



## Article

# European Public Service Media, Disability Sports and Cultural Citizenship in the Digital Age: An Analysis of Agenda Diversity in the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games

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**Abstract:** In the current cross-media ecosystem, which is characterized by technological disruption, the prominent relationship between public service media (PSM), sport and cultural citizenship is undergoing a profound transformation. Currently, PSM can utilize its myriad platforms, channels and services to transcend the constraints of linear broadcasting, find new ways of advancing diversity and overcome the perception of disability sport as a media 'blind spot'. Through content analysis, the objective of this research has been to examine the agenda diversity on Twitter offered during the timeframe of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games by 15 PSM corporations in Europe. This comparative analysis of 6072 tweets demonstrated the uneven attention devoted by European PSM to the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics. In the aggregate, 39.42% (n = 2398) of the messages focused on the event, although significant imbalances can be observed among the different media organizations, both in terms of the volume of coverage and the attention given to the various Paralympic disciplines and protagonists. From a theoretical perspective, the article adds to the existing literature on the nexus between media, sport and cultural citizenship, signaling the need for PSM to reimagine its social media strategies to counteract the limited visibility of different societal groups and to adequately contribute to enhancing cultural citizenship in the digital age. The results can also inform media practitioners. Despite that the conditioning factors and trade-offs linked to the commercial nature of social networking sites cannot be overlooked, PSM should take into account the importance of promoting inclusion and observe audiences' increasing interest in disability sport.

**Keywords:** public service media; sports; cultural citizenship; sports media; sports journalism; disability; Tokyo 2020; Paralympics; diversity; Twitter



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## 1. Introduction

In the current cross-media ecosystem, which is characterized by technological disruption and the proliferation of digital channels and platforms (Glebova et al. 2022; Zheng and Mason 2022), the core relationship between public service media (PSM), sport and cultural citizenship is undergoing a profound transformation. In contrast to private sector media, PSM refers to organizations that are “publicly funded, less commercially driven and have a distinct public service mission” (Sehl and Cornia 2021, p. 1470). This public service mission is based on crucial obligations and values such as diversity, innovation, independence, excellence, universality, accountability, media literacy and social justice (Cañedo et al. 2022). Founded as radio and television entities, Public Service Broadcasters (PSBs) have transitioned into PSM over the last few years, “meaning that its contents are no longer distributed only through radio and TV (broadcasting), but through all possible platforms, especially the Internet” (Sehl 2023, p. 3).

Throughout history, PSM has played a unique role in building and developing cultural citizenship through sports (Rössland 2017; Scherer and Sam 2012; Smith 2017; Taylor and Thomass 2017). The news coverage of sports through different formats, as well as the

free-to-air broadcasting of national and international competitions, has long allowed PSM to achieve “mass attention and thereby, public legitimacy” (Lünich et al. 2021, p. 289), while offering citizens the opportunity to fully participate “in the collectively oriented public culture environments that constitute the social” (Hutchins et al. 2019, p. 989). In the process, public broadcasters have played a crucial role in creating and sustaining the cultural heritage of nations in relation to sport (Ramon and Haynes 2019). Thus, the strategies, practices and output delivered by PSM have been essential in preserving “the rights and responsibilities regarding access to and representation in, sports culture” (Rowe 2018, p. 12), which are deeply embedded in the notions of cultural citizenship.

Nevertheless, PSM’s use of sports content to enhance cultural citizenship through linear broadcasting is increasingly threatened by the significant tensions and pressures that arise from digitization, globalization and commodification (Hesmondhalgh and Lotz 2020). Around the world, the escalating costs of sports broadcasting rights is threatening the provision of free-to-air content (Smith 2017). Major events legislation is still in force in many countries to “ensure that citizens are able to engage with these culturally significant occurrences” (Phillips and Martin 2020, p. 587). However, the expansion of over-the-top and on-demand services has deeply complicated the regulation of the digital sport broadcasting market, while raising important concerns about the future preservation of cultural citizen rights (Evens and Smith 2022; Rowe et al. 2022).

In this troubled context, PSM can utilize its myriad platforms and services to transcend the constraints of linear broadcasting and find new ways of advancing cultural citizenship (Hermes 2020). Digital spaces provide new opportunities for PSM to promote diverse and inclusive coverage that gives a broader recognition to those areas, topics and voices that are “often neglected by the commercial media” (Cwynar 2017, p. 135). New destinations can help PSM to provide “variation in content” (Morlandstø and Mathisen 2022, p. 2) and make various “societal groups visible” (Steiner et al. 2019, p. 102). In the field of sports, modern digital technologies have significantly altered the way in which sport is globally transmitted and consumed, offering new opportunities for flexibility and inclusivity (Glebova et al. 2022). Particularly, digital technologies can bring “less prominent professional or even recreational sports to the forefront” (Zheng and Mason 2022, p. 8) and “make it easier to give visibility to groups or initiatives that previously did not have access to distribution channels” (Glebova et al. 2022, p. 5). Thus, digital platforms—including social media—can be instrumental in showcasing “traditionally underrepresented sports and protagonists, including sportswomen and athletes with disabilities” (Ramon and Rojas-Torrijos 2022, p. 919).

