



Para Sport Against Stigma 2.0

Case Study:

Paris 2024, Malawi, and the Power of Media: How Making Noise is Changing Disability Narratives

April 2025

Delivered by



Part of AT2030, funded by UK Aid and led by GDI Hub



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Introduction

The Problem In Malawi, people with disabilities continue to face deeply rooted stigma, which is reinforced by limited and often misrepresentative media coverage. The Making Noise campaign found that Para sport coverage in mainstream media has increased but remains inconsistent, with frequent use of inappropriate language and a focus on disability rather than athletic performance. Broadcast media, in particular, has been slow to embrace Para sport, with only two TV stories and one radio feature included in the media monitoring sample. This limited coverage means para sport is often invisible to the general public, reducing its potential to challenge stigma and increase awareness of assistive technology (AT). Journalists tend to frame disability sports stories as either inspirational triumphs or as charity cases, rather than recognizing Para athletes as elite competitors. Additionally, structural inequalities limit the reach and impact of campaigns, restricting efforts to shift public perceptions and increase AT adoption.

The Opportunities Para sport presents a unique opportunity to reshape narratives around disability, shifting public attitudes from charity-based perceptions to empowerment and inclusion. Through intentional media engagement, digital campaigns, and advocacy efforts, para sport can drive greater awareness and uptake of AT by portraying individuals with disabilities as active, capable, and deserving of equitable access to resources. The Making Noise campaign demonstrated that strategic storytelling can influence both policy and public perceptions, paving the way for systemic change.

About the Making Noise Paris 2024 Activities

The Malawi Paralympic Committee, and University of Malawi, worked closely with a range of national stakeholders to develop activities and media content aimed at challenging and shifting stigma associated with disability through Para sport. This initiative employed the "Making Noise" methodology and was implemented before, during, and after the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games, spanning the period from June to December 2024.

Key activities included:

- Press conferences to generate national media coverage and public discourse;
- Community awareness events to engage local populations directly;
- Theater for development performances to creatively address disability perceptions;
- Storytelling through various media channels to amplify the voices and experiences of Para athletes.

Together, these activities contributed to a broader movement to promote inclusion and celebrate the achievements of persons with disabilities in Malawi.

Analysing Narratives Through Media Monitoring

To support ongoing learning and adaptation, the Malawi Council for Disability Affairs (MACODA) conducted two rounds of media monitoring during the campaign. Findings were discussed during a two-day workshop held from 27–28 November 2024, gathering perspectives from the Department for Disability Affairs, the Malawi Sports Council, a storytelling NGO, and Para athletes themselves. The reflection yielded valuable insights on the effectiveness of the campaign's media strategies and identified opportunities for future improvement.

Goal

The overarching goal was to use the Making Noise process to leverage Para sport as a platform for shifting stigma around disability and advocating for increased visibility. By influencing media narratives and engaging a broad range of stakeholders, the campaign aimed to improve the portrayal of Para athletes and strengthen disability rights advocacy.

Key Insight

Media coverage during the Paralympic Games and associated events was predominantly positive, often aligning Para sport with themes of national pride. However, Para athletes themselves were often missing from the narratives, with their experiences typically relayed through officials or other intermediaries. Additionally, negative framing persisted in advocacy efforts, with journalists sometimes portraying calls for support as "complaints," which diluted the intended advocacy messages.



Execution Highlights

- Analysed 40 media stories across print, radio, television, and digital platforms, assessing language, framing, and representation.
- Employed arts-based research methods, including collage-making workshops, to reframe narratives and center athlete perspectives.
- Engaged media professionals, disability rights organizations, and Para sport stakeholders to identify gaps and new opportunities for collaboration.

Key Learnings

- **The Missing Voice of Athletes:** While Para athletes were often featured visually (through photos and videos), they were rarely quoted, leaving their authentic voices absent from media narratives.
- **Negative vs. Positive Framing:** Advocacy stories risked being perceived as complaints, reducing their effectiveness. Advocacy that highlights athletes' achievements and needs constructively is far more impactful.
- **Media's Role in Shaping Perception:** The language and framing choices made by journalists significantly influence public attitudes towards disability. Sensationalist or charity-based narratives reinforce stereotypes, while balanced, athlete-centered reporting promotes empowerment and inclusion.
- **Sustainability of Coverage:** Media attention typically surged during the Paralympics but quickly diminished afterward, highlighting the need for sustained storytelling beyond major events.

Recommendations for Future Campaigns

- **Amplify Athlete and Coach Voices:** Offer media training to Para athletes and coaches to help them confidently tell their stories and advocate for their rights.
- **Strategic Media Engagement:** Develop journalist guidelines and host workshops on responsible reporting of disability and Para sport.
- **Consistent and Year-Round Storytelling:** Establish continuous initiatives to maintain visibility for Para sport beyond global events.
- **Advocacy that Centers Athlete Experience:** Focus advocacy efforts on athlete-led narratives that show the real-world impact of investment in Para sport and assistive technology.
- **Leverage Community Platforms for Wider Reach:** Partner with grassroots organizations to overcome digital divides and amplify stories at the community level.

Conclusion

The Making Noise campaign demonstrated that Para sport can serve as a powerful tool for shifting stigma around disability — but only if the narratives are framed thoughtfully and the right voices are elevated. By centering Para athletes in media coverage, strengthening advocacy strategies, and ensuring sustained engagement beyond high-profile events, future efforts can deepen the connection between Para sport, disability rights, and access to assistive technology. Addressing structural inequalities in media representation and digital access will be crucial for driving lasting social change.

Read More: The full media monitoring report is available on the project website.

Acknowledgments:

James Chiutsi
Memory Baluwa
Prof. Mufuanji Magalasi
Dr. Jessica Noske-Turner
Jennifer Wong

Collaborating organizations:

MACODA, MNSC, FEDOMA, Media Houses

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