

Analysis of disability representation in *We are the Superhumans* by Channel 4

RQ: In what ways does Channel 4's representation of disability in *We are the Superhumans* alienate disabled viewers and undermine a progressive discussion of ableism?

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Introduction

I. A progressive discussion about ableism

In fictional literature, disability is commonly reduced to a metaphor for past sins, weakness, or bad luck, perpetuating a wide range of stereotypes. Such literature fails in accurately portraying the disabled experience. The specific stereotype I focus on is the supercrip. The supercrip narrative portrays a disabled person who has ‘overcome’ their disability and relies on the assumption that disabled people have a lower level of achievement; as such, performing everyday activities becomes impressive. (Schalk, 2016). It can be understood as a narrative form with specific narrative mechanisms: superlative language, analysis of body and continuous comparison to a nondisabled norm (Silva and Howe 2012). These mechanisms produce a stereotype, as such, an individual cannot embody the stereotype (Schalk, 2016).

I argue that representation perpetuating the use of the supercrip narrative undermines a progressive discussion about ableism. Disability narratives are commonly criticized for reducing disability to a bodily experience aligning with the medical model of disability (Rankin, 2014). This states that disability can be described solely in terms of disabilities' effect on the body. Opposing this model, is the field of critical disability theory, based on a social model of disability. Stella Young defines this as “[Being] more disabled by our society than by our bodies” (2014). The lived experience of disability is largely induced by societal prejudices and lack of accessibility. A progressive depiction of disability is thus a narrative which depicts disability as a social and complex experience in which suffering is induced by our societies.

II. Methodology

To answer my research question, I apply several frameworks from critical disability theory. Primarily inspiration porn criteria outlined by J.Grue (date unavailable) and the outlined mechanisms of the supercrip narrative. These frameworks were selected as they align with what I defined as a progressive discussion about ableism.

The inspiration porn criteria are as follows: individualization, mystification, devaluation, and objectification

These are significant as they obscure the meaning of disability, treating disabled people as objects of inspiration. Inspiration porn may therefore lead to the alienation of disabled viewers as the content is aimed towards non-disabled people. Furthermore, I evaluate the use of Supercrip narrative mechanisms: superlative language, analysis of body and continuous comparison to a nondisabled norm (Silva and Howe, 2012). Supercrip narrative mechanisms are established as harmful to disability representation as they perpetuate damaging stereotypes (Patricia A. Dunn and Amber Moore, 2017), therefore undermining a progressive discussion about ableism.

My analysis focuses on the advertisement “We are the Superhumans” (WATS) by Channel 4, drawing upon Channel 4’s Paralympics mission statement (2016) throughout to provide perspective and documentation of intention. This advertisement is chosen as it was the main promotion for the Paralympics coverage by Channel 4.

III. Channel 4's Mission Statement for Paralympics Coverage

In the UK, Channel 4 is the sole provider of Paralympics coverage (International Paralympics Committee, 2020). Their advertisement for the 2016 Paralympics WATS, was intended as a positive contribution toward accurate portrayal of disability in media through representation of disabled peoples' achievements, normal and spectacular alike:

“The marketing focus for the Games would be about making this more than just a sporting event, using it as an opportunity to fundamentally change public attitudes towards disabled people. We took an early decision to celebrate the achievements and abilities not just of elite athletes, but also everyday disabled members of the public. Taking the Paralympic spirit and celebrating ability in the widest sense.”

(Channel 4, 2020)

Channel 4 is aiming to spark a progressive discussion about disability and ableism, thus being at the forefront of changing public attitudes. Because of this, holding Channel 4 accountable for their representation of disability is highly relevant.

Chapter 1: Alienation of disabled viewers

To discuss and evaluate whether Channel 4 is alienating disabled viewers, I analyse how WATS presents disability as a bad thing, universalises the disabled experience and how those who do not relate to the narrative may feel alienated. According to the criteria of inspiration porn and the background of critical disability theory, presenting disability as

something which should be overcome and as a solely physical and individual experience is negative. This is because it caters to a non-disabled audience rather than the disabled community it is depicting, alienating a portion of disabled people who do not relate to the narrative depicted.

