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Para Sport Against Stigma 2.0

Making Noise Media Analysis Report

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Introduction

Para sport has been increasingly covered in the mainstream media in Malawi, boosted by the 'Making Noise' campaign around the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games as part of the Para Sport Against Stigma project. Making Noise seeks to realise the potential of para and Paralympic sport as a platform for social change. A media monitoring report by Harriet Kachimanga of Malawi Council for Disability Affairs (MACODA) showed a significant increase in the number of news stories about para sport in 2024. This media analysis report aims to build on the MACODA report, and shares findings from a two day workshop held on 27-28 November 2024 involving perspectives from the Department for Disability, Malawi Sports Council, a storytelling NGO and Para athletes.

Objectives

The objectives of the media analysis were to:

- Build on the Media Monitoring Reports by MACODA
- Understand the representation and framing of disability and Para sport in the media stories of the Paralympics and Malawian Para Sport from the Making Noise campaign
- Contribute to knowledge on how to achieve the National Disability Policy Priority Area 8 strategy which states: 'Strengthen the use of sports as a platform to raise public awareness on disability mainstreaming'.

Summary of the MACODA Media Monitoring Report

MACODA, the Malawi Council for Disability Affairs, is a statutory body established under the Persons with Disabilities Act, 2024. As part of its mandate to promote the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities, MACODA conducts annual monitoring of media to assess disability representation.

In line with its role to raise awareness on disability issues, MACODA extended its media monitoring to include coverage of Para sport during the campaign period, producing a dedicated report on how these events and athletes were represented in the press.

Two reports were produced: Media Monitoring Report (MMR) of articles from July to August; and Media Monitoring Report 2 (MMR2) mostly of articles from August to October.

In total, 45 news stories were identified, although around four of these appear to be about the Olympics. The stories appeared in print media (13), radio (7), TV (5), online and social media (15) (MMR1 & MMR2). The first report found that "most of the reporters used inappropriate disability terminologies.

For instance, the word 'help' was frequently used instead of 'assist.'" (MMR1).

The second report found that "there was improvement in terms of media coverage of disability sports and empowerment initiatives in some of the big media houses" (MMR2), but that "It was found that there is still inconsistency and sometimes inaccurate representation of persons with disabilities in media coverage.

Despite having a lot of stories portraying positivity, some stories portrayed negativity" (MMR2)

Context of disability representation in the media

To contextualise the representation of Para sport in the media it is useful to outline more general patterns of disability representation in mainstream media. This section outlines the points discussed in the workshop on how disability is usually represented in mainstream media.

One central issue is that of the language used, where too often demeaning language is used to refer to disability. Derogatory language may also imply sarcasm or making a joke at the expense of people with disabilities.

For instance, we looked at how one of the mainstream media houses in Malawi created an entire TV program after seeing an image on social media of a woman with disabilities marrying an abled man.

They went so far as to trace the woman and question her on how this was possible. This kind of coverage highlights the pervasive stereotypes and prejudiced attitudes towards people with disabilities, often sensationalizing their lives in ways that reinforce negative perceptions.

Secondly, stories will often focus more on the disability rather than the action or performance, including where the disability is not the most relevant or necessary part of the story.

Third, it was noted that stories relating to disability are often framed from a negative angle, and that furthermore, if a person with a disability does something bad, the media will often give this more emphasis.

Fourth, we noted issues with bias and discrimination by the media, for example, the media expects incentives to cover stories on disability sport compared with mainstream sport, and in general achievements by persons with disability get less attention in the media, or are seen as less newsworthy in their own right.

Fifth mainstream media stories often include excessive and patronising praise for people with disabilities when they do everyday things, indicating low expectations for people with disabilities.

Linked with this is a phenomenon of disability inspiration stories about overcoming obstacles against the odds, which are highly attractive for media and able-bodied audiences.

Finally, media often present events or actions for persons with disabilities as a charity case, highlighting the generosity of the giver and disempowering the person.



Methods

For this analysis, a sample of print, social media, radio and TV news stories were collated, drawing on the collection assembled by the MACODA reports.