Focusing on the latter issue, for many public and privately-owned media organizations, disability sport has “not been considered relevant, important, interesting, accessible or timely enough to be routinely prioritized on the broadly mediated agenda” (Sjøvaag and Kvalheim 2019, p. 292). For such reasons, disability sport can indeed be considered a media ‘blind spot’ (Morlandstø and Mathisen 2022). The proliferation of platforms and channels “affords a degree of cultural oxygen” (Goode 2010, p. 533) for athletes with disabilities, who remain far less visible in the media than their able-bodied counterparts (Brittain 2017; Solves et al. 2019).

However, as is rightly noted by Goode (Goode 2010, p. 532), new media destinations do not automatically ‘translate into a guarantee of greater visibility or recognition’ for all social groups. Previous research on the use of sports-centered Twitter accounts by European PSMs such as the BBC, RTVÉ, RAI, FranceTV and RTÉ demonstrated that platforms such as Twitter offer new opportunities to deliver high-quality sports content and engage with new audiences (Ramon and Rojas-Torrijos 2022; Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon 2021). Nevertheless, the findings also indicated that content for disability sport offered by PSM sports desks remains remarkably scarce, demonstrating “a continued lack of agenda diversity in routine digital media coverage” (Antunovic and Bartoluci 2023, p. 170).

Considering the power of media narratives to shape society’s perceptions of disability, important questions arise: beyond routine coverage, are social media platforms being

leveraged by PSM to lend recognition to athletes with impairments during major mega-events, such as the Paralympic Games? Does content during the Paralympics help raise awareness of the diverse Paralympic disciplines and protagonists and, therefore, contribute to an enhancement of cultural citizenship?

Bearing these questions in mind, the purpose of this study was to examine the agenda diversity on Twitter offered during the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games by 15 PSM corporations in Europe. The article first provides an overview of the media coverage of disability sport and scrutinize the best practices involved in the reporting of the most recent Paralympic Games. Our attention will then turn to the affordances provided by new platforms and social media channels to improve the visibility of athletes with any sort of impairment. Our analysis of 6072 tweets considers the unequal attention devoted by European PSM during the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics, both in terms of the volume of coverage and the attention given to the different Paralympic disciplines and protagonists. The results have clear implications for media practice, signaling the need for PSM to reimagine its social media strategies to counteract the limited visibility of disability sport and adequately contribute to enhancing cultural citizenship in the digital age.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Media Coverage of Disability Sport and the Paralympics

According to the literature review of the existing research on the coverage of disability sport, it can be noted that, with a few exceptions, the visibility and representation of people with disabilities can still be considered scarce. This situation reinforces the idea that disability sport remains a media 'blind spot' (Morlandstø and Mathisen 2022; Sjøvaag and Kvalheim 2019). As Brittain (2017) asserts, "a lack of understanding towards and coverage of, disability issues within the media is not limited to just disability sport, but to disability in general" (p. 242).

Despite the growing interest in media and sport and the large number of studies of media and the Olympics over recent years, disability has remained "almost entirely invisible in the mainstream of this scholarship" for many years (Goggin and Newell 2000, p. 73). The intersection of disability and mass media, however, is increasingly resonating as a crucial topic in the modern world, precipitating the expansion of research and publications on disability across many scholarly disciplines (Ellis and Goggin 2015).

As a consequence of this growing concern around disability, research focus has shifted over time from traditional media studies to other interdisciplinary approaches, enabling a deeper understanding of the nature of disability and its visibility in the media-sport world. In this context, "media-focused scholarship has identified different ways that sport articulates, perpetuates and can challenge ableist views of disabled bodies" (Cherney et al. 2015, p. 9). One of the main conclusions reached by several authors is that sports media outlets have been complicit in perpetuating those ableist narratives in their coverage of disability and disability sport events that are commonly associated with perceptions of inferior ability and performance (Pullen et al. 2019) and with representations of what has been termed a 'supercrip' narrative about the athlete heroically overcoming the barriers posed by a disability (McGillivray et al. 2021).

Despite these perceptions, recent media coverage of athletes with impairments has evolved from traditional to progressive (Schantz and Gilbert 2008). As noted by Pate and Hardin (2013), progressive coverage, which is more focused on abilities and athletic accomplishments than on disabilities and overcoming adversities, is an example of the best media practice when reporting on the Paralympics and other disability sport events, as is the case for the best coverage of able-bodied sport.

Unlike other sporting competitions, the Paralympics stands out as a global sports mega-event that receives ever-increasing media attention and, consequently, plays a key political and cultural role in showcasing athletes with impairments, leaving stereotypes behind and, ultimately, in changing people's attitudes about disability (Kolotouchkina et al. 2020). As a result of this, the extraordinary and hyper-visible achievements of Paralympic

athletes emerge in discourses of national identity (Bruce 2014), in which the enhanced abilities of disabled bodies have become socially accepted and politically celebrated as symbols of inclusion and integration (Howe 2008).

