

Influencing Paper

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Can The Commercial Be Political?

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Examining the Challenges of Para Sport Storytelling and Social Change

In the world of sports, the blending of social change with commercial interests has always been a complex dance. This complexity is particularly pronounced in the realm of para sport, where the goals of disability inclusion and social change can clash with the profit-driven motives of the commercial sector, in both obvious and more subtle ways. In our current project, *Para Sport Against Stigma (PSAS)*, we navigated this grey zone between social change and commercial interests, striving to use the platform of Para sports to drive disability inclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa while grappling with the realities of commercial pressures. The question that lingers throughout the project is, can the commercial ever truly be political?

Aiming for Social Change Through Para Sport

PSAS has always been focused on a core mission: enhancing disability inclusion through engagement with the Paralympics and Para sport. With its second phase of research funding underway, PSAS brings together an impressive range of stakeholders, including non-profits like the UK's FCDO/UK Aid, para sport volunteers, universities, national broadcasters, and Disabled Persons Organizations (DPOs). These groups are united by a shared vision of fostering social change.

Alongside the idealism of social transformation, there is also a desire among many stakeholders to connect with commercial entities—sponsors, advertisers, and influencers. These connections are seen as a necessary step toward scalability and sustainability. And this is where things get complicated. The overlap between the drive for social change and the pull of commercial interests creates tension, especially when the commercial is framed as a pathway to larger audiences and greater impact.

Communicating for Social Change: The Commercial and the Neoliberal

The concept of *Communication for Social Changemaking*^[1] captures this tension. It highlights the increasing intertwining of commercial logics and social change efforts,

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from corporate partnerships to social enterprise funding models. These frameworks often prioritize market-driven solutions to social issues, and one effect is to reframe traditional charity-based development as 'old-fashioned' and 'ineffective'. The rise of "platformised social change" (Noske-Turner *et al.* 2024) further complicates this by curating activism to fit within the constraints of social media platforms—algorithmic biases often suppress more radical or political forms of activism in favor of more palatable, apolitical content.

For disability rights and inclusion, the Paralympic Games serve as an intriguing case study. Channel 4's coverage of the London 2012 Paralympics is often cited as groundbreaking, with its "Hollywood treatment" of the Games and its focus on creating emotionally powerful narratives around Para athletes. But there have been some important critiques, particularly around how disability is represented in media. Critics argue that these portrayals often lean into the "supercrip" trope, portraying athletes as inspirational figures who overcome immense odds, which can mask the systemic issues of ableism that persist.

Three Approaches to Storytelling in PSAS

Our PSAS project involved experimenting with three distinct storytelling strategies around the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games, each with its own strengths and challenges:

- 1. Co-Created Campaigns in Mainstream Media**

Using the *Making Noise* toolkit, we collaborated with local stakeholders in Malawi to create a campaign designed to boost mainstream media coverage of Para sport. This included organizing local Para sport events and sharing press releases with journalists. The resulting media coverage, however, revealed a gap between the voices of Para athletes. Journalists often sensationalized the advocacy messages, framing them as complaints, thus limiting their potential to drive real social change.

- 2. Fictional Dramas**

In collaboration with StoryWorkshop Educational Trust, we produced a six-episode radio drama as part of the popular *Zimachitika* series. The drama followed the story of Limbika, a young woman with a disability, navigating stigma and isolation before finding empowerment through Para sport. The drama was deeply affective, addressing themes of discrimination, family dynamics, and personal growth. While it connected with audiences, it also carried the weight of being linked to development funding, a factor that sometimes limited its ability to break free from the "charity" frame.

- 3. Short Ad-Style Video for Social Media**

Our most commercially oriented approach was a one-minute video titled *Beyond this Land*, designed for maximum shareability on social media. The video juxtaposed images of African Paralympic athletes with iconic African imagery,

tapping into the aesthetics of high-end commercial brands. While the reception was overwhelmingly positive, especially among stakeholders seeking to elevate disability sport, the commercial treatment raised questions about whether this strategy compromised the political potential of Para sport storytelling. The video relied on a "lifestyle brand" aesthetic to elevate disability sport, associating it with commercial value rather than the deeper, more complex realities of disability rights.

The Tension Between Social Change and Commercialization

So, what does it mean to use the commercial for social change? The three strategies we employed illustrate the delicate balance between embracing commercial aesthetics and staying true to the values of disability activism. On the one hand, the ad-style video demonstrated how a commercial approach could elevate disability sport, helping it gain cultural capital and break through mainstream media. On the other hand, it may have glossed over the deeper, systemic issues of stigma and ableism that require long-term, committed social change. The radio drama, in contrast, was able to delve into these complexities with nuance and depth, but its more niche format—may not be suitable for commercial appeal?

This brings us to the central question: *Can the commercial be political?* Our research suggests that while the commercial space is not naturally conducive to radical activism, there is potential for change when commercial strategies are used tactically and mindfully. By aligning disability sport with mainstream media and lifestyle aesthetics, we can elevate its visibility and cultural capital, but we must remain critical of how these commercial platforms often dilute the politics of disability rights.

Conclusion: Embracing Multiple Storytelling Approaches

Ultimately, this project highlights the value of embracing multiple strategies for storytelling and community engagement. Each approach—whether mainstream media, fictional drama, or commercial video—offers unique insights and opportunities for social change. While the commercial sphere is fraught with limitations, it can also provide a platform for raising awareness and shifting cultural perceptions. The key lies in navigating the grey zone between commercial and social change with intention and reflexivity, ensuring that the politics of disability rights are not lost in the process.

[1] Noske-Turner, J. (2023). Communication for social changemaking: A “new spirit” in media and communication for development and social change? *International Journal of Communication*, 17, 2940–2959. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/18759>

Learn more about Para Sport Against Stigma:

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www.lborolondon.ac.uk/research-innovation/para-sport-against-stigma

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