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*Published in:*  
Disability and Society

*DOI:*  
[10.1080/09687599.2016.1197823](https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2016.1197823)

*Publication date:*  
2016

*Document Version*  
Author accepted manuscript

[Link to publication in ResearchOnline](#)

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*  
McPherson, G, O'Donnell, H, McGillivray, D & Misener, L 2016, 'Elite athletes or superstars? Media representation of para-athletes at the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games', *Disability and Society*, vol. 31, no. 5, pp. 659-675 . <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2016.1197823>

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## **Elite Athletes or Superstars? Media Representation of Para-athletes at the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games**

This paper offers a discourse analysis of media representations of para-athletes before, during and post Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games in print, broadcast and online sources with a view to influencing attitudes towards people with a disability. We use the lens of critical disability theory to inform the study and analyse media representations of para-athletes beyond the physical barriers faced by people with a disability. We seek to address the dearth of studies that examine disability at major sporting events and make a contribution to understanding the media-sport cultural complex (Rowe 1999) and its importance in influencing public attitudes towards disability.

**Keywords: Para-sport; disability; mega-events; media; Commonwealth Games**

### **Introduction**

There is a growing recognition by governments and other public and private stakeholders that major sporting events can create legacies and contribute to the processes of social change for communities (Carey, Mason, and Misener 2011; Foley, McGillivray, and McPherson 2011; Gratton and Preuss 2008). However, to date there has been little empirical evidence that hosting para-sport events (sport events for people with a disability) can lead to the same benefits that have been associated with able-bodied events (Weed and Dowse 2009). Whilst detailed empirical investigations assessing changes in attitude amongst Games volunteers, spectators and organisers have been carried out (Misener, McGillivray and Legg 2015), it is also important to consider the role played by the media in representing athletes with a disability (para-athletes) and the effect of these representational practices on public awareness of, and attitudes towards, disability (Barnes 1992; Carter and Williams 2012). Misener (2013) points out that media coverage plays an important role in shaping audiences' perceptions, and Silva and Howe (2012) argue that 'the positive potential of the relationship between sport and disability can only be enacted through representational practices consonant with the "empowerment" promise of the Paralympic Movement' (175).

In this paper we explore, through a discourse analysis of media texts (broadcast, print and online), how para-athletes were portrayed before, during and after the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games. We draw on critical disability theory (CDT) to inform the analysis, arguing that disability is a complex political, social, and economic issue. Utilising CDT, it is posited that barriers to inclusion go beyond the physical, to encompass broader societal prejudice and exclusion (Chadwick 1994; Pothier and Devlin 2006). Representations of disability in the media have long been viewed as influential for wider societal attitudes about disability (Hardin and Hardin 2004). Moreover, the opportunity afforded by major sporting events to reach audiences across the world means that representations of disability communicated via media outlets are even more important. Until now, very few studies have considered media representations of disability at major sporting events (see Pappous, Marcellini, and de Leseleuc 2011 and Butler and Bissell, 2015 for two examples), nor are scholars making significant inroads into the sport management domain (Shapiro and Pitts 2014). The images used in the media afford an

opportunity to challenge the currently dominant medical model which represents disability as a condition to be ‘cured’, and to educate and inform, especially through the medium of sport. In this article we offer a contribution to understanding the media-sport-cultural complex (Rowe 1999) and its importance in influencing public attitudes towards disability.

Structurally, we begin with an overview of media representations of major sport events, emphasising the power of media narratives in influencing perceptions of people with a disability, their role and position in society. Here, we build on wide-ranging work on the ability of the media to both reproduce and challenge stereotypes through its coverage of sport (e.g. O’Donnell 1994). Following a discussion of the discourse analysis methods utilised to explore media representations around the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games we then focus on a number of emergent themes from our empirical enquiries to challenge the existing literature and shine a light on the complexities of role identification for para-athletes.

### **Media representations of para-athletes**

Driven by the growth in interest in the Paralympic Games, a number of scholars have focused attention on media representations of people with a disability in elite sport (Barnes 1992; Smith and Thomas 2002; Hardin and Hardin 2004; Kama 2004; Berger 2008; Howe 2008; Silva and Howe 2012; Cherney, Lindemann, and Hardin 2015; Hodges, Scullion, and Jackson 2015; Butler and Bissell 2015). Barnes’ (1992) early work on disabling imagery in the media emphasised the need to use language that empowers individuals with a disability rather than labelling or confining them, and to avoid hailing athletes with a disability as superhuman or having magical abilities. A number of scholars (Hardin and Hardin 2004; Howe 2008; Berger 2008; Purdue and Howe 2012) have emphasised the influential discourse that emerged in the early 2000s of the ‘supercrip’, ‘those individuals whose inspirational stories of courage, dedication, and hard work prove that it can be done, that one can defy the odds and accomplish the impossible’ (Berger 2008, 648).

