

Disability is Still a Minority Topic An Interview with Daniel Jackson¹

Veronika Macková
Charles University

Daniel Jackson, Associate Professor at Bournemouth University, United Kingdom, has dedicated his research to the intersection of media and democracy, including news coverage of politics, the construction of news, political communication, and political talk online.

Among many other publications, perhaps his most important ones are *From everyday conversation to political action: Talking austerity in online 'third spaces'* (2015), *Inside Churnalism: PR, journalism and power relationships in flux* (2015), *New platform, old habits? Candidates' use of Twitter during the 2010 British and The media, political participation and empowerment* (2013), *Dutch general election campaigns* (2014), and *Strategic news frames and public policy debates: Press and television news coverage of the euro in the UK* (2011).

This interview draws on Daniel Jackson's book *Reframing Disability? Media, (Dis)Empowerment, and Voice in the 2012 Paralympics* (2015) stemming from a commercial research project for Channel 4 (official broadcaster of the Paralympic Games 2012). Therefore, the interview is dedicated to everyday experiences of disability and disability sport within the context of the London 2012 Paralympics. Moreover, the interview focuses even on televised coverage of the Games and on the perception of athletes with disabilities.

The organisers of the Paralympic Games in London 2012 came with an explicit aim to “transform the perception of disabled people in society,” and used sport to contribute to “a better world for all people with a disability.” Do you think it worked well?

The Paralympic Games in 2012 came with a political agenda as well as about elite sports competitions etc. When I think of our 2012 project with Channel 4, this question framed a lot of what we are concerned with, which is, “Did it transform perceptions of disabled people?” And we were really concerned with that question right from the start. It was an 18-month project where we did four rounds of interviews with people. We did one round of interviews immediately after the Paralympics, but we did three leading up to the Paralympics in order to try and get a sense or a baseline of perceptions of disability sport etc. In the immediate aftermath of the Paralympics, it was clear from our data that there had been a change. We did our interviews in September or early October, so it was immediately after the Paralympics. In order to answer that question “transformation of perception of disabled people”, we really

¹ This research was supported by the project SVV IKSŽ FSV UK 260464 and PROGRES 19.

needed another round of interviews a year later, in 2013, or six months later at least. Our data was immediately afterwards in the afterglow of the Paralympics. There are two strengths there. One is – what changed? And the second is a longer term – has changed it actually things?

In what way has the perception of disabled people transformed?

I think what it did was giving people a vocabulary to talk about disability generally, not just about disabled sports, through the amount of coverage but also through the type of coverage in the UK. I am only really talking about the UK. It is necessary to give people vocabulary by addressing head-on issues of disability. The programme, which again you might have heard of, called *The Last Leg*, was particularly successful at doing it. It did it through humour and it had a hashtag #isitok where people would tweet in their questions about, “#isitok to use this kind of language?” or “#isitok to laugh when someone in a wheelchair falls off?” or “#isitok to not know something?” or whatever. It just kind of demystified a lot of things which had been quite taboo. That has continued in the aftermath of that as well. So yes, it addressed the language. It also, from my point of view, gave people more access points to disability in terms of everyday conversation. In three waves before the Paralympics, we found that the language was a problem. It was awkward for people to talk about disability, they did not know what words to use. And people also did not have a kind of access points to it. We call these access points bridges. People needed bridges to disability because a lot of people did not have direct experience with it. That is one of the things which the Paralympics provided. And also, if I think about the Superhumans campaign and the sport and elite competition etc., it really pursued and tried to put a different type of perception of disabled people in people’s living rooms, particularly through the TV as a key medium. It was successful in doing that. And the interest in Rio 2016 Games is some evidence of that as well where there is still good TV ratings etc. in the UK. So there is no doubt, I think, that there was an initial bounce after the 2012 Games.

Can a single mega sports event transform perceptions of a whole group or a whole minority of disabled people?

Probably not. I think it was always probably a too ambitious goal or a claim to transform the perception of disabled people. I do not think it was ever going to be really able to do that in one go. It is expecting too much and that is where you look at the more recent evidence and surveys etc. When we picked up the story in 2016 with Channel 4 as researchers and it seems to me that 2012 was absolutely key in terms of a cultural shift in that broadcaster, which has continued since 2012 through to 2016 and onwards to 2017 etc., where they are really making efforts to normalise disability by using people’s disabilities in the programme-making in front and behind camera etc.

