. On the other hand, a small proportion of individuals note their own experience of disability, whether through their own impairment or that of a friend or family member, influences their opinions of reporting on disability sport.

Personal link to impairment type

Understandably, where a preference for content on specific impairment types is expressed, individuals tend to be more interested in media content related to their own disability or that of close friends or family. This reflects a broader point whereby people tend to like media content which has a personal link to them, whether this is through location, sport, or impairment type.

Visible disabilities

A few individuals suggest that it can be easier to report on physical impairments that are clearly visible to the observer, and suggest that for this reason, sports and physical activity for those with visible impairments may receive more coverage than others such as learning difficulties and mental health conditions. Among these respondents, a greater variety of coverage on non-visible disabilities is welcomed. For example, reporting on the Invictus Games which covered those with mental health conditions was praised by one individual with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

"I don't live too far from the Alexander Sports Ground, and obviously they do national games there, but they also do local things there, and they do local Paralympics things there. So I read about that in my local paper."

Depth interview

"The wheelchair footballers, they get a lot more publicity than any of the other kids, especially the invisible [impairments]. They don't realise the challenges that people who haven't got visible disabilities have."

Depth interview

ONLINE COMMUNITY WITH NON-DISABLED ADULTS



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CURRENT ACCESS TO DISABILITY SPORTS IN THE MEDIA

A large proportion of respondents report mainly accessing sports media online, and this is also the way that they tend to access media coverage of sport and physical activity for disabled people. Similar to the views of disabled adults, non-disabled adults tend to report seeing disability sports reporting less frequently than reporting on non-disability sports, and mention that they have to actively search to find content on disability sport.

"Since I mostly consume news on the internet nowadays, I would like to be able to read about disabled sports achievements on the internet as readily as I can about the FA Cup or some such sport!"

Online community

"Aside from the Invictus games and Paralympics I think coverage of disabled sports is minimal. Although they often run in parallel with regular events like world championships you don't often see them get much exposure. They might tack on a short story after the main event. It devalues the disabled sports when they always play second fiddle."

Online community

Sky Sports, BBC, Channel 4 and The Guardian are the most frequently mentioned sources of sports reporting. As among disabled adults, Channel 4 is seen to provide particularly good coverage on disability sports – mainly due to its Paralympics coverage – although far fewer individuals mention this than among disabled adults, suggesting that this perception is weaker for this group. The Guardian, not often mentioned by disabled adults, is also seen to provide high quality coverage of all sports including disability sport, although the lower proportion of articles about disability sport is still regarded as disappointing.

Many individuals mention a particular moment that has increased their interest in disability sport. This includes high profile events such as the Paralympics and Invictus Games, but also personal experiences and involvement in local and voluntary activities.

"When the Commonwealth Games were held in Glasgow I got very interested in various events and was able to attend a few of the events. This is when I really became interested and more aware of disability sports."

Online community

"Since my late sister had her injury (1992) I've been a keen follower of the Paralympic Games and more recently, the Invictus Games."

Online community

CHANGE OVER TIME



There is almost unanimous agreement that reporting of sport and physical activity for disabled people has improved greatly over the last ten years. The London 2012 Paralympics are mentioned as a key moment in this improvement, and Channel 4's coverage (both of the 2012 Paralympics and disability sport more broadly) is often cited as an example of high quality reporting that exists now as a result. Ensuring that improvements around these major events are enduring changes, which filter down to improve reporting at a day-to-day and local level, is a key point made by a number of individuals.

"The last 10 years has certainly seen a rise in media reporting & this should only improve. I still think it should be an ongoing thing rather than just more coverage at Olympic times."

Online community

"It's come a long way, good coverage of major events and the Last Leg has certainly moved things forward. But today I looked through daily paper and not one reference to a disabled sportsperson or event. There's still a long way to go and it needs reporting at local level not just the world events."

Online community

Language is a factor that is thought to have improved greatly with time. It is identified that words such as 'handicapped' are now acknowledged to be outdated by the media and respondents mentioned that they do not come across articles which they feel use inappropriate words or phrases. Thus with no obvious offence being caused, the future improvements that are suggested tend to be more nuanced, about tone, content and placement. Most prominent though, is simply a request for more coverage of sport and physical activity for disabled people in the media.