The supercrip narrative is one that has dominated the sport media’s representation of para-athletes (Hodges, Scullion, and Jackson 2015), creating particular difficulties for those concerned with advancing the position of people with a disability in society. This narrative either views the individual as ‘ordinary’ in being able to live a ‘normal’ life despite their disability, or as ‘heroic’ (Barnes 1992; Hardin and Hardin 2004) reflecting achievements unattainable for the majority of people living with a disability. The supercrip concept has faced significant critique for promoting the notion that individuals need to fight against their impairments to secure unlikely successes (Silva and Howe 2012). Moreover, use of the ‘super’ nomenclature and the emphasis on ‘overcoming’ narratives (Silva and Howe 2012) in elite para-sport are said to undermine the positions of people with a disability and can have the effect of making sporting participation seem unattainable for many.

Whilst there is broad agreement about what the constituent elements of the supercrip narrative are, there are different perspectives on its power and influence upon public attitudes towards people with a disability. For example, Hardin and Hardin (2004) concentrate on what they depict as the *hegemonic* function of the supercrip media model,

which acts to reinforce the position of disabled people at the bottom of the social hierarchy, failing to address the wider social, economic, cultural and environmental barriers that reinforce ableist infrastructures. Theoretically, Hardin and Hardin (2004) emphasise how the mass media play a crucial role in inculcating 'values and beliefs essential to institutional structures in society by adopting dominant assumptions and framing content within them' (n.p). Butler and Bissell (2015) concur, arguing that media framing organises media content through selection, emphasis or exclusion of particular perspectives. As a result, the supercrip (and associated superhuman) narrative is normalised in media presentation, potentially reinforcing negative images and perceptions of people with a disability.

Silva and Howe (2012) agree that 'media representations are one of the main tools responsible for the perpetuation of social myths around disability, including its construction as Otherness' (178). As Butler and Bissell (2015, 8) suggest, 'mediated sport broadcasts of disability reify hegemonic constructions of disability that stem from the medical model'. This, they argue, leads to an over-emphasis on impairment rather than the athlete and athletic prowess. Such stories are considered to be more palatable to the able-bodied population and draw attention away from the real and material societal barriers that prevent people with a disability from maximising their life chances. MacAloon (2006, 31) refers 'to a passive audience content to be wowed'. The need to create a spectacle and gain television coverage for para-sports reinforces the need for the most readily accessible imagery to be selected and circulated. The objectification of the (normalised) sporting body has been critiqued by feminist scholars and disability studies commentators alike. Shakespeare (1994) has argued that people with a disability experience this objectification with their bodily impairments being viewed as objects of sympathy or social or medical curiosity. Yet, for many people with a disability the disability or impairment is only one isolating factor in their lives (Hodges, Scullion, and Jackson 2015). The images of para-athletes found in the media can portray difference and exacerbate distance further. The continued desire to brand para-athletes as superhuman rather than elite sports people like their able-bodied colleagues symbolically devalues citizens with a disability who cannot achieve that status (Barnes and Mercer 2003).

The dominant narrative or discourse of the supercrip is not without contestation and negotiation. For example while Purdue and Howe (2012), emphasising the work of Hinds (2000), argue against this type of reporting, Berger's (2008) study of wheelchair basketball players suggested that 'disabled athletes themselves say they find media representations of other disabled athletes inspiring, believing that the latter model an affirmative experience of disability for people with disabilities as well as the general public' (650). Hardin and Hardin's (2004) study also highlighted how people with a disability saw value in securing positive media attention, even if this was framed through the supercrip lens. They go on to identify 'alternative models' to the supercrip – those that emphasise society's failings to identify legitimate grievances and access issues. In this respect, there is some evidence of the 'disruptive potential inscribed in disability sport' (Silva and Howe 2012, 176). If athletes to be represented in such a way as to give recognition to the complexity of disability, the challenges associated with access, transport, income, disabling attitudes and infrastructures need to be foregrounded. There is some evidence that the media industries are now more informed by these alternative models. For example, during the London 2012 Paralympic Games, Channel 4, the official

broadcaster, was directed to avoid referencing disability first. Tim Hollingsworth from the British Paralympic Association advised journalists that ‘Paralympic athletes want to be referred to as elite athletes first and foremost and as disabled people secondarily – if at all’ (Nunn 2012), trying to move away from the supercrip narrative.