It is widely agreed that London 2012 proved to be “a game-changing moment in the history of Paralympics sports coverage” (Bradshaw and Minogue 2019, p. 145), thanks to unprecedented media exposure and, most notably, the dedicated approach of the official broadcaster, Channel 4, to promote both the event and its main protagonists (Pullen et al. 2020b). This coverage brought disability sport into the mainstream, impacted citizens’ perceptions of Paralympic athletes and elevated the profile of the Games as an elite sporting event by capturing huge audience numbers (a 400% increase since the 2008 Beijing Paralympics) and also establishing its commercial success (Pullen et al. 2022, p. 369). Since London 2012, the level of coverage of the Paralympic Games has been on the rise, but the amount and quality of this coverage varies greatly among territories and even within different media outlets in the same country (Brittain 2017).

After parasports claimed space in high-impact sports news during the Rio 2016 Paralympics (Menezes dos Santos et al. 2022), the technologically enhanced media coverage of Tokyo 2020 “crossed-over to mainstream audiences more often and in more interesting ways, than previous Games” (Goggin and Hutchins 2021, p. 136). Pullen et al. (2021, p. 82) refer to these Paralympic Games as “the most digitally accessible and savvy” because of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) strategy that focused on providing live streams of events on its own Paralympic mobile app, as well as on YouTube and Facebook, and delivered extra content on social media such as Snapchat, Instagram and TikTok in a bid to reach younger audiences.

Although there have been signs of improvement in media representations of the Paralympics since London 2012, some studies note that the quantitative and qualitative imbalances between the representation of able-bodied sport and disability sport mega-events are still in force (Goggin and Newell 2000; Howe 2008). The persistence of condescending narratives and stereotypes (Bruce 2014; Cherney et al. 2015) shapes representations of athletes with an impairment, which, to a certain extent, seem to remain biased and anchored in stigma (Kolotouchkina et al. 2021).

## 2.2. Best Reporting Practices on the Paralympics

In contrast to the longstanding invisibility and stereotyping of athletes with disabilities, recent Paralympics have offered outstanding examples of news outlets providing respectful media coverage that represents Paralympians as athletes first (Page et al. 2022). Apart from Channel 4’s abovementioned broadcasting strategy in Great Britain, the heritage of the Rio Paralympics is still present in *Globoesporte.com*, one of the most accessed sport information sites in Brazil; this website has a section exclusively dedicated to news on Paralympic sports (Menezes dos Santos et al. 2022). Similarly, the Spanish sports daily *Marca* has substantially increased its coverage of Paralympic sports and athletes since London 2012 and now publishes stories and interviews on a daily basis thanks to the financial support of the Spanish Paralympic Committee (Solves et al. 2019).

In the context of the 2020 Tokyo Paralympics, Japan’s public broadcaster NHK offered innovative coverage both during the pre-games period and during the actual event, featuring a news program conducted by three anchors with different kinds of impairment. This corporation also launched an animated series that introduced anonymous and famous Japanese para-athletes of 11 Paralympic sports categories with anime-style narratives to provide an entertaining experience and, at the same time, explanatory content about the specifics of each para-sports discipline (Kolotouchkina et al. 2021, p. 105). NHK offers an example of how a PSM corporation may effectively contribute to ensure diversity and promote cultural citizenship through the coverage of underrepresented sports and athletes with disabilities (Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon 2021).

After reporting on the Tokyo Games for Czech Television, Macková (2021) notes that, as Paralympic sport becomes more professional, journalists are changing their style by



reporting on athletes as professionals and by focusing more on the event and less on the life stories of athletes with disabilities. However, journalists still find that “the stories of what happened to athletes, how they came to their disability, how they overcame it, can educate the public on disability-related issues” (Macková 2021, p. 54).

Taking all recent media coverage of Paralympics into account, Antunovic and Bundon (2022) propose a reconsideration of professional journalistic values in order to ensure the responsible coverage of this mega-event and any disability sport in the future. These authors recommend that sports journalists develop merit- and sport-focused coverage of the Paralympics as a top-level, international sporting event, to act ethically and challenge stereotypes and to include diverse perspectives, as well as contextualizing their reporting by intertwining sports with other larger social issues.

### *2.3. New Platforms and Social Media Channels: New Avenues for Improving the Visibility of Athletes with Disabilities?*

As seen above, while coverage and global audiences of the Paralympics are experiencing constant growth, several challenges still impede the representation of disability in sports. For sports media professionals, some of these challenges are directly related to the ways they use digital platforms and social media channels to improve the coverage of athletes with impairments as a means of enhancing their visibility and transforming citizens’ perceptions of them.

Goggin and Hutchins (2017, p. 230) state that “the London Paralympics saw social, mobile and online media fully incorporated into the media enterprise” and, since then, the attention paid to these high-impact platforms has been heightened by sports media outlets in their coverage of the mega-event. In the context of networked digital media, there has been an expanding line-up of popular and accessible sports media, not only produced by the industry but also by users and athletes; this development has been accompanied by the proliferation of niche channels and sources of digital sports media (Hutchins and Rowe 2012).

Nevertheless, although social networking sites clearly have the potential to increase the visibility of Paralympians and promote social inclusion, these platforms sometimes replicate the exclusionary and discriminatory attitudes that, more often than not, people with disabilities experience offline. As noted by Ellis and Kent (2017, p. 1), “social media has the potential to both enable and further disable people with disability”. This may become a ‘double-edged sword’ for sports media outlets. As a matter of fact, they do not always make the most of social media platforms’ potential to produce a more diverse and multi-faceted sports news agenda that ultimately contributes to enhancing social inclusion and cultural citizenship (Ramon and Rojas-Torrijos 2022; Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon 2021).