Overcoming disability

The song “Yes I can” by Sammy Davis Jr. is the music of the advertisement which through its lyrics create an uplifting and inspiring tone. The song repeats “Yes I can”. The positive word choice of ‘yes’ and ‘can’, and its repetition, emphasise the uplifting atmosphere of the advertisement. “Yes I can” is a response phrase, it implies someone saying ‘no’ first. This implication makes the song more empowering. Affirming your ability to do something, but also proving someone wrong. The lyrics thus inspire the audience, particularly emphasising the idea of ‘overcoming’ hardships. Whilst an inspiring advertisement would commonly be regarded positively, in the case of disability, the subtext can be ‘If disabled people can overcome losing limbs, I can overcome the hurdles in my life’. This subtext is significant as it treats disabled people as instrumental, serving the purpose of inspiring the non-disabled viewer. Furthermore, according to critical disability theory, disability is not something that can, or should be, overcome. As such, portraying disability as something which should be overcome is harmful to progressive understandings of disability (Patricia A. Dunn and Amber Moore, 2017).

The intonation of the phrase “Yes I can” is on the pronoun *I*, emphasising the individuality of the statement. It is the individual who is accomplishing or overcoming something. The constant, repetitive pronoun choice of *I* individualises the disabled characters, separating the struggles of a minority into individual challenges. Individualization is one of

the criteria for inspiration porn as it reduces the disabled experience to one within the body and the individual, rather than a product of societal barriers. The lyrics “Yes I can” thus do not only present disability as something which should be overcome, but also as an issue solely within the individual.

“I can do anything” is another lyric repeated in the song throughout the advertisement. This hyperbole is constructed to exaggerate and emphasise the ability of the individual to achieve anything if they just try hard enough. It is clear that the statement is not meant to be taken literally, as examples in the lyrics include climbing Mount Everest and fighting all night with no rest (2.24-2-26). Rather, the purpose of these lyrics is to emphasise the sentiment that if individuals try hard enough, they can overcome anything. The music in the advertisement can be heard by some characters in the advertisement, the band, but other characters cannot hear the music. This means that the lyrics are there to create the inspiring tone for the audience, rather than to inspire the characters in the advertisement. This further supports my argument that the advertisement is aiming to inspire the non-disabled audience, rather than the community it is depicting.

Critiquing WATS for presenting disability as something to overcome is questioned by some disabled people who feel that disability is something you should overcome (Nina Muehlemann, 2016). It may be empowering as it emphasises the individual power to change their lives. However, regardless of who is able to ‘overcome’ their disability, the idea is reliant on the assumption that disability is a bad thing. Presenting disability as a bad thing will inherently alienate some disabled viewers as an aspect of their identity is being presented as something one should try to remove or “overcome”.

“This is the common issue surrounding the dichotomous disability narrative that plague disabled people more and more. For the common social notion of disability is that of overcoming the weakness in your own body and mind”

(Elizabeth Wright, 2020)

Consequently, if the lyrics “Yes I can” do not apply to a disabled viewer, they may feel weak or as if they are not trying hard enough. The narrative depicted is made to be dichotomous, you are either a superhuman or you are not a superhuman.

Universalising the disabled experience

The narrative of the advertisement is presented as universal, implicitly saying that the experience depicted is the universal experience of disability. The title of the advertisement primes the audience to view the advertisement as a depiction of the universal experience of disability. This is because the title uses the universal pronoun “We”. Throughout the advertisement, a large number of disabled characters are depicted. The advertisement does not focus on a small group of people, rather it depicts an array of people in a range of settings such as work, the grocery store, and at an Olympic stadium. The common factor amongst the characters is that they have a visible disability. Therefore, the “We” in the title becomes representative of the entire disabled community. This effect is furthered through the interchangeability of the disabled characters in the advertisement, for example at 0.52-0.55. There are 5 consecutive cuts between 5 characters in wheelchairs in vastly different situations.

Figure 1. 0.52-0.55 (5 shots are cut together, in the advertisement they are consecutive)



This scene does not show the faces of the disabled characters, thereby their personal identity is not the purpose of the shots, rather the purpose is to show that the narrative depicted applies to all disabled people. The characters all appear in the centre of the shot and are moving in the same direction. This, paired with the fast-paced cuts between them and their anonymousness means that they function as a synecdoche for the disabled community. They are all moving forward, and they are all in situations which show that disabled people can do both everyday things, working in an office, grocery shopping, and exceptional things, competing in the Paralympics. This is significant as it supports the statements in the lyrics, these characters can do anything. Therefore, the experience depicted, disability can and should be overcome, is presented as both true and universal through the use of several characters as synecdoche for the entire disabled community.