Misener (2013) argues that the media have the opportunity to frame disability as an empowering narrative that can lead to a closing of the distance between the elite athlete and the lived experience of those with a disability. Furthermore, Silva and Howe (2012) conclude that ‘in order to treat athletes with impairments as true athletes, media coverage must play a crucial educative role in increasing public knowledge of ... classification, new sports, records, and performances in order to develop an informed and educated audience’ (191). Yet, despite the London Paralympic example detailed previously, there remains little evidence to date to suggest that the media industries are ready or willing to take on this educative role, though the power of the media spectacle around major sporting events may provide some hope. Hodges, Scullion, and Jackson (2015) go as far as to suggest that audiences are encouraged to have low expectations of people with a disability thus when they watch the event their achievements are applauded and met with surprise.

### **Para-athletes and major sporting events**

Major sporting events like the Olympic and Paralympic Games represent a unique opportunity to influence and shape a global consciousness. Given the power and influence of such major media events (Dayan and Katz 1992), international sport federations and organising committees are in a position to contribute to the social good promoting equal opportunities for access and inclusion in sport (Foley, McGillivray and McPherson 2015; Bob and Swart 2009). There is some evidence that, when leveraged effectively, large-scale events can offer opportunities for conflict resolution, cohesion, shared understanding of values and differences and, importantly, to shape and change attitudes globally and locally (Amara 2008; Howe 2008; Misener and Darcy 2014; Foley et al 2015). That said, many authors, including those listed above, are (rightly) sceptical of the role of legacy from major sport events in bringing about material social change. The role of media is critical in these leveraging efforts. Brittain (2010) and Howe (2008) have both warned against patronising media approaches to elite para-sport athletes that emphasise overcoming adversity or bravery rather than stoic athleticism and competitiveness. Howe asserts that ‘the media have framed Paralympic sport as a (sub) culture, establishing boundaries around it but seldom exploring what makes it culturally distinctive’ (319). However, cities hosting para-sport events do have the opportunity to frame media messages and showcase accessibility, and promote a particular discourse about disability before, during and beyond the Games themselves. Organising Committees, local and central government stakeholders play an important role in framing that message.

The London 2012 Paralympic Games were hailed as an overwhelming success in changing attitudes towards people with a disability (Walker 2014) but others questioned both the significance and sustainability of these changes (Birrell 2013, Hodges, Scullion, and Jackson 2015). There is little doubt that the London 2012 Paralympic Games were successful when measured in terms of spectator interest and media attention. Nearly 3 million tickets were sold for events, with athletes performing in front of full venues every day and 13.2 million people in the UK watched the Opening Ceremony, the largest

audience Channel 4 had achieved in a decade (International Paralympic Committee 2012). However, academic commentators have looked more closely at the media coverage of these Games and concluded that coverage was predominantly framed around the notion that the para-athletes were ‘superhumans’ (Barratt 2012), continuing the increasingly well-established discourse of the supercrip (Berger 2008). But, as Neil Coyle from the Disability Rights group indicated, people may also get the impression from these representations that ‘disabled people don’t need support if they can do all these great things. Just look at what they can achieve on their own, the sort of superhuman challenges they’ve overcome’ (Coyle in Barratt 2012). The remainder of this article focuses on investigating, through a case study of one major sporting event, the extent to which media coverage of para-athletes represents a stage upon which alternative narratives about disability are played out, reframing the discussion towards a more nuanced understanding of para-sport and disability more generally.

## Methods

This paper focuses primarily on media representations of Scottish para-athletes during the 2014 Commonwealth Games. Our sampling time-frame ran from 1 May 2013, when the forthcoming Games were presented to the media, to 28 July 2014, by which time media coverage had come to a natural end. A detailed electronic search using the terms ‘parasport’ and ‘para-athlete’ as keys then identified all press and online articles relating to the Games in the following outlets: the two leading Scottish broadsheets (*The Herald* in Glasgow and *The Scotsman* in Edinburgh, providing eighteen articles between them); six tabloids (the Glasgow-based *Daily Record* and *Evening Times* providing a further twenty-four articles) and five local newspapers from areas where different athletes were either born or lived. If we add to these seventeen websites – including those of BBC Scotland and Scottish Television and a number of disability-related sites – the total number of sources was thirty and the total number of articles analysed was eighty-six. The *Inside the Games* website was by far the most productive of the internet sites consulted, accounting on its own for eleven articles.

