

**Written evidence submitted by Dr Daniel Jackson, Prof Michael Silk  
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**The future of Public Service Broadcasting inquiry.**

**Summary**

- Our research shows that Channel 4's broadcasting of the Paralympics has had a profound impact on public perceptions of disability and para athletes.
- Interview data demonstrates that the bold and ambitious approach that Channel 4 took towards re-presenting disabled bodies was as a direct consequence of their unique remit.
- We argue that progressive representations of minority groups on television are central to a healthy civic culture, and require a thriving PSB sector to provide the necessary leadership.

**Who we are**

Dr Daniel Jackson is Associate Professor of Media and Communication at Bournemouth University. His research broadly explores the intersections of media, power and social change, including the construction of news, political communication, the mediation of sport and the dynamics of civic culture in online environments. He has edited five books and is co-editor of the election analysis reports, published within ten days of major electoral events. Daniel is former convenor of the Political Studies Association Media and Politics Group and the Journalism Research Group at Bournemouth University.

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Prof Michael Silk is Professor of Sport & Social Science and Deputy Dean (Research & Professional Practice) in the Faculty of Management. His research and scholarship is interdisciplinary and focuses on the various relationships between sport & physical activity, mediated spectacles, and inequality. He is currently an investigator on the AHRC funded project: Gendered re-presentations of disability: Equality, empowerment and marginalisation in Paralympic media (AH/T006684/1). Past projects as PI include an AHRC funded project

(AH/P003842/1) focussing on the representation and cultural legacy of the Paralympics with colleagues at Loughborough, Bath, Nottingham and Western Ontario.

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Dr Emma Pullen is Lecturer in Sport Management in the School of Sport, Health and Exercise Sciences at Loughborough University. Her recent research is broadly focused on the role of sport media and broadcast environments on the representation of disability and gender, and the role of media in social change and civic culture. She has published a number of academic papers on this topic and collaborates with international partners in her continued work in this area.

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We are the project team of an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project (AH/P003842/1) from 2016-2019 that focussed on the cultural legacy of the 2016 Paralympics. Influenced by the success of Channel 4's entry as the United Kingdom's official Paralympic broadcaster in 2012, the project explored media constructions of disability through Paralympic sport and the impact on public attitudes and perceptions of disability.

In this submission we draw on three datasets that were collected through the project: in-depth interviews with 23 executive level production and editorial staff at Channel 4, including their commissioning partners, conducted in February and March 2017; 18 focus groups with 216 members of the public in England and Wales between June and December 2017; and a commissioned representative survey of 2011 members of the public, collected in February 2019.

This research captured the intentions and practices of Channel 4's (C4) 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. This approach allowed us to examine the important and influential relationship between Paralympic production practices and the wider impact on everyday attitudes and understandings of disability that contribute to progressive social change and a continued cultural legacy.

We believe the way that Channel 4 changed the story of disability representation, and its subsequent impact on audience perceptions of disability sport and disabled people were inextricably tied to its remit as a public service broadcaster (PSB): something that is worth preserving. It was for this reason that we were driven to submit this evidence.

Our evidence responds to one main area of the call:

*Impact: What value, if any, do PSBs bring to the UK in terms of economic (local and national), cultural and societal impact?*

### **Context**

Scholarly work has highlighted the important role of the Paralympic games in shaping everyday public perceptions, attitudes and understandings of disability as the most culturally visible and celebrated display of disability on television (Schantz and Gilbert, 2001). Previous research on the media and the Paralympics highlighted the following issues:

- It's historic invisibility and marginalisation from mainstream media platforms and primetime schedules (e.g. Beacom et al., 2016; Bruce, 2014; Purdue and Howe, 2013).
- The invisibility of impairment – with audiences often receiving a sanitised version of disability (Darke, 2004)
- Specific representations which range from a medicalised and individualised portrayal of disability that promotes perceptions of vulnerability and helplessness, and/or the hyper-glorification of sporting achievement underpinned by a heroic overcoming narrative. The latter narrative frame, termed the 'supercrip' narrative, has received much critical attention (Ellis and Goggin, 2015; Hardin and Hardin, 2004)
- The existence of stigma hierarchies of disability in media representations where certain disabilities are given more attention and characterised as exceptional; typically visible, physical and acquired disabilities that can fit the heroic overcoming narratives, or 'supercrip' (Purdue and Howe, 2013; Silva and Howe, 2012).