The focus on what the characters are doing rather than who they are is also prevalent throughout the advertisement through the use of wide angles, not focusing on one character for more than a couple of seconds and not focusing on faces. Thereby the characters throughout the advertisement are treated as interchangeable and fungible, or replaceable.

A right and wrong type of disabled

Through presenting the disabled experience depicted in the advertisement as universal, there is a subtext created that if this experience does not align with yours, then it is because you are doing something wrong. Because the advertisement presents disability as something which should be overcome, disabled people who do not “overcome” are presented as not trying hard enough.

WATS depicts disability as visible physical impairments. Most actors in the advertisement are either in wheelchairs, have prosthetics or are amputees. This is particularly seen at 0.30-0.32 when 4 disabled athletes are shown individually against a white background. This scene has no visual background elements other than the white background. This leads to an increased focus on the visual appearance of the athletes as they stand out in colourful clothing. Furthermore, the lyric in that scene is “take a look what do you see?” which further emphasises the visibility of disability. The lyric is telling the audience to focus on what is visually obvious, which is their disability. Due to the emphasis on the visibility of disability, Channel 4 is reducing disability to bodily impairments. These choices result in a harmful reduction and simplification of disability. This is because disability is made to mean bodily impairments which can be overcome. If this meaning does not apply to the disabled viewer, for example if their disability is not visible, then they may feel alienated by this one-sided representation of disability.

For example, Lucy Catchpole argues in her article “I love Channel 4’s Paralympics advert. But we can’t all be superhumans” that advertisements such as WATS increase the negative perception of disabled people who do not fit the narrative depicted.

“What does “no such word as can’t” and “yes I can” mean for me? It means I am a failure [...] I am a wheelchair user but could not be further from the wheelchair jumper in the film [...] These things already frustrate and confound people. Why can’t I be just a bit more damn inspirational?”

(Catchpole, 2016)

Whilst Catchpole’s claim cannot be universalised to the entire disabled community, when these forms of narratives are the only ones told, that can create a harmful effect by limiting what disability means. If your disability is not something that can be overcome, or you do not want to overcome it, this type of representation may make people more negative towards you.

The narrative in WATS is arguably a supercrip narrative. This is because it uses superlative language and analysis of body, although there is no direct comparison to the non-disabled norm (Silva and Howe, 2012). Susan Wendell argues that a supercrip narrative “*may reduce the ‘Otherness’ of a few people with disabilities, but [...] increases the ‘Otherness’ of the majority of people with disabilities*” (1996, pg64). Through using supercrip narrative mechanisms, individualizing disability and universalising the experience depicted, Channel 4 is alienating disabled viewers. In Leah Cameron’s study on this advertisement (2018), she uses focus groups to observe and collect their responses to the advertisement. She found that disabled viewers reacted negatively to it, whilst non-disabled viewers felt more positively about it. The disabled focus group noted that they felt the advertisement was not intended for them. This study further supports my argument that the advertisement alienates some disabled viewers and caters toward a non-disabled audience.

