

## **Sports journalism ethics and the portrayal of race and disability. The coverage of the London 2012 Olympics in the British, American and Spanish quality press**

*Ètica en el periodisme esportiu i la representació de la raça i la discapacitat. La cobertura dels Jocs Olímpics de Londres 2012 a la premsa de qualitat britànica, nord-americana i espanyola*

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**ABSTRACT:**

According to their normative public service role in democratic societies, the various media should carry out responsible treatment of all areas of the news arena, including sports. Nevertheless, this field has been characterised by many ethical drawbacks, including the biased representation of non-white and disabled athletes. This paper examines whether six quality newspapers (*The Guardian/The Observer, The Daily Telegraph/The Sunday Telegraph, The New York Times, The Washington Post, El País and La Vanguardia*) complied with the deontological principle of justice in their portrayal of race and disability during the London 2012 Olympics. The results show that the media challenged the traditional white ethnocentric perspective and raised the public's awareness of racism in sport and society. Despite this, evidence suggests that certain covert stereotypes continue to be present in the sports media.

**KEYWORDS:**

Sports journalism, ethics, justice, race, disability, London 2012.



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**RESUM:**

D'acord amb el seu rol de servei públic en les societats democràtiques, els mitjans de comunicació han de realitzar un tractament responsable de totes les àrees informatives, incloent-hi els esports. No obstant això, aquest camp ha estat caracteritzat per diverses mancances ètiques, inclosa la representació esbiaixada dels atletes no blancs i discapacitats. Aquest article ha examinat si sis diaris de qualitat (*The Guardian / The Observer, The Daily Telegraph / The Sunday Telegraph, The New York Times, The Washington Post, El País i La Vanguardia*) van respectar el principi deontològic de justícia en la representació de la raça i la discapacitat durant els Jocs Olímpics de Londres 2012.

## SPORTS JOURNALISM ETHICS AND THE PORTRAYAL OF RACE AND DISABILITY

Els resultats demostren que els mitjans van desafiar el tradicional etnocentrisme blanc i van generar consciència pública sobre el racisme en l'esport i en la societat. Malgrat tot, l'evidència il·lustra que certs estereotips subtils continuen presents en la cobertura esportiva.

### **PARAULES CLAU:**

periodisme esportiu, ètica, justícia, raça, discapacitat, Londres 2012.

## 1. Introduction

According to their normative public service role (Singer, 2013) and their centrality in the transmission of values in democratic societies, quality media should carry out responsible treatment of all areas of the news arena, including sports. In the current landscape, characterised by increasing concern among citizens over the moral ground of media professionals (Plaisance, 2009), sports journalists should also commit to excellence. In order to do so, they should comply with the essential principles of media ethics: truth, justice, freedom and responsibility (Alsius, 2010).

That being said, in the field of sports journalism, extensive literature has shed light on a series of drawbacks that have challenged the normative standards of the profession. Those widespread practices include the blurring of the frontiers between journalistic genres, the pervasiveness of rumour, the narrowness of the agenda, the use of warlike language, the lack of a public-service mission, the misrepresentation of identities or the low variety of sources employed (Horky and Stelzner, 2013; Rojas Torrijos, 2011). All these ethical shortcomings have disparaged the credibility and respectability of the professionals working in the sports journalism field, an area still characterised by the long-held notions of “toy department” and “fans with typewriters” (Rowe, 2007).

Bearing this context in mind, this paper examines how two key ethical areas (the portrayal of race and disability) were covered during the London Olympics by six quality newspapers of three different countries (United Kingdom, United States and Spain). To begin with, the paper will offer a review of the literature on these two components, which are circumscribed within the deontological principle of justice (Ramon, 2013). After outlining the methodological foundations of the research, the article will present the results extracted from the qualitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews. The findings will be contrasted with the prescriptions established in the major national and transnational codes of media ethics.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Theoretical framework

Journalism ethics can be understood as “the moral principles, reflected in rules, written or unwritten, which prescribe how journalists should work to avoid harming or distressing others” (Franklin *et al.*, 2005: 74). More precisely, deontological ethics “emphasises rights and duties” (Sanders, 2003: 32) and refers to the “voluntary expressions of submission to specific norms” (Pasquali, 1997: 28). Given the fact that information plays a key role in the construction of citizenship, journalists must have a “moral compass” (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001: 181), that is, a sense of ethics in order to carry out their professional practice. To generate high-quality con-

tent and “build their own reputation as credible sources of information” (Girginov and Parry, 2005: 79), good journalists should follow the considerations established in the deontological principles of truth, justice, freedom and responsibility.