One report tells a pretty critical picture of life as a disabled person in the UK at the moment. Because at the same time as having these superhumans in our living rooms and on our TV screens, in the real world at the same time, there was a lot of government cuts to disability benefits etc. And this, the evidence then (this report evidences it quite well) that is life for disabled people in this country has not got better

in the last six, seven years in the sense that access to quality education, levels of poverty etc. are different if you are disabled and if you are not. And there are still many problems with disabled people in society. One mega event is not going to change that. If you want to transform the perception of disabled people in society, you have got more chance of doing it over a long period of time rather than doing a mega event.

How were the Paralympics 2012 mediated and promoted and how did they frame both disability and disability sports?

One of the major differences for 2012, compared to the previous Paralympics, was the sheer amount of coverage by Channel 4. The amount of time of live sport, live Paralympics that you could watch was unprecedented. In previous Olympics and Paralympics, it was always the BBC and the Paralympics. You got highlights, you might have got a bit of live coverage etc. 2012 was a big change. We had every day for two weeks nonstop Paralympics plus highlights and all that kind of thing as well. That was really very important. From the interviews, it was clear to me that Channel 4 wanted to promote it, wanted to frame it as the elite sport. And there was pressure from the British Paralympic Association, who really wanted it to be about the sport. The British Paralympic Association had concerns about Channel 4 in the lead-up to 2012, just because Channel 4 takes risks. It is sometimes quite in your face that they do not mind breaking taboos etc. on Channel 4. They were slightly concerned about how Channel 4 was going to do it. And they were very happy in the end, of course. But Channel 4 framed it as the elite sport, first and foremost. And I mean that is important in terms of the credibility of the athletes. And that is what the athletes want when you talk to Paralympic athletes. First and foremost they wanted it to be elite sporting spectacle where people would turn on and think: "Yes, this is good quality." They want you to talk about the sport first. Channel 4 also had to take into account the fact that this is disability sport as well, so to what extent do we talk about the disability, to what extent do we challenge people's vocabulary and language about this? They used LEXI.

Can you explain what LEXI is?

LEXI was kind of like a programme or a feature, which came on the screen just to explain the disability and to explain the classification. Imagine you are watching TV and whenever there was an event, for instance, the Paralympics, they are just about to start the swimming and you have something called LEXI, which would come on the screen and it was kind of a stickman and it had all of the different classifications in. When the viewers are watching it, that swimming race, they might be thinking: "Well, one guy has only got one arm, one has only got one leg. How come they are allowed in the same race? How come it is not only legless people in this race?" They would explain the classification in a visual way. And it was considered a success by audiences. It helped to demystify, helped to explain things but without being intrusive. It was often very quick in and out – this is the classification, move on.

The second thing the Channel 4 did in terms of how they framed this event was with backstories, the features about the athletes just like in the case the ordinary Olympics – "What is the story of this athlete?" When I was speaking to the people from Channel 4 and the producers etc., they did audience research and they knew

that people wanted to know these guys' stories: "How is it that they lost their arm?" or whatever. And some of the stories are truly both interesting and inspirational, which in itself inspiration is a problematic concept for a lot of disabled athletes. They do not want to be considered inspirational. The athletes in the British Paralympic Association were a bit more concerned about it, they did not want this to be sob stories or triumph over adversity or these kinds of things which frame it in a pitying way. They wanted to frame it in a more positive and empowering way, which is one of the reasons why they came up with the Superhumans campaign.

What did motivate you to conduct a research study on athletes with a disability?

My research is mostly concerned with journalism, political communication, the intersection of media and democracy. But I have always been very interested in the politics of representation generally beyond just politics. And I have always been interested in sports – I played a lot of sport myself. We did a piece of commercial research with Channel 4 for 2012, which is really how I got interested in that, I was quite in a major part of that project. And that maintained that interest to the point where we decided for 2016 that we wanted to do another study, so we put in the bid for some money in the UK and we got it. It is a combination of my interest in media studies and in the sport.

In the Czech Republic, nobody has examined disability sports audiences yet. What is the situation in other countries? Are you familiar with the research on athletes with disabilities in the world?