We are not suggesting any direct or unproblematic relationship between media representations and their broader social effects (Wolf 1992): such effects are complex and mediated by a wide range of social and individual factors. Our position is closest to Stuart Hall’s encoding-decoding model (1980) in which he posits three audience responses to media texts: dominant readings, in which the audience accepts the producers’ preferred reading as encoded in the text; negotiated readings, where the audience reaches a compromise position with the text; and aberrant readings where the audience rejects the producers’ preferred meanings. Since in this study we are dealing only with texts as published, we are limited to an analysis of the preferred meanings encoded in the text themselves – we are however keenly aware that other readers may well develop alternative readings of these texts.

Our analysis is also informed by strategic interviews conducted as part of a larger, comparative international study of leveraging parasport events for sustainable community participation of which this article is an outcome. In the course of this larger study, we conducted 15 pre-event interviews with representatives from the Glasgow 2014 Organising Committee, local government and central government stakeholders. Three of

these interviews inform the results for this article – the Glasgow 2014 Ltd. Chief Executive Officer, the Head of Legacy and Engagement and the Head of Media – all of whom were involved in decisions related to media framing of para-sport athletes from a producer’s perspective (preferred meanings).

The analysis we offer below brings together two forms of discourse analysis, one developed by French philosopher Michel Foucault, and a second – Critical Discourse Analysis, or CDA – developed in the UK by Norman Fairclough. Both approaches analyse language and images as vehicles of discourse, as we also do here, and both also look beyond the individual text to much larger frames of meaning. The primary difference is that while CDA takes the individual text as a starting point and subjects it to a fairly detailed formal analysis before moving on to interpretation and explanation, Foucault focuses instead on a search for ‘regularities’ which by definition appear across a wide range of texts irrespective of their formal content. No individual text represents a valid unit of analysis for Foucault: discourses are, for him, ‘systems of dispersion’ (2002, 41) and capturing them involves identifying their traces across multiple sources. For our purposes, these include newspaper reports, advertisements, online articles, promotional images and interview transcripts.

For our analysis of images accompanying coverage of the Commonwealth Games, we draw in particular on the work of Manghani (2013). Like Foucault and Fairclough, Manghani argues for a move beyond formal analysis (for example of composition, figure and ground, colour palette and so on) to ‘both a critical and creative approach [where] it is not enough to simply analyze what we see in an image. We must also consider what images do and what we do with them’ (16). The visual dimension of the Commonwealth Games was, as we will see, rich in complex and often contradictory meanings.

We identify two concurrent narratives in the media sources analysed. The first and more complex of the two deals with a narrative of change where the para-sport athlete moves from being ‘different’ in the precise sense of requiring differential treatment when compared with able-bodied counterparts, to being presented as ‘one of us’ in terms of entitlements. The second is more static in nature, and presents an alternative (though not necessarily oppositional) discourse in which the para-athlete is appropriated by a largely commercialised discourse of the disabled athlete as star.

## **Results**

### *The para-sport athlete as ‘different’*

The difference referred to here is not in any sense *ontological* – there is no suggestion anywhere that the para-sport athletes *are* actually different: on the contrary, it relates quite specifically to their differential needs when compared to able-bodied counterparts. It manifests most strikingly in their need for special equipment not simply to enhance performance, but to make it possible at all. There are numerous references to pieces of apparatus being custom-built for the individual athlete, at times by close family and friends at the latter’s individual expense. Thus Meggan Dawson-Farrell, a T54 wheelchair, athlete is quoted in the *Scotsman* (28 August 2013) as saying:

My dad built some rollers for me to train on, so I don't have to be outside in all weathers. They're like the rollers cyclists use and, for wheelchairs, they're quite expensive to buy. My dad's a steel fabricator, so he was able to build a set of rollers for me.

The tone of the coverage is, with few exceptions, positive and supportive and highlights the wide range of support offered by mostly private individuals, while resolutely avoiding the condescending 'aww factor' (Ellis 2009). This element of the discourse revolves insistently around the figures of Scottish Athletics athlete, Meggan Dawson-Farrell, and British Athletics athlete, Samantha Kinghorn, and their respective stories. The articles feature a considerable amount of direct speech, which not only adds to the drama and provide powerful human stories but also crucially allows the athletes to *speak for themselves*, in stark contrast to the official figures from politics and sport who frequently spoke on their behalf during the early coverage stressing the educational potential of the Games. Thus in the online site *Inside the Games* Dawson-Farrell again speaks for herself stressing the need for support:

It also shows that you can't succeed on your own, and I know I wouldn't be close to competing at an event such as the Commonwealth Games if it wasn't for the support of my family, [coach] Ian [Mirfin] and everyone else around me (18 December 2013).

