

Institution: Bournemouth University		
Unit of Assessment: 24		
Title of case study: Shaping para-sport policy and broadcast coverage		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2017-2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Emma Pullen	Post-Doctoral Researcher	June 2017 – March 2019
Professor Michael Silk	Deputy Dean Research and Professional Practice	January 2015 - current
Dr Daniel Jackson	Associate Professor	September 2006 – current
Dr Richard Scullion	Deputy Dean Education	January 1997 – May 2019
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2019-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) <p>Findings from the AHRC-funded project 'Re-presenting para-sport bodies: Disability and the cultural legacy of the Paralympics' have been utilised by Channel 4, Paralympics GB, and UK Sport to shape future broadcasting, policy, practice and promotion of para-sport. Specifically, drawing on the project's extensive evidence base, these organisations have given greater emphasis to more representative and broader coverage of disabled people, types of disability, athlete voices and types of para-sport in their strategic planning, marketing and promotions, and media coverage for Tokyo 2020 and beyond.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) <p>With the rapid commercialisation of the Paralympics and the entry of Channel 4 as rights holder in the UK, the Paralympic Games - elevated as a sporting mega event - has become an increasingly important site of disability representation. Silk, Jackson and Pullen undertook the largest ever academic project to examine the implications of the rapid commercialisation of the Paralympic Games and the increasing visibility of (selected types of) disability in the media [R1, R6]. The project aimed to capture the intentions and practices of Channel 4's broadcasting of the Rio 2016 Paralympics; the influence of this on the content of Paralympic coverage and mediated forms of disability representation; and the wider impact on public attitudes toward disability. Key research questions included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is Paralympic sport produced and what are the dominant representations and meanings ascribed to Para-athletes through televisual representations? • How do audiences (those that identify as non-disabled and disabled) interpret such meanings? • And how do interpretations influence understandings of disability and disabled people in everyday life? <p>Based on an integrative methodological approach (including audience focus groups, production interviews, textual analysis and data interpreted by artists in the form of an exhibition), the evidence highlighted that despite claims that Channel 4's Paralympic coverage has made</p>		

disabled bodies more visible, there remain tensions and contradictions within the coverage, as well as discomfort amongst disabled viewers who were found to be much less likely to be engaged with Paralympic coverage than non-disabled audiences [R4]. Specifically:

- The study of the practices of senior production staff at Channel 4 revealed that Channel 4's promotional campaigns and para-athlete backstories not only marked and rendered disability (hyper)visible, but they were narrated with the intention of popularising and making disability 'sexy'. Questions thus remain over which types of disability are subject to media acclaim. For example, the back-stories of athletes with cerebral palsy and severe impairments are deemed unsexy, less marketable and less media-friendly [R1, R3].
- The focus of the coverage was on the Paralympic events / athletes deemed to be most 'accessible' to audiences. Events where disabled bodies most approximate ableist sporting norms through mobility enhancing technology were 'hyper-visible' in coverage [R2]. For example, 50% of coverage was given to swimming and track & field events, while 60% of coverage was given to wheelchair classified athletes; by contrast, some disability classifications gained almost no coverage [R2].
- Our survey data helps understand who the Paralympic audience is [R5]. Findings suggest they are more likely to be younger, female and non-disabled, and therefore different to typical sporting audiences.
- Our survey and focus group data found that disabled audiences are often critical of Paralympic broadcasting, stating that coverage often puts particular disabilities "on a pedestal" and makes a distinction between disabilities deemed superhuman and those deemed ordinary [R4].

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

All of the articles below are published in peer reviewed journals:

Articles:

R1 Pullen, E., Jackson, D., Silk, M. and Scullion, R., 2018. Re-presenting the Paralympics: (contested) philosophies, production practices and the hypervisibility of disability. *Media, Culture & Society*, 41(4), pp.465-481. DOI: [10.1177/0163443718799399](https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443718799399)

R2 Pullen, E. and Silk, M., 2019. Gender, technology and the ablenational Paralympic body politic. *Cultural Studies*, 34(3), pp.466-488. DOI: [10.1080/09502386.2019.1621917](https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2019.1621917)

R3 Pullen, E., Jackson, D. and Silk, M., 2019. (Re-)presenting the Paralympics: Affective Nationalism and the "Able-Disabled". *Communication & Sport*, 8(6), pp.715-737. DOI: [10.1177/2167479519837549](https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479519837549)

R4 Pullen, E., Jackson, D. and Silk, M., 2020. Watching disability: UK audience perceptions of the Paralympics, equality and social change. *European Journal of Communication*, 35(5), pp.469-483. DOI: [10.1177/0267323120909290](https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323120909290)

Report:

R5 Pullen, E., Jackson, D. and Silk, M., 2019. [Re-presenting para-sport bodies: Disability & the cultural legacy of the Paralympic Games](#).

Grant:

R6 [Re-presenting para-sport bodies: Disability & the cultural legacy of the Paralympics](#) (Arts and Humanities Research Council, 01 Feb 2017) (AH/P003842/1) – GBP557,004

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The research findings outlined above have influenced the ways in which Paralympic sport is presented, in particular encouraging more representative coverage of disabled people in the build-up to and during the Tokyo 2020 Games, which are now due to take place in 2021.