"Compared with the coverage that able-bodied players get it's a drop in the ocean."

Online community

"I believe that with the amount of crap that is on TV nowadays there is definitely room for more coverage."

Online community

CONTENT



Among non-disabled respondents there is a notable preference for watching live coverage of sport, as opposed to reading match reports, commentary and feature pieces after events. Many respondents believe that the live sport is the really exciting part, while complementary content can provide context and is useful when missing live coverage.

"I much prefer watching sports live, however if I'm unable to, then I rely heavily on the live commentary mainly on BBC Sport, or I like particular pages on Facebook and check these for updates."

Online community

"Any human element to a story, whether the sports person is non-disabled or not, always catches my interest."

Online community

Fact-based match reports tend to be less popular with non-disabled respondents than with disabled respondents. However, similarly to disabled people, non-disabled people also report that more information about classifications and different disabilities would be welcomed. This group often mention enjoying the personal aspect of stories, and this can be a real draw for them.

"The background/history/info on the individuals I think is crucial for audience engagement. That's the key piece to get us all on board and pre-supporting the competitors – so we feel we know a bit about them before they start."

Online community

"There seemed to be very little explanation on how different disability levels were matched/weighted, how people adapted their individual needs to the sport attempted etc. I'm genuinely interested in all of that."

Online community

A number of respondents mention that when it does come to reading articles about disability sport, they are often frustrated by the short length of online articles featuring disabled athletes. This suggests that there is appetite for more content on sport and physical activity for disabled people, meaning that the variety of content people would like to see could be included within this increased quantity of content.

LANGUAGE



Similarly to disabled respondents, non-disabled respondents perceive language to be an important factor to consider when reporting on disability sport, but largely believe that the media do a good job at using appropriate wording. Terms that are seen as less appropriate are those which could be considered to patronise athletes or portray their disability negatively. Considering how athletes wish to be portrayed – either by consulting with them or empathising – is mentioned as a key way to avoid this happening.

Generally, non-disabled respondents are open to the use of more emotive language, with fewer concerns than disabled respondents that this is sensationalising or portraying disabled athletes in a way they would not like to be portrayed. It is felt that emotive language helps create a human element to stories which many report enjoying.

“Achievement based positive vernacular should be focused on. The word inspirational has become clichéd and new synonyms should be found that are evocative but not patronising or at risk of being overused.”
Online community

Mostly positive	Mixed opinion	Mostly negative
Disabled	Inspiring	Limited
Disability	Brave	Partially
Athlete	Superhuman	Affliction
Paralympian	Impaired	Wheelchair-bound
		Handicapped

“Words such as victim, cripple, crippled, retarded, stricken, poor, unfortunate or special needs are disrespectful and can hurt people and make them feel excluded.”
Online community

“My main issue is to do with disabled athletes being treated differently to able-bodied – I think the approach of the Last Leg in being very straight forward & using language that some may feel is non PC is admirable.”
Online community

ACKNOWLEDGING DISABILITY



In contrast to disabled people's perceptions, there is divided opinion over whether media content about sport and physical activity for disabled people should clearly address the topic of disability, or should avoid referencing disability.

Addressing disability

Individuals who believe disability should be directly referenced tend to believe that this is necessary to raise awareness and acceptance of disability. On the other hand, it is also desired that any focus on disability is entirely factual, to the point, and could discuss broader context of how it affects an athlete's life, rather than just focusing on the disability itself in isolation. A number of respondents positive towards referencing disability mention that disability sports can be more exciting than non-disability sports. Therefore making sure media content on disability sport is signposted as such could be a draw for some people.

However, some individuals believe that mentioning disability can be condescending, implying that whatever the athlete has achieved is only impressive in the context of their disability. Playing down reference to disability is regarded to be a way to portray disability sport on par with non-disability sport.

"I do think it is important to address the disability as the more it is talked about the more people accept and are aware of many different conditions."

Online community

"That would mean focusing on the whole picture not just the disability per-se. So for example, if you wear a part prosthetic leg how do you manage the friction/pain to the limb as part of the training and competing?"