Channel 4 – mindful of some of the aforementioned criticisms of previous broadcasters, brought a new level of ambition to Paralympic broadcasting, when it took over from the BBC in 2010. Their ambition was “to change attitudes to disability and disability sport. And to create a nation at ease with disability” (Walsh, 2015, p. 27). Their coverage was characterised by:

- Unprecedented exposure – 9+ hours a day of live sport (a 400% increase in coverage from the 2008 Beijing Paralympic Games), plus extensive build up programmes.
- A 'no holds barred' approach to portraying disability across the broadcasting, where they talked about disability – not just the elite sport. This included the *Last Leg* – a satirical highlights and chat show - where humour was used to demystify disability and allow audiences to become comfortable talking about disability in a public arena.
- Developing disabled talent both on screen and in production – with a two thirds target for on screen and 50% in production.
- Changes in how para athletes were marketed, represented and promoted to the British public. This was initially through the 'superhuman' campaign in London 2012 followed by 'Yes We Can' campaign in Rio 2016. Both campaigns presented a non-sanitised view of disability and aimed to grab audience attention to improve audience numbers; increased audiences were key to changing attitudes.

## **Section 1. The impact of Channel 4's Paralympic broadcasting on public attitudes towards disability**

From our survey and focus groups, we outline four important themes that demonstrate societal change in attitudes towards disability and disability sport.

### *1. Engagement with the Paralympics*

**Around half of UK adults have followed Paralympic sport to some extent in the past five years.** While no comparative UK audience data exists for the Rio Olympics, our data implies that the Paralympics is squarely in the mainstream of public consciousness and is followed by a considerable portion of the UK population. Importantly, women were just as likely as men to follow the Paralympics (in contrast to most mainstream sport) and younger people were more likely to follow the Paralympics than older people.

**Interest in para-sport is not just contained to the Paralympics, as a spectaculatised mega-event.** Around half of survey respondents who follow the Paralympics enjoy watching programmes featuring disability sport *other than the Paralympics* when they are on TV.

## 2. *Perceptions of athletes*

**82% of UK Paralympic audiences are interested in the sporting achievements of athletes.**

**70% are interested in the backgrounds of athletes.** Importantly, in Paralympic broadcasting, backstories provided an opportunity for non-disabled audiences who were less familiar with disability - both on and off screen - to understand many of the social and cultural barriers disabled people faced.

## 3. *Perceptions of disability*

**95% of the audience agree that watching the Paralympics has had a positive impact on the lives of disabled people implying a perception of progressive social change.**

**70% that agree that the Paralympics have challenged their attitudes about disabled people.**

**53% agree that it's given them more confidence with disabled people in terms or real-world interactions.** Prior to 2012, we conducted research on behalf of LOCOG and Channel 4 to understand audience perceptions of disability sport (Hodges et al. 2015; Hodges, Scullion and Jackson, 2015). One of the main obstacles to engaging with disabled people was a lack of confidence, particularly in the language of disability. Now, many audience members claimed how the Paralympics has made them “feel much more comfortable engaging with [disabled] people”. One focus group member claimed they were:

*“much more willing to try and engage with people I come across in daily life with a disability than previously I might not have. I have found over the last 6 years, having been exposed to it more on TV, that I want to talk to people”*

**For nearly half of participants, watching the Paralympics has inspired them to engage in other media that feature disability,** suggesting a considerable impact beyond sport and to general media consumption.