### 2.1. The deontological principle of justice

One cannot escape from the fact that justice is a “crucial component of journalistic conscientiousness” (Spence and Quinn, 2008: 275). The major ethical recommendations (UNESCO, Art. 9; International Federation of Journalists, Art. 7; Council of Europe, Art. 28; Society of Professional Journalists, Art. 1; Independent Press Standards Organisation, Art. 12; National Union of Journalists, Art. 10; Spanish Federation of Journalists Associations, Art. 7; Catalan Journalists Association, Art. 12) are unequivocal about the avoidance of discrimination and stereotyping for reasons such as race, sex, nationality or disability.

However, in sports journalism some disadvantaged social groups, such as non-white athletes or disabled participants still “experience more difficulty than others when accessing media” (Alsus, 2010: 113). Moreover, the media have tended to reproduce stereotypes that contribute to the social construction of differences and the generation of prejudices and stigmas. This situation is worrying, bearing in mind that mediated sports are a crucial space in which individual and group identities are shaped, legitimised and conveyed to the public (Boyle and Haynes, 2009).

### 2.2. Commitment to justice in the portrayal of race

As Farrington *et al.* (2012: 16) highlight, “race and racism have always been broad and complex concepts”. Far from being innocent, these terms carry “much ideological weight” (Bernstein and Blain, 2003: 17). In quantitative terms, “several studies have suggested that black athletes have historically been underrepresented in sports media” (Grainger *et al.*, 2006: 448). In his longitudinal study of NBC’s Olympic coverage from 1996 to 2006, Billings (2008) found that white athletes were mentioned 72.1% of the time, followed by black (13.1%) and Asian (9.5%). Meanwhile, Hispanics and Middle Eastern athletes received less than 1% of the overall coverage. In the most recent investigation conducted in this field regarding NBC’s coverage of the London Olympics, Angelini *et al.* (2014: 115) highlighted that “white athletes were more likely to be mentioned (64.3%) than all other athletes combined”.

Qualitatively, “athletes of different ethnicities have been treated in markedly different manners over the past several decades” (Billings, 2008: 80). Despite the fact that there “has been a decline in overt forms of racism within sport media (traditionally exhibited in areas such as underrepresentation, underreporting and biased commentaries), media nonetheless supports racist discourses and beliefs through stereotypical portrayals” (Grainger *et al.*, 2006: 461).

First of all, sport media still tend to use simplistic stereotypes that reproduce the idea that there are biological differences between black and white athletes. In con-

trast to non-whites innate “quickness, physical strength, speed, jumping ability and force” (McDonald, 2010: 160), white athletes are often framed with intellectual capabilities, effort and leadership (Billings *et al.*, 2014). Those stereotypes “negate much of the hard work, commitment and sacrifice behind the sporting success of black athletes” (Farrington *et al.*, 2012: 49).

In the second place, even if documents such as the ethical code promoted by the Independent Press Standards Organization – IPSO (Art. 12) state that the details of an individual's race “must be avoided unless genuinely relevant to the story”, on many occasions the media tend to highlight the race of the competitors even when it is not a noteworthy element. To illustrate, Farrington *et al.* (2012: 152) saw that in British media “Christophe Lemaitre became a ‘white’ sprinter; Zesh Rehman was framed as an ‘Asian’ footballer and Lewis Hamilton was presented as a ‘black’ driver”.

To comply with the principle of justice, journalists should commit to carrying out non-biased treatment of race, avoiding such simplistic stereotypes and linguistic differences. Furthermore, given the global impact of sporting mega-events such as the Olympics, the media can go a step further and use the coverage to engage in some form of antiracist journalism (Drew, 2011), foster broader conversation about the role of multiculturalism and raise awareness about the pending challenges related to racism. Historical cases such as *Sports Illustrated's* investigative series on discriminatory practices towards African American athletes in 1968 (Smith, 2006) demonstrate that socially responsible sports journalism can contribute to drawing the public's attention to racism in sport and society at large.