In any case, digital platforms such as blogs, podcasts and social media channels represent new avenues for amplifying the scope of sports media coverage and for filling gaps that still exist in current mainstream sport journalism. According to Domeneghetti (2021, p. 176), those gaps “are symptomatic of the tendency among legacy sports media and their staff, to shy away from reporting on complex issues”; these issues demand and deserve a higher level of attention from sports journalists than they currently receive.

### **3. Method**

This research examines the agenda diversity on Twitter offered during the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games by 15 European PSM companies: RTBF (Belgium), Česká Televize (Czech Republic), Yle (Finland), France TV (France), ZDF (Germany), RTÉ (Ireland), RAI (Italy), LTV (Latvia), NOS (The Netherlands), NRK (Norway), TVP (Poland), RTVE (Spain), SVT (Sweden), RTS (Switzerland) and Channel 4 (United Kingdom). Three research questions guided the study:

- RQ1. What is the volume and frequency of content on the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics published by European PSM companies on Twitter? What engagement figures (retweets and favorites) are obtained by those publications?

- RQ2. What agenda is delivered by European PSM companies regarding the proportion of coverage devoted to different Paralympic sports? How much coverage is devoted to sportswomen?
- RQ3. Which multimedia elements are deployed by European PSM companies on Twitter?

To identify a suitable sample, researchers filtered the list of the IPC's official broadcast partners to select Europe-based companies. In the process, PSM companies that did not have a sports-centered account (such as RTP in Portugal or LTR in Lithuania) or whose Twitter accounts were not updated (such as @DRSporten in Denmark or @ERTsports in Greece) were discarded from the sample. To ensure comparability, in countries where two or more official Paralympic broadcasters exist (such as Germany and Switzerland), one account was selected. Finally, broadcasters from 15 countries, representing diverse regions and models of media systems (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Castro-Herrero et al. 2017), were selected. According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022, the selected countries have high levels of internet penetration (surpassing 95% in the cases of Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the UK) and between 32% and 56% of the populations of these countries use social media as a source of news (Newman 2022).

All of the examined broadcasters created their sports-centered Twitter accounts between 2007 and 2012, except for RTVE, which created its profile @deportes\_rtve in 2014. So far, the most prolific accounts have been @BTBFsport, @francetvsport and @RTEsport, followed by @sport\_toppl and @RaiSport. @Sportstudio (the account of news and updates from the ZDF sports department) has the highest number of followers (618,649), followed by the Twitter accounts held by PSM in the Netherlands, France, Italy and the Czech Republic (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Contextual data for the accounts examined.

Country	Account	Joined Twitter	Tweets	Following	Followers
Belgium	@RTBFsport	1 December 2009	169,437	1070	133,592
Czech Republic	@sportCT	19 July 2011	67,334	454	212,969
Finland	@YleSporten	10 February 2010	55,597	2039	4100
France	@francetvsport	4 May 2010	147,761	1295	268,460
Germany	@sportstudio (ZDF)	16 January 2009	60,204	1528	618,649
Ireland	@RTEsport	19 September 2007	138,750	1363	125,858
Italy	@RaiSport	30 November 2011	109,487	709	245,489
Latvia	@ltvsports	4 November 2011	37,652	37	8231
The Netherlands	@NOSsport	22 December 2010	89,782	79	346,060
Norway	@NRK_Sport	19 August 2009	53,642	6077	82,031
Poland	@sport_tvppl	22 January 2010	118,141	1405	124,339
Spain	@deportes_rtve	22 May 2014	53,223	196	94,506
Sweden	@SVTSport	20 January 2010	78,760	4001	164,390
Switzerland	@RTSsport	16 December 2012	65,372	223	25,220
United Kingdom	@C4Sport	9 March 2010	4719	338	140,287

The tweets published by the sampled PSM companies during the timeframe of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics (24 August 2021–5 September 2021) were analyzed. Posts were gathered using Twitonomy (<http://twitonomy.com>, accessed on 6 September 2021), a web-based software program created by Digitonomy, which accesses data via Twitter's application programming interface (API). This specialized tool has been extensively employed in scholarly research on sports communication over recent years (Grimmer and Horky 2018; Ramon and Rojas-Torrijos 2022; Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon 2021). To ensure the retrieval of all of the content published during the examined timeframe, data were extracted on 6 September 2021. The total number of downloaded tweets was N = 6072.

Once the Twitter posts were downloaded, they were processed using Microsoft Excel and subsequently examined using the content analysis technique. Content analysis was defined by Berelson (1952, p. 18) as "a research technique for the objective, systematic and

quantitative description of the manifest content of communication". Due to its flexibility and broad applicability, content analysis has been increasingly used to scrutinize content published by different actors on social media platforms (Clark et al. 2021). By employing "a uniform system of categories" (Franklin et al. 2005, p. 46), we applied this technique to tweets published by PSM companies on their sports Twitter handles, to contrast the research questions (RQ1–RQ3) with the empirical data obtained.

