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Source: Getty Images for the IPC.

# Media Guide: How to cover the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games

ATHANASIOS (SAKIS) PAPPOUS e DORALICE LANGE DE SOUZA



*The impact of the Rio 2016 Paralympics on the media was felt well before the opening ceremony at the Maracana Stadium and will continue to be felt for many years to come. For over a decade now the Brazilian Paralympics Committee (BPC) has been working to promote a wider understanding of para-athletics and of the wide range of categories among the events and athletes. During this time we have seen the enthusiasm with which sections of the press have responded to Paralympic events to which many had never been previously exposed, but, equally, we have had to deal with all-too-frequent instances of stereotyping, prejudice and biased reporting as well.*

*Paralympians are capable of extraordinary fetes and their impairment is only one characteristic among many that go towards defining the human being – neither the most nor least important. These are top athletes, the majority of whom live for and form their sport. They represent the best in Brazil, and we are justifiably proud of their achievements.*

*We have been conscious over the years, however, that the reality for those who deal with para-athletes in their day to day lives – as we do at BPC – is very far removed from that of millions of Brazilians who, due to issues of accessibility and visibility in our society, rarely interact with people with impairments. In this context, the Paralympics taking place for the first time in Brazil, and Latin America, provides us with a great opportunity to challenge and change attitudes towards impairment.*

*In order for this to be achieved, the participation of the media is absolutely essential. Because of this, we are immensely pleased with the University of Kent's project, in partnership with the Federal University of Parana, which led to the production of this guide. The BPC immediately embraced the concept and it is our hope that this publication will be of help to media professionals, especially those who are experiencing the Paralympics for the first time.*

*We guarantee that there will be no lack of great stories and great events to recount!  
We hope you enjoy the guide and we wish you all the best in your work.*

A handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to read 'A Parsons'.

Andrew Parsons  
Brazilian Paralympic  
Committee President



Dear readers,

At the IPC we aspire to make for a more inclusive society for people with an impairment through para-sport and I am delighted that Rio 2016 will be the biggest Paralympic Games to-date.

Latin America's first Paralympics will feature around 4,350 athletes from 170 countries, competing in 22 sports. We aim to build on the momentum of London 2012 by setting new records in terms of spectator attendance, TV audiences, athletic performance and social legacy.

Even before the Games have started we know they will be the most widely broadcast in Paralympic history. More than 125 countries and territories will show the Games to a record cumulative TV audience in excess of four billion people.

The growing interest in Paralympic sport has been down to the ever-improving performances of para-athletes. Many are now full-time and benefit from high performance training programmes on a par with their Olympic counterparts.

This improvement in standards across all sports has resulted in greater media coverage. It is this ever increasing quality and quantity of media coverage that is acting as catalyst for the Paralympic Games to change and challenge deep-rooted views in society regarding disability. Today, the Paralympic Games are the world's number one sporting event for driving social inclusion and I truly believe these Games will change Latin America forever.

I hope you enjoy your experience covering the Rio 2016 Paralympics and would like to thank you for your continued hard work.

Enjoy the Games.



*Philip Craven*

Sir Philip Craven MBE  
IPC President



## INTRODUCTION

In September 2016 the Paralympic Games, one of the greatest sporting events in the world, will take place in Rio de Janeiro. The Games represent a unique opportunity to educate the public on different types of impairment and how to combat stereotypes related to the question of impairment. The fact that the Games will be taking place in Brazil, with excellent media coverage, will allow the promotion of positive images of the Paralympic athletes and of impairment generally. In other words, the media can contribute to raising the profile and recognition of Paralympic athletes, which will help all people with impairment to overcome the challenges they face in terms of accessibility and inclusion.

The media plays a fundamental role in the transmission of cultural values and in the production and dissemination of social representation. However, various international studies have shown that the standard of media coverage of the Paralympics has fallen well below the standards set by the Olympics. Unfortunately, the majority of media professionals has little knowledge for the Paralympic Games, which leads to a stereotypical coverage of the event and of the Paralympic athletes.

In order to promote a more inclusive and fairer coverage of sports for people with impairment, two academic institutions, the University of Kent and the Federal University of Parana, have joined forces and, with financial support from the Newton Fund/Araucaria Foundation, have produced this guide (which was in its original version is in Portuguese) for the use of professionals in the Brazilian media so that they can promote a more inclusive image of people with impairment during Rio 2016.