### **2.3. Commitment to justice in the portrayal of disability**

Disabled athletes have received scant attention from the mass media and have “long been associated with negative connotations and stigma” (Cherney and Lindemann, 2010: 196). Through stereotypes such as “pitiable and pathetic”, “object of curiosity”, “his/her worst enemy” or the “inability to participate in daily life” (Barnes, 1992), the media have tended to “reinforce the image of a disabled person either as a tragic but brave victim of a crippling condition or as a pitiable and pathetic individual” (Horne and Whannel, 2011: 176).

Thomas and Smith (2003) studied the textual and photographic coverage of the Sydney 2000 Paralympics in the British print media, detecting that “nearly one-quarter of the articles in the national newspapers depicted athletes as ‘victims or courageous people who suffer from personal tragedies’” (Girginov and Parry, 2005: 75-76). Afterwards, in their examination of the photographic coverage of the Paralympic Games in ten European broadsheets from Sydney 2000 to Beijing 2008, Pappous *et al.* (2011: 345) illustrated that the “competitiveness and the abilities of Paralympic athletes” were not highlighted.

Focusing on the Beijing 2008 Paralympics, Buysse and Borchering (2010) analysed the coverage in 12 newspapers from five countries (United States, China, South Africa, New Zealand and Italy), revealing that “Paralympians were not repre-

sented as competent athletes" (Buysse and Borcharding, 2010: 316). Fortunately, the study by Chang *et al.* (2011), who scrutinised the coverage made by Canadian newspaper *The Globe and Mail* on the same edition of the Paralympics, noted that the outlet "portrayed athletes with disabilities as 'real athletes' rather than 'super crips' or 'victims'" (Chang *et al.*, 2011: 44).

This article does not focus on the Paralympic Games, as the event examined is the London 2012 Olympics. However, two Paralympians (Oscar Pistorius and Natalia Partyka) took part in both the Paralympic and Olympic programmes. The South African runner Oscar Pistorius is "perhaps the most high-profile case of a Paralympian seeking Olympic inclusion" (Corrigan *et al.*, 2010: 289). Pistorius underwent a double amputation and ran with the aid of carbon fibre blade prosthetic limbs. In July 2011, he obtained the Olympic "A" qualifying time. In July 2012, he was finally included in the South African 4x400 m relay team and 400 m individual lists. The Polish table tennis player Natalia Partyka, who was born without her right forearm, competed in the Beijing 2008 Olympics and also in London 2012. Their participation opened the unique possibility to analyse how the international media portrayed them.

### 3. Methodology

The research aims to answer the following question: Did British, American and Spanish quality newspapers comply at the London 2012 Olympics with the deontological principle of justice with regard to the portrayal of race and disability? How did the media treat traditionally disfavoured groups such as non-white or disabled athletes? In order to answer this question, two qualitative techniques have been employed: qualitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews.

Qualitative content analysis (Altheide, 1996; Bryman, 2012) allows the researcher to read, interpret and make valid inferences from the communicative messages included in the sampled newspapers. The researcher purposely selected six top-tier newspapers considering strategic criteria such as their quality, relevance in their communicative systems, wide circulation and their capacity to carry out systematic, insightful and rigorous sports journalism. More precisely, the examined media were: *The Guardian/The Observer* and *The Daily Telegraph/The Sunday Telegraph* (United Kingdom); *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* (United States); and *El País* and *La Vanguardia* (Spain).

The rationale for choosing these newspapers in their print editions was clear. While it is true that television, Internet and social networking sites occupy a central space within the increasingly complex media sports landscape (Boyle, 2015), newspapers have the chance to work more in-depth and carry out a "pre- and post-event analysis" (Boyle, 2006: 54). As Fernández Peña *et al.* (2010: 1671) explain,

“television is not an appropriate medium for debating complex issues or expanding on facts” because “it offers a sort of mosaic of a complex reality like the Olympic Games, rendering it incomplete despite hundreds of hours of broadcasts”. The print media have not only “been considered the primary sites for citizens to discuss matters of common concern” (Wahl-Jorgensen and Galperin, 2000: 20) but they are “still important vehicles for news gathering and for producing and disseminating information to a broad public” (Darnell and Sparks, 2005: 360).

Within these newspapers, the object of study has been the information that made reference to the London 2012 Olympics. The timeframe of the observation covers 33 days (18 July – 19 August 2012), including the 19 days of the event plus one week before and after the Games.

