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Communication for Localisation: “Making” the Paralympics Malawian

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Abstract

Like many media and communication initiatives for development and social change that are highly global in nature, the social impact of expanding the broadcast footprint of the Paralympic Games to regions such as sub-Saharan Africa is often simply assumed, and the markers of success are underpinned by a reach-centric logic. In this paper, we explore whether and how the Paralympics can become a platform for social change. Informed by findings from a four-year participatory action research project, this paper analyses experimentation with different communication for social change approaches related to para sport and the Paralympics, with a focus on Malawi. The Paralympics presents a unique context for analysing communication for social change, as it involves collaboration between non-profit and commercial stakeholders. We advance and operationalise the concept of “communication for localisation,” combined with an ecological approach to communication, to draw attention to the agency of local actors in interpreting global media content. We highlight four moments of “making” that demonstrate practices of localisation and interpretation that are important for grounding the Paralympics within local contexts in meaningful and impactful ways.



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Keywords: communication for development; communication for social change; localisation; communicative ecologies; Paralympics; para sport; disability; Malawi

Introduction

The global broadcast footprint of the Paralympics has rapidly grown over recent decades. In 2004, the Athens Paralympic Games were broadcast to just 25 countries. This grew to 80 countries for Beijing 2008, 115 for London 2012, and 154 for Rio 2016 (IPC 2017). In 2021, the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games was broadcast to 175 countries and territories (IPC 2021) and marked the first free-to-air (FTA) Paralympic broadcast to sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).

This expansion was motivated by a tacit understanding shared by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) and its partners that watching the Paralympics can lead to social change, and a social mission has underpinned the Games since their origins (Brittain 2010). The IPC claims that the Paralympics is now “the world’s number one sport event for driving social inclusion” (IPC 2022). The broadcasters involved, such as Channel 4 in the UK, also express social motivations as drivers of their efforts (Pullen et al. 2018). Concurring with this view, UK International Development (now part of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, FCDO) subsidised the broadcast rights and production costs of the SSA broadcast of Tokyo 2020.

In this paper, we explore what is needed to realise the social change potential associated with the Paralympics as it moves into the SSA region. Drawing on findings from participatory action research (PAR) conducted from 2020 to 2024 through a long-term collaboration between two universities (Loughborough University and the University of Malawi), we argue that while social impact was the primary motivation, this impact was often simply assumed. Most actors, including development funders, sports bodies, and broadcasters, were driven by what we will refer to as reach-centred logics: the belief that increased audience reach numbers equate to increased impact, where “social impact” is implicitly assumed to primarily be about individual attitudes toward disability. In the field of communication for social change, countering this assumption is not a new concept. Waisbord identified a widespread consensus in the field that initiatives “cannot solely resort to the mass media” but must also involve interpersonal communication for social change, as it is through peer conversation that social learning and critical conscientisation occur (Waisbord 2005, 81). While concurring with Waisbord’s stance, we propose that the Paralympics is a particularly novel case that expands the horizons of these debates, as it brings together mainstream commercial imperatives and actors with social change advocates and agendas, doing so on a significant global scale.

We argue that reach-centred logics have consequences that undermine impact. The dominance of reach-centred logics leads to the prioritisation of efficiencies in production and distribution. Globally, most Paralympic broadcast rights contracts are

negotiated bilaterally between the rights holder and a single, often national, broadcaster. Here, however, for efficiency, a French production company, TV Media Sport (TVMS), was contracted to produce a central, pan-African daily highlights package for the region (see Pullen et al. 2024). TVMS produced 13 daily highlight packages, each with an average length of 55 minutes, in English, French, and Portuguese. These packages were provided free of charge to national broadcasters in 49 participating SSA countries. They primarily featured on-field action, along with some interviews. The primary effort towards localisation was the intention to include as many African athletes as possible. However, this was challenging due to the inequity of participation at the Paralympic Games (Novak 2014) and the editorial choices made higher up the production chain by the Olympic Broadcast Service (OBS), which tends to focus on finals and podium results (Pullen et al. 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic also hampered the ability to produce backstories. In this way, the underpinning reach-centred logic drove decisions toward centralised content production and dissemination, at the direct expense of a production prioritising meaning and relevance for local audiences across SSA.

This historic experiment to extend Paralympic media engagement beyond Global North contexts provides an opportunity for unique scholarly contributions to both Paralympic media studies and the study of communication and social change. How can the Paralympics, a global media phenomenon, be made meaningful and impactful in a local context such as that of Malawi? This paper argues for the importance of active localisation in achieving the levels of social impact that are hoped for and often claimed. We present an alternative approach to centrally produced broadcasts, one that is informed by communication for social change scholarship and emphasises critical perspectives on dialogical communication aimed at people-centred change that is attentive to social and structural transformation (Dutta 2015; Manyozo 2017; Thomas and van de Fliert 2014; Waisbord 2005). Our proposal is context responsive (Sabiescu 2020) and could be both replicable and scalable. After reviewing critiques of disability representation and global Paralympic media, we engage with perspectives and debates about localisation. We first discuss television (TV) localisation practices before turning to current debates on the localisation of international development. Theoretically, we advance the concept of “communication for localisation,” first discussed by Lie (2003), by combining it with a “communicative ecologies” approach (Hearn and Foth 2007; Lennie and Tacchi 2013; Slater 2014; Tacchi et al. 2019). In doing so, we draw attention to the agency of local actors in interpreting global media content. Throughout the paper, we explore the concept of “making”—including the making of the “voice-over,” making meaningful spaces, forging connections, and engaging in dialogue to create meanings—to highlight the active nature of localisation in ways that “make” the Paralympics Malawian.