We are aware that for many journalists the Rio Paralympics 2016 will be their first experience of people with impairment and of Paralympic sports. Because of this the information in this guide is intended to help them with their task of providing positive and accurate coverage. A significant part of the guidance offered is inspired by the *“Guide to Reporting on Paralympics”* of the British Paralympic Association”, published for the London Games of 2012, and the *“Guide to Reporting on Persons with an Impairment”*, published by the International Paralympic Committee in 2014 and the authors would like to acknowledge the help and inspiration they received from those two institutions.



## 1.1. TEXTS

### 1.1.1. Focus first on the athlete and not the impairment

When writing about the Paralympics the fundamental principle is that you should treat the athletes with disabilities with the same respect you offer to able-bodied athletes. The basic rule is to address the athlete first, not the impairment. Paralympic athletes want to be treated first and foremost as athletes and not a persons with a disability. Vaios Gioras, a member of the Greek wheelchair basketball team in the 2004 explained in an interview:

*“Ask me what you like but not about my accident. We are here to show the world that we are athletes and not that we are people with mobility difficulties”.*

While analysing the coverage of past Paralympics we came across many headlines such as “Visually Deficient Wins Silver for Brazil!” This way of referring to an athlete is problematic as it focuses more on the impairment than the person/athlete. It would be better to identify the athlete by name instead of speaking about them in anonymous, generic terms such as Visual Deficient. Far better to say “Mary X, para-athlete, wins Silver for Brazil”.

Paralympians, like all Olympians, sacrifice years of their lives preparing for high-level competition. Therefore, they deserve to be treated the same as their Olympic colleagues. In other words, they should be treated no more and no less than any high-level competitive athlete.

### 1.1.2. Impairment does not equate to suffering

The Paralympic athletes don't see themselves as victims of suffering in some way. Their impairment is part of who they are. It is quite common for journalists to describe athletes with disabilities as “being a victim of ...” or “suffering from” a condition. This reinforces stereotypes about disability as equating to suffering whereas Paralympic athletes demonstrate that people with impairments can lead happy and fulfilled lives, achieving the highest levels of sporting performance. Thus try void terms that suggest the athletes are deficient, fragile or tragic in some way – for example “He/She suffers from a degenerative condition that paralyses the muscles”.

Avoid terms such as “suffers from”, “victim of”, “afflicted with” – these terms stigmatise and suggest a tragic element in the person's life. Paralympic athletes see themselves as in a context of pos-



sibility and high performance so they should not be treated as suffering victims.

### 1.1.3. First and foremost athletes

**Don't identify people according to their impairment but according to their qualities and abilities.** Use expressions linked to sporting contexts rather than adjectives associated with deficiency. We suggest using terms such as "athletes", "runners", "swimmers", "wrestlers" rather than "wheelchair bound", "blind", "amputees". If it is necessary to refer to an impairment, this should come after identifying the athlete and achievement.

Avoid	Suggestions
Handicapped/ disabled	Athletes, or, disabled athlete.
Wheelchair bound	Wheelchair user or a person who uses a wheelchair

### 1.1.4. Prioritise the sporting achievements of the athletes and not their impairment

The time and space a journalist has to cover a news item is very short. Because of this, make the best use of the time and space available by focusing more on the performance of the athlete rather than the impairment. If it is necessary to refer to an impairment, don't lead with it. Prioritise an ath-

lete's achievements and abilities rather than disabilities. Remember that the Paralympic athletes are competitive athletes who have worked hard to get to where they are. So, although the narrative of victory over adversity and physical challenges may be a legitimate part of the story, we should prioritise the sporting achievements.

### 1.1.5. Terminology

See below, in the first column, examples of terminology used in the past that should be avoided. In the second column we suggest alternatives.

Inappropriate	Terms apropiados
<b>Deficient, crippled, paralysed, handicapped, invalid</b> – these expressions reinforce negative stereotypes of physical disability and defects.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use "athlete", where further explanation is required, use "athlete with an impairment" or "athlete with an amputation/cerebral palsy/spinal cord injury."</li> </ul>
<b>Suffers from, victim of, afflicted by</b> – these terms stigmatise and suggest tragedy whereas athletes see themselves as high-achievers who shouldn't be seen in terms of victims.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use "an athlete had an car accident which damaged his spine/ which led to an amputation etc."</li> </ul>
<b>Confined to a wheelchair</b> – to the athlete concerned the chair is an instrument of freedom and movement, not confinement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use "an athlete who uses a wheelchair or wheelchair athlete".</li> </ul>



## 1.2. PHOTO COVERAGE

### “An image is worth a thousand words”

(Confucius)

Photographs transmit emotions and help us express how we would like to be perceived. They also tell a story and can have a bigger impact than words in themselves. In addition, their impact is immediate. Therefore, in accordance with the directive of the International Paralympic Committee, athletes should be portrayed as “dynamic, triumphant, international individuals”.

