

THE USE OF LANGUAGE AND MEDIA IN COVERING THE PARALYMPIC GAMES

Alice N. Tejkalová

Charles University in Prague, Faculty of Social Sciences, Prague (CZECH REPUBLIC)

E-mail: alice.tejkalova@fsv.cuni.cz

DOI: 10.7813/jll.2015/6-1/21

Received: 03.11.2014

Accepted: 09.02.2015

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the use of language and media in covering the Paralympic games on the special case study of the Czech Republic. The analysis narrated in the paper is based on the qualitative analysis of articles in major Czech mass media. Our results show that the media coverage of Paralympic Games and athletes with disabilities in the Czech media declined after the 2008 Beijing Summer Paralympic Games. These results might be due to the shift of Czech media to "mainstream" (and therefore more profitable) sport events, as well as the change of the public opinion to the Czech Paralympic movement.

Moreover, our results show that media tolerate some social minorities, but not all of them. Thence, it can sometimes be challenging to demand tolerance and open space for discussions about diversity and critical communication even inside circles where one would think it would be found without difficulty, but it is always worth trying.

Keywords: language, mass media, Paralympic movement, narrative, Czech Republic

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the producers of media content than on media content itself. This is because I suppose that critical communication is more a matter of those who have the power to set the agenda (media owners, media content producers, powerful social players) and the audiences who end up reading (I definitely support Stuart Hall's (1) idea of the various ways of reading media texts) media texts. And that is why I see media content more as a space where critical communication can or cannot be articulated.

Power is required in order to thrust ideas into the media discourse, (this paper is based on the recognition of power in discourse defined by (2, 3, and 4). Even though the simple proportional measures (more employees from various minorities) do not necessarily result in more diverse media content, staff composition plays an important role in deciding which topics and events make it into media content and how much space they will receive. And it does not matter if ethnic, gender, or disability issues are at the centre of attention. There have been studies concerning diversity management, e. g. (5 and 6), etc. and many books and studies have been published about diversity in the media staff – (7, 8, and 9), etc.

The choice of topics and events also depends on the economic interests of the publishers and media owners, but sometimes, (as is the case with the Czech media coverage of athletes with disabilities) saying that Paralympic sport is not a topic that sells newspapers can be a way to cover-up a staff's inability to write truly interesting and intimate stories about this sport (as they were able to write for example from the Olympic Games). Because plain news reports never sell newspapers.

2. ATHLETES WITH A DISABILITY IN THE CZECH MEDIA

The public service broadcaster *Česká televize* (Czech Television) must, by law, include social diversity in its content. Since 2002 *Česká televize* has been broadcasting a monthly feature about athletes with a disability called "*Paralympijský magazín*" (Paralympic Magazine). Besides this magazine, news about major sports events of athletes with a disability appears in the regular news coverage. During the Paralympic Games (especially the summer ones), the coverage is more intensive, but it cannot compare in quantity with the Olympic Games, which are broadcasted on two channels 24 hours a day.

While covering various World Championships, myself and foreign colleagues have discussed whether it would be better to have an in-depth, specialized TV programme on athletes with disabilities along with infrequent mainstream news coverage or to be able to incorporate the topic into the mainstream news, even in a shorter form. I am for the second option. Ideally, such mainstream coverage would be supported by a specialised feature and intensive coverage of major events, such as the coverage we witnessed in the UK during the 2012 Summer Paralympic Games.

But coverage of minority topics is not only an issue of television, these topics meet with challenges in the whole media discourse. According to the results of research I conducted on media coverage (especially media stereotyping and framing) of athletes with a disability in the Czechoslovak and later Czech newspapers from 1948 to 2008, there is a different trend here than in the UK (even though, according to Howe (10), the situation there prior to hosting the Olympic and Paralympic Games was not ideal).

