



# Paralympics through the Lens of the New York Times

## Introduction:

Disabled people are underrepresented in sports on various levels from participant [1-3] to leadership positions in the sport industry [4]. Although 12.4% of Canadians have disabilities related to activity and functional limitations, they represent only 1% of the memberships of National Sport Organizations [5]. The non inclusion of disabled people in mainstream sport is seen as one reason for 'separate' sports opportunities for disabled people [6]. How media deals with the Paralympics plays a big role in the participation of disabled people in sport [1]. Furthermore, quantity and quality of media coverage of the Paralympics is one powerful influence on public representations and attitudes toward sport for people with disabilities [7].

Given the important role of the media to transmit discourses to the public and the perception of importance of the NYT we chose to investigate a) the imagery of the Paralympics and its athletes and competitive sport with people with disabilities b) the views and hopes of athletes with disabilities and c) the visibility of athletes with disabilities through the lens of the NYT from 1851-today.

Keywords Number of articles (Name of ProQuest database)

	NYT 1851-2007	NYT 1980-2011	Canadian Newsstand (1980-2011)
<b>Paralympic</b>	122	208	20,999
<b>Olympic</b>	162,208	38,267	570,099
<b>Paralympics</b>	146	177	10,709
<b>Olympics</b>	50,810	28,607	426,860

Table 1. Overall visibility between Paralympic(s) and Olympic(s) in the New York Times and the Canadian Newsstand (which composes 300 newspapers) is comparatively the same, resulting in far less visibility in print media coverage of Paralympic(s).

## Experimental Approach:

A frequency and content analysis was conducted of the NYT to investigate historical and contemporary media constructions and discourses surrounding the Paralympics. The NYT were searched for articles covering the Paralympics from the ProQuest database (University of Calgary provided) for articles from 1851-2006 and the latest East Coast Edition (1980-2011). 217 documents were obtained. Canadian Newsstand was also researched to provide insight into Canadian coverage of the Paralympics. Results were periodized into four time frames that landmark increased media coverage of Paralympic Games: Paralympics were first visible in NYT in 1955; Barcelona 1992, Atlanta 1996 and Beijing 2008 experienced increased coverage.

Term	1955-1991	1992-1995	1996-2007	2008-2011
<b>injur*</b>	6	28	36	-
<b>defeat*</b>	26	2	3	11
<b>handicap</b>	15	5	13	8
<b>disease</b>	2	1	4	14
<b>defect</b>	4	3	3	5
<b>limit*</b>	-	-	4	11
<b>victim</b>	7	1	3	-
<b>participant</b>	3	-	4	2
<b>bound</b>	1	-	3	5
<b>cripple*</b>	6	-	3	-
<b>confine*</b>	3	1	2	1
<b>unusual</b>	2	-	2	2
<b>charity</b>	-	2	4	-
<b>ill*</b>	1	-	3	1

Table 2. Visibility of stereotypes of Paralympians remained throughout NYT downplaying the competitiveness of Paralympics and its athletes.

Paralympian	# Articles	Paralympian	# Articles	Paralympian	# Articles
<b>Oscar Pistorius</b>	22	<b>*Neroli Fairhall</b>	4	<b>Melissa Stockwell</b>	3
<b>*Natalie DuToit</b>	9	<b>Kortney Clemons</b>	4	<b>Chris Wadell</b>	3
<b>Jessica Long</b>	7	<b>Alonzo Wilkins</b>	3	<b>Bill Demby</b>	3
<b>*Marla Runyan</b>	7	<b>Brian McKeever</b>	3	<b>Helene Hines</b>	3
<b>Marlon Shirley</b>	6	<b>*Natalya Partyka</b>	3	<b>Tony Iniguez</b>	3
<b>Dennis Oehler</b>	6	<b>Nick Scandone</b>	3		
<b>Erin Popovich</b>	5	<b>Aimee Mullins</b>	3		