Online community

"There are many sports that I'd rather watch the disabled version of – you wouldn't catch me watching archery generally, but watch a competitor grip and release from their mouth, now that's impressive stuff."

Online community

HEADLINES

Reflecting varied opinion about whether disability should be highlighted, or not referenced in media content, respondents are split over headlines which mention disability. Some mention this would be a draw for them to read the article, others prefer headlines which focus on the achievement without mentioning disability.

Beyond this, respondents are fairly unanimous in preferring headlines which:

- Celebrate achievement
- Are concise
- Clearly explain what the article is about

In contrast to the opinions of disabled adults, there is less of a concern among non-disability adults about headlines which sensationalise. Very few respondents raised this as a negative factor of headlines in the articles presented.

“Great heading straight to the point and giving credit where it is due.”

Online community

Inspiring George Shaw of Ellesmere Port becomes Cerebral Palsy United ambassador

“I like the headline. It makes you want to read the story as deafness is not an issue that is often covered, especially in the sports world.”

Online community

Inspirational Jodie earns England deaf rugby call-up

“I do not like the title – Disability Sport – as the first words used. I really don't think this is needed at all!”

Online community

Disability Sport: Youngsters get hands-on experience of tournament participation

IMAGES

Similar to the insights from disabled adults, non-disability adults report a preference for images which:

- Show the disabled person participating in sport (as opposed to in a non-sport situation)
- Are face/front on shots of the athlete

Perhaps reflecting a preference for watching live sport amongst this group, action shots were particularly favoured by these respondents. Another reason for this preference may be a wish to see disabled people being empowered through their sport – pictures in which disabled people were shown in a less positive situation (such as sat on the side-lines) were less liked for their potential to perpetuate a stereotype of disabled people as less able to participate in sport and physical activity.

Less liked

More liked



“It would be nice to see these two sat down so the stark difference in ability is not so obvious and they are not looking down on her.”

Online community



“Good photo. You can see they are passionate and enjoying the game. Shame it’s not got any athletes in shot too.”

Online community



“Nice action shot to demonstrate her abilities.”

Online community

AMBASSADORS AND PRESENTERS



Non-disabled adults would like to see more disabled athletes featured in the media. In contrast to disabled adults, while there is perceived to be a role for them as ambassadors for the sport, there is greater demand for disabled athletes as presenters and commentators on sport and physical activity for disabled people. This is often driven by a feeling that disabled athletes would be able to give better insight into the life of a disabled athlete and communicate this to the wider public.

"It's even better to see that there has been some disabled commentators covering the games too as it does give a greater insight into the preparations the athletes have to do."

Online community

"If there's one thing I've noticed about the majority of disabled sports people (and non sports people) is that they have great (often black) senses of humour. They aren't afraid to address or discuss their disabilities, their obstacles etc."

Online community



There is also broader sentiment among this group that featuring more disabled people in all forms of media would be a positive step to increasing understanding of disability more widely. Thus it is not the case that disabled athletes are believed to only be able to report on disability sport – they are seen as potential contributors across the wider sport and mainstream media.

"We need to see more disabled people on TV – presenting, participating in shows etc. Why do we only see them presenting shows relating to disability in some way? We need to lift all those good presenters from Invictus, the Paralympics etc. and have them anchor sports year round."

Online community

"People with disabilities are capable of anything just as much or even more than able bodied people. So they should get the same type of coverage and attention by the media."

Online community



EFFECTS OF MEDIA REPRESENTATION



Non-disabled adults mention two main effects of the way that sport and physical activity for disabled people are represented in the media: effects on children and young people and effects on their propensity to be active.

Children and young people

A number of respondents are concerned that the way disability is represented in the media affects younger people's perceptions of disability and the way they might engage with disabled people. Media content on sport and physical activity for disabled people forms part of this wider representation of disability. Encouraging a focus on what disabled people *can* do and their achievements is seen as key to ensuring young people respect disabled people and combat negative perceptions of disability.