The need for extra funding is a recurring theme and critical comments invariably relate to the unwillingness of (almost always institutional) others to fully recognise the right of the para-athletes to the specialised support they are entitled to as a result of their 'difference'. The *Daily Mail* (20 December 2013) allows coach Ian Mirfin to go into the inadequacy of existing financial support for sprinter Libby Clegg and the continuing need for alternative sources of funding (albeit in this case by Scottish Disability Sport):

She's funded for one foreign meet but for most of the competitions, she has to go down south – so there's the associated costs for that, explains Mirfin, who also helped train Paralympic silver medallist Libby Clegg. We were lucky this year Scottish Disability Sport gave a lot of support to the girls trying to qualify for the Commonwealth Games.

Though individualised, the para-athletes are presented as the recipients of willingly given community and charitable support, having to pay for additional training themselves or with family help, needing more resolve to make it at an elite level (see below), which is not matched by a corresponding level of institutional support: the media sources analysed clearly see it as part of their function to bring this imbalance to the attention of their readers.

*The inspirational para-athlete*



In the data set (press, images, online) analysed, the presentation of the para-athletes is unflinching (and even to some extent unrealistically) positive: they are consistently presented as determined, competitive, steely, inspirational and so on. Emphasis in the narratives is on overcoming extremely difficult circumstances to make it this far. The dominant figures remain Samantha Kinghorn and Meggan Dawson-Farrell, joined at this stage here by swimmer Stefanie Reid. Thus the *Herald* (10 August 2013) recounts Kinghorn's story as follows (our italics in this section):

The Borders teenager was just 14 when she was struck by snow falling from a roof near her home. Almost immediately, she realised her back was broken, but the testimonies of those who shared time with her over the six months she spent in the renowned Spinal Injuries Unit at Glasgow's Southern General Hospital suggest that she accepted the hand life had dealt her just as quickly and showed a stirring determination not to waste her days on self-pity.

In the *Scotsman* (26 August 2013) this narrative reappears: 'In what represents a remarkable journey of *determination*, she [Kinghorn] will grace Hampden Stadium in July flying the saltire'. The *Herald* (5 January 2014) uses a similar language in relation to Dawson-Farrell:

The 21-year-old from Tullibody, Clackmannanshire, was among the first athletes to confirm her place in Team Scotland last September, testament to a steely determination which has already seen her overcome a series of obstacles, not least undergoing emergency brain surgery six times in the past year.

Stefanie Reid, who also works as a model, personifies the 'inspirational' element of this discourse: 'The public want people they can relate to, people that *inspire* them and Stef is the ideal model to put that message across and show what we are trying to change in the fashion world' (*Inside the Games*, 11 November 2013). References to male para-sport athletes are rare in this analysis. Micky Yule, a former soldier who lost both his legs to an IED in Afghanistan, is one: 'He has undergone 40 operations while adapting to life as a double amputee and, testament to his *determination*, soon set his sights on a far greater challenge' (*Herald*, 4 January 2014). Kevin Wallace of the bowling team makes a brief appearance noting also the narrative of difference between those with acquired disability to an often understated story of overcoming is attached, versus his congenital disability in which the low-key inspirational narrative is created through the storying of his impairments:

The apprentice joiner was born with Spina Bifida, a fault in the spinal column in which one or more vertebrae fail to form properly, leaving a gap or split, causing damage to the nervous system. 'I have some nerve damage and a hole in my back,' he says. He is insistent, however, that it has never

held him back ... ‘I do struggle with balance but then, when I’m on the green, people tell me I have a perfect delivery. It feels natural to me’ (Herald, 15 December 2013).

The athletes with acquired injuries invariably acknowledge that these characteristics (determination, resolve) were ones they already possessed even before becoming disabled. What makes them different from their able-bodied counterparts in terms of their media presentation is quite specifically what the journalists see as their constant bravery, which becomes a permanent feature of their response to their situation, whereas it is usually attached to the able-bodied only in isolated moments of pain or exhaustion. In the case of the para-athletes this permanent bravery makes them both ‘extraordinary’ and ‘exemplary’. For the *Daily Record* (26 September 2013) Meggan Dawson-Farrell is ‘the bravest athlete in Scotland’.