The content analysis codebook included the following variables: date of publication; retweet count; favorite count; Paralympic-themed tweet or not; Paralympic sports covered; gender of protagonists; and the multimedia elements included in each tweet. These variables were informed by previous research focused on the nexus between PSM, sport and agenda diversity on social media (Ramon and Rojas-Torrijos 2022; Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon 2021), as well as by previous literature involving the news coverage of the Paralympic Games (Kolotouchkina et al. 2020; Solves et al. 2018; Solves et al. 2019). Content was coded in two stages. In the first stage, to answer RQ1, all the analysis units (N = 6072) were classified into tweets that were either focused on the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games or not focused on them. In the second phase, the Paralympic-themed tweets (n = 2398) were coded to scrutinize both the agenda diversity and the range of multimedia elements offered by PSM accounts during the event.

#### 4. Results

##### 4.1. Volume, Frequency of Publication and Engagement (RQ1)

The comparative analysis of 6072 tweets demonstrated the uneven attention devoted by European PSM companies to the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games. In the aggregate, 39.42% (n = 2398) of the messages focused on the event, although great imbalances can be observed among the different media organizations. Paralympics coverage represented 86.06% of the content posted by Channel 4, confirming the ongoing commitment of this right-holder to disability sports (Pullen et al. 2020a). Adopting an inclusive approach, content on the Paralympic Games exceeded 60% of the output published by PSM companies in France, Spain and Germany. Conversely, in other countries, such as Ireland, the Netherlands, Italy and Poland, this content only constituted between 20% and 30%. The proportion of tweets devoted to the Paralympics was smaller still in Switzerland (9.87%), Finland and the Czech Republic (9.55%) and Norway (8.33%) (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Volume and frequency of the analyzed tweets.

Country	Account	Tweets	N Paralympics	% Paralympics	Paralympic Tweets/Day
Belgium	@RTBFsport	773	111	14.36%	8.54
Czech Republic	@sportCT	356	34	9.55%	2.62
Finland	@YleSporten	157	15	9.55%	1.15
France	@francetvsport	580	402	69.31%	30.92
Germany	@sportstudio (ZDF)	205	127	61.95%	9.77
Ireland	@RTESport	453	131	28.92%	10.08
Italy	@RaiSport	304	80	26.32%	6.15
Latvia	@ltvsports	129	26	20.16%	2.00
The Netherlands	@NOSsport	355	100	28.17%	7.69
Norway	@NRK_Sport	48	4	8.33%	0.31
Poland	@sport_tvppl	474	95	20.04%	7.31
Spain	@deportes_rtve	1400	938	67.00%	72.15
Sweden	@SVTSport	237	57	24.05%	4.38
Switzerland	@RTSport	314	31	9.87%	2.38
United Kingdom	@C4Sport	287	247	86.06%	19.00

Although athletes with disabilities were indeed featured in the agenda in many cases, their position was diluted due to the overabundance of content related to other high-profile sports and competitions. To illustrate this point, in Belgium, @RTBFsport devoted a significant part of their output to reporting on Formula One, the US Open, two major cycling events (La Vuelta and the Tour de Benelux) and the national men's football team's (the Belgian 'Red Devils') qualifying matches for the Qatar 2022 World Cup. A similar pattern can be observed in the case of @NOSsport in the Netherlands, where news updates about the domestic top-flight football league (Eredivisie) dominated the agenda, followed by detailed attention to Formula One and the major international tennis and cycling events that occurred during the relevant timeframe.

With regards to the frequency of publication, it should be highlighted that @deportes\_rtve published 72.15 tweets per day on the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics. The French broadcaster @francetvsport offered 30.92 Paralympic-themed tweets on average per day, followed by @C4Sport (19) and @RTESport (10.08). These accounts greatly capitalized on the "nowness" of sports (Rowe 2018), offering a continuous stream of information consisting of minute-by-minute updates of events, live scores and Paralympic-themed news.

During the timeframe of the study, the following accounts engaged unevenly with Twitter users. Notably, in the cases of @francetvsport, @RTESport, @RaiSport, @ltvsports, @deportes\_rtve and @C4Sport, Paralympic content achieved higher engagement figures (retweets and favorites) than non-Paralympic content (Table 3). This demonstrates that, in different countries, Paralympic information generated high interest among the public and even surpassed the figures obtained by tweets devoted to other sports and competitions.

**Table 3.** Engagement figures obtained for Paralympic-content and non-Paralympic content.

Country	Account	Paralympic Content			Non-Paralympic Content		
		N	Retweets	Favourites	N	Retweets	Favourites
Belgium	@RTBFsport	111	67	419	662	490	2368
Czech Republic	@sportCT	34	98	3257	332	2784	28,846
Finland	@YleSporten	15	0	12	142	17	150
France	@francetvsport	402	13,165	83,253	178	802	5395
Germany	@sportstudio (ZDF)	127	227	2638	78	253	3799
Ireland	@RTESport	131	2493	24,965	322	1718	13,405
Italy	@RaiSport	80	2253	22,517	224	1243	16,127
Latvia	@ltvsports	26	105	844	103	72	355
The Netherlands	@NOSsport	100	632	10,430	225	901	11,408
Norway	@NRK_Sport	4	2	20	44	20	276
Poland	@sport_tvpp1	95	1189	9845	379	1917	30,290
Spain	@deportes_rtve	938	13,129	54,314	462	2028	7383
Sweden	@SVTSport	57	142	2645	180	280	6868
Switzerland	@RTSsport	31	28	251	329	110	1190
United Kingdom	@C4Sport	247	10,370	59,830	40	379	5245