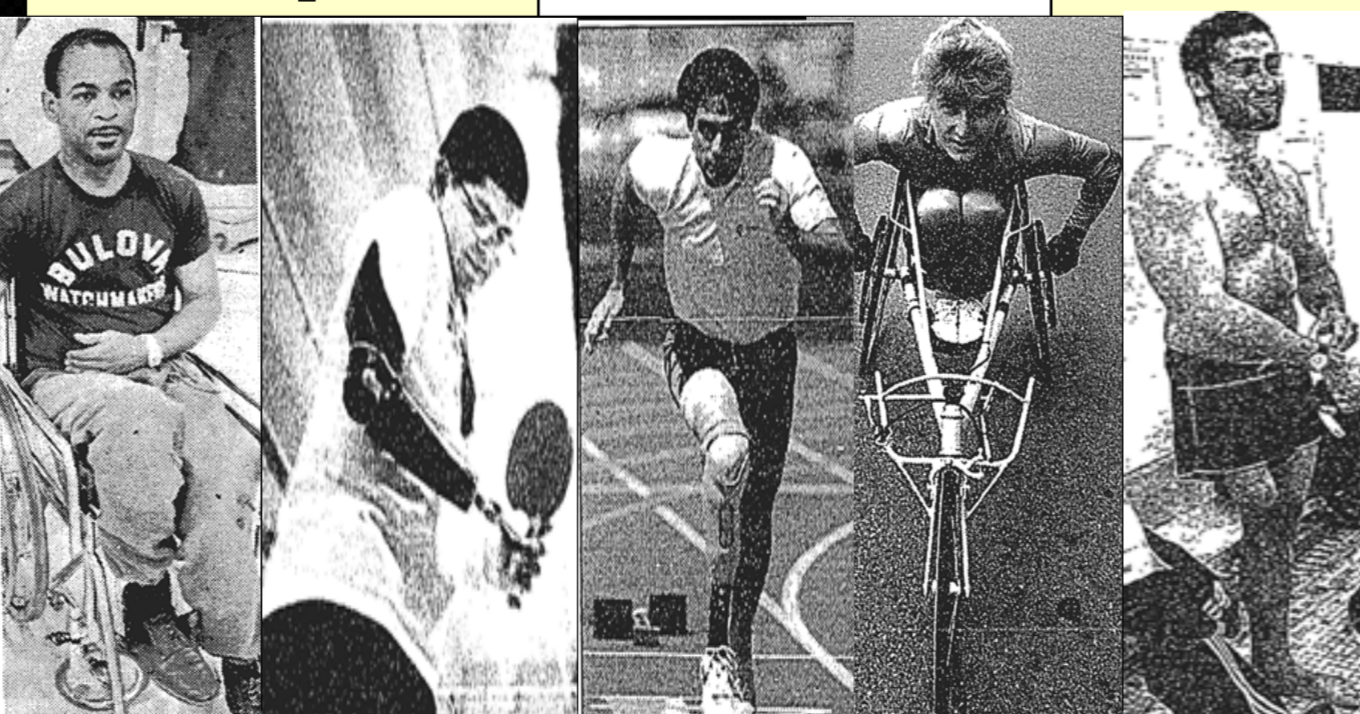


Table 4. Visibility of Paralympians with at least 3 hit-counts in separate NYT articles. \*Indicates athlete competed in the Olympics. \*George Eyser was only mentioned in 2 articles but also competed in the Olympics. \*Karoly Takics and \*Liz Hartel who are known to have competed in the Olympics were not mentioned in NYT at all.

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Term	1955-1991	1992-1995	1996-2007	2008-2011
<b>victor*</b>	32	-	17	16
<b>beat</b>	35	-	14	9
<b>courag*</b>	3	3	10	6
<b>Special</b>	5	5	1	4
<b>hero*</b>	3	2	3	3
<b>extraordin ary</b>	-	1	3	6
<b>achieveme nt</b>	3	1	2	4
<b>overcome/ overcame</b>	1	-	3	2
<b>conquer*</b>	1	-	-	1

Table 3. Visibility of supercrip stereotype exhibiting terms in NYT emphasizing winning language and perceiving disability as negative.



## Results:

- In media the Paralympics are much less visible and underrepresented in comparison to the Olympics (Table 1). In fact, the hit-count for the Vancouver Paralympics in NYT was zero and it was as comparably low in the Canadian Newsstand, despite Canada being the hosting nation.
- NYT used extensively stereotypes (Table 3 & 4) to typecast athletes with disabilities as: charitable, vulnerable, supercrip, his/her own enemy, unable to participate in activities of daily living, liberation tools (such as wheelchair) as negative (i.e. wheelchair 'confined' or 'bound').
- Very few Paralympians were covered by name (Table 4).
- Difference in coverage existed based on the label of 'impairment' (Table 2).
- N = 42 articles highlighted that Paralympians wanted to compete in the Olympics. The NYT discussed Paralympians (N = 5) who competed in the Olympics.

## Conclusion

Given the results, the authors conclude higher visibility of Paralympics and less stereotypical portrayal of Paralympic athletes is desired and needed to put forth a vision for recreational and high performance sport and sport education that increases the numbers and quality of participation in performance and recreation sport and sport education for disabled people.

## References

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