Propensity to be active

There are broadly two camps of opinion when it comes to how media content on disability sport affects people's reported motivation to exercise. A large proportion of individuals say it motivates them to take up a sport or be more active as it puts their own barriers to getting started into perspective. On the other hand, a smaller proportion of individuals say that despite finding disability sport inspiring, it does not make them more likely to be active. These people often see themselves as armchair enthusiasts, engaged with sport as a spectator, but not as a participant.

"I'll regularly think 'bloody hell if they can do that, why are you sitting on your arse moaning about your bunion'."

Online community

"I like my children to know about how much effort and determination is needed to get a certain level and for them to realise if they set a goal and work hard it can be achieved."

Online community

"I often admire the people I read about and their life stories but I don't feel like I want to be any more active. It is the same when I read about my favourite musicians. I enjoy finding out about them and listening to the music they make but it doesn't encourage me to pick up an instrument."

Online community

DEPTH INTERVIEWS WITH JOURNALISTS



English Federation
of Disability Sport



CONTENT

Journalists highlight that content within sports pages tend to be dominated by the ‘major’ sports, in particular football, with other sports – including sport and physical activity for disabled people – on the margins competing for coverage. Journalists, however, do say that they recognise a difference in the quantity and style of reporting of sport and physical activity for disabled people in the media compared to non-disabled people.

“The fact is that far more people are interested in football than any other sport.”
Local media

“I don’t see it being separate from able-bodied sport. I just see it as being another sport that is on the margins, performance sport on the margins.”
Specialist media

Coverage of non-disability sports vs disability sports

Journalists report that there is a disparity in the level of coverage that disability sports receives compared to non-disability sports, with the latter receiving more in most media formats. They highlight that the rise in the prominence of social media and online print, as well as growing coverage of disability sports on TV thanks to Channel 4, has provided a greater opportunity to cover disability sports in new formats. However, **coverage in these and traditional media formats**, such as newspapers and magazines, **remains comparatively low**. Journalists do stress that coverage of disability sport has increased dramatically over the past decade, especially following London 2012. Some, in particular, highlight how the style of coverage at the Paralympics potentially changed perceptions, with it not longer being seen as a sideshow to the Olympics but an entertaining sporting event in itself; demonstrating the power of effective coverage on the general public.

“Well there’s clearly less coverage.”
Local media

“I mean, I can remember when the Paralympics used to get half an hour a week on BBC Two.”
Specialist media

“For the first time, probably, in terms of the design of 2012 and the coverage it got, people started to realise that this is a genuine sporting contest, and you can ignore the fact, in some ways, that the competitors are disabled.”
Specialist media

Despite this, journalists cite that sports reporting of sport and physical activity for disabled people mostly **peaks during the Paralympics**, with limited coverage outside of the Games.

CONTENT

Match reporting vs personal stories



Journalists report that there is a tendency within the media to focus on personal stories of disabled athletes rather than reporting sport matches of disabled people. Some highlight that this results from competition for space within papers, with different angles needed to engage readers or having to place sport and physical activity for disabled people outside of sports sections of papers. Some argue that there is currently no demand for match reporting among their audience as the public are not currently familiar with the sports themselves and the scheduling of competitions. They cite that background information

about an athlete is required to engage the reader and give context to an event. Referring specifically to the need to clarify the classification system, they argue that this ultimately increases the profile of currently unknown disabled athletes. A few journalists note that background information is required when any sport – whether disability sport or non-disability – is less well-known to the public. This may give an indication that there needs to be a balance between the two when reporting on disability sport, and indicates less background context/human interest stories may be needed as coverage and popularity of sport and physical activity for disabled people increases.

Some journalists are particularly optimistic about disability sport coming into the mainstream in the future. They stress, however, the important role of disability sports ambassadors or ‘stars’ who can promote the sport, garner sponsorships and ultimately bring their sport to the forefront.

“I would say, for example, [...] disability sport, if it’s getting any coverage, [it] would tend to be perhaps the human interest angle [which] would be perhaps be played up a lot more, for fairly obvious reasons that there may be a story behind the disability someone has.”

National media

“People don’t know the rhythm, people don’t know the story, people don’t know the dynamics behind the competition.”

National media

“We need these people. We need these people to make the sport, to sell the sport, if you like.”

