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Disability, Sport, and Television: Media Visibility and Representation of Paralympic Games in News Programs

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Abstract: With a few exceptions, media visibility and representation of people with disabilities is scarce. It is biased and anchored in stigma, distorting their image and hindering their full social participation. Paralympic sport is one of the social fields where the challenge of an objective representation of disability becomes particularly important due to the ever-increasing amount of television attention to the Paralympic Games as a global sports event and some persisting stereotypes in media representation of athletes with disabilities. Through an exploratory and interpretive research method, aimed at assessing media visibility of disability from the perspective of content production and its dissemination, the paper reviews the evolution of media representation of the Paralympic Games and athletes with disabilities during Sochi 2014, Rio 2016, and PyeongChang 2018 global sports events in the daily news programs from the National Spanish Broadcaster, RTVE. The effective inclusion of people with disabilities in the public sphere and a progressive removal of stereotypes and stigma depends to a great extent on the visibility and objective representation of disability in media.

Keywords: disability; Paralympic Games; media; news program; stereotypes; gender; ablenationalism; assistive technologies; RTVE

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1. Introduction

Although fifteen percent of the world's population lives with some kind of disability [1], media representation of people with disabilities is still scarce and often anchored in stereotypes and social stigma [2,3]. Physical signs of difference related to disability result in prejudice, labeling, status loss, and discrimination [4]. Notwithstanding some exceptions such as the International Day of People with Disabilities or the World Down Syndrome Day, which usually get brief mentions in media, or the occasional participation of people with disabilities in popular TV shows, disability is far from visible in the media on a global scale. In this regard, the recent global launch in over 190 countries of the Rising Phoenix documentary on Netflix, one year ahead of the Tokyo 2021 Paralympic Games and featuring a remarkable story of the Paralympic movement, is one of the most recent extraordinary milestones of global media visibility of disability.

The invisibility of people with disabilities is closely linked to the substantial number of physical and social barriers that hinder their full integration into the public sphere and in the decision-making processes concerning their daily life experience [5]. The World Health Organization [1] notes that the limited media coverage of disability is usually related to the negative perceptions, prejudices, and stereotypes that become major obstacles to full inclusivity and the accessibility of people with a disability to key social experiences.

Normalizing social perception of disability, while confronting negative attitudes, prejudices, and stereotypes is one of the significant challenges still facing communication practice and that needs to be addressed by practitioners and scholars [6–8]. The role of the

media and communication industries is critical in raising global attention to sport and social justice, disrupting traditional perceptions, and fostering new meaningful communication practices [9,10]. McPherson et al. [11] argue that the images used in media can educate, inform, and challenge the prevailing stereotypes of disability.

The paradigm shift in the representation of disability requires particular attention in the field of Paralympic sports communication. Since 1964, the Paralympic Games have become a singular scenario of support to athletes with disabilities [12,13] as well as a meaningful tool of citizen engagement, social inclusion, and sustainability [14]. However, the visibility of the achievements of Paralympic athletes is still not comparable to the coverage and attention usually received by athletes without a disability.

This research aims to contribute to the current academic debate on the role of television in the normalization of the representation and visibility of disability on screen. The paper first discusses the prevailing stereotypes and models of disability representation from the perspective of cultural and critical disability studies. The catalytic role of the Paralympic Games as a global and hyper-visible event of para-sports is also reviewed. Based on the previous analysis, a case study of the Spanish National Broadcaster's (RTVE) media coverage of the three last editions of the Paralympic Games in Sochi 2014, Rio 2016, and PyeongChang 2018 is presented, exploring the representation of athletes with disabilities in daily news programs.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Stereotypes, Technology, Ablenationalism, and Gender in Disability Representation

The understanding of disability and its representation has advanced from multiple perspectives in recent decades, identifying a series of common representation models, prevailing stereotypes, and critical intersections with gender, technology, and nationalism [2,15–19]. Goodley et al. [20] (p. 973) argue that disability "is both a signifier of inequity and the promise of something new and affirmative". The complexity of the understanding of disability and its public acceptance is reflected in its media representation, ranging from simplistic, cruel, and discriminating frames anchored in stigma and stereotypes to inspirational positive discourses that enhance abilities, normality, and equality.