Content analysis has been triangulated with semi-structured interviews with top scholars and IOC representatives, chosen taking into account their relevance, experience and adequacy to the research purposes. The sample of interviews, which were conducted on a face-to-face basis between September 2013 and March 2015, includes the following interviewees: Andrew C. Billings and Kim Bissell (University of Alabama), Neil Farrington and John Price (University of Sunderland), David Rowe (University of Western Sydney) and Mark Adams (International Olympic Committee Communications director).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Commitment to justice in the portrayal of race

During the London 2012 Olympics the sampled newspapers gave wide exposure to the achievements of non-white athletes, challenging the traditional “white ethnocentric perspective” (Farrington *et al.*, 2012: 54) in news reporting. As commented subsequently, the information about race was only provided in exceptional cases, such as with the American gymnast Gabrielle Douglas. The sampled media did not engage in overtly racist comments, even though certain covert stereotypes were fostered throughout the coverage. On a broader level, the newspapers took the opportunity to raise the public’s awareness of racism.

#### 4.1.1. Positive evaluation of non-white athletes

The performances of non-white athletes were positively portrayed and were devoted a fair amount of coverage in London 2012. The Jamaican runner Usain Bolt was one of the most prominent stars of the event. His historical triumphs in the 100 m, the 200 m and the 4x100 m relay not only received broad coverage within the newspapers’ pages but also featured on the front pages of the British, American and Spanish outlets. Leaving Bolt’s case aside, the accomplishments of other non-white athletes were highly praised. To illustrate, David Rudisha was depicted



as “the greatest 800 m runner in history” (Bull, 2012). Ethiopia’s Tirunesh Dibaba was portrayed as “history’s greatest female distance runner” (Longman, 2012a). The American athlete Ashley Eaton was described as the “indisputable king of the decathlon” (Martín, 2012). The British runner Mo Farah was depicted as a “true warrior” (Hayward, 2012), who due to his “strength of mind and belief” (Cram, 2012) had become the sixth Olympian to win in the 5,000 and 10,000 m. Other non-white athletes that were highlighted include Jessica Ennis, Christine Ohuruogu, Yohan Blake, Louis Smith, Ye Shiwen, Nicola Adams, Anthony Ogogo, Yamilé Aldama, Tiki Gelana, Meseret Defar and Felix Sánchez.

#### 4.1.2. *Mentions of race: the case of Gabby Douglas*

For the most part, journalists made the right decision not to mention the racial background of the competitors, as it was not relevant to the coverage. In the case of Gabrielle Douglas, the first African American to win the all around in gymnastics, the specific situation demanded a differential approach. Her race was mentioned as an indispensable piece of data for readers to comprehend the historical importance of her success. As Billings argues:

Sometimes race is part of the story, sometimes it tells something about who athletes are. And when journalists say ‘I have decided to be colour-blind’, to me, they are missing part of the story. If you grow up in a given environment or with a different racial background, that is part of who you are and it is part of the story that needs to be shared. (Andrew Billings, interview, July 2014)

Providing information about Douglas’ race helped readers to understand much more of the background, her life story, her personality and the struggles she had to overcome to achieve her triumph in London 2012. Macur (2012) explained that when Gabby Douglas left her family and went to West Des Moines (Iowa) to train and live, she found herself in a different environment in which race played an important role (“Douglas noticed right away that she was one of the few black people in town. She was used to standing out. Often, she was the only black gymnast at high-level competitions.”). However, that initial situation did not set her apart from her objective and she kept on working to improve, a goal that led her to achieve an outstanding result at the Olympics.

That being said, Eagleman (2013: 11) argues that providing details about her background “seemed to cast Douglas in the ‘other’ spotlight due to her race”. As Bissell sustains, this case illustrates the fact that the media sometimes tend to focus prominently on the different attributes rather than considering sportsmen and sportswomen’s athleticism in the first place:

There was a lot of news about Gabrielle Douglas being the first African American to win in women’s all around. On one hand, it is worth noting, because it is something

that went down in history. On the other hand, it points out difference. I think there is a very fine line between celebrating success based on difference and then celebrating it but mentioning what the difference is, because that is when you introduce “oh, she is African American” not “she is an athlete first and foremost”. Her race was mentioned and was turned into a prominent lead. In the case of Oscar Pistorius, if he had won in the 400 m or in the relay, running against able-bodied athletes, the lead would have been “disabled athlete” or “The Blade Runner wins”, because it makes it a little more newsworthy. It is like their identity is more important than being an athlete. (Kim Bissell, interview, July 2014)