Not really. I did a literature review for that project in 2012 and my literature review is mostly focused on the UK, but what appeared to me is that there was very little research on audiences when it comes to disability sport. There was quite a bit of research on elite athletes themselves, you would often get interview-based projects with elite and disabled athletes, not that many still. And there were very few content analyses of disability sports. There have been few studies, just a handful of newspaper coverage or news coverage of the Paralympics, but I found very little firstly on the content analysis of the broadcasting and very little on audiences. At least to my knowledge, there have been very few studies outside the UK after our 2012 study on audiences and disability sport. And there is broader literature, of course, in media studies etc. on disability and the media. There are actually a few key studies etc. when it comes to the media coverage and the mediation of disability or media representations of disability, but not a great deal when it comes to sports.

You carried out a research study for Channel 4 after the Paralympic Games in 2012. How were the results accepted by the company itself?

We did four reports, three of them before the Paralympics and one after. And I am pretty sure that our research was influential in terms of helping them share that coverage and the types of the framing of the Paralympics etc. that they ended up doing. They were a pleasure to work with and they continue to be now when we are doing this project in 2016. They are public service broadcaster and their funding model is

that they are publicly owned, they get income through advertising. It was the first time it had not been on the BBC. And I mean the people who brought the Paralympics to the Channel 4, it is quite refreshing the memory because I only spoke to them not that long ago and they were approached by the local organizing committee for London Olympic and Paralympic Games who have the say of who gets the rights. They were approached and invited to bid for it. And for them, for Channel 4 it was just a really obvious and clear fit to their agenda. Channel 4 is more about marginalized groups and minority groups etc. It is not all about that but Channel 4 has always, by remit, had an agenda to represent those that are not always represented by the other channels. So for them, it was an obvious and clear alignment with what they are trying to do, which is to be a positive source of social change. For them, it was an easy decision. It was a big financial gamble to Channel 4 because they had to give up almost two weeks of solid primetime air for the Paralympics. They had to find sponsors etc. which they did not know. They were not sure whether the right sponsors would come forward with the right kind of money etc. So it was a commercial gamble for them.

Could you explain the high ratings of disability sports in the UK compared to other European countries?

I mean one explanation, for 2012, is that it was in London. And we just had the best Olympics ever, to us, it was like, “The London Olympics, oh my God, that was amazing, I do not want it to stop.” – “Oh, do not worry, here comes the Paralympics, it is another two weeks of this brilliant spectacle.” So it definitely benefited from the fact that it was in London and it was straight after the Olympics. That would be the most straightforward answer to why we had the high ratings. If Channel 4 had just gone with highlights, I do not think it would have been as popular. The live coverage, the fact that they gave it so much time kind of became a virtuous circle, you self-reinforced them. The more coverage they gave it, the more interest there was. I mean that also Channel 4 did a very good job of promoting it, they put a lot of time into their advertising campaigns etc. They really pushed it. It also was on primetime with lots of airtime and Britain is good at the Paralympics, we win a lot of medals. We are in the top three or four countries. There is an important nationalistic angle to this. And it is an important nationalistic angle in the coverage. And when we spoke to the producers and the programme-makers, it was clear from them as well that they would focus on sports where Britain was going to win or we had a good chance of winning. We cannot see all the sports, but we just see the ones where Britain has a good medal chance. That is an important reason again for the high ratings – people like to see British athletes winning medals. And that was happening at the Paralympics.

What is interesting about the Paralympic sports for television stations?

It is an elite sport and competition and they are mega-events. And these mega-events do not come along very often. You have got the Olympics/Paralympics, you have got the World Cup, you have got things like the Oscars, one outside the sport, etc., but within the sport, there are not that many you would consider a mega event. So just the sheer fact that it is a huge spectacle and the eyes of all of the world are on that city or that country at that time. It is always going to be an interesting spectacle for

the audience. But then it is also an elite sport and competition. And in the UK at least, if you want to watch sport, you generally have to pay quite a lot of money for it, you have got to buy it, you have got to buy a package that allows you to watch the Premier League or allows you to watch the Champions League or that kind of thing. So this is something which is free. It is on a free TV channel. I think that it is also an interest to the public because there are not that many of them out there.

Do you perceive disability sports or Paralympic sports as a minority topic?

I would say that it still is a minority topic. In terms of participation, it is bound to remain a minority because the minority of people have disabilities. But it certainly has gone into the mainstream a lot more in the sporting sense. I think you would classify it as a minority sport.