Hunt [21] notes that the mere fact of having a different body, because of disability, and, therefore, being included in the minority group versus a "normal" majority, elicits prejudices leading to discrimination and even oppression. Barnes [22] argues that disability stereotypes are linked mainly to superstitions, myths, and beliefs rooted in popular culture from historical times and reproduced in the mass media, hence, fostering their prevalence within the public imagery. Research on the mass media by Nelson [23] and Barnes [22] identified a series of common stereotypes that distort the image of people with disabilities portraying them as pitiable, helpless, and vulnerable. The critical values of the neo-liberal Western society such as the personal appearance and individual autonomy exercise a strong influence on a "presupposition of inferiority based on their functional incapacities" [24] (p. 41) of people with disabilities and their failure to meet dominant normative aesthetics of physical beauty and personal independence. Media coverage of the Special Olympics in Leicester in 2009 for people with learning disabilities depicted para-athletes as "largely 'sympathetic', normatively passive, dependent people who deal bravely with their impairments and rely profoundly on the assistance of others" [25] (p. 224).

These simplistic and discriminating stereotypes are a reflection of the two prevailing models of understanding disability. The dependence of people with disabilities on medical treatment, stressing the body impairment as tragic [26–28], is conceptualized as the medical model of disability. The social construct of ability meaning "finely tuned 'able' body" [6] (p. 423) is usually viewed as the opposite of disability. The beliefs and practices that discriminate because of the lack of ability or on the basis of an imperfect or abnormal body are defined within the critical disability theory as ableism [15].

In parallel to the focus on impairment of the medical model, the social model of disability emphasizes the existence of marginalization, exclusion, and discrimination of

people with disabilities from social life and social places that are fully accessible and taken for granted by people without disabilities [16,17]. The social model highlights the dependence of people with disabilities on social help due to education, employment, transport, health, or cultural systems being inadequate or inaccessible for their specific needs [29,30].

Attention to the technologically capacitated performance of people with disabilities has been also common in media, leading to the formation of a superhuman, cyborg, or supercrip representation [2,13,18]. This representation enhances the exceptional abilities, skills, and talents of people with disabilities to achieve extraordinary results [31,32]. In the field of professional para-sports, advanced assistive technologies such as fiber carbon blades and racing wheelchairs contribute to the media spectacle of enhanced disabled bodies [33]. While some scholars argue that this frame offers a positive and inspiring representation of disability [34], the approach is also critiqued. An excessive exaltation of the superior capacity of a minority can bring a divide fostering general expectations about abilities of disabled people [35], raising hopes regarding their abilities of adaptation and social inclusion, while downsizing the importance of barriers and everyday issues that the vast majority of disabled people face in their life experience [2]. The excessive focus on the technologically enabled capacities of people with disabilities might also be related to the general perception of disability identified by the World Health Organization [1] as linked primarily to people moving in wheelchairs, as well as blind and deaf people, while excluding all other impairments.

Reviewing the media coverage of the London 2012 Paralympic Games, Pullen et al. [36] identify among the key drivers of increased visibility of the competition the strong visual impact of racing wheelchairs and advanced technologies for limb impairment, contributing to 69 percent of the total direct coverage, while the coverage of competitions performed by athletes with other severe disabilities was omitted. Bush et al. [12] (p. 643) highlight the commodified media nature of the 2012 Paralympic Games, organized "under neoliberal, militarized and securitized 'logics' of the market" at the intersection of complementary interests and social forces "that coalesced to make the event understandable".

The historical prominence of wheelchairs in para-sports competitions has been also documented by Bailey [28] who notes that from the first Stoke Mandeville Games of wheelchair polo in 1944 and until the 1976 Games in Toronto, only wheelchair athletes were able to compete. Blind and amputee athletes joined the competition for the first time in 1976.