Leaving Douglas’ case aside, there were few mentions of the race of the participants throughout the coverage. In the case of the South African rower Sizwe Ndlovu, who achieved the gold medal in the lightweight men’s four category, the mentions of race were justified by the fact that he had been “South Africa’s sole black winner in London so far” (Smith, 2012). In the case of the French runner Christophe Lemaitre, he was mentioned to be “white”. This information was featured in the specific context of the piece, in order to explain that if Lemaitre won the bronze medal, “it would be the second white athlete since Pietro Mennea in 1980” that could achieve it (Martínez, 2012). However, it could be argued that providing that information about the skin colour was not entirely relevant for explaining the athletic success in those stories.

#### **4.1.3. *The presence of covert race stereotypes in the coverage***

Quality newspapers did not incur in the traditional stereotypes that establish biological differences between black and white athletes. Yet, it may have been very enlightening to see them publish pieces that explicitly counteracted those misleading notions.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, two remarkable cases show that certain stereotypes connected to race continue to be present in sports media.

First of all, we should refer to the photographic coverage that the gymnast John Orozco received in *The Washington Post*. In the piece “Unlikely events trip up US” (Clarke, 2012), which focused on the underperformance of the men’s gymnastics team, the only photographed gymnast was Orozco, who had also appeared alone on the newspaper front page. As he was the only African American in the team, the restrictive selection of images could lead the audience to inaccurately associate the failure with the black athlete. This lack of carefulness was precisely criticised in a letter to the editor written by Christina FitzPatrick (*The Washington Post*, 2012a). As the reader argued, the newspaper should have been “more sensitive to its choice of photographs and avoid the appearance of suggesting that the problem was the African American on the squad”.

The second case refers to the ambivalent portrayal of Niger’s rower Hamadou Djibo Issaka, who received a wild card from the IOC to participate in the single sculls event. On the one side, he received attention from the majority of the sampled newspapers (with the exception of *El País* and *La Vanguardia*), which framed

his participation as an important step for non-discrimination and the development of sport (Brown, 2012a). Nevertheless, Issaka was portrayed as an object of curiosity to a certain degree. His depiction was unable to escape the constant comparison with other athletes such as Éric Moussambani from Equatorial Guinea, who participated in the 100 m freestyle swimming event in Sydney 2000. In addition, he was described using patronising expressions such as “has a technique that can generously be described as crude” (*The Washington Post*, 2012b), “the Games’s unlikeliest participant” (Kitson, 2012), “the Games’ most popular loser so far” (Ferguson, 2012), “worst performance on water” (Clarey, 2012) or “he may have had a dubious sculling action but he was possessed of an insuperable spirit” (Brown, 2012a). Those expressions may have potentially undermined the athletic value of his participation.

#### 4.1.4. *Fighting against racism and praising multiculturalism*

On a broader level, the newspapers took the opportunity of the Olympics to raise the public’s awareness of racism. This is a core function of media in democratic societies, as reflected in Article 1 of Resolution 1003 of the Council of Europe. That function connects with the need to reject discrimination and the language of hatred and confrontation (UNESCO, Art. 9; International Federation of Journalists, Art. 7; Council of Europe, Art. 33; National Union of Journalists, Art. 9).

To begin with, all the sampled newspapers condemned two discriminatory Twitter comments contrary to the spirit of the Olympic movement. One of them was published by the Greek triple-jumper Paraskevi Papachristou, who disparaged the African immigrants in Greece (“With so many Africans in Greece, at least the mosquitoes of West Nile will eat homemade food.”). Some of the outlets, such as *The Daily Telegraph*, contrasted her words with the views of relevant representatives such as Isidoros Kouvelos, head of the Hellenic Olympic Committee (HOC), who emphasised that Papachristou had “showed no respect for the basic Olympic values” (Magnay, 2012). *El País* devoted a particularly critical editorial piece about the issue, arguing that at the Olympics, “manners are also determining” (*El País*, 2012). The other Twitter comment was made by the Swiss footballer Michel Morganella (who insulted South Korean players stating that they could “go burn” and referring to them as a “bunch of mongoloids”). *La Vanguardia*’s (2012a) editorial position made it clear that Morganella’s racist and threatening action did not have “any excuse”, in a moment where he was blinded by the defeat.