The findings of this project were disseminated through a) a project report for non-academic stakeholders [R5], b) meetings with Channel 4, Para GB and UK Sport to discuss emergent findings, and c) an exhibition featuring artistic interpretations of the research data held in London in July 2019 [E1, E2]. The exhibition was attended by representatives from Paralympics GB, UK Sport, Sport England and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, as well as executives from Channel 4.

Shaping broadcast coverage within the UK

Channel 4, who will broadcast the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games in 2021, have made it clear that BU research will “*underpin... future coverage of the Paralympics*” [E3] and that the coverage will “*embrace a wider spectrum of disabilities within para-sport coverage*”, implementing our recommendations [R1, R2].

A film from the opening night of the exhibition [E2] was used by Channel 4 “*as a provocation at the first meeting of the creative team*”, resulting in, “*a key change of emphasis in the marketing for Tokyo 2020 - as a result of the research - [which] was a shift in how we will focus on elements of the athletes lives as sports people and humans*” [E3]. This move away from their portrayal of Paralympians as ‘superhuman’, draws directly on BU’s research which showed that this labelling was particularly problematic amongst disabled audiences [R4]. Based on the team’s recommendations [R5], Channel 4 have “*engaged in dialogue with disability advocates, policy makers and disability rights groups with regard to how disabled people would like to be represented*”, in order to shape coverage of Tokyo 2020 [E3].

Shaping Para-sport policy, practice and marketing

Paralympics GB, the governing body for the Great Britain and Northern Ireland team at the Paralympics, states that the “*insights provided from the data ... have framed the decisions we have made for Tokyo in 2021 and beyond*” [E4]. In particular, the research has:

- “*informed the development of our new corporate strategy to focus more on athlete voice, which we identified as enabling the organisation to enhance its authenticity and credibility and allow Paralympics GB athletes to talk about wider social issues*” [E4].
- “*supported our desire to incorporate a wider range of disabilities (beyond those that are most visible) in this marketing campaign and utilise athlete voice to drive social change*” [E4].
- Encouraged Paralympics GB to showcase “*a wider range of sports, impairments and diversity – particularly with regards to BAME athletes*” during Tokyo 2020 coverage [E4].
- Directly informed Paralympics GB’s marketing strategy for the 2021 Paralympics, [E4], drawing on project data which highlights the young and female audience for the Games [R5].
- Encouraged Paralympics GB to focus their Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for Tokyo 2020 around “*increased public awareness of Paralympics GB athletes*” and an improvement in “*positive attitudes to disabled people*” [E4].

Providing an evidence base for sport policy in the UK

In February 2019 BU collaborated with UK Sport to develop the UK Sport Public Attitudes Survey, focusing on public attitudes towards para-sport, the Paralympics, and media coverage of such events. The research team's analysis of the initial results has helped shape UK Sport's approach to parasport events, enabling them to *"explore territory that we had never specifically entered into before and enhanced our knowledge accordingly"* [E5].

Silk, Jackson and Pullen later presented their broader research findings to a UK Sport all-staff session in February 2020, which:

- *"informed the way [UK Sport] communicate regarding issues of para-sport ... In particular, it is supporting our attempts to encourage the media to cover a broader spectrum of disabilities and parasport events"* [E5]. This draws on our research highlighting a need for a broader representation of disabilities / events, as some disabled audiences feel current coverage does not represent them effectively [R1, R2, R4].
- *"help[ed] to shape our communications strategy for the Tokyo Paralympic Games, ... particularly in the audience demographics that we will seek to engage"* [E5]. Specifically, UK Sport will now target a younger, female audience, drawing on BU's finding that para-sport is more popular amongst these groups [R5].
- Supported UK Sport to *"make a stronger case for increased funding from government"* for para-sports [E5], drawing on the team's evidence for both the popularity and progressive impact of watching para-sport [R5].
- Made *"an invaluable contribution to a proposed new induction programme for those coming into Paralympic sport and to the enhanced support being developed for disabled athletes transitioning out of sport"* [E5].
- Influenced diversity and inclusion (D&I) policy, particularly from our finding that there was a lack of racial and ethnic diversity across featured para-athletes during the Rio 2016 coverage [R5]. *"The research has landed at a particularly opportune moment in UK Sport's development in that, building on the momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement, we have recently restated our commitment to the whole area of diversity and inclusion – i.e. to tackling racism in British sport; to implementing a far more ambitious internal D&I plan; and to driving forward D&I within our new strategy"* [E5].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

E1 Silk, M., Jackson, D. and Pullen, E. (2019) *Bodyparts - Exhibition at Asia House in London*. [online] ArtRabbit. Available at: <https://www.artrabbit.com/events/bodyparts>. [Accessed 16 December 2020].

E2 Bournemouth University (2019) *Bodyparts – Bringing Paralympic representation to life through art*. Available at: <https://stories.bournemouth.ac.uk/bodyparts-exhibition/index.html>. [Accessed 16 December 2020].

E3 Channel Four (2020). *Testimonial letter, dated 28th October 2020*.

E4 Paralympics GB (2020). *Testimonial letter, dated 28th September 2020*.

E5 UK Sport (2020). *Testimonial letter, dated 6th October 2020*.