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The 2012 Cultural Olympiad and Paralympic Games: An Opportunity to Challenge the Archetypal, Stereotypes of Disability for Good?

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Introduction

In less than 24 months, the Paralympic Games, allegedly, the second biggest sporting event in the world sport arena and across the world will visit London and provide a unique opportunity to raise awareness and challenge stereotypes of disability which we find in our community.

Along with this the Cultural Olympiad programme forms part of the logic of equalitarian management between the two mega-sport events, the Olympic and Paralympic Games. Indeed, among the proposals that emerged from the IOC 2000 Commission, was recommendation 15 which proposed the formalisation of stronger ties between the IOC and the International Paralympic Committee (IPC). As a result, nowadays Paralympic and Olympic athletes perform in the same stadiums, are hosted in the same Olympic Village and there is the same organising committee for both events (Pappous, Marcellini & de Leseleuc, 2011). The parallels between the Olympic and Paralympic Games is also reflected in the celebration of a common Cultural Olympiad.

This programme of events and festivals has evolved over the last century from being a competitive Olympic Art programme where artists competed for bronze, silver and gold medals concurrently with the Olympic sports events. The first competitive art programme was held during the Stockholm Summer Olympics in 1912. By 1952, the decision to replace the Olympic Arts programme with non-competitive cultural exhibitions and events successfully promoted greater links between Olympic sports and art. Interestingly, this was the same year the Paralympic Games was transformed into an international event.

The present Cultural Olympiad is thus a programme of national and regional cultural events and festivals inspired by De Coubertin's vision for the Olympics to encourage a symbiosis between sport and art, and enthusiastically delivered by the nations and regions Creative Programmers.

The closing ceremonies of the XIX Olympic and XIV Paralympic Games marked the start of the London Cultural Olympiad; the most ambitious pre-Games cultural programme since its formalisation at the XXV Summer Games. From the Barcelona Summer Olympic Games in 1992 to the Beijing Games in 2008, host cities have focused the Cultural Olympiad events and activities around the host city; London has chosen to extend this to a nationwide programme that is to be: ".....the largest in the history of the Games" (Lander & Crowe, 2010, p. 35). The intention is for all regions to have the opportunity to participate in cultural activities that are inspired by the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, but shaped by regional identities, traditions and cultures. The West Midlands, for example, are showcasing their multicultural communities by combining dance with Bollywood, while the South East are celebrating their Paralympic legacy with an on-going series of disabled and Deaf sport and art events. The Cultural Olympiad therefore is not only to celebrate the Games but to strengthen community pride and cohesion through regionally inspired small and large-scale events.

The Cultural Olympiad offers a unique opportunity for disabled artists to obtain funding in order to celebrate the inspiration of the Olympic and Paralympic Games, and produce inclusive, artistic performance made by disabled artists themselves. This will be a clear contribution to a long-time claim of the Disability Rights Movement who have promoted the slogan “Nothing about us without us”, referring to the argument that no social decision should be made about a group of society without the participation of the members of that group (Charlton, 1998). As part of this aim, the largest United Kingdom (UK) programme of arts, sport and culture commissions by Deaf and disabled people is supported predominantly by the Olympic Lottery Distributor, through a £3million fund. Collaborative efforts among Deaf and disabled artists, alongside non-disabled artists, through Unlimited, draws on a social model and so eliminates those constraints typically associated with physical disability, and the stereotypes that are evident in today’s society. An example of an ‘Unlimited project’ is the Candoco Dance Company where disabled choreographers are commissioned to produce large-scale dance pieces for both disabled and non-disabled dancers for the final year’s celebrations.

By encouraging networking and collaboration through cultural events and festivals, the potential to challenge and dispel the archetypal stereotypes of disability for good are very real. The London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games (LOCOG’s) ambition to use the Paralympic Games to “change public attitudes towards disability, celebrate the excellence of Paralympic sport and to enshrine from the very outset that the two Games are an integrated whole” (Lord Coe, LOCOG President). These sentiments are echoed in regional Cultural Olympiad programmes around the UK, but perhaps more so in the South East of England whose Paralympic legacy has served as a catalyst for collaboration between disabled and non-disabled artists, sports people and local communities.

On paper, the rationale and proposed outcomes of the Cultural Olympiad and Paralympic Games favour the opportunity for building social capital, however there are a number of barriers that serve to challenge the extent of that success. For the purpose of this paper, only two constraints are identified and discussed further.

The mass media: Paralympic Games and the Cultural Olympiad

The mass media play a fundamental role in the transmission of prevailing cultural values and in the production and reproduction of social representations. The Paralympic Games have, until now, received limited and biased coverage (Pappous et al., 2011). This is also true of the Cultural Olympiad (Garcia & Miah, 2007). Barnes (1992) noted that popular cultural images of disability perpetuate negative stereotypes and that this negativity persists partly because it is constantly reproduced through the media. This negative portrayal of disabled people in culture has been evident in films and other creative industries where disabled people are frequently cast as the villain, and ironically, rarely cast to play the disabled character, such as in *Forrest Gump* or *Rain Man*. According to Barnes (1992) categorisation of stereotypical depictions, the media frequently depict people with disabilities as: pitiable and pathetic, an object of violence, sinister or evil, curios, super cripple, object of ridicule, as their own worst and only enemy, a burden, sexually abnormal, or incapable of participating fully in community life and as “ordinary” people who just happen to have impairments.