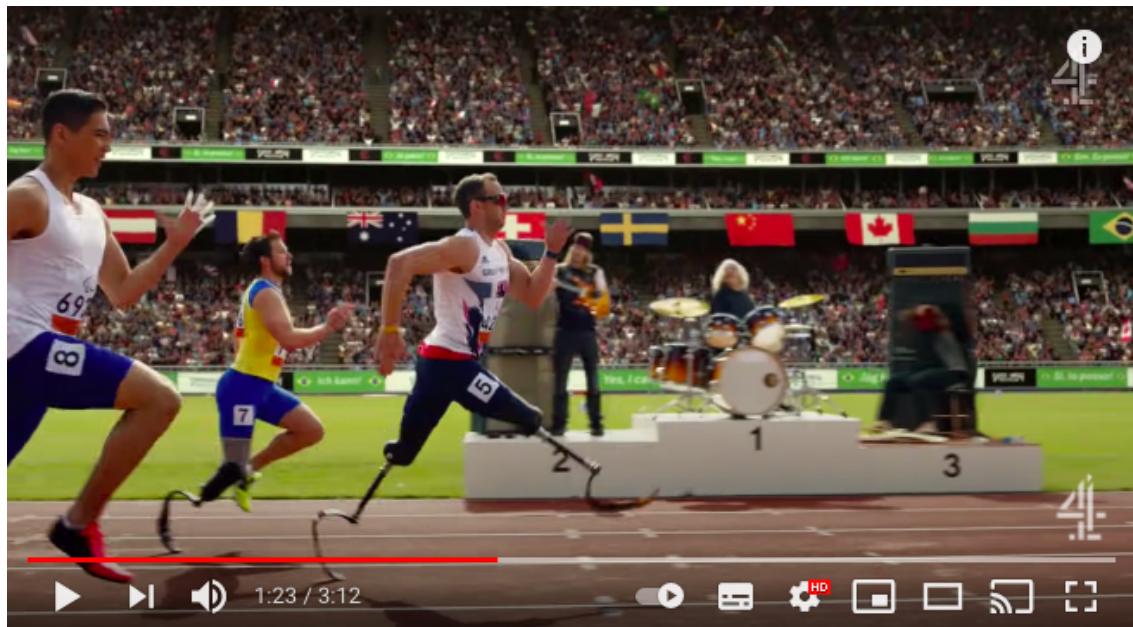
Chapter 2: Undermining a progressive discussion about ableism

More harmful than alienating the disabled audience, is the possibility that Channel 4's representation of disability in WATS undermines a progressive discussion about ableism. To evaluate this, I will discuss the claim they make in their mission statement "*using it (the Paralympics) as an opportunity to fundamentally change public attitudes towards disabled people*". I will discuss this through analysing objectification of disabled characters in form of de-valuation, and the use of harmful stereotypes. These points of analysis are chosen as they are mechanisms of inspiration porn and the supercrip narrative. Furthermore, de-valuation implies a notion of being less worthy, which is central to progressive discussion about ableism. The use of harmful stereotypes perpetuates the notion that current ideas of disability in media are progressive, which they in general are not (Patricia A. Dunn and Amber Moore, 2017).

De-valuation

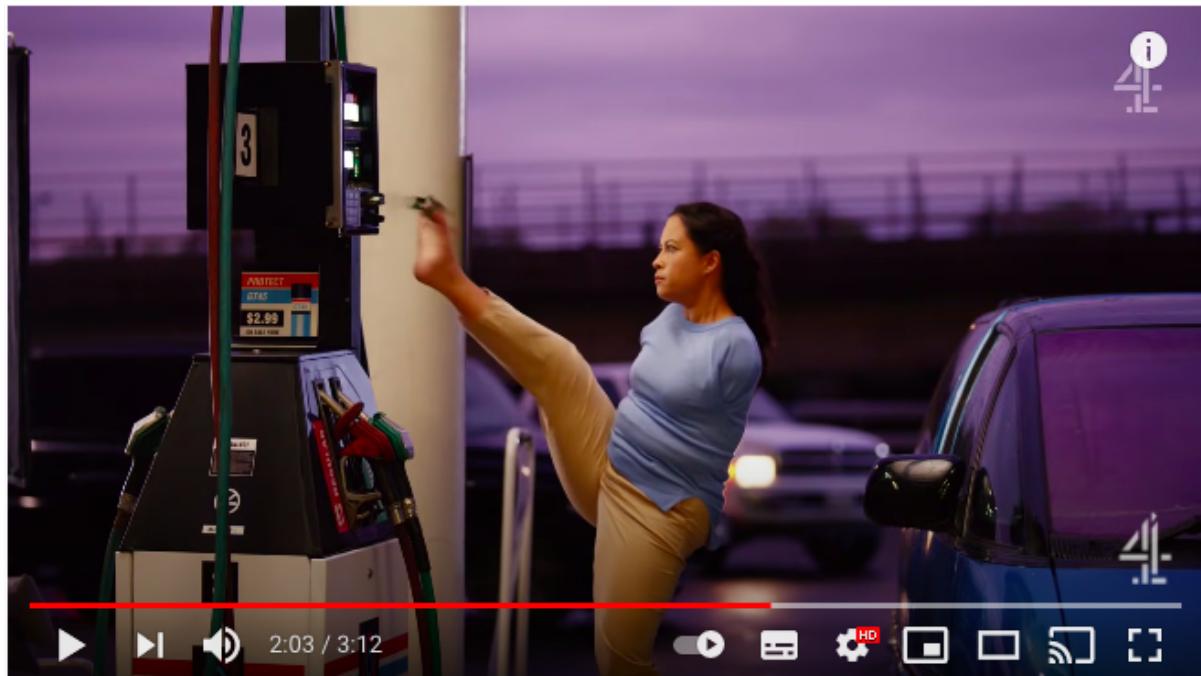
The obscured image of disability in WATS is furthered by representing disabled people as having a smaller scope of achievement. Devaluing disabled people and their perceived abilities. This is achieved through creating a parallel between everyday activities and the Paralympics. Both activities are celebrated within WATS and presented as major achievements. The two scenes focused on are types of scenes that reoccur, Paralympics scenes, and scenes showing disabled people doing everyday activities. My first example is a Paralympics scene (figure 2). The second example is an everyday activity (figure 3) (Channel 4, 2016).