Together, this data presents an important break from previous research in Paralympic audiences conducted prior to 2012 (Hodges et al. 2015), with evidence of a clear and palpable shift amongst audiences toward greater societal comfort with disability.

#### *4. Overcoming barriers to engaging with disability in the media*

In our work prior to 2012, we identified discomfort towards watching disabled people play sport and a feeling that the Paralympics does not represent elite sport as significant barriers for some audiences to engaging with the Paralympics. Eight years on, these sentiments were almost non-existent amongst the UK public, evidencing the extent of societal change.

**Only 6% of survey participants feel uncomfortable watching disabled people perform in the Paralympics.**

**Only 13% believe that the Paralympics does not represent elite sport.**

### **Section 2. The importance of PSB remit in driving this change**

Alongside evidencing the attitudinal and behavioural changes inspired by Channel 4's broadcasting of the Paralympics, it is important - through our interview data - to explain the centrality of their PSB remit to driving this change.

C4 operates under a statutory remit as a sustainable social enterprise with a mandate that includes stimulating debate and education, promoting innovation, fostering new talent, reflecting cultural diversity, and inspiring change through high-quality and innovative content that challenges the status quo. The 'C4 way' was described by one senior executive as 'doing it first ... being diverse' and **C4 viewed the 2012 Paralympics as an opportunity to translate this philosophy into production practices that 'inspired change and championed difference.'** Indeed, the perceived 'fit' between the Paralympics and C4's public service remit was near perfect, as a senior executive explains:

*"The values of the Paralympic Movement and the values of Channel 4, they come together in almost a total eclipse of the sun ... Be different, stand up to diversity, represent an alternative*

*point of view, champion young people, champion new talent. You can see how the Paralympics is just a bull's eye on many of those things.”*

C4's broadcasting of the 2012 Paralympic Games acted as a showcase of, and a commitment toward, the 'C4 way.' The single biggest project in the broadcaster's history, the stated aim was to change dominant media perceptions of disability; 'the slightly apologetic attitude towards showing disabled people whether they're sportspeople or not, generally on television' (senior executive). C4 were deeply cognizant of these underpinning industry practices and cultural assumptions, that they felt reinforced marginalisation within mainstream media products.

*“Fundamentally the public will never take disability sport as seriously or feel about it as passionately on the same scale as able-bodied sport ... because people instinctively and unconsciously think that a disabled person is not going to be able to perform to the same level as an able-bodied person and therefore the sport is never going to be as good. I think that may or may not be true, but when your job is to be the one that is innovative, alternative, challenging, that was like a red rag to a bull to us ... from that moment on, I think it made us even more focused ... to get the public to see what we could see you had to shake things up and be quite confrontational and be quite in-your-face but authentic (senior executive).”*

C4 felt that a 'reframing' of Paralympic coverage was required, one that challenged dominant non-disabled production techniques, legitimised it as an elite sporting event, and stimulated audience interest. To achieve these ambitions, C4 took a significant step change in the marketing and broadcasting of the games, in an effort to differentiate the Paralympic media product within the media sport marketplace, and to break from the perceived (aesthetic) 'misfit' of the disabled body and the elite sport context. Of central importance was a form of marketing that utilised athlete backstories as the point of distinction. In so doing, some of these stories centralised (rather than erased) disability — they were described by one interviewee as 'confrontational' — but were emplaced within a wider narrative of sporting success, and thus were seen as an 'authentic' technique that could serve to both legitimise elite sport and serve as a point of difference. Such an approach was a pathway to connect to audiences, to 'normalise' disability (senior executive) and provide a provocative vehicle to challenge societal perceptions of disability.