Is the research similar to another minority topic?

The critique of media coverage of disability generally, it is not that different to some of the critiques of race or of gender. Studies have shown across popular culture, not just that one of the sport now, but in popular culture, there is a range of stereotypes existing. For example, when it comes to media coverage of popular cultural treatment of disability, there are a number of stereotypes. It is similar to them in one sense. But in the other sense, I would probably argue, at least with media representation. There has been more progress in gender equality than there has been in disability. There has been more progress in race and ethnicity representation than in disability. 2012 is probably an important kind of a milestone in terms of trying to address that and it has continued for Channel 4 in particular. But I would say, compared to those that are minority issues, such as the easiest ones, race, and gender, it is probably slightly behind them in terms of their everyday normalisation of disability on our TVs etc., it still has got some of a journey to go.

What do you think about analysing disability sport? From my point of view, all research studies are still separate. Is it possible to do comprehensive research, connecting all the participants such as spectators, athletes or companies? If so, what could be a good methodology for doing so?

It is absolutely possible. The only thing that you need to do there is scale and, usually, funding. So this connects to the project I am doing right now, which is a big project. We are doing interviews with the producers, the production work package which is all about understanding the story of how the Paralympics was put together in 2016. And then we have got an audience side, which is going to be looking at the meanings etc. in the way that people engage with the Paralympics. And asking that question of: "Is it able to change perceptions?" etc. We are also doing a content analysis as well of the actual coverage. So it is absolutely possible to look at it from a number of angles. The main reason why most studies do not do it is probably because they did not have the funding to do it. You usually have to have the funding or a lot of time, perhaps a PhD or whatever, to be able to do it in a particular way.

I think kind of what I described, as of something which takes account of audiences, of production and of content. And you could talk to athletes as well, of course,

but certainly kind of one of your classic mass communication designs is audiences, is content and is production and it does not always come together because of, as I said, the scale or the funding. But that is generally how I describe what we were doing in 2016 – it is that kind of triangle of audience, content, and production. And that allows you to see it from different vantage points than if you are just looking at one, one in isolation or one at a time. So hopefully it should allow us to be able to triangulate, as the methodological term goes, which is to compare your findings across each method in order to be able to validate each one.

What is the role of cultural context when doing research? Is it possible to mediate the knowledge about a particular research study to other countries? What are the common characteristics?

It is a difficult question. If I think of beyond just this Paralympics study, our knowledge of many of the questions I am interested in, politics, political communication and media and journalism etc., is that you look at comparative studies. And there is a growing number of them, but there are still not that many of them, and so it often starts with a single case study of a country which well often developed theory or concepts etc. which other people take up in other countries and that is often how knowledge spreads. Sometimes you can say – okay, well, what is a similar country to the UK in terms of its broadcasting and media, political context, or social characteristics etc., which are very similar to another country? Or if you had to say, an obvious example might be the Nordic countries, the Scandinavian countries where you might think – okay, there is a reason, if we find this finding in Denmark, we might expect the similar finding in Norway. Except for that, you would expect we need evidence from other countries. It is not enough to just rely on single country studies in terms of understanding things like audience response.

Do you think that disabled athletes will be better represented in the media? That it will not be the minority topic anymore?

At least when I speak to Channel 4, they are already thinking ahead to future Paralympics etc. And those changes between 2012 and 2016, which were about the knowledge of the audience, in 2016 they did not use LEXI as much. And in the future, they might not use LEXI as much because the audience gets it now, the audience has come to the point: “We do not need to have the classifications explained every single time in such detail.” I think that will continue where you get more familiarity with the classifications in different sports etc., which will mean it is more focused on the sport etc. A lot of the other broadcasters as well recognise that they need to do more in terms of representation and normalisation of disability in everyday representation on TV. They are well aware of it and I think there has progress been made for sure. I would say also that is a positive story generally from the media point of view or at least broadcasting point of view. But the everyday experience of disability in this country for people with disability is still an issue. The reality with the cuts to disability benefits with the often narrative in parts of our press and newspapers, that people are cheating the system out of money because they are not really disabled or whatever, it is that kind of thing, which I do not think does any benefit for disabled people. The reality

of being disabled is still definitely a problem and an issue and that in many ways it is not getting better. Whilst the media representation is a positive story, the everyday experience of many people with disabilities is the opposite, it is not great and it is not getting better.