Figure 2.



This shot has a celebratory tone, achieved partly because of the live audience in the background. The audience do not only visually occupy a large portion of the image, but their cheering is also heard over the music. The shot also features bright colours such as the lime green grass, colourful flags in the backgrounds and the athletes' bright clothes. This adds to the liveliness of the scene, furthering the celebratory emotions conveyed. Furthermore, the perspective of the scene is significant, focusing closely on the athletes and having an unfocused audience fill the entire background. This use of perspective to make the athletes appear large against the background audience emphasises the achievements of the athletes. These choices considered makes it evident that the scene is framing this participation in the Paralympics as an enormous achievement. Scenes such as this one reoccur in the advertisement such as at 0.33, 1.26 and 1.50.

Figure 3.



The scene depicted above lasts for one second and is featured in a fast paste sequence showcasing clips of the Paralympics, paralleled with videos of disabled people performing everyday activities. This choice of fast paced cuts is significant as the Paralympics videos ignite a strong celebratory feeling and emphasises the large scale of achievement. When scenes such as figure 2 are shown interchangeably with scenes of everyday activities, the feelings are transferred to everyday activities. As in the Paralympics scenes, this shot features heavily saturated colours. This is particularly seen in the purple sky covering a large portion of the image and being reflected in the car windows. Although the shot is at night-time, it feels bright due to the saturated sky and light colours the woman is wearing. The bright colours make the image exciting and associates it with scenes such as figure 2. Lastly, this shot presents filling gas as a major achievement because of the body language of the actor. She is standing in a split-like position, having her leg elevated highly, and balancing without arms to stabilize. To non-disabled viewers, this may seem extremely difficult as they are not used to balancing this way. This may make a non-disabled viewer feel like this activity is a lot harder, and thus a lot more worthy of celebration, than to the disabled character filling gas.

Due to the choices discussed above, the scene is presented as depicting an achievement equally as great as participating in the Paralympics. This is significant as this representation presents everyday activities as extraordinary when disabled people do them, relying on the harmful assumption that disabled people are unable to do such activities.

In the essay “*Reevaluating the supercrip*”, Sami Schalk summarises this argument. “*The regular supercrip narrative...is premised upon the ableist assumption that people with disabilities do not do these things and thus are not just like everyone else.*” The idea that disabled people are represented as inherently different from non-disabled people is furthered in the very title of the advertisement. The title, “We are the Superhumans” mystifies disability through describing disabled people as superhumans. If the advertisement only depicted the Paralympics itself, and not everyday activities, one could argue that the superpower referenced is elite athletic ability, but as “everyday disabled people” (Channel 4, 2020) are depicted, the commonality and distinguishing factor is indeed disability itself. With associations to superheroes through the word “super”, the advertisement implies that the characters depicted are more than human, other than human. This is problematic as it implies that disabled people are strange and mystical, particularly because they are associated to superheroes. The association to superheroes is furthered by the last shot of the advertisement as depicted below.

Figure 4.



In this scene, further parallels to the idea of superheroes are drawn. This is because a person who is wheelchair skating is depicted as flying upward, the camera angle shifting to depict him as flying. The title also appears in the centre of the screen which further emphasises this idea. The character flying upward is significant as it symbolises that disabled people can overcome, rise above, or break free from the restrictions and expectations of being disabled. This is problematic as it relies on the idea that disability is to be overcome, but also that overcoming disability is inherently good. Goodness associated with overcoming disability is particularly communicated through the disabled character moving towards the sky which is typically associated with heaven. Therefore, not only is disability presented as something which can be overcome, but that people should overcome it. When celebrating disabled people only through the abilities we expect them not to have, we further the idea that some disabled people are better than others because they can “overcome” their disability.