As (11) points out: "*to understand how media can either empower or suppress social groups, we need to distinguish between the represented discourse and the representation of discourse (2), that is to identify who speaks (about whom) in the news*". When it concerns social minorities, it is usually the social majority who speaks about them in the media (2).

The data studied here revealed that it was not until 1988 that the Paralympic athletes started to speak for themselves in the media coverage of the Paralympic sport; surprisingly enough, in 2008 there was once again very limited space given to Paralympians themselves in coverage of the SPG (12). During the entire analyzed period of 60 years, there were no stories

written by people with a disability themselves, and among the journalists writing about the sports events of athletes with disabilities in the studied material there were only 2 women.

For almost 60 years "the other" (Hall 2001; Pickering 2001) was a dominant frame for describing the athletes with a disability by the media analyzed. The otherness of athletes with a disability was most visible in the case of soft news rather than of hard news. For example, in 1992 *Rudé Právo* did not report about 9 out of 13 medals from the Summer Paralympics in Barcelona won by Czechoslovak athletes (similarly, during the games in Sydney *Lidové noviny* did not inform about 26 out of 43 medals). Also during the Beijing 2008 games, newspapers missed some medals.

Another example is from the Games in Barcelona when a discus thrower Miloslava Beňhalová won the first gold Paralympic medal ever for the Czechs. Such a sport achievement would have led to intensive media coverage if it had concerned an athlete without a disability. However, due to the lack of knowledge of Paralympic sport, sports journalists were unable to interpret the event in a historic context and to understand its significance.

Rather a common practice was to publish belatedly articles about Paralympic sport and Paralympians' achievements (13). The newspapers did not see this field of sport as their priority, as the sports section editor-in-chief of *Právo* Karel Felt stated in the interview with me in 2009: *'Paralympic sport is not something people would buy newspapers for'*.

During the entire studied 60-year period, with the exception of the Paralympic Games in 1988 and 2004, there was present in the coverage a strong heroic framing with a notion of pity—athletes are described as heroes, but not "real" athletes—resulting in defense and self-defense of athletes with a disability. It can be best documented by the following quotations:

'Although at the Paralympics people compete for medals, one could say they rank second.' (Jan Krůta, a journalist, in his article in *Právo* on 28 August 1996)

'It isn't what the majority of people think it is like—that we go somewhere and some doctor gives us a medal for nothing. Our training is often more difficult and painful than the training of athletes without disabilities.' (Martin Kovár, a swimmer, quoted in the article in *Sport* on October 1, 2004)

'First of all, I have to say that I strongly admire those people who, I may say it a bit harshly, don't think about suicide and want to have a place in a society and want to compete in sport. But people will want to have their [Usain] Bolts, someone who is able to show performance on the top level without any physical restriction. So I think that this is the decisive thing.' (Jan Švéd, sports section editor-in-chief of *MF DNES*, in an interview with the author on 20 October 2009)

The strong focus on disability and oddity in the stories on athletes with a disability is another example of how the discursive otherness of these people has been articulated in the Czechoslovak and Czech media. Since 1988 there is an increasing trend towards the personalization of the Paralympic Games, yet, with exception of the reporting from 1988, 1996 and 2004 (in *Právo* only), there are more sentimental stories about a disability than stories about athletes' achievements."

Since 2008, the Czech media have tended to overlook the Paralympic Games. The justification has often been that media outlets, having been slammed by the financial crisis, simply lack the funds to cover "minor" sport topics. This state-of-affairs culminated in poor Czech coverage of the 2012 Summer Paralympic Games in London. Television, newspapers and online news servers did such a poor job of covering the Games that, for the first time, there was a public outcry and politicians expressed their disappointment.

As a result, there was a slight improvement in TV coverage during the Winter Paralympic Games in Sochi this year. This coverage consisted of broadcasts of live sledge ice-hockey matches. The last time there was any live TV coverage of Paralympic sport in the Czech Republic was in 2009 during the World Championships in sledge ice-hockey.