The influence of nationalism on the disability representation is also highlighted by scholars, in particular, when extraordinary and publicly visible achievements of people with disabilities emerge in discourses of national identity. In the context of the Paralympic Games, the medals of national para-athletes increase the amount and complexity of media coverage, "especially for athletes whose successes allow the nation to feel good about itself" [37] (p. 1447). Furthermore, Snyder and Mitchell [38] (p. 113) identify the convergence of nationalism and ableism as "'ablenationalism'—the degree to which treating people with disabilities as an exception valorizes able-bodied norms of inclusion as the naturalized qualification of citizenship". The enhanced abilities of disabled bodies become accepted in national discourses and cultural spheres and celebrated as symbols of inclusion and integration [18]. The coverage of the Beijing 2008 and London 2012 Paralympic Games by mass media in New Zealand featured unequal media treatment of national Paralympic teams. While only 32 percent of visual representation and comments about the New Zealand national team had some references to the disabilities of athletes and mainly covered their sports performance with a narrative similar to the representation of athletes without disabilities, 80 percent of visuals and comments about foreign national teams highlighted disability [39]. Similar evidence of the discourse of national pride, normalizing the perception of para-athletes and fostering their recognition within the public sphere, was identified by Pullen et al. [36] in the high media visibility of the successful UK national Paralympic team of track and field athletics and swimming at the Rio 2016 Games. The

ablenationalism was also observed in the portrayal as national heroes of two Spanish Paralympic athletes with impressive records of medals during the London 2012 Games in the Spanish print press [40].

The focus on the intersection of disability and gender is also getting increased attention in critical disability and cultural studies [13,19,41]. Gerschick [19] (p. 1267) highlights the profound effect of disability on "the material and nonmaterial experience of gender" in terms of gender enactment, socialization, income, and physical vulnerability. Stereotyped gendered patterns of sexualization, trivialization, and infantilization were identified by De Léséleuc et al. [42] in media coverage of the Paralympic female athletes, highlighting their femininity, personal aspects not related to sports competition, and designating them as young or little girls, despite their adult age. McPherson et al. [11] argue that existing power imbalances are maintained through codes of femininity, glamorization, and trivialization in media representation of female para-athletes. A narrative of infantilization and asexual objectification was identified by Pullen and Silk [13] in the media coverage of one of the most successful female Paralympic swimmers of the UK, while in parallel, a narrative of "technologically capacitated body, revealing his tall muscular physique enhanced with, and centered on, carbon fiber prosthetics" [13] (p. 10) was displayed for a successful male Paralympic athlete. Furthermore, the review conducted by Rees et al. [43] of sixteen studies into the media coverage of para-athletes from 2001 to 2017 identified that, while media visibility of elite athletes with disabilities is significantly lower than that of elite athletes without disabilities, female athletes with disabilities are even less visible in the media.

2.2. Media Visibility of the Paralympic Games

The Paralympic Movement initiated by Ludwig Guttmann in 1944 at Stoke Mandeville Hospital in the UK as rehabilitation and social therapy for people with spinal injuries, has become a global phenomenon celebrating inclusion and sports excellence [12,13]. Reviewing the 60-year history of the Paralympic movement, Bailey [28] argues that Paralympic sport has a far-reaching impact on the attitudes towards people with disabilities, promoting inclusion, and bringing down barriers and stereotypes. Each new edition of the Paralympic Games experiences an increase both in the number of competing athletes and in sports disciplines. While only 400 athletes from 23 countries competed in 8 disciplines at the first Paralympic Games in Rome in 1960, the 2016 Rio Games featured over 4000 athletes from 160 countries in 22 sports disciplines [44].

The role of mass media in general and particularly of television, digital media, and social platforms is essential for the development and globalization of the Olympic movement [45,46]. Fernández-Peña and Ramajo-Hernández [47] highlight the contribution of television to disseminate the major values of the Olympic movement, turning the Games into an extraordinary global phenomenon followed by millions of spectators worldwide. Whannel [8] (p. 773) notes that the celebration of global sports events, enhanced by social media and smartphones, exercises such an impact in the media that it makes it "temporarily difficult for columnists and commentators to discuss anything else. They are drawn in, as if by a vortex". Furthermore, Galily and Tamir [48] argue that the increasing popularity of sport due to the significant amount of television attention and the spread of new media, together with large circulation revenues and advertising sales generated by mass media industries from the coverage of global sports events, underpin the mutual dependency between sport and mass media. In parallel to the diversification of media channels, the audience of the Paralympic Games is experiencing significant growth. From 10.6 million viewers of at least 15 consecutive minutes during the Athens 2004 Games, the coverage reached more than 31.6 million people worldwide at Rio 2016 Paralympics [49].