Perpetuating stereotypes

The stereotype that if disabled people just try hard enough, they can do anything, is one which is reoccurring in WATS. Therefore, discrimination and prejudice does not make a significant impact on the characters in the advertisement, because if they just try hard enough, they can. This mentality of “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” is seen particularly through the scene at 2.13. A young man in a wheelchair is screamed at and told “No you can’t” by a person in power, quickly cutting to the young man saying, “Yes I can” and playing basketball. The scene has been cut to switch from a dark and dull office setting to a bright and focused basketball hall. Furthermore, the disabled character answers the statement “No you can’t” in the basketball scene. Therefore, playing basketball, or proving the man wrong, is the response, not only saying “Yes I can”, but showing it through action. This fast cut diminishes and overlooks the structural battles disabled people face which is why “No you can’t” is often true. Furthermore, because the response is also playing basketball, or action, WATS is again emphasising “overcoming” through action.

WATS continuously emphasises actions and achievements as what should be celebrated. Whilst this may seem positive, in the case of disability, it perpetuates the stereotype that people must be “worthy” of dignity. Furthermore, WATS does not show assistance although its use is common in the disabled community. In fact, an EU report found that 37% of disabled people need assistance for daily activities, including work (Eurostat, 2018). Therefore, by not including assistance in the advertisement, WATS overemphasises independence. Because there is a deliberate lack of assistance in the advertisement, and implicit message is being communicated that disabled people can be independent if they just try hard enough. This is another harmful stereotype perpetuated in the advertisement; Disabled people can do anything, without help, and only through the things they accomplish

should they be celebrated. Whilst celebrating disabled people who accomplish things without assistance can be positive, Patricia A Dunn. argues that because such supercrip narratives are practically the only type of representation of popular media (Patricia A. Dunn and Amber Moore, 2017) contributions to this type of representation continuously perpetuate harmful stereotypes with nothing challenging them.

Although Channel 4's intention was to “*change public attitudes towards disability*” (2016), their use of stereotypes perpetuates already established, harmful, ideas. Furthermore, Channel 4's intentions resulted in a piece of inspiration porn. Stella Young, who coined this term, argues that the purpose of this is “*to inspire you, motivate you, so that you can look at them and think ‘well however bad my life is, it could be worse. I could be that person’.*” (2014). The use of disabled characters for the purpose of the non-disabled consumer devalues the disabled characters to objects of inspiration. Channel 4 achieved celebrating “*the achievements and abilities not just of elite athletes, but also everyday disabled members of the public*” (2016), but in a way which relies on ableist ideas. As such, the celebration resulted in perpetuating already established ableist stereotypes.

Conclusion

As established, WATS individualizes disability, obscures the meaning of the term, and objectifies disabled characters through devaluation. This means that it fulfils the inspiration porn criteria outlined by J.Grue. It can therefore be established that the advertisement alienates a large portion of the disabled audience. However, some disabled people did react positively to the advertisement, arguing it is a step towards more positive representation of

disability (Muehlemann, 2016). The argument in such cases is usually that the representation is better than previous representation of disability, not that WATS is good representation.

WATS does not provide positive representation of disability for disabled people, or grounds for a progressive discussion on ableism through accurately portraying the disabled experience. Rather, it alienates disabled viewers through objectifying them and undermines a progressive discussion about ableism by treating disabled people as objects of inspiration, ‘overcoming’ a hurdle in their lives.

So, whose responsibility is it to create more diverse representation? Is the moral responsibility of the implications of the advertisement on Channel 4 alone? As the sole provider of Paralympics coverage in the UK (International Paralympics Committee ,2020), Channel 4 can be argued to have a greater responsibility than other networks. Channel 4 themselves claim to “*stand up for diversity and inspire change*” (2016) and as such, claimed part of that responsibility. Channel 4 is viewed as “*a new international benchmark for Paralympics coverage*” (Channel 4, 2016), as such, their poor representation affects how the Paralympics are covered globally, as other channels are encouraged to follow Channel 4’s lead.

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