National media

“You need an athlete that people will recognise in the street and people know and people would want his autograph.”

Local media

DRIVERS OF CONTENT – DEMAND

Looking at the factors that inform the content of their publications, journalists say that they react to the demand of their audience. Demand is tracked through three broad mediums: traditional audience preference; social media (especially Twitter) and online publications. Online is the premium medium through which journalists garner demand for particular sports, with them noting that you can now gauge interest based on how many ‘clicks’ and ‘hits’ stories receive on their online website. They argue that from this they can see that sport and physical activity for disabled people does not garner the same level of interest as non-disability sport, especially ‘major’ sport such as football.

“On the website, you know exactly how many people have read any given story. You know exactly how long they spent reading that story. You know whether or not they’ll come back and read another story on the same subject.”

Local media

“You have any number of other events going on, so you have to decide what you think is demanding most interest, what will be watched by most people, what will be talked about by most people.”

National media

Other journalists note, however, that a lack of demand may not be due to a lack of interest in disability sport but rather a lack of awareness of what events and matches are going on. While some journalists praise Channel 4’s coverage of the Paralympics, they highlight a gap in TV coverage in between the Paralympics. They say that London 2012 demonstrated how there can be interest in disability sports, especially when involving British athletes and charismatic sports individuals at a national level, and appealing individuals and teams at a local level. Referring to the issue of coverage of women’s sport, there is a suggestion that problems of demand of disability sport lay in the lack of supply by media outlets; it important therefore to look at current problems within the supply side.

“I think there is a real appetite for it. People developed a real interest in disability sport.”

Specialist publication

“It probably follows on from women’s sport quite a lot actually. This debate about: is the problem that people don’t want to watch it? Or is the problem that it doesn’t receive the coverage, or doesn’t receive the funding, that would make it a more viewable sport?”

Specialist publication

DRIVERS OF CONTENT – SUPPLY

Sporting Calendar

Journalists refer to a number of factors which influence the supply of coverage of sport and physical activity for disabled people, both in terms of the volume and style. The first of which, and the most prominently mentioned, is the **limitations of the sporting calendar**. Journalists claim that this not only tends to limit them to coverage of majoring sporting events – such as the Premier League, Wimbledon and the Open – but that the calendar itself does not include events relating to sport and physical activity for disabled people apart from the Paralympics and, only sometimes, other events such as the London Anniversary games.

“We’ve always quite religiously followed the calendar.”
Specialist media

Press Releases

Sources of information which feed content varies among publications, from primary work from their in-house team to relying on external sources such as Twitter, websites and TV. A good number of journalists, however, report using press releases from either National Governing Bodies, sports clubs or the Press Association. Some journalists **express concern about the number of press releases they receive and their quality regarding disability sports and disabled athletes**. One journalist, in particular, referred to press releases from a European sporting championships, whereby non-disabled athletes were covered in extensive detail and disabled athletes were only mentioned in a few sentences. Other journalists, however, highlight the variety of press releases they receive from the Press Association and *some* National Governing Bodies and sports teams, though say that better contact from press contacts would always be helpful.

“We rely on a couple of different sources and you can only cover what you’re getting.”

Local media

“In terms of match reporting, it’s still very, very difficult even to find the result sometimes, which has got to be something that the Governing Bodies need to look at.”

Local media

Local journalists are more likely to report that they cover sports and physical activity for disabled people than those in national media outlets. It is suggested that these journalists – who are more likely to rely on content from local, individual sources (including the general public) – and some national journalists that is important to build **working relationships** with contacts to build the supply and coverage of disability sports. Such contacts include press contacts, sports teams’ contacts as well as individuals and the public.

GOOD REPORTING: STYLE AND LANGUAGE



When referring to what constitutes ‘good’ sports reporting, journalists highlight that reports should tell the reader something that they do not already know; such as additional analysis, background information and backstory of teams/individuals. It is here where there is a tendency for journalists to focus on the history – or human interest side – of disabled athletes. Some journalists note that, as a result, language tends to refer to the athletes’ disabilities rather than talents.