The motto of the Paralympics is “Spirit in Motion”. Therefore, photos should be selected on the basis that they show athletes in action in the competitive field. We shouldn’t focus on the impairment but equally we shouldn’t try to hide it. The Paralympics are a unique opportunity to showcase the abilities and competitiveness of the athletes: remember that the athletes – not the impairment – should be the central focus of the image.



Source: International Paralympic Committee.





## TYPES OF IMAGES TO BE AVOIDED

### 1.2.1. Passive poses that accentuate the impairment

Often Paralympic athletes are portrayed in a passive pose before or after the competition. Such photos prevent the public from perceiving and appreciating the sporting efforts and abilities of the athletes. It is preferable to portray them in action – swimming, running, jumping, wrestling etc. The symbol of the Paralympics, the three “agitos”, from the Latin “I move myself”, symbolise constant movement, always advancing, exactly what the photographs should be projecting.



Source: Authors.



Source: Getty Images for the IPC .

### 1.2.2. Photos which portray failure

Many people, including medics, believe that demanding physical sports are not recommended for people with impairment. Photos like the one below, which show paralympic athletes falling can reinforce such beliefs.



Source: Getty Images for the IPC.



### 1.2.3. Photos which portray the athletes in conditions of isolation and dependency, or which hide their faces

Avoid photos which show athletes outside the sporting context or which only show part of the athlete's body, or fail to show the face. These photos tend to imply dependency, limitation and failure. Photos not showing the face tend to anonymise the athlete in the same way as phrases such as "the blind" and "confined to a wheelchair", fitting them into a category based on perceived disability, as if they are part of a homogenous group that exists in an obscure form in an isolated world.



Source: Getty Images for the IPC.



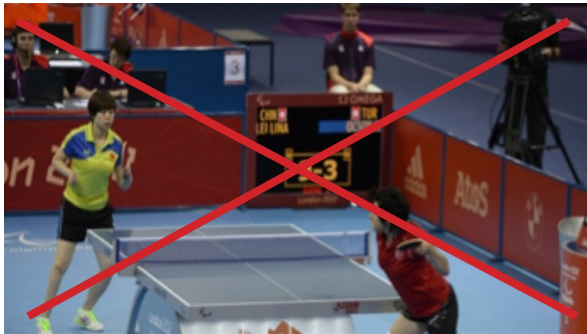
Source: Authors.



### 1.2.4. Photos which hide deficiency

During coverage of past Games there have been cases where the impairment has been deleted. This is not necessary

#### Edited photo



Source: International Paralympic Committee.  
This photo was cut by the authorities to illustrate the problem of edited photos.

#### Unedited photo



Source: International Paralympic Committee.

#### Edited photo



Source: Getty Images for the IPC.  
This photo was cut by the authorities to illustrate the problem of edited photos.

#### Unedited photo

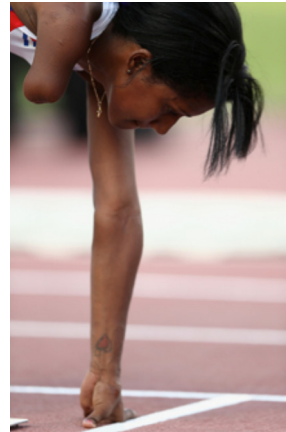


Source: Getty Images for the IPC.



### 1.2.5. Photos that accentuate impairment

We have noticed in the coverage of past Paralympics a number of photos that accentuate the impairment. In this type of photo, like the ones below, we don't see the athlete and we don't see the person. We focus on the prosthesis or wheelchair, or on the missing or partially missing limb. In the same way as it would be strange to focus on the foot or hand of an able bodied athlete, it is strange to focus on the impairment of the para-athlete. We should avoid objectifying the impaired body. We should focus not on what may be missing, but on the strong points and dynamic capacity of the athlete.