Berger [31] argues that since the first Paralympic Games held in the 1960s and until the end of the 20th century, the medical model emphasizing personal tragedies and their numerous barriers was the most common in media coverage of this global Paralympic event. The review of the Sydney 2000 Paralympic Games by Goggin and Newell [50] reached a similar conclusion, revealing an excessive focus on personal problems of para-athletes.

Hodges et al. [51] identified an important shift in the media coverage of the London 2012 Paralympic Games. The contribution of Channel 4, which had exclusive rights to the Olympic coverage, was particularly remarkable. McGillivray et al. [52] highlight the impact of the advertising campaigns Meet the Superhumans and We're the Superhumans, launched by Channel 4 in anticipation of the London 2012 and Rio 2016 Games. The campaigns paid tribute to the British Paralympic team, delivering a new perspective on the identity of para-athletes, blending their athletic performance and daily life experiences. Furthermore, a series of personal interviews and stories about athletes with disabilities and their personal environment were launched by Channel 4, placing focus on sports training and performance of the best national athletes with and without disabilities [36]. In addition, Channel 4 hired presenters and editorial and technical staff with disabilities.

On the other hand, the evolution of the photo coverage of the Paralympic Games from Sydney 2000 to Beijing 2008 by leading newspapers from Spain, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Greece, assessed by Pappous et al. [7], showed a contradictory trend. While a total number of images featuring para-athletes experienced constant growth, therefore, ensuring their greater visibility, in parallel, the images became more static, without depicting the action and movement of the athlete and increasingly omitting visual references of their disabilities. The most common image featured a smiling athlete, in some cases, with a national flag [7]. Purdue and Howe [53] identified the existence of the Paralympic paradox in the media coverage of these global sports events. On one hand, the media focus is increasingly aimed at highlighting the values of the elite para-sports competition and the results achieved in each sports discipline. At the same time, however, the approach is focused on strengthening the role of elite para-athletes as models of inspiration and empowerment for all the community of people with disabilities, emphasizing their impairment condition and their ability to reach the world's sports elite. The authors argue that this duality in media coverage is contradictory and adds complexity to the normalization of the representation of disability in para-sports.

3. Materials and Methods

The research method is exploratory and interpretive, aimed at assessing the representation of disability in Paralympic sport from the perspective of content production and its dissemination by the National Spanish Broadcaster, RTVE, in its daily news programs. These informative news programs are broadcast from Monday to Sunday at 6:30 a.m., 3 p.m., and 9 p.m. and cover the most relevant national and international news.

The paper is guided by an exploratory case study approach to examine the evolution of the media coverage by RTVE of the three recent editions of the Paralympic Games in Sochi 2014, Rio 2016, and PyeongChang 2018. The research is structured as an empirical inquiry focused on the in-depth analysis of a specific contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context [54]. Key research questions are aimed at identifying a specific focus and best practices put in place by RTVE to ensure visibility, understanding, and awareness of the Paralympic Games and its main protagonists.

This paper attempts to:

> Make an assessment of the evolution of disability representation in terms of emission time and featured content in the daily news programs of RTVE from Sochi 2014 to PyeongChang 2018.
> Identify key media protagonists among national and international Paralympic teams.
> Explore the impact of ablenationalism, gender, and assistive technology on the media representation of para-sports athletes.