Disability, the Paralympics, and Sub-Saharan Africa: Intersecting Debates

For the IPC, UK International Development, and others involved in the African broadcast of the Tokyo Games, it was common sense that the Paralympics had positive impacts; however, in disability studies and some activist communities, the Paralympics is far more contentious. Questions have been raised about whether this quadrennial media spectacle represents a net positive for the wider, heterogeneous disability community (Bundon and Clarke 2015). The Paralympics is argued to rest on a powerful “disabling myth of disability,” which suggests that if people would only choose to be brave enough, bodily limitations could be transcended (Goggin and Hutchins 2021). Scholars point to the dominance of the “overcoming adversity” narrative, often termed “supercrip” (Berger 2008; Purdue and Howe 2012), as undermining broader disability activism for structural change. Berger (2008, 648) defines supercrips as “those individuals whose inspirational stories of courage, dedication, and hard work prove that it can be done; that one can defy the odds and accomplish the impossible.” This positivity-infused trope is frequently applied in patronising ways to both people with impairments who lead ordinary lives and to individuals (e.g., para-athletes) who excel (Howe 2011), often neglecting more challenging political struggles against structural inequalities and oppression.

Secondly, there are critical debates necessary regarding the consequences of applying Global North concepts and practices of disability and disability sport to Global South contexts. In keeping with calls to decolonise disability studies (Grech 2015; Meekosha 2011), it is problematic to assume universal meanings of disability or the Paralympics. Scholars have found that African thought on disability is conceptually organised in categories of “difference,” rather than focusing on “deficiency” (as in “dis”ability) (Devlieger 2014; Livingston 2006), and is sometimes underpinned by religious, spiritual, and moral frameworks (Muderredzi and Ingstad 2011). Modern sport, too, has Eurocentric origins and values, often assumed to be universal (Burnett 2017), and the colonial underdevelopment of disability services has led to a “disability divide” in para sport globally (Novak 2014).

Thirdly, it is important to consider the political economy dynamics underpinning the discursive power within globalised, mediated sport. Sporting events, such as the Olympics and the World Cup, feature prominently in broadcast schedules across SSA (Akindes 2014; 2018; Smith 2016). Transnational commercial broadcasters dominate sports media flows in Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone African countries, and few local broadcasters can compete with their commercial power (Akindes 2014; 2018). On this basis, television sports broadcasting flows in SSA have been characterised as “neo-cultural and economic imperialism” (Rowe 2011, 90) or “electronic colonisation” (Akindas 2018).

The Global–Local Nexus

To advance our discussion of localisation, we will consider ways of understanding the global–local nexus from three perspectives: television and localisation, localisation debates in aid and development, and the communication for development and social change literature.

Television and Localisation

The localisation of global content has been a commercially driven practice since the early days of television (Waisbord 2004). Television has a transnational history, commonly importing and exchanging programmes, as well as copying, imitating, and adapting genres and forms (Mikos 2020). Since the 1990s, franchising and licensing have formalised practices of localising, especially for reality television formats such as *Idol* and *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* (Moran 2009; Oren and Shahaf 2012). Moran described localisation as similar to processes of familiarisation or domestication, involving practices of adapting to cultural contexts in order to increase the enjoyment of audiences (Moran 2009). Catering to local tastes and cultures has commercial value (Donoghue 2014). As Esser (2016) argues, what is referred to as “localisation” actually means “nationalisation,” and national identity endures strongly through television despite the apparent decline of the nation within globalisation processes. Within sports TV, there is a particularly strong persistence of national localisation, as sports require an affective connection to the nation (Rowe 2011). Sport is the “perfect material for global television,” combining “specific forms of commentary, editing and presentation that are directed towards identified audiences and so customized for them” (Rowe 2020, 203–204). On the other hand, television content may be denationalised as part of localisation, and in African contexts “localisation” more often means “regionalisation,” with pan-African forms often produced along linguistic lines, using colonial languages for expediency (Ndlela 2016). The SSA Tokyo broadcast followed the model outlined by Ndlela (2016), which was a single pan-African package featuring commentary in three colonial languages: an expedient but denationalised and, therefore, less “local” mode of localisation.

The Localisation Agenda in International Development

Another series of debates on localisation can be seen in the field of humanitarian aid and development. Over the decades, international development has been criticised for