#### 4.2. Diversity Agenda: Sports and Gender (RQ2)

Our findings reveal that, in Tokyo 2020, European PSM companies gave prominence to highly commodified Paralympic sports while minimizing the exposure of other disciplines, thus reinforcing the diversity imbalances observed in legacy media (Pullen et al. 2020a). Leaving aside 'multisport' posts (19.30% of the sample), three Paralympic sports had a significant presence and accounted for half of the sample: swimming (n = 503; 20.98%), athletics (n = 449; 18.72%) and cycling (n = 257; 10.72%). Those three sports were followed by wheelchair basketball (n = 130; 5.42%) and table tennis (n = 125; 5.21%) (Table 4).



**Table 4.** Paralympics sports agenda.

Sports	N	%
Archery	22	0.92
Athletics	449	18.72
Badminton	24	1.00
Boccia	18	0.75
Cycling	257	10.72
Equestrian	40	1.67
Five-a-side football	46	1.92
Goalball	9	0.38
Judo	30	1.25
Paracanoe	26	1.08
Powerlifting	16	0.67
Rowing	15	0.63
Shooting	30	1.25
Sitting volleyball	9	0.38
Swimming	503	20.98
Table tennis	125	5.21
Taekwondo	7	0.29
Triathlon	67	2.79
Wheelchair basketball	130	5.42
Wheelchair fencing	10	0.42
Wheelchair rugby	30	1.25
Wheelchair tennis	70	2.92
Multisport	465	19.39
Total	2398	100.00

Many events and protagonists did not receive the wider visibility and recognition that social media platforms can easily afford. The emphasis on hyper-commodified Paralympic sports came at the expense of other minority disciplines. In fact, eight sports (archery, boccia, powerlifting, rowing, goalball, sitting volleyball, taekwondo and wheelchair fencing) were barely visible across the sample: they did not reach 1% of the coverage and received a total number of 106 tweets combined.

The scope of accounts such as *@francetosport* (20), *@C4Sport* (18) and *@deportes\_rtv* (17) was remarkably diverse, as the three corporations covered a wide range of Paralympic disciplines (Table 5). Those accounts were followed by *@sportstudio* and *@RaiSport*—which covered 13 sports each—and *@RTBFsport*, *@NOSsport* and *@SVTSport*, which delivered news on 12 individual and team sports. PSM companies in Finland, Latvia, Norway and Switzerland demonstrated a lower level of diversity, showcasing five or fewer Paralympic sports in their timelines. In those countries, attention was concentrated on those sports that achieved more medals, such as athletics in the cases of Finland and Switzerland, or equestrianism in the case of Latvia. It should be noted that, in nine countries across the sample (the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Poland, Ireland, the Czech Republic, Finland, Norway and Switzerland), the total number of Paralympic sports covered by PSM companies was lower than the number of Paralympic sports in which their home athletes competed.

The diversity imbalance of these accounts in relation to Tokyo 2020 also had a gendered dimension. Table 6 demonstrates that the Paralympic information disseminated by PSM companies on Twitter primarily focused on male athletes ( $n = 1057$ ; 44.08% of the sample). Female participants were featured in 746 posts (31.11% of the sample), while nearly a quarter of the posted Twitter messages were devoted both to male and female competitors ( $n = 595$ ; 24.81%). Notable exceptions to this trend can be found in the cases of *@RTESport* (Ireland), *@RTSport* (Switzerland) and *@SVTSport* (Sweden), where publications devoted to female athletes exceeded half of their output. In those countries, the successes of female competitors such as Ellen Keane (swimming), Katie-George Dunleavy, Anna Beck and

Louise Jannering (cycling), Manuela Schär and Catherine Debrunner (athletics), or Louise Etzner Jakobsson (equestrian) drove a great part of the PSM coverage on Twitter.

**Table 5.** Number of Paralympic sports covered by PSM companies and competitors in each country.

Country	Account	N Paralympic Sports Covered	Competitors
France	@francetvsport	20	61 in 13 sports
United Kingdom	@C4Sport	18	227 in 19 sports
Spain	@deportes_rtve	17	139 in 13 sports
Germany	@sportstudio (ZDF)	13	134 in 18 sports
Italy	@RaiSport	13	115 in 16 sports
Belgium	@RTBFsport	12	31 in 10 sports
The Netherlands	@NOSsport	12	72 in 12 sports
Sweden	@SVTSport	12	26 in 11 sports
Poland	@sport_tvppl	11	89 in 12 sports
Ireland	@RTEsport	9	31 in 10 sports
Czech Republic	@sportCT	7	28 in 8 sports
Finland	@YleSporten	5	16 in 7 sports
Latvia	@ltvsports	4	7 in 4 sports
Norway	@NRK_Sport	3	15 in 7 sports
Switzerland	@RTSsport	3	20 in 9 sports