However, the broader social dimension of the challenges they face is never lost. In a clear mobilisation of the social model of disability, Dawson-Farrell ‘was sometimes prevented from using the gym because of health and safety regulations’ (*Daily Record*, 26 September 2013). The athletes themselves never adopt a heroic pose and are in the main presented as stoic and philosophical about their situation. Kinghorn ‘refus[ed] to dwell on the loss of her mobility’ (*Herald*, 9 May 2013) and ‘accepted the hand life had dealt her’ (*Herald*, 10 August 2013), Dawson-Farrell ‘soldiered on’ (*Daily Record*, 26 September 2013). Dreamers, maybe – Stefanie Reid is described by *The Times* (2 December 2013) as ‘one of life’s dreamers – but hardly the stuff of dreams: they are the boy or girl next door coping bravely with adverse circumstances’. In short, the coverage not only avoids the ‘aww’ factor, but also what Hodges, Scullion, and Jackson (2015) call the ‘awe’ factor, which they view as reproducing existing hierarchies of ability/disability through transforming elite performance into an object of reverence.

### *The para-sport athlete as “the same as you”*

If the theme of constant bravery accompanies the para-athlete everywhere setting him or her apart both from able-bodied athletes and the population in general, so also does the constant accompanying discourse of the disabled athlete as simultaneously ‘one of us’. The discourse expresses an ultimate ambition, on the part of these athletes, not to be ordinary in any general sense but to do away with the distinction between para-sport and able-bodied athletes altogether. In the extract from *The Herald* 25 September 2013, ‘everyone’ clearly means ‘all the other athletes’:

The Commonwealth Games will have an athletes’ village that is inhabited by all, from the able-bodied to the wheelchair user. ‘You are in there with everyone. All together’, she [Stefanie Reid] said. ‘It means we are not different ... the bottom line remains – sight or no sight, I’m still the fourth-fastest female sprinter in the country at this moment in time, so why not aim for one of the three places with the able-bodied athletes?’

The sprinter, who won silver for GB in 2012 in the T12 100m, added: ‘Why should I be denied my opportunity? What is para-sport all about if not to give disabled people a

chance to push at the boundaries ... I would love to push so hard the barriers broke altogether' (*Daily Record*, 9 December 2013). The message she seemed to want to portray was that she was just the same as any other elite athlete, rather than the same as any ordinary individual, and defy the odds and accomplish the impossible (Berger 2008).

For both journalists and athletes, positive reaction is specifically one which recognises this status as an elite athlete: 'The reaction to my [Libby Clegg's] bid to become an able-bodied athlete with Team Scotland at the Commonwealth Games has been overwhelmingly positive' (*Daily Record*, 28 December 2013). As the Head of Media for Glasgow 2014 pointed out, though 'para-sport at G2014 accounted for less than 10% of the medal events ... it is a better direction of travel'. The discourse in evidence here links with broader social discourses relating to changing attitudes to those with physical or mental disabilities. Those in policy positions are now more aware and informed of the need to navigate a path for elite (para) athletes whilst also ensuring that development pathways exist for those people with a disability facing everyday barriers to participation in sport and physical activity. This is a difficult balancing act to achieve, but at Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games the emphasis on 'inclusion' was paramount:

There's a focus on inclusion and the majority of initiatives were not targeted at people with disabilities, they are open to everyone including people with disabilities, and I think that's been part of the way of trying to deliver this [engagement] .

In the voice and messaging around Glasgow 2014, narratives of accessibility and inclusion were prevalent, stressing the importance of the 'we are all the same' message across the spectator, volunteer and competitor experience. And yet, there remain some tensions in media reporting of para-athletes' difference and uniqueness (the supercrip, medicalised narrative) and the opportunity provided by the Games to draw attention to the realities of living with a disability.

### *The para-sport athlete as star*

Alongside to the discourses identified above, we find a parallel set in which the para-sport athlete is presented as a star, and the statements which carry it often appear in the same texts as the previous set. Nonetheless, they clearly belong to a different discursive formation, one whose frame is visibly more commercial, corporate and spectacular rather than primarily journalistic. A clear indication of this is the extent to which this discourse is expressed primarily through visual means, part of a strategy of spectacularisation for at times quite explicitly corporate ends. Dyer's (1986) contention that stars are not in any sense 'born' but are first and foremost 'produced' for a range of commercial purposes is highly relevant here. Our focus here, then, is on the star-making strategies to be found. A striking – and unexpected – feature of this discourse is its heavy reliance on a strongly gender-coded presentation of the athletes featured.