One could think that the involvement with sport could liberate people with disabilities from the stereotypical depiction as described above, however Pappous and colleagues (2011; in press) concluded that disability sport is marginalised and trivialised in most newspapers. In relation to the coverage of disability sport, the use of language and terminology by newspaper journalists reaffirms traditional, medicalised views of the disabled (Thomas & Smith, 2003; Schantz & Gilbert, 2001) without acknowledging the socio-genetic dimensions of disability (Barnes, 1992). This results in further strengthening negative attitudes toward the disabled (Deleseleuc et al., 2010). These studies illustrate the presence of severe bias in the representation of disabled athletes by editors, journalists and photographers.

According to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and Office for Disability Issues, one way to influence attitudes and society's perceptions of disabled people is by "promoting inclusion and disability equality through the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad and its programmes." (DCMS) As has already been mentioned, the Paralympic Games, until now, has received limited coverage from media, however there are strong expectations that the parallel event of the Cultural Olympiad that will accompany the 2012 Paralympic Games will mark a turning point and will offer an exceptional platform to powerfully demonstrate an alternative, positive profile of achievements of disabled people.

These high expectations are based, on one hand, on the high expected numbers of media journalist that have expressed their interest to report on the Games. More than 10 000 press and media journalists from around the world will cover a mega-sport event in which 4 200 Paralympic athletes will participate. It is worth mentioning that it will be the very first time that a commercial channel (Channel 4) will broadcast the Games, offering widespread media coverage that will include 150 hours of television coverage, and running its biggest ever marketing campaign to promote the Games. It is hoped that not only the Games will attract more media coverage, but also the Cultural Olympiad creative events linked to the Paralympic Games. Kevin Lygo, Channel 4's Director of Television and Content, stated that: "We are genuinely thrilled to be given this opportunity to work with LOCOG to bring Paralympic sport into full public focus before, during and beyond the 2012 Games and to deliver a lasting legacy, including altering public attitudes to disability and disability sport" (Carter, 2010).

On the other hand, it is not only the increased interest of the media but also the long and strong tradition that the Paralympic movement has in UK that makes many people think that the 2012 Paralympic Games will offer an exceptional platform to powerfully demonstrate an alternative, positive profile of achievements of disabled people. The Paralympic Games were 'born' in the UK, with the Games forerunner, the Stoke Mandeville Games, being held in England until becoming an international event in 1952. Thus, the Cultural Olympiad associated with the 2012 Games offers an ideal context, in terms of place and time, and provides a well-timed unique opportunity to promote a positive and empowering media portrayal of disabled people, a community group that has been both underrepresented and misrepresented in mass media.

The expected effects of a `unique atmosphere`

The `unique atmosphere` that is generated from small and large-scale events and festivals is a guaranteed phenomenon that engenders `community spirit`, encourages social cohesion and changes attitudes (Picard & Robinson, 2006; Chalip, 2006). Furthermore, the `atmosphere` generated from events challenges our social norms and distinctions by creating a liminoid space (in which ordinary social roles are suspended) (Chalip, 2006), thus reducing inhibitions and encouraging participation in a new activity or socialising outside usual peer groups. Reference to liminality can be found within various 2012 Games and Legacy reports however the more manageable term `higher plane` is used instead, indicating that the phenomenon arising from festivals and events is recognised as a valuable and known outcome with the potential to carry forward the momentum into the legacy or post event period. These short-term changes in behaviour and attitude can therefore translate into lifelong changes but only under certain conditions. Time is essential if networking and relationships are to develop into robust, mutually-beneficial partnerships. Without this, those short term gains will remain as such. Having said that, relationships can only truly flourish if the mechanisms that promote them are understood and monitored over time. This presents the second barrier for consideration in this paper.

Difficulties in measuring the intangible social benefits of the Cultural Olympiad and the Paralympic Games

Intangible social benefits are inherently difficult to measure and subsequently remain as anecdotal reference points that serve to humanise strategy documents and press releases with an emotional `feel-good` factor. Unlike tangible social benefits such as increased employment and training, the intangible outcomes are not evidenced in annual government statistics at all, or fully researched within the context of the Cultural Olympiad or the Paralympic Games. Without the means to measure, monitor and record these benefits over time, there is limited scope to learn and build on those critical success factors that achieve long term change in people`s attitudes and behaviour to disability.

One of few studies that does attempt to measure the intangible social benefits is that from Pappous et al (2011). By measuring the media coverage of the Paralympic Games, the research concluded that the Paralympic Games had a long-term effect on the media coverage of disability sport, not only during the Games but also four years later. The impact of continued media exposure well into the legacy period has the potential to act as a `substitute` catalyst once the Games is over, and could help to convert temporary changes in behaviour and attitude in to lifelong changes.

The 2012 Cultural Olympiad and Paralympic Games should influence the direction for future Games by providing a blueprint that successfully challenges the stereotypes associated with disability. It could even be argued that the UK is in the best position to achieve this goal however, until the Games are concluded the actual long term impact of the nation and region wide Cultural Olympiad remains unknown."

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