It is important to point out, though, that **this pathway towards re-presenting the Paralympics was far from uncontested**. Despite alignment between the Paralympic ethos and C4's remit, tensions related to commercialisation, spectacle, and elite sport performance have, and continue to, define C4's relationship with key stakeholders. The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) and British Paralympic Association (BPA), for example, had both previously pursued agendas squarely predicated on showcasing elite sport, and were initially sceptical of C4's plans to start a wider conversation around disability:

*“Our Paralympic coverage is on the edge of what the IPC and the BPA would have wanted, and they didn't realise what they wanted until we had done it. I think there's almost a bit of creative tension about ... because one of the big things we had a big tussle with them about ... is whether you should tell the backstories of the athletes (senior executive).”*

The 2012 'Meet the Superhumans' campaign was perhaps the epitome of the tensions between C4 and its stakeholders. As the central framing device showcasing C4's positioning of the Paralympics, it became the anchor point for representation. Powerful and emotive, with high production values, the campaign attempted to both provoke and draw attention to the upcoming Paralympics. The finished 'film' may have been slick, the production process may have won industry plaudits, and it might have acted to cement C4 as the 'home' of the Paralympics; yet getting to this point required sustained engagement, diplomacy and engagement with stakeholder groups. Interviewees spoke particularly about the considerable investment that went into working with disability action groups, charities, and athletes, often through involving them in audience testing of the advertising campaigns:

*“Some of the stakeholder groups ... were very wary of all of that. [We put in] enormous time and effort briefing people on our plan for the marketing campaign before we started to do it. We knew that we couldn't have stakeholder groups rubbishing it or coming out and being critical or dissing it when they saw it. So we knew we had a job on our hands to persuade them why we were doing what we were doing” (senior executive).*

Whilst one senior executive described the relationship between C4 and some stakeholders 'always in tension', C4 saw themselves in the role of advocate, as a 'cultural change agent' in the management of stakeholder relationships. And here, **their remit was the crucial factor in**

**empowering them to follow their instincts to innovate and challenge the status quo - even where it was against the judgement of other stakeholders.**

## **Conclusion**

**Our evidence clearly demonstrates the role and value of PSB - through the case of C4's remit and the Paralympic Games - as a vehicle for positive and profound social change that can benefit diverse societal groups.** PSB provides a unique broadcast environment that facilitates the wider visibility and inclusion of historically marginalised groups and improves the multiculturalism and diversity of mainstream media. This ultimately impacts on civic life; benefiting the lives of minority groups through challenging typically regressive media stereotypes, and on the wider public through improving perceptions and attitudes toward minority groups and thus may lead to great social and cultural cohesion.

However, it is also important to recognise that this on-screen progressive change is not solely driven by Channel 4 and the Paralympics. The Paralympics was one part of C4's wider programming that has seen greater representation of disability alongside other marginalised groups across their most popular primetime shows. This has been evidenced in the most recent Ofcom's (2019) Monitoring report, where Channel 4 and the BBC continue to lead the way in terms of on screen diversity.

**Importantly, the UK's PSBs success with disability programming has become recognised internationally,** with the UK viewed as forward thinking and leading in disability inclusion, equality and rights. For instance, C4's success in improving UK perceptions of disability through Paralympic coverage has been described as "the international benchmark for how Paralympic sport should be covered by a broadcaster" by IPC President Sir Philip Craven, and C4 are now advising the IPC and Paralympic broadcasters across the world. We would argue that given the global retreat of public service broadcasting and rising tide of digital narrowcasting and neoliberal deregulation, this is no coincidence. C4's approach to the Paralympics involved taking risks, many of which were commercial. These are risks that other broadcasters - including some PSBs - across the world have not been willing to take, to the detriment of progressive social change and the lives of disabled people worldwide.

Finally, whilst we have pointed to progressive social change in the last decade, we are also careful to recognise that there is still a great deal of work to be done, especially as sport and disability intersect with gender and race. We believe that PSB is a crucial platform to continue momentum, and the impact from our case study suggests that this is an area which will be embraced by PSB. We fear that if left to the dictates of the market, that future strides and momentum may not occur; as such we advocate for PSB as an exceptionally important and crucial platform for further challenging the status quo and disability rights.

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