In the second place, the quality newspapers praised multiculturalism and opposed the discriminatory practices conducted by other outlets at the popular end of the market. As Andrews and Rick (2014: 200) highlight, tabloid newspapers used “the convenient vehicle of the London Olympics to further their own populist and/or regressively ideological agenda”. More precisely, *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* criticised *The Daily Mail*’s attempts to convey damaging expressions such as “Plastic Brits” to refer to athletes that were non-white or non-British born, such

as Mo Farah or Yamilé Aldama. As Rowe explains, racism is still problematic in certain segments of the market: "There are still many people in the media who find it hard to accept that a black person is really British in a same way that a white is." (Interview, March 2015)

Before the Games, *The Guardian* devoted an article to the issue, where Yamilé Aldama urged people to abandon the notion of "Plastic Brits": "I want it to stop, it is not nice for me or for my family. And it is not good for other people. It is very sad that this is happening because it sends the wrong message. What if children start being called Plastic Brits in the playground? Please let us stop this before real damage is done." (Aldama, 2012) Afterwards, in the piece "Not plastic. Just tough, loyal and talented" in *The Daily Telegraph*, Brown (2012b) condemned that notion, considering the "Plastic Brit" definition a "dreaded" moniker, "an offending word" and a "hideous affront" to Aldama's struggle. Likewise, *The Guardian* highlighted the fact that athletes like Aldama or Farah "embodied the very notion of multiculturalism" (Kessel, 2012) and argued that modern British identity is multi-ethnic and multifaceted.

At the end of the Olympics, *The Guardian* (2012) emphasised that the Games allowed "a golden glimpse of a nation that celebrates men and women with equal awe, and embraces British athletes of all racial backgrounds". According to Mohamed (2012), the triumphs of Mo Farah could help British Somalis to gain a prominent place in the national consciousness in a positive way, away from the "persistently negative representations in the media" based on "the worst connotations: violence, terrorism, gangs".

Taking all the aforementioned aspects into account, Mark Adams, the IOC Communications director, stresses the importance of fighting against discrimination:

That mass media send the audiences the message of anti-discrimination is absolutely central. We can think also about Sochi and the gay rights issues. Non-discrimination is absolutely central to the Olympics, it is one of the fundamental principles of the Olympic Charter and we just don't say that, it really is. Take for instance the case of the Swiss athlete who was sent home after his comments. Largely in the UK and the US press, and in the Spanish press of course too, there is no room for racism. (Mark Adams, interview, May 2014)

Leaving the debate about "Plastic Brits" aside, it was at the core of the public service mission of the media to take the opportunity of the Olympics to raise awareness of the structural contradictions in society. In particular, in the article "Ahora todos somos británicos", *La Vanguardia's* London correspondent Rafael Ramos reflected on the hypocrisy in British society regarding attitudes to immigrants, which are different depending on whether they are winning athletes or common people. According to Ramos (2012), "when it is about demanding social benefits from the

state or competing in the labour market, British citizens whose origins are Caribbean, Bangladeshi or African are not welcome. But when it is about paying taxes or winning medals at the Games, they are welcomed with open arms and considered *us*".

## 4.2. Commitment to justice in the portrayal of disability

As regards the representation of disability, the newspapers placed a great deal of attention on Oscar Pistorius. The significance of his inclusion was well delivered, even though he was unable to escape the controversy surrounding the unfair advantage that his prosthetics could provide him. The treatment of Natalia Partyka illustrated the minimisation that non-prominent disabled athletes face in media. Finally, the case of Im Dong-Hyun revealed the display of inaccuracies about disability among journalists.

### 4.2.1. *The coverage of Oscar Pistorius*

The media recognised and endorsed Pistorius' historic participation as a remarkable milestone for inclusion, celebrating the fact that he "challenged precedent and also defied limits" (Bruni, 2012). Pistorius was valued for his "humanity, fight, commitment and nonconformity" (Arribas, 2012) and for the nature of his performances in London, where he competed not only "in a symbolic way but with fighting spirit and speed" (*La Vanguardia*, 2012b). Contesting the long-held stereotypes, the media did not depict him as a pitiable and pathetic individual, but rather as a competitive athlete with whom the audience empathised: "The crowd of 80,000 roared because they felt happy for Oscar Pistorius, not sorry for him. They rose from their seats in awe, not in uncomfortable ambiguity." (Wise, 2012)