Source: Getty Images for the IPC.



Source: Authors.



Source: Authors.



### 1.3. IMAGES THAT PROMOTE THE EMPOWERMENT OF PARALYMPIC ATHLETES

We illustrated examples of photos that fail to promote a positive image of Paralympians. To conclude our brief, below are examples of images that promote the athletic and Olympian spirit. The athletes are represented in action and in a

competitive context. They are dressed in sporting clothes and exhibit facial expressions compatible and expressive of sporting effort and competition. None of the photos suggest an intention to highlight deficiency.



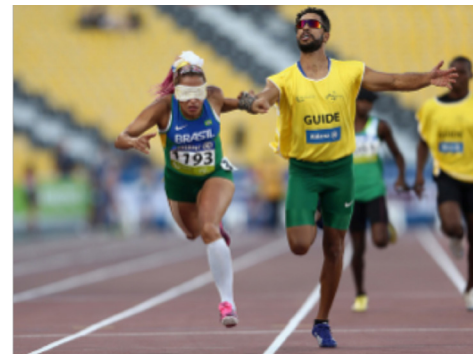
Source: Getty Images for the IPC.



Source: Getty Images for the IPC.



Source: International Paralympic Committee.



Source: Getty Images for the IPC.



### 1.3.1. The importance of camera angle

Many athletes in the Paralympics compete in wheelchairs or in a sitting position as, for example, in seated volleyball. It is suggested that the camera angle should include the dynamic characteristics of the sport. There is scientific evidence to suggest that camera angle has a significant effect on our perceptions of an individual. For example, photos taken from an overhead angle are not a good op-

tion for portraying athletes who use wheelchairs or who are seated,. Photos taken from a high angle make the subjects of the photography look smaller, more passive and less powerful. Photos taken at eye-level project a message of dynamism and equality. Equally, photos from low angle tend to empower the person being photographed, making them appear more in control of the situation.



Source: International Paralympic Committee.  
Low angle shot: seated volleyball.



Source: Brazilian Paralympic Committee.  
Eye-level shot: Fencing.





Source: Brazilian Paralympic Committee.



Source: Brazilian Paralympic Committee.

### Characteristics of photos that promote a positive image and empower Paralympic athletes

The athletes are portrayed in action in the field of competition

They are wearing sports clothes

They are photographed in action

Their facial expression portray competition and effort

Any impairment is not hidden



## 1.4. PARALYMPIC CLASSIFICATION

People with impairments have different levels of physical and mobility challenges. To make the Games as equitable as possible and to ensure that the events involve athletes with similar characteristics and challenges, the Paralympic events include so-called “sport classes”.

All the athletes competing in the Paralympics undergo a process of functional classification where the athlete is evaluated to ensure eligibility to compete in a specific para-event on equal terms with other competitors.

In some events, such as seated volley ball, or wheelchair basketball, not all athletes are wheelchair users. Some may have a limited ability to walk but in order to compete on equal terms with other contestants they do so seated. This may appear strange to anyone who is not acquainted with the classification system of the Paralympics.

For further details on functional classification, please see the page of the Brazilian Paralympics Committee ([cpb.org.br](http://cpb.org.br)) and of the International Paralympics Committee ([Paralympics.org](http://Paralympics.org))

## 1.5. GENERAL GUIDANCE FOR INTERACTING WITH PARALYMPIC ATHLETES

- When you want to film, interview, photograph or speak to a person with a disability, address him or her directly, not the person accompanying them or acting as their interpreter.
- Speak in a natural way – there is no need to speak slowly or loudly!
- Remember that sometimes, depending on the impairment, a person with an impairment might take a little longer to respond or to react to a situation.
- If you think a person needs help, ask them first to check that they do need help before intervening. Your help might not be needed or desired.
- When speaking to athletes in a wheelchair, make sure you are within their line of vision, moving back so that they can see you comfortably. If you are carrying out a lengthy interview, make use of chair so that you are on level terms.
- Respect the personal space of a para-athlete and remember that a wheelchair may be part of their space. Don't handle their chair unless requested to do so.
- If you are unsure of the tone or terms used to cover Paralympic events, or paralympic athletes, do not be afraid to ask.







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"Guide to Reporting on Paralympics" of the British Paralympic Association", the "Guide to Reporting on Persons with an Impairment" by the International Paralympic Committee

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