I see it as crucial for the recognition of sports for athletes with a disability in the Czech Republic that the public finally realized the topic was underrepresented in 2012 and that people began to articulate their concern (even if the media only paid attention to politicians' exclamations). Hopefully, public concern will one day lead to massive improvement.

What I think is crucial for critical communication overall, is the media representation of all aspects of the everyday life of minorities in general. For example, in the case of the Roma minority we can see in the Czech media increasing negative coverage in recent years (for example calling them "maladjusted", etc.). In the case of athletes with a disability, the media tends to create somewhat romantic portraits. They are presented as people who challenge their destinies, live their lives more wisely, because of their experience of suffering, etc. Such ideas are deeply rooted in journalists who cover sports as we could see for example from the quotation of Jan Krůta above. These romanticized views can lead to the incapacity to react appropriately, when negative events occur in the sport of athletes with disabilities. News coverage may inappropriately contain a special element of shock or surprise when something goes awry with an athlete with a disability (or those things may not be covered at all)—even though things just as often go badly with athletes who do not have a disability. I can add another example of how editors and reporters think about this:

"If those people can somehow attract readers, it is through something amazing. For example that some person challenges his or her destiny, they did not give up, even though they are disabled, they achieved something. And when we have so much negative news from other sports and non-sport events, this sport should be about the desire to challenge destiny, not be connected with struggles about money or even with doping cases or cheating. It degrades the Paralympic sport".

So it will not surprise us that there was absolute shock when Oscar Pistorius, the excellent runner, shot his girlfriend to death in 2013. I got a couple of phone calls from my colleagues who work in print, wanting to quote me: *"What do you say to that?" "How is it possible?" "What does it mean for Paralympic sport?"* I had to laugh, even though it is not a laughing matter at all, because it reveals how sports journalists (and people in general) think about Paralympic sport. Oscar Pistorius was everywhere in the media coverage of the Paralympic Games in Beijing (2008) and London (2012) He was always the nice hard-working guy challenging his destiny. He was a symbol, because he also challenged the world of athletes without disabilities. Negative relationships with his rivals were mentioned for the first time years after they were visible at big sports events, just because at the London Paralympics he was not able to control his temper and publicly accused one of his rivals of cheating. When he killed Reeva Steenkamp most Czech sport journalists (and the general public) could not understand how this great guy could do such a thing! And then suddenly we began to learn all the dark bits about this hero that had not

so far been widely published because of the way he courted the media.

3. TEACHING FUTURE WRITERS ON USING TACTFUL LANGUAGE AND TOPICS

Teaching future writers how to cover minority topics is easy in these days in the Czech Republic. As we can see from the examples above, we have plenty of evidence of the poor treatment of minority topics in the hands of the Czech media and there are quite a few students who want to change the situation. In addition, we have hosted many guests who have much to say about the media's coverage of topics touching them personally.

What is most alarming and most representative of the manner in which journalists view sports of athletes with a disability is the very question: "What does Pistorius mean for Paralympic sport?" Because the answer is: "Nothing." Oscar Pistorius is just one of hundred-thousand athletes with a disability throughout the world and that he was chosen by the media and by the International Paralympic Committee PR as the icon of this sport says a lot about the way we want to see such athletes: handsome and as "normal" looking as possible, ideally competing with athletes without a disability, which actual only a very small minority of them can do. But it says nothing about Paralympic sport at all. The tragic death of Reevea Steenkamp was not a Paralympic failure. It was the personal failure of Oscar Pistorius. And the surprise came only because for years journalists all over the world simply wanted to see in Pistorius only their dream vision of the Paralympic athlete.

By the way, there are still no journalists with a disability in the sports staffs of the Czech media and only between 10 and 30 % (depending on the medium) of reporters are women. The largest representation of women in the media is in Czech Television. Sometimes these women reporters are not even true journalists, but are instead former models that are hired to attract attention. This is also described by Boyle (2006), regarding the UK media.