Research results were obtained from a comparative content analysis of media coverage of the three recent editions of the Paralympic Games and a series of in-depth personal interviews with news-makers involved in the Paralympic Games coverage by RTVE and accessed through purposive sampling. Three semi-structured interviews, one hour and a half in length, were conducted with Julia Luna, sports journalist, RTVE; Yolanda Garcia, Editor-in-Chief of Sports News, RTVE; and Manuel Gomez Zotano, Director of Interactive

Technologies, RTVE. The interviews were held in October and November 2019, gathering specific insights from the news-makers' perspectives on the media representation of disability, the visibility of para-sports on RTVE, and prevailing discourses on disability in daily news programs. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and codified for the thematic analysis. Moreover, the emissions of the daily news programs during the three last editions of the Paralympic Games were reviewed in order to identify news stories linked to the Paralympic coverage. A total number of 16 stories were identified for the Sochi 2014 event, 12 stories for Rio 2016, and 4 stories for the PyeongChang 2018 Games [55–57]. The content analysis of all stories was undertaken with the purpose to identify key themes of the media coverage: sport discipline featured, key protagonists of the story, main topics addressed, and prevailing disability narrative. The assessment of the disability narrative was particularly focused on identifying the presence of references to the physical impairment of para-athletes, the prevalence of ablenational discourses, and stereotyped gendered patterns, as well as on the impact of assistive technologies on para-athletes representation. Live and deferred transmissions by RTVE of Paralympic competitions were not included in the analysis.

4. Results

Since 1964, the first Olympic Games in Tokyo, RTVE has held exclusive broadcasting rights in Spain for coverage of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. The introduction of digital satellite transmission technology in 1964 initiated a new stage of mega-sports events coverage by RTVE [58]. The first coverage of the Games was mostly focused on the Opening Ceremony and two hours of daily summaries and key results of the competitions [59].

Each new edition of RTVE's Paralympic Games coverage experienced an increase in total broadcast time and diversification of its informative channels. Live and deferred coverage have been extended from daily summaries to interviews with athletes and their coaches, special reports, and behind the scenes stories. Julia Luna, RTVE's sports journalist [60], argues that, although for a long time Paralympic sport was considered a second-class sports category by the media, there has recently been a shift in perceptions, mainly on account of the visibility of the London 2012 Paralympic Games. The 2012 Games became a milestone in the media visibility of disabled athletes due to the dedicated approach of Channel 4 to promote both the event and its main protagonists. The coverage on RTVE of the London 2012 Paralympics had over 300 h of live transmission through five channels of Teledeporte (RTVE's Sports TV channel, TDP) and TVE–HD. The Opening and Closing Ceremonies, track and field athletics, cycling, and swimming, as well as all matches of the Spanish national 5-a-side football team and wheelchair basketball, were broadcast live. Furthermore, all the achievements of the national Paralympic team were covered in stories and interviews in daily news programs on TVE, 24 Hour Channel, Spanish National Radio (RNE), and Radio 5. In parallel, every day of the global Paralympic event, TDP offered a 45-min daily summary of the competitions. While seven journalists and technical staff with expertise in different Paralympic disciplines from RTVE covered the event in London, daily programs in the Madrid studio were delivered by a sports journalist and a Paralympic athlete. All the broadcast content was delivered live on the digital channel of rtve.es and stored for on-demand viewing [61].

The complementarity and amplification of Paralympic content were particularly remarkable on RTVE's digital platform, as Manuel Gomez-Zotano [62], Head of Interactive Content at RTVE highlights:

> In 2012 we made a dramatic change, from a digital broadcasting model based on being a mirror of the TDP to launching our new digital broadcasting channels. This new expansive digital model featured specific Paralympic content that was not broadcast on television. In 2016 we made the Games ubiquitous on the web, HDMV, and Smart TV with five different digital channels.

4.1. Complexities and Challenges of Paralympic Coverage

Despite a progressive deployment of additional channels for live and deferred transmissions, Paralympic coverage on RTVE faces many complexities. The usual lower relevance of Paralympic sports among other competitions, lower budgets, and far fewer reporters assigned to the Games, as well as the lack of specific knowledge, experience, and expertise among reporters in narrating Paralympic competitions, are acknowledged as the critical issues that remain to be addressed [60,63]. Luna [60], an experienced reporter of swimming competitions, admits her own emotional shock and initial difficulties in focusing on Paralympic sports performance and not on disabilities of athletes during her first narrations of Paralympic swimming. García [63] acknowledges the important change in the news-makers' perception of the Paralympic movement after the London 2012 Games that set a new global standard of media representation of para-sports athletes and their competition.