**Table 6.** Gender of protagonists.

Country	Account	Male		Female		Mixed		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Belgium	@RTBFsport	49	44.14	24	21.62	38	34.23	111	100.00
Czech Republic	@sportCT	22	64.71	3	8.82	9	26.47	34	100.00
Finland	@YleSporten	9	60.00	5	33.33	1	6.67	15	100.00
France	@francetvsport	252	62.69	77	19.15	73	18.16	402	100.00
Germany	@sportstudio	55	43.31	35	27.56	37	29.13	127	100.00
Ireland	@RTEsport	42	32.06	70	53.44	19	14.50	131	100.00
Italy	@RaiSport	22	27.50	35	43.75	23	28.75	80	100.00
Latvia	@ltvsports	11	42.31	7	26.92	8	30.77	26	100.00
The Netherlands	@NOSsport	36	36.00	35	35.00	29	29.00	100	100.00
Norway	@NRK_Sport	1	25.00	2	50.00	1	25.00	4	100.00
Poland	@sport_tvppl	37	38.95	38	40.00	20	21.05	95	100.00
Spain	@deportes_rtve	398	42.43	300	31.98	240	25.59	938	100.00
Sweden	@SVTSport	15	26.32	29	50.88	13	22.81	57	100.00
Switzerland	@RTSsport	10	32.26	16	51.61	5	16.13	31	100.00
United Kingdom	@C4Sport	98	39.68	70	28.34	79	31.98	247	100.00
	Total	1057	44.08	746	31.11	595	24.81	2398	100.00

#### 4.3. Deployment of Multimedia Elements (RQ3)

The use of multimedia elements across the board facilitated audiences' appreciation of Paralympic sports and protagonists who tend to be ignored in mainstream media. As Table 7 reveals, 98.87% of the posts that constitute the sample included multimedia elements. Most of the accounts—with the sole exception of @RTSsport in Switzerland—made extensive use of multimedia components, being fully aware of their value when it comes to mobilizing users' attention and enhancing the completeness and quality of the information provided (Naraine and Parent 2017). The 'Link + Photograph' format was the most employed across the sample (45.50%), followed by 'Link + Video' (23.19%).

**Table 7.** Deployment of multimedia elements.

Multimedia Component	N	%
Link + photograph	1091	45.50
Link + video	556	23.19
Video	346	14.43
Link	267	11.13
Photograph	64	2.67
Link + photo gallery	34	1.42
No multimedia	27	1.13
Photo gallery	12	0.50
Audio	1	0.04
Link + audio	0	0.00
Survey	0	0.00
Total	2398	100.00

The outlets that made greater use of video in their Paralympic-themed tweets were *@francetvsport* (n = 302; 75.12% of its output), *@C4Sport* (n = 208; 84.21% of its content) and *@deportes\_rtve* (n = 597; 63.65% of its production). In a similar vein to the findings from other studies (Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon 2021; Ramon and Rojas-Torrijos 2022), the audio format was nearly absent from the PSM Twitter timelines: only *@RTSport* published one audio-based post focused on the Swiss para-athlete Sofia Gonzalez. Other formats, such as surveys, were not displayed during the studied timeframe.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

As Rowe (2004, p. 385) highlights, “questions of access and equity in sports participation have been historically and continually prominent”. Likewise, the access and proper visibility of athletes with impairment in sports media is an area of heightened importance for PSM, given the affordances provided by social networking sites. Free from “the restrictions of television programming” (Antunovic and Bartoluci 2023, p. 170), digital spaces can easily allow media outlets to provide expanded coverage of Paralympians, contributing to enhancing their social recognition and valorization.

Phillips and Martin (2020, p. 584) remind us that the coverage of sporting events “can attract the attention of millions of viewers and can also help to shape community identities, affect imaginaries of place and can become deeply inscribed in a public’s memory”. As one of the largest sporting mega-events in the world, the celebration of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games offered PSM outlets a crucial opportunity to broaden the agenda while affording space to diverse Paralympic sports and protagonists through their myriad platforms.

However, as can be seen from the present analysis of the European PSM sports-centred Twitter accounts, these opportunities were not fully met. It is true that different PSM outlets, such as Channel 4, France TV, RTVE and ZDF, provided consistent reporting on the Paralympic Games on Twitter, leveraging the potential of multimedia elements to provide the most comprehensive coverage possible and enhance the visibility of Paralympians. That said, considering the whole sample, it can be argued that the overall visibility of athletes with impairments was limited during the timeframe of the Paralympic Games. European PSM coverage on Twitter during the event remained focused on mainstream and able-bodied sports, thus confirming the findings of previous research that indicate that PSM sports coverage on social media “reinforces, rather than counteracts, the long-standing diversity imbalances present in the analogue age” (Ramon and Rojas-Torrijos 2022, p. 290).

Considering the proportion of tweets devoted to the Paralympic Games, it can be argued that, in certain countries, PSM did not offer coverage that counteracted the idea of disability sport being a media ‘blind spot’ (Morlandstø and Mathisen 2022; Sjøvaag and Kvalheim 2019). In contrast to routine Twitter news flows (Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon 2021),

the gender gap in the coverage proved to be narrower in Tokyo 2020, but inequalities in the space allocated to both male and female athletes persisted across different territories.