Although there were slightly more men (12) than women (9) in the Scottish para-sport team, with the exception of Micky Yule it was only the three female athletes mentioned earlier who were elevated to this status of (albeit relatively minor) stardom in media coverage of the Games. These three women not only appeared in numerous reports

– Libby Clegg and Samantha Kinghorn each in ten and Meggan Dawson-Farrell in eleven in the sample supplied – but also at times featured in photographs accompanying those reports. In the case of Kinghorn this increased exposure included appearing in a short film, of which she was expressly presented as the ‘star’. The film, referred to as a ‘movie’, was made by a leading Glasgow legal firm, in one of the few cases of commercial sponsorship we encountered. In stark contrast to the journalists’ texts, these images presented the athletes as objects rather than as subjects, and transformed them from witnesses of their own situations into targets of an (at times overtly) sexist gaze.

In the cases of Kinghorn and Dawson-Farrell, these often highly stylised images tended to foreground the athletes’ equipment rather than the athletes themselves, the equipment thereby achieving a kind of vicarious star quality of its own.<sup>1</sup> This also highlighted their missing limbs, also emphasising their impairment and falling squarely within the supercrip discourse. Thus Kinghorn was presented in ‘feminine’ pink and somehow upstaged by her equipment,<sup>2</sup> as was an almost ‘psychedelic’ Dawson-Farrell in feminine pinks and blues: by contrast Kevin Wallace, the para-sport bowler, was shown in dressed in casual clothes in what appeared to be a public park and against a rather dull and dimly lit background.<sup>3</sup> Only one male para-athlete achieved anything remotely approaching this kind of star presentation, and this was weightlifter Micky Yule. The *Herald* recounted the story of his disability in a dramatic form never found in relation to the female athletes and, while their disabilities were clearly signalled as the result of domestic accidents or congenital conditions, his was decidedly military and virile in nature. The *Daily Record*’s accompanying text (3 January 2014) ran as follows:

For Micky Yule, it all changed in a split second. A time frame little more than the blink of an eye; the lone beat of a bird’s wing; a single breath, which saw his life jump the tracks onto an irrevocably altered path. A staff sergeant in the Royal Engineers, the 35-year-old was serving in Afghanistan when, on a routine mission to clear improvised explosive devices (IEDs), one detonated beneath his foot. Yule lost both legs instantaneously. The left one was severed from the knee down, the right an unsalvageable tangle of bone, muscle and sinew.

The accompanying image showed him surrounded by iconically masculine industrial imagery and posed in such a way as to emphasise his physique (naked from the waist up) and to render his disability almost completely invisible: the *Daily Record*’s article began ‘Industry, strength and power aren’t just found around the Clyde – powerlifter Micky Yule has these qualities in abundance’ (5 January 2014).

However, this differential treatment of male and female athletes is perhaps nowhere clearer than in the case of registered blind runner Libby Clegg (she has Stargardt

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<sup>1</sup> Two of the images covered here can be found in Go Scotland’s image gallery – <http://www.goscotland.org/image-gallery.aspx?OpenMediaFolderId=2585> – Meggan Dawson Farrell at position 2 and Micky Yule at position 17.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.heraldscotland.com/sport/13117677.Six\\_to\\_follow\\_Sam\\_can\\_do/](http://www.heraldscotland.com/sport/13117677.Six_to_follow_Sam_can_do/)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.heraldscotland.com/sport/13136394.Bowls\\_Young\\_and\\_gold/](http://www.heraldscotland.com/sport/13136394.Bowls_Young_and_gold/)

Macular Dystrophy, giving her only slight peripheral vision on her left side). Though she appears in many photographs, the most striking of these shows her not at all as a star in her own right, but as relying on her guide runner Mikhail Huggins for support: clearly showing the guide rope, stressing a relationship of dependency, and he, as a result of his stature, dominates the image, reducing her in some sense to the role of appendage to his stardom.<sup>4</sup> In the accompanying article, Huggins is quoted as appropriating the key role in this relationship for himself: ‘When we run we are linked by a guide rope. We have to be in sync, with the same stride patterns and our arms moving together. Timing is crucial. Her destiny is in my hands’ (*Daily Record*, 9 December 2013). Thus female athletes may be constructed as stars, but they are also, unlike Micky Yule, somehow simultaneously upstaged by their equipment or their male guides. There is still clearly work to be done to move beyond the representation of the para-athlete-as-star as a function of their gender or other characteristics.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