Furthermore, a high degree of difficulty in understanding the rules and norms of some modalities of Paralympic competition has a negative impact on audience attention and interest. Yolanda Garcia [63], Editor-in-Chief of Sports at RTVE notes:

> These Paralympic competitions are not easy at all to narrate. Track and field athletics or swimming are easy, as everybody understands them, the same happens for tennis or basketball. However, for more specific Paralympic sports such as football 5-a-side, you need to explain it well because people do not know the rules or understand how it is played. We are gradually improving our coverage. The Spanish Paralympic Committee provides enormous help with experts for sports narration.

Luna [60] also acknowledges the critical support she received from experts of the Spanish Paralympic Committee during her narrations of swimming Paralympic competitions that helped her to better understand the peculiarities of Paralympic classification and applied rules.

Although the Paralympic movement is getting increasing support and promotion from the International Paralympic Committee on a global scale, the usual low visibility of para-sports athletes in the public sphere makes them completely unknown for the general audience and yet to be discovered and admired. Luna [60] argues that the public anonymity of Paralympic athletes hinders the emergence of fans, supporters, and commercial sponsors that play significant roles in the lives of all athletes and foster continued public engagement with their sports performance.

In this regard, engaging young audiences with the Paralympic movement was also stressed as a critical challenge of news-makers. The promotion of inclusive sports competitions among children and young people and the amplification of Paralympic coverage on digital platforms and social networking sites popular with younger audiences, as well as fostering greater visibility in media of para-athletes and sports experience are considered some of the essential steps to leverage awareness and understanding of Paralympic sports and of achievements of their key protagonists among young people [60,62,63].

4.2. The Visibility of the Paralympic Games in Sochi 2014, Rio 2016, and PyeongChang 2018 in Daily News Programs of RTVE

The coverage of the latest editions of the Paralympic Games in Sochi, Rio, and PyeongChang had a similar approach by RTVE to the previous editions of the Games and offered live broadcast of the Opening and Closing Ceremonies, the competitions of the Spanish Paralympic athletes, and brief stories in daily news programs, highlighting the most important milestones of each day [64]. The participation of Spanish para-sports athletes was rather low at the Winter Games in Sochi and PyeongChang, with only seven athletes and two guides in 2014, and three athletes and one guide in 2018, who took part in the alpine skiing and snowboarding competitions [65,66]. The Summer Paralympic Games in Rio 2016 were attended by a much larger team from Spain with 127 athletes competing in 15 sports disciplines with 200 h of live broadcast of competitions.

A comparative summary of the Paralympic Games coverage by RTVE on its daily news programs during the last three editions of the Paralympic Games is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of the Paralympic Games Coverage on Daily News Programs by RTVE, 2014–2018.

Place and Year of the Event	Sochi 2014	Rio 2016	PyeongChang 2018
Dates of event	7–16 March	7–18 September	9–18 March
Number of Spanish para-sports athletes	9	128	4
Total number of stories	16	12	4
Total broadcast time (minutes and seconds)	16:14	12:58	3:50
Sports covered in the story	alpine skiing, snowboard, para ice hockey	athletics, swimming, cycling, wheelchair basketball	alpine skiing, snowboard
Number of stories on Spanish para-sports athletes vs.total stories	14/16	10/12	4/4
Number of stories on Spanish female para-sports athletes vs. total stories	1/16	3/12	2/4
Number of stories on foreign para-sports athletes vs. total stories	2/16	2/12	0/4
Featured protagonists	Spanish Paralympians		
Key narratives	Spanish national team, international Paralympic movement, Opening Ceremony, medals won by Spanish para-sports athletes, accidents, personal stories of athletes and their guides		
Main frames	sports competition, personal overcoming	sports competition, personal overcoming, advanced assistive technologies	sports competition, personal overcoming

Notwithstanding the significant difference in the total number of participating para-sports athletes in the summer and winter editions of the Games, the broadcast time and the number of stories featured in RTVE news programs have decreased significantly as outlined in Table 1. From over 16 min of coverage in 2014, broadcasting time decreased to less than 4 min in 2018, making Paralympic sport almost invisible on the main public television news programs during the Global Paralympic event. While acknowledging the launch of the additional channels such as TDP and digital broadcasting by RTVE, the visibility of Paralympic sports on the main RTVE news programs was minimal.