Conversely, he could not get away from stereotypes to some extent. First of all, he was portrayed on many occasions as an object of curiosity, with the overuse of expressions such as "the 80,000 pairs of eyes in the Olympic Stadium were trained on only one man ahead of his race" (Gibson, 2012) or "all eyes in the Olympic Stadium were still on Pistorius" (Steinberg, 2012). Secondly, journalists used his nickname ("The Blade Runner") in multiple episodes without highlighting it in commas or italics. Some relevant examples include: "Will the blade runner make it through?" (Barkham, 2012); "Pistorius, known as the Blade Runner" (Shiple, 2012); or "Johnson calls for ban on the blade runner" (Pickup, 2012). Although Pistorius was the first to coin this term in 2009 in the title of his autobiography, the insistence on this nickname by the media contributed to foster the stigma of "cyborg", which marked difference and deviation from the able-bodied athletes (Corrigan *et al.*, 2010).

On top of that, he was unable to escape the constant debate about whether his carbon-fibre prosthetics gave him any advantage in able-bodied events. The over-emphasis on controversy was criticised by Wise (2012) in his opinion piece "A run to celebrate instead of debate" in *The Washington Post*. Wise argued that instead

of being asked “how many other children born without limbs he made feel whole again”, Pistorius’ participation was unfortunately characterised by the persistent debate. Wise urged people to focus on the essential: “When he runs Sunday, stop and take it in as a human being, without having to dwell on the how and why. For at least one day, let’s start commemorating and stop calibrating.” According to Billings, the media should not have devoted as much attention to this aspect:

Are we going to be blind at the fact that this man is competing on blades? No, that is completely part of the story and I am OK with media focusing on that there. However, I don’t think it should be reduced to making him a carnival act, I don’t think so much attention should be focused on whether he had or not an unfair advantage because largely that had already been litigated at that point. So you can focus a little bit more on his reality, having cleared those hurdles, instead of going over and over again in the controversy. (Andrew Billings, interview, July 2014)

#### **4.2.2. The cases of Im Dong-Hyun and Natalia Partyka**

South Korean archer Im Dong-Hyun came under the spotlight after achieving the first world record in London 2012 with a mark of 699 points. Even though he had limited sight, he was inaccurately described in several media reports as “the blind archer” (*La Vanguardia*, 2012c), “registered as blind” (*The Observer*, 2012) or “legally blind” (Butler, 2012). Other reports identified him as “blind” (written in quotation marks) or “almost blind” (Liew, 2012). His portrayal, based on oversimplifications, is an example of how the misuse of terms contributes to the persistence of inaccurate perceptions about disability. Since “journalists rarely cover disability sport” (Corrigan *et al.*, 2010: 299), professionals showed their lack of specific background in this area.

Those inaccuracies were revealed by *The New York Times* (Longman, 2012b). Thanks to the consultation of experts, coaches and federation representatives (such as Mario Scarzella, vice president of the World Archery Federation or the coach Teresa Iaconi), the author contributed to breaking long-lasting stereotypes, clarifying also that limited sight does not equate to the impossibility of performing in archery.

A final note should be made about Natalia Partyka. The Polish table tennis player was rendered almost invisible by the sampled media, even though she was the only participant (along with Pistorius) who competed in both the London Olympics and Paralympics. In contrast to *The Guardian*, *El País* and *La Vanguardia* (where she was not even mentioned in their print versions), *The New York Times* did indeed talk about her, but she was only referred to in a brief piece about her tennis match against Jie Li (Reuters, 2012). Similarly, in *The Sunday Telegraph* she was only briefly mentioned in an article devoted to Pistorius (Moreton, 2012). *The Washington Post* (2012c) was the only newspaper that at least included a small photograph of the athlete.

## 5. Conclusions

This article has contributed to the communication and sports field by engaging in scholarly debate surrounding ethics and quality of information in sports journalism. The study put forward a research question: “Did British, American and Spanish quality newspapers comply in the London 2012 Olympics with the deontological principle of justice with regard to the portrayal of race and disability? How did the media treat traditionally disfavoured groups such as non-white or disabled athletes?” In trying to answer this question, the study provided enlightening examples of high-quality coverage, which complied with the deontological principle of justice. It should be borne in mind that journalists are shaped by the particular newsroom culture in which they operate, and indeed the reviewed newspapers are recognised for being responsible outlets at the “quality end” segment of their respective markets.