Due to the nature of broadcast media this was harder to access, and only two TV stories and one radio story could be included in the sample.

The majority of the print and social media stories identified by MACODA were printed and included.

The first step was to review all stories in the sample, taking notes of language and framing. Then, the stories were sorted into categories for analysis.

The four categories identified were:

1. Preparation
2. Advocacy
3. News / Sporting Action
4. Inspiration / Motivation

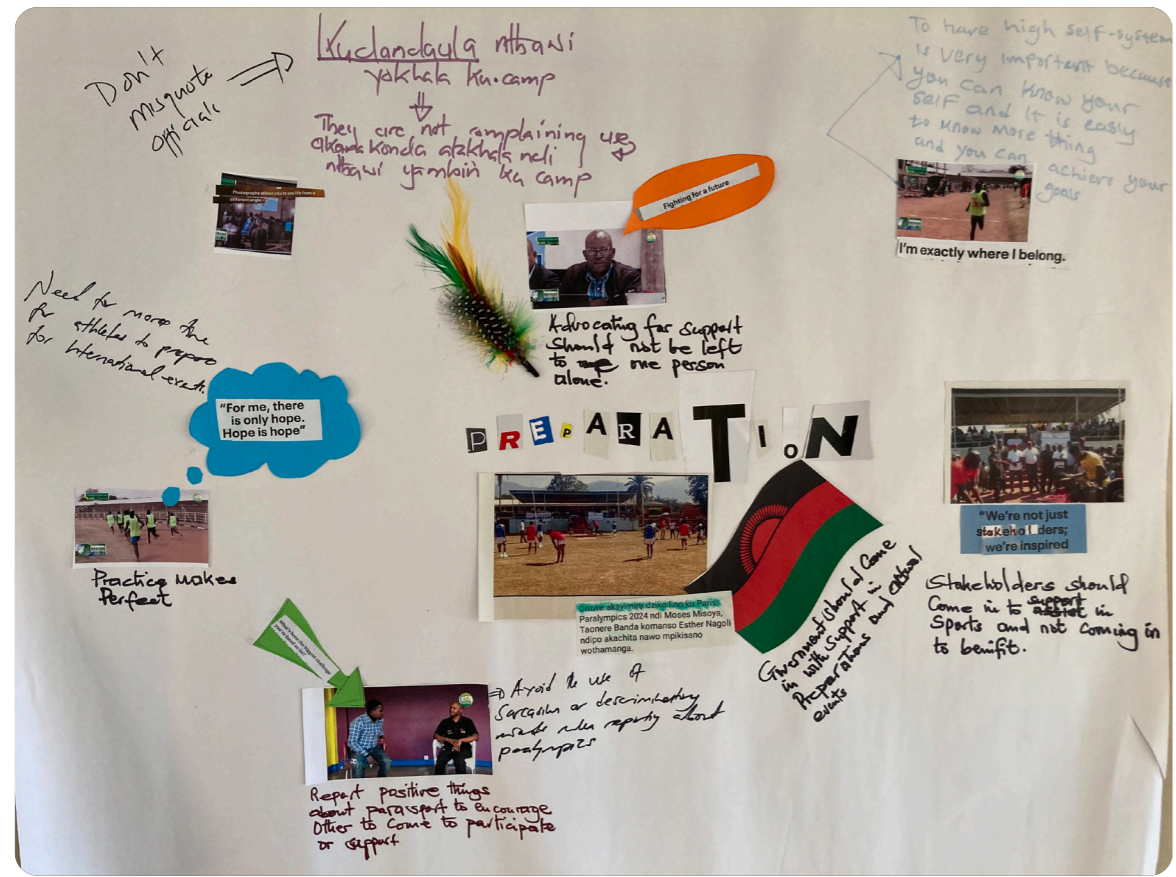
Taking each category in turn, we applied qualitative textual analysis using the arts-based research method of collage.

The collages highlighted key elements of the articles, mixing them with images from other sources (magazines) and adding embellishments and colour to highlight meanings, interpretations, and patterns. Written notes were added on language and framing.