4.3. Media Representation of Paralympic Athletes in Daily News Programs of RTVE

The content analysis of the 32 news stories featured in daily news programs revealed some common frames in the media representation of para-sports athletes. In line with the results of the research conducted by Rees et al. [43] highlighting the prevailing media coverage of national athletes, the absolute prominence of Spanish Paralympians and their achievements in different sports modalities was identified in the stories broadcast by daily news programs (Table 1). This media narrative was in line with the category proposed by Karen DePauw [6], the (In)visibility of Disability, that highlights sports performance as the main condition of the athlete, with the disability being a minor nuance. The experience of Julia Luna [60] regarding the coverage of the PyeongChang 2018 Paralympic Games confirms this frame. The journalist argues:

> You need to see Paralympic sport as sport and the Paralympic athletes as athletes. Of course they've got a hard personal story, hard, but also enriching, because

> when you get to know them and to understand everything they've overcome, I cannot imagine myself at their level, what they do and their sports achievement. My admiration is absolute. But the most important goal is to see sports.

Although the total number of broadcast stories was significantly lower at the 2018 Paralympic Games, some similarities of featured topics were identified among the three editions of the Games (Table 1). The farewell and the welcome back public events with the national team, the most remarkable moments of the Opening Ceremony, and the medals won by Spanish Paralympians became the most common content of the stories. Among the key protagonists featured in daily news programs, Spanish medal winners in alpine skiing Jon Santacana and his guide Miguel Galindo, as well as snowboarder Astrid Fina, had prominent roles both in the Sochi 2014 and the PyeongChang 2018 media coverage. At the Rio 2016 Games, Spanish swimmers Michelle Alonso, Teresa Perales, and María Delgado, as well as cyclist Juanjo Méndez and the national wheelchair basketball team, were the main protagonists.

Exceptionally, at Sochi 2014 and Rio 2018, three stories focused on foreign athletes were identified: the first one was related to a serious accident suffered by the United States Paralympian Tyler Walker; the second one featured a high degree of disability of the Egyptian athlete Ibrahim Hamadtou in the table-tennis competition; and the last one focused on the refugee status of the Syrian Paralympian Ibrahim Al Hussein. A focus on the disability of para-sports athletes is in line with the second category identified by DePauw [6] of Visibility of Disability with an emphasis on the health impairment.

Stories featuring sports achievements and medals won by Spanish Paralympian athletes, highlighting their status as exceptional Spanish athletes, contrasted with the stories depicting adverse circumstances of foreign athletes, revealing an ablenational perspective [18] in media representation of disability in daily news programs by RTVE.

At the winter editions of the Sochi 2014 and PyeongChang 2018 Paralympic Games, Spanish athletes did not use any advanced assistive technologies in their alpine skiing and snowboard competitions. The only reference for those technologies was identified in the story related to a serious accident involving the United States athlete Tyler Walker and his chair adapted to the downhill race. However, coverage of the Rio 2016 Summer Games featured a series of stories on the track and field athletics competitions, specifically highlighting the use of carbon fiber blades and wheelchairs by basketball players. The identification of this content confirms the theories of Clogston [32] and Berger [31] regarding the growing media interest in the extraordinary results of para-sports athletes achieved thanks to advanced assistive technologies that, while providing a great media show, outshine other less spectacular Paralympic competitions [36].