Our analysis of media coverage of the para-sport element of the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games reveals a mixed picture. While the often negative – indeed at times extremely antagonistic – views of disability activists regarding high-level para-sport events such as the Paralympics and the athletes who take part in them are well known (Braye, Collins, and Dixon 2012), there is much that is positive in the media coverage of the Glasgow Games. The vast bulk of the textual (linguistic) output analysed clearly conforms to the social model of disability and is just as clearly critical of the structural, cultural and institutional impediments which resist adapting in such a way as to minimise the effects of the impairment on the individual’s chosen path. The journalists assume, correctly, that their readers will want to know how certain kinds of impairment – specifically those caused by accidents – came about, but it would be a mistake to simply equate the recounting of these accidents with acceptance of a supercrip discourse and its associated medicalising and individualising focus. In fact, the articles analysed show not just acceptance of, but a consistently high level of support for, the social model, with those helping the para-athletes achieve their ‘dreams’ receiving unfailingly positive representations (as do the athletes themselves), and those obstructing them being cast in a negative light. The need for the media to represent para-athletes first and foremost based on their ability and to treat their circumstances as secondary has still some way to go, however desirable. The Glasgow 2014 Organising Committee, in tandem with Commonwealth Games Scotland, appears to have played a significant part in framing that debate too, as para-athletes were represented in Team Scotland on an equal footing with their able-bodied colleagues.

The gender dimension of the coverage, however, remains problematic. An unexpected combining of gender and disability was already in evidence in various official announcements and statements made over a year before the Games began, with both the

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<sup>4</sup><http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/sport/other-sports/athletics/blind-sprinter-libby-clegg-reveals-2906678#ixKpOTBTQCzpmA1E.97>

Scottish Minister of Sport and the Head of Media for the Games presenting increased inclusion of both female and para-athletes as part of a single aim, thereby, however implicitly, presenting the Games as an able-bodied male preserve, albeit as one to be breached. In stark contrast to the social model of disability widely accepted and disseminated by the print journalists, their photojournalist colleagues continue to equate elite female para-athletes with stardom and sexual appeal achieved through a heavily gender-coded version of the supercrip. Our study confirms Butler and Bissell's (2015) contention that codes of femininity are employed in media representations to maintain existing power (im) balances. They suggest that 'attractiveness, emotionality, femininity, and sexuality are a few traditional markers of gender representation, and through an emphasis on these attributes via media coverage of disabled athletes, the effect on viewers could be that athletes are noted for these characteristics over their athleticism' (22). Such internal tensions in the media discourse of the para-athlete are entirely consonant with Foucault's understanding of discourse as 'a space of multiple dissensions' (2002, 173) rather than of consensus. While media representations around Glasgow 2014 were, in many instances, progressive in their adherence to social models of disability and critical disability theory, drawing attention to the multiple and complex barriers associated with negative attitudes, insufficient social support, a dearth of information and restrictive physical structures, inconsistencies remain pertaining to gender, remnants of the supercrip narrative and its individualising tendencies.

The perhaps uncomfortable truth may well be that the relationship between the social model and the supercrip discourse in media coverage of the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games is to some extent symbiotic as well as oppositional since the journalists clearly saw no problem in reproducing both in the same text, despite their clearly differing 'messages'. Given the increasing tabloidisation of the UK press system (Harrington 2008) – a process affecting both quality and popular outlets – with its concomitant commercially driven focus on celebrity and star-making, it may be that the conditions of possibility do not currently exist for a discourse based on the social model of disability to exist on its own, and that its presence for the time being is predicated on 'sharing the stage' with some version of the supercrip discourse, whatever the limitations of the latter. This unlikely pairing would, none the less, suggest the emergence of what would appear to be a 'contested hegemony' alongside the continuation of 'othering' para-athletes.

Even allowing for these complexities, however, the level of support for the social model of disability in the textual output analysed remains striking. The sporting field may, therefore, as a result of its particular composition, offer possibilities for contestation which do not exist to the same extent elsewhere. Though contradictions remain – perhaps precisely because clearly identifiable contradictions have arisen – we must conclude that, at the symbolic level, a significant change has taken place in the UK both as a result of the London Paralympics and of the Glasgow Commonwealth Games. The media industries and their framing of parasports can play a significant role in challenging sporting federations, funders and other institutional actors to address the continuing, systemic obstacles para-athletes face compared with their able bodied counterparts. Major sporting events, as media spectacles, provide a powerful platform to disseminate messages about a social model of disability already embedded in broader urban infrastructural policy and practice. Both the *Daily Record* (29 July 2014) and the *Daily Express* (29 July 2014)

approvingly quoted Libby Clegg as saying ‘People don’t care about it being para-sport, it’s just a race to them. It just shows the leaps and bounds that para-sports have made’. Only further research will establish the extent to which such a change in discursive practice might eventually result in change in the lived experience of those living with disability.

### **Funding Body**

This work is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and Sport Canada, Grant Number IG # 435-2013.

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