We try (I have been teaching these classes with the visual communication expert and a freelance photographer and professor Filip Láb since 2008) to teach our students how to find stereotypes in media content, how to avoid them in their own work and also how to persuade their editors to publish their articles or reports. Some of our students continue to pursue these topics and become experts in some minority topic. Some even start interesting projects in their own media like Michaela Mužíková in the daily "Hospodářské noviny" (Business News). Mužíková helped to launch a project supporting young journalists and students of journalism from ethnic minorities in their jobs. Some of them stayed with "Hospodářské noviny" or with some other media outlet owned by the same person and have been broadening the diversity of the staff. Media belonging to this group called "Economia Publishers" are writing in the most non-stereotyping ways about issues concerning ethnicity. One can find interesting pieces in their work about topics such as the common living of Roma and non-Roma people.

4. CONCLUSIONS

As mentioned above, media language content producers have an important role in the process of critical communication. To include some topic in public discussion and to prevent exclusions of certain social groups from media discourse requires people who are open to diversity, and who are struggling against prejudice. A society that was for a long time under communist rule such as ours, where anything deviant from the set norm was considered to be disturbing or even potentially dangerous, needs time to heal and to generate people who are open enough to cover minority topics.

On the other hand, one could say that 25 years from the fall of the Communist regime should be enough time to create an open climate and, yet, still the situation is not too rosy. Our society is pretty nationalist and still excludes a lot of topics and peoples and hides behind stereotypes amplified by the media.

As it has been already stated above, Fairclough (2) pointed out that there is a difference between represented discourse and representation of discourse. In the case of the Czech media it is completely true that the majority talks more about minority topics (whatever they may be), than people from minorities speak for themselves. The main exception, from my point of view, has been in the case of homosexuals who speak about their rights quite often. This could be connected with homosexuals being in high social positions whereas, for example, Roma people or people with a disability have not tended to be in positions of power. To improve critical communication in the Czech Republic, we need, among other things, to bring this into balance.

REFERENCES

1. Hall, S. Encoding/Decoding. In *Media and Cultural Studies – Keywords* edited by Durnham, M. G. and Kellner, D. M., 166–176. Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001.
2. Fairclough, N. *Media Discourse*. London: Arnold, 1995
3. Foucault, M. *Dejiny šílenství – hledání historických kořenů pojmu duševní choroby*. Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny. (in Czech), 1993
4. Van Dijk, T. Opinions and Ideologies in the Press. In *Approaches to Media Discourse*, edited by Bell, A. and Garret, P., 21–63. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998
5. Wrench, J. *Diversity management and discrimination: immigrants and ethnic minorities in the EU*. Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate, 2007
6. Eger, L. *Diversity management: comparison, the best practices of Visegrad countries*. Plzen: Nava, 2012
7. Ter Wal, J. *Racism and cultural diversity in the mass media*. Vienna: European Research Centre on Migration and Ethnic Relations, 2002
8. Hanitzsch, T. & Hanusch, F. Does Gender Determine Journalists' Professional Views? A reassessment based on cross-national evidence. *European Journal of Communication*, 27(3): 257–277 (2012)
9. Weaver, D. H. & Willnat, L. (eds.). *The Global Journalist in the 21st Century*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2012
10. Howe, P. D. *The Cultural Politics of the Paralympic Movement Through an Anthropological Lens*. Oxon: Routledge, 2008
11. Tejkalová, N. A. *Ti druzí sportovci: mediální stereotypizace a rámcování handicapovaných v tisku v letech 1948–2008*. Praha: Karolinum, 2012
12. Němcová Tejkalová, A. The Role of Power in the Articles about Athletes with a Disability. In *Media, Power and Empowerment – Central and Eastern European Communication and Media Conference CEECOM Prague 2012*, edited by Pavlíčková, T. – Reifová, I., 364–369. Newcastle upon Tyne UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014
13. Boyle, R. *Sports journalism: context and issues*. London: SAGE, 2006