Finally, the review of the stories featuring female Paralympians has revealed no evidence of gendered patterns of sexualization, trivialization, or infantilization in their media representation in daily news stories. The participation of female Spanish athletes in the winter editions of the Games in 2014 and 2018 was low. While two female athletes, Ursula Pueyo (alpine skier) and Astrid Fina (snowboarder), took part in the Sochi 2014 Paralympic Games, only Astrid Fina joined the 2018 Games. Among the 16 stories featured on the daily news program during the 2014 Games period, only one was focused on the competition of Ursula Pueyo. Two stories featured the participation of Astrid Fina at the 2018 Games, celebrating her bronze medal and her prominent role as the flag bearer of the Spanish Paralympic team at the Opening Ceremony of the Games. During the 2016 Rio Games, three stories featured Spanish female Paralympians Teresa Perales and Maria Delgado (swimmers) and Elena Congost (marathon runner). Their media representation was primarily focused on the extraordinary achievements and medals won in their respective competitions.

5. Discussion

The review of the Paralympic Games coverage by daily news programs on RTVE provides some insights into the visibility of disability in the Spanish public broadcasting

channel and its key media narratives. The exploratory and interpretive method of the research does not allow the results to be generalized. However, they confirm the existing theories in the field of critical disability studies while providing clear evidence of the marginal status of the representation of disability in the news programs of RTVE during the most recent editions of the Paralympic Games and of the remaining challenges that have yet to be addressed.

More specifically, the review of the media coverage of the recent Paralympic global events has shown a progressive reduction in the visibility of Paralympic sports in the main daily news programs. Despite the diversification of the media coverage through new dedicated thematic channels such as Teledeporte and social networking sites, the invisibility of Spanish Paralympians in news programs is worrisome. This situation confirms the persistent challenge to ensure visibility and the objective media coverage of disability, removing stereotypes and stigmatized models [1–3,6,7]. Fostering thorough knowledge and continuous monitoring of Paralympic sports and their complexities among sports reporters and news-makers is particularly valuable for setting global standards of media representation of disability in sports.

Considering the usual invisibility of Paralympic sports in media, it is, therefore, unsurprising that national Paralympians were almost invisible in the news program of the main public service broadcaster RTVE during the most important global mega-event. While this research was not focused on assessing the impact of this invisibility on the sponsorship opportunities of para-sports athletes or on the number of their fans and followers, we can expect a negative effect of this invisibility. Social distance grounded on some persistent stereotypes and public stigma [22,23], the difficulty in understanding the rules and regulations of specific Paralympic disciplines, and the lack of prestige and public recognition of Paralympic sports, in general, and of their protagonists, in particular, are some of the main barriers that need to be overcome to normalize the visibility of the para-sports competitions. The non-normalization of disability hinders the full integration of people with disabilities in public life [5], thereby facilitating the permanence of prejudices that lead to discrimination [21].

The challenge to normalize disability in sports does not belong exclusively to the mass media. Only a joint action by all agents of the Paralympic movement (National Paralympic Committees, sports federations, athletes, coaches, media, and fans) can enable an objective understanding, public awareness, and social relevance. This is the way to achieve the (In)Visibility of DisAbility identified by DePauw [6], establishing in the collective imagination the perception of the Paralympic athlete linked exclusively to their sports achievement, not their disability. The prevailing discourses of disability as lack, failure, or deviance [20] in parallel with "normative 'accepted' production practices by dominant organizations and the (in)visibility and marginalization of nonnormative groups" [9] (p. 441) remain some of the key issues to be addressed from a multidisciplinary approach to "create a new discourse from a coalition of voices that reimagine citizenship, human rights, democracy and well-being for those (athletes) with impairments" [12] (p. 644).

This research has provided some evidence that there continues to be scant visibility of disability in the media and representation is often stigmatized and stereotyped [2,3]. The effective inclusion of people with disabilities in the public sphere together with the normalizing of the overall perception of their role in society, and a progressive removal of stereotypes and stigma, depends to a great extent on the visibility provided by the media to topics of disability. While Paralympic sports is just one of the facets of disability, its social impact has indisputable importance for the formation of fully inclusive societies, united by values of respect, mutual support, and solidarity among their citizens.

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