The majority of journalists say that they are comfortable reporting on sport and physical activity for disabled people, having written about either disabled athletes or disability sport in the past. Despite this, journalists do say that there is sometimes confusion with regard to what language should be used when referring to disabled people and disability sports.

“We see it so often in mainstream media, the language people use. Like saying things like, ‘The disabled.’ I’m like, ‘Oh, you can’t say that!’”
Specialist media

“I think there’s a little bit of confusion sometimes with the terms.”
National media

There is also a sense among some journalists that they do not want to offend disabled people or sound patronising when reporting on disability sports or disabled athletes; this is particularly true at the beginning of journalists’ careers. Some journalists also express particular concern about the lack of disabled *journalists* within the media, saying that improvements in coverage and the language used would improve as a result of more disabled people working in the sector.

“You know how you get this politically correct worry? You’re always thinking, ‘is it still alright to call it disability? Will you grossly offend somebody by using that term?’ That’s the only thing that worried me.”
Local media

“I think, if I’m honest, in the beginning I was very worried about the right words, and the right terminology, and absolutely not wanting to patronise anyone, or offend anyone.”
National media

GUIDELINES



While some journalists report awareness of certain guidelines in place for reporting on sport and physical activity for disabled people, they often cannot recall any specific guidelines and express confusion about guidelines changing over time. Looking at reasons for why journalists would like a guide, the main themes which come across are a desire for **clarity and consistency**; both in terms of the **language that should be used** when referring to disabled athletes and disability sports, and also the **event classifications**.

“I mean, personally, some clarity on what the different categories are because obviously there are the different disabilities. They’re grouped together and that seems quite complicated, and I think that could be explained more clearly.”

Local media

“The language to use I think is a massive thing. It seems to change quite a lot and we’re never quite sure exactly what language is okay to use.”

Local media

Within this, they stress the importance of a different genre of language; focusing on the **positives attributes of disabled athletes** rather than more negative or patronising phrases. This will hopefully generate the benefit of having trickle down effects to terminology being used in wider society.

“I think maybe with, say, a disabled athlete you might use the word ‘brave’ where you would use the word ‘talented’. And how often do you hear that, actually, this person’s talented?”

Local media

“So rather than saying, ‘wheelchair bound’ or ‘MS sufferer’; we just don’t like the negative connotations of things like that.”

Specialist media

In a bid to generate consistency in language and terms, some **journalists place the onus on National Governing Bodies** themselves, to be more consistent with the words they use and to create a standardised set of terms and classifications for different impairment types. As alluded to earlier, journalists highlight the utility of **having a sporting calendar – which could sit alongside non-disability sport – highlighting disability events outside of the Paralympics**. Referring to the classifications system specifically, journalists say that a concise media document outlining the different categories would be very helpful; with one journalist referencing Channel 4’s LEXI decoder as a particular good visual guide for Paralympic classifications.

CONCLUSIONS



CONCLUSIONS



Overall, individuals generally regard media content on sports and physical activity for disabled people to be of a good quality, with notable improvements in coverage since the 2012 Olympics. There is an appetite for a wide range of media content on sport and physical activity for disabled people and continuing to ensure a balanced range of content is provided to journalists will help satisfy the widest range of individuals. There is clear preference among the public that **placement of disability sports content** should reflect that of non-disability sports content. The broad consensus is that if a report is focused on scores, it should be in the sports pages with the non-disability match reports; if there is a lifestyle piece about a disabled athlete, this should be featured where lifestyle pieces about non-disabled athletes are.



Both disabled adults and non-disabled adults would like to see more **ambassadors for disability sport**, preferably athletes themselves, featured in the media to raise the profile of sport and physical activity for disabled people. Ambassadors are also seen to have a valuable potential role in presenting and commentating on disability sport, providing insight into the classification system which some individuals, and indeed journalists, feel is not clear to them.



Journalists identify a number of barriers to providing excellent reporting on disability sport ranging from not being aware of the timing of disability sports events to lacking confidence on language and the classification system. Making these **resources easily accessible to journalists** and ensuring links are being built between NGBs, local sports clubs and journalists is key to maintaining momentum to increase coverage of disability sports at all levels.



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