As already pointed out, the sampled media gave salience to the achievements of non-white athletes and took the right decision not to focus on the race of the participants (IPSO, Art. 12), with the much needed exception of Gabby Douglas, whose specific situation unmistakably demanded a different approach. It should also be positively assessed that the coverage did not include racist comments or typical stereotypes that establish biological differences between black and white (Billings *et al.*, 2014), which are still “very much an issue in some areas of the news arena such as the tabloid press” (Neil Farrington and John Price, interview, September 2013).

More importantly, bearing in mind journalism’s public mission to inform and enlighten in democratic societies, stated in many codes (UNESCO, Art. 1-2; International Federation of Journalists, Art. 1; Council of Europe, Art. 17; Society of Professional Journalists, Foreword; American Society of Newspapers Editors, Art. 4), the newspapers took the opportunity of the London Olympics to raise the public’s awareness of racism within sport and society. The print media organisations gave salience to the criticism towards the Twitter comments made by Paraskevi Papachristou and Michel Morganella and the tabloid-created moniker of “Plastic Brits”, and also raised awareness of the structural contradictions in society. Therefore, the quality newspapers engaged in forms of antiracist journalism and praised the values of multiculturalism and non-discrimination. Those fundamental values lie at the core of the major deontological codes of the profession (UNESCO, Art. 9; IFJ, Art. 7; Council of Europe, Art. 28; SPJ, Art. 1; IPSO, Art. 12; NUJ, Art. 10; FAPE, Art. 7; CPC, Art. 12) as well as in the Olympic Charter, the essential document of the Olympic movement (IOC, 2015).

Given the widespread absorption of Olympic coverage (Billings *et al.*, 2014) and the importance of the media as transmitters of values in this coverage (Girginov and Parry, 2005), these results have far-reaching significance, as the inclusive attitudes displayed by the newspapers may certainly reverberate among readers and society at large.

That being said, closer scrutiny of the material also revealed some areas where imbalances should be addressed. In terms of race, evidence suggests that certain covert stereotypes were fostered throughout the coverage. With regard to disability, and although the coverage moved away from traditional stigmas, the study uncovered the presence of other stereotypes connected to Oscar Pistorius. At the same time, the research unravelled the fact that Natalia Partyka was mostly ignored and that Im Dong-Yun was inaccurately portrayed.

Bearing in mind the power of the Olympic coverage to shape identities (Billings and Angelini, 2007), research suggests that journalists should maximise carefulness in the language they use to depict non-white and disabled athletes. Drawing from the idea of shared responsibility, proper education and literacy at all levels (at higher education institutions, within newsrooms and among citizens) is a central opportunity to raise awareness of the remaining problems and strive for professional excellence.

The results of this article should be seen in light of their limitations. It should be acknowledged that the research has provided a snapshot of the coverage delivered by six elite organisations on a certain moment in time, which should be enhanced with complementary studies in the field. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to continue monitoring the coverage of race and disability in the forthcoming Olympic events (Rio 2016, Pyeongchang 2018 and Tokyo 2020). The range of quality newspapers considered could be expanded to include other media outlets from different journalistic cultures in Europe and beyond. The triangulation of the qualitative content analysis with media professionals (sports journalists and decision-makers) would be very useful to delve further into their mindsets, ethical values and professional routines. All this knowledge would contribute to a better understanding of the sports journalism field from the standpoint of ethics and quality of information. 📌

## Notes

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**2** The documents that have been considered are: Resolution 1003 on the Ethics of Journalism (Council of Europe); the Declaration on the Conduct of Journalists (International Federation of Journalists, IFJ); the International Professional Ethics Principles of Journalism (UNESCO); the Editors' Code of Practice (Independent Press Standards Association, IPSO); the Professional Code of Conduct (National Union of Journalists, NUJ); the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics (SPJ); the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) Statement of Principles; the Deontological Code of the Journalistic Profession of the Spanish Journalists' Associations Federation (FAPE); and the Declaration of Principles of the Journalistic Profession of the Catalan Journalists' Association (CPC, 1992). The specific code on sports journalism, the Ethical Guidelines of the Associated Press Sports Editors (APSE) did not render relevant information for this particular research project.

**3** A type of piece that counteracted the traditional notions in a more explicit way could be found outside the sample, and more specifically in *The Times* (Syed, 2012), which used academic sources and scientific results to point out that "the very notion of 'black' athletic superiority is deeply misguided".



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