In addition, several PSM outlets across the sample did not engage with a wide range of Paralympic sports, but rather reproduced the hegemonic position of highly commodified disciplines, thus reinforcing the findings of previous research (Pullen et al. 2020a). This approach, which replicates the same agenda model that can be found in the coverage of able-bodied sports, limited the visibility of different minority disciplines.

It should be noted that the amount and type of coverage varied from country to country, depending on different factors such as the sports culture in the respective territories, the national relationship with the Paralympic Games throughout history, the number of competitors who took part in each discipline and the total number of medals obtained by national athletes in Tokyo 2020. For instance, @C4Sport has offered sustained coverage of the Paralympics over recent instances of the event (Pullen et al. 2020a), while giving recognition both to the large size of the British delegation (227 competitors in 19 sports) and their success in Tokyo with 124 medals (Great Britain finished second in the medal rank, after China). Arguably, the Paralympic coverage offered by PSM outlets such as @sportCT, @YleSporten and @NRK\_Sport was also influenced by the figures from their home countries participating in Tokyo (Czech Republic: 28 competitors in eight sports, eight medals; Finland; 16 competitors in seven sports, five medals; Norway: 15 competitors in seven sports, four medals).

In addition, as Humprecht et al. (2022, p. 2) stress, “media systems are increasingly shaped by the rise of information and communication technologies”. Across Europe, PSM companies “highlight the strength of Twitter for informing highly news-interested users and its speed in breaking news situations” (Sehl et al. 2018, p. 17). However, differences between the use of Twitter in the countries that integrate sample should be considered. For instance, the high volume and pace of publication displayed by @deportes\_rtve can be related to the prominent position of Twitter in the Spanish media landscape, where according to the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022* it is currently used by 19% of citizens for news purposes (Newman 2022, p. 103). Arguably, both the lower volumes and slower paces of publication shown by PSM in countries such as Czech Republic, Norway and Switzerland can be linked to the relatively limited usage of Twitter for news among citizens in those territories (Newman 2022).

It should be noted that, in a similar vein to coverage of the Olympic Games, coverage of the Paralympics tends to focus on those athletes “who bring glory to the nation” (Bruce 2013, p. 128). This trend, along with the conditioning factors and trade-offs linked to the commercial nature of social networking sites, cannot be overlooked (Steiner et al. 2019); however, the diversity imbalances observed here raise important questions for the construction of cultural citizenship in the digital age. As Antunovic and Bartoluci (2023, p. 169) remind us, “the media do not simply reflect values of society, but play an important role in determining which sports, stories and voices become dominant”. Additionally, as Morlandstø and Mathisen (2022, p. 4) contend, media ‘blind spots’ “have implications for democracy, citizenship and public sphere”. With disability sport not being considered relevant to the agendas of many countries, the scarcity of content contributes to “systematic gaps in public knowledge” (Morlandstø and Mathisen 2022, p. 5), while also restricting Paralympians’ opportunities to achieve wider “social recognition and institutional support” (Ramon and Rojas-Torrijos 2022, p. 934).

Considering the societal, economic and sporting impacts of editorial decisions, PSM outlets should take into account the importance of promoting inclusion. In the process, PSM should not neglect audiences’ increasing interest in Paralympic sport. As noted in the results, in countries including France, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Latvia and the UK, Paralympic-themed content garnered higher engagement figures than non-Paralympic content. With this in mind, PSM outlets should capitalize on this growing social interest and provide more diverse coverage that helps to raise the profiles of athletes with disabilities among

the wider population, thus contributing to the enhancement of cultural citizenship through sports coverage.

As with any project, this research has limitations that open up possibilities for future studies. First, while Twitter remains a central platform within the sports-media complex, future studies should also examine the portrayal of disability sport on other social networking sites such as Instagram, Facebook and TikTok. Second, future research should continue examining the coverage of disability sport offered by PSM during the forthcoming Summer and Winter Paralympic Games (Paris 2024, Milano Cortina 2026, Los Angeles 2028 and Brisbane 2032), as well as the routine coverage developed in the periods between Games. Future works on the Paralympics should consider broadening the sample to incorporate other European PSM, like ARD (Germany) and SRF (Switzerland) as well as PSM outside of Europe.

Third, subsequent studies on content could also benefit from embracing a qualitative approach that examines the language embedded in Paralympic-themed tweets. This approach could be particularly helpful to better understand whether digital platforms contribute to fostering progressive coverage of Paralympians that steers away from long-standing ableist narratives and stereotypes (Cherney et al. 2015; Kolotouchkina et al. 2021; Macková 2021; Pate and Hardin 2013; Schantz and Gilbert 2008).

In addition, the adoption of other methods, such as in-depth interviews with social media managers and editors, could be a productive means of deepening our understanding of the newsroom cultures, editorial priorities and conditioning factors involved in the production and transmission of Paralympic-themed content on digital platforms. Moreover, other qualitative methods, such as focus groups with audiences, could provide researchers with detailed insight into citizens' perceptions of and expectations for the coverage of disability sport.

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