The collage process also enabled a 're-storying' of the articles, intervening in the texts to create new counter-narratives.

Findings

This section presents the collages created for each of the four categories, followed by the key insights.



1. Preparation

Collage narrative: The articles that are published in the lead up to the Paris Games, in general, have quite a positive, optimistic, hopeful tone.

There is a strong sense of national pride, where athletes 'represent' the nation.

There are some powerful statements from Para sport leaders and key stakeholders, such as the MPC President, whose contributions are about "Fighting for a future", and the Vice President who talked persuasively about the challenges being faced.

However, they are misquoted by journalists who refer to them as 'complaining' This misquotation often stems from the journalists' attempt to create a sensational story or attract attention.

By framing the officials' statements as complaints, journalists think they will provoke a stronger emotional reaction from political leaders or the corporate world.

However, this ends up distorting the true intent of the statements and, in the process, diminishes the validity of the challenges presented. It also perpetuates the stereotype of people with disabilities as being ungrateful and demanding.

There was a strong showing of other stakeholders supporting athletes, "we're not just stakeholders, we're inspired", but the support should be wider than just one or two people - greater support from the government would be powerful.

Athletes are shown preparing for their events, looking confident, and it is a time where they feel hopeful and optimistic.

However, their voices are not heard in any of the stories - they are just talked about by other stakeholders, filmed or photographed, but not quoted or interviewed. We don't hear from the athletes about their challenges, their motivations, their hopes, and how they prepare.

Key Insights

- The lead up to a Paralympic Games is a period where stories tend to be positive, hopeful, supportive, linked with national pride.
- Most of the story is taken by/ given to officials. They do speak well.
- Although Para athletes are filmed or photographed, they are not heard, they are just talked about by other stakeholders.

2. Advocacy

Collage narrative: The goal is that para athletes are successful and can take off and fly, represented by the plane and feathers.

Many of the articles about advocacy sound a bit like they are 'always complaining', tending to make unfocused demands dinon the President and others. For example, the article "Para sports banking on disability act to thrive" makes it seem like Para sport is passive, (banking on = relying on).

Meanwhile, more effective advocacy would be at the more global level, where the President and other powerful stakeholders (e.g. Parliament which, can advocate to the Treasury), have a forum, as long as they know what they should be advocating for.

They need to understand the potential, represented by the 'masa' or mouse nest, to be able to facilitate much bigger levels of support, for instance, the 5.3million kwacha from the Irish Embassy, as well as corporates - it is not just a national level issue, there is a global inequality in Para sport, needing advocacy at a global forum.

Many of the advocacy articles did not include the voices of the athletes or provide a clear visualisation of what success for Malawian Para sport athletes would mean for the country or the global community.

It would be a great advocacy tool if the stories of athletes were documented in a positive way, allowing them to take center stage.

For this, the media needs to center and trust the athletes to speak for themselves, "put your trust in us".

Key Insights

- Many of the articles intending to advocate sound like they are always complaining.
- The articles mostly make unfocused demands.
- It might be more effective to focus on key people to influence, and to be clear what the demand is, and to focus on global forums.
- Advocacy must trust Para athlete voices.



3. News and Sporting Action

Collage narrative: In general, these are fact-based stories, and most of the headlines and stories take a positive spin, for example, "Paralympics break record", "Malawi's athletes shine at the 2024 Paralympic Games", "Paralympic athletes improve finishing times", especially compared with Olympic coverage, which were often more negative, for example, "No Olympic Medals in 52 years".

However, the negative story of two athletes losing their place to go to Paris due to quotas grabbed headlines: "Paralympic Blow: athletes Banda, Saukira miss out on global race in Paris".

This is a sensationalist headline that doesn't reflect the story, and the explanation is oversimplified, saying only that it was "due to technicalities".

This is because the media always love negative story.

Additionally, in most of the articles and videos, with the exception of just one, athletes are not interviewed; only the officials.

The quote that is included from an athlete is powerful. Once the games are over there is a sudden end to the stories, and so in the collage there is much less on the right side of the collage: less activity means less stories to report on.

Key Insights

- These are typically fact-based stories
- Most of them take a positive spin, but negative stories do grab headlines
- Once the Games are over the stories suddenly stop; the media need activities to report on
- Only one story quotes an athlete



4. Inspiration and Motivation

Collage narrative: In the middle we have one of the Malawian Paralympians in Paris, posing in a very imposing, confident, powerful photo, looking like he is getting a guard of honour.

He was one of the inspiring stars, and the headline is "Malawi's Athletes shine at the 2024 Paralympic Games".

However, the article starts with 'Para Sport Against Stigma (PSAS) project, a collaborative effort between the University of Malawi and Loughborough university...', so in the collage the opening sentences are crossed out, and an arrow with the words "start here" is added to "This year Malawi was represented by two athletes".

Underneath there are the words "I don't want to just be a passenger in these scenarios", emphasising the missing athlete voice. The collage compares two stories that talk about supporting athletes.

On the left, a story about the Malawi Olympic Committee giving support or "motivating" young female athletes with resources beyond sport - school supplies, food, school shoes, etc.

This was a good initiative, recognising the athlete as a whole person, including education and other support, which can enable the athlete to achieve.

On the other side is a person in the shadows, in the dark, with their mouth gagged, representing a story about the MNCS donating to a para athlete who lost their home, who was "struggling" and who then gratefully "thanked" the MNCS, urging others to "work extra hard despite having physical challenges". This story can be summed up by the biblical saying "don't let your left hand know", meaning do not brag about charity. Underneath the gagged figure is a quote "I'm not limited by labels. My storytelling is elite in any genre", again highlighting the need for athletes' voices to be included.

Key Insights

- Striking, confident photos of athletes can be powerful and inspiring
- Often sponsors are named prominently in a story, burying the people who are really the centre of the story
- Interestingly, there were no inspirational stereotype stories (e.g. about doing everyday things, overcoming obstacles) see Context of Disability Representation in Media in this collection.
- There are problematic stories that use a charity frames and leave out voices of Para athletes
- There are good ways to report on support, especially holistic support, to para athletes, using words like "motivating" instead of "helping"



Cross-Cutting Insights

The strongest theme across the four collages was the missing voice of para athletes. Athletes are pictured and filmed, but they are spoken for by others, and are rarely quoted or interviewed. Similarly, there is a complete absence of coaches' voices, despite the critical role they play.

The negative stories are associated most with advocacy where journalists characterise officials as "complaining" and where the deficiencies or "a lack" are highlighted. Negative stories also come through in the preparation period, where there is a focus on the "challenges we face", and in the inspiration category, where negative stories use a charity frame.

Meanwhile, the positive representation presents an opportunity for constructive advocacy at all levels – both in preparation and during the Games events.

Stories showing wider stakeholders highlight the energy and momentum behind the Para sport movement.

There remain inconsistencies and areas for improvement in the language used and framing. For example, phrases like "our friends with disabilities" is perhaps well intentioned but is patronising and creates a separation or othering.

Recommendations

1. It is crucial to include the voices of athletes and coaches:
 - a. Create more platforms for interaction between the media and Para athletes and coaches.
 - b. There is a need for capacity strengthening of Para athletes and coaches to be confident when speaking with the media.
 - c. Hold more activities to generate stories for the media to cover, so that there are opportunities for para athletes to build confidence in speaking to the media.
 - d. Timing of the journalists visits should be adjusted so they are not all gone by the time the athletes have finished competing.
2. Offer professional development and training to the media on reporting on para sport and disability. It could include a media analysis workshop.
3. Strengthen the ongoing monitoring of para sport media stories, including this within the MACODA remit, and include a feedback mechanism to the media.
4. Ensure that advocacy is targeted, strategic and constructive, avoiding unfocused demands and emphasis on what we lack, and include para athletes' voices in advocacy.
5. Engage with wider stakeholders for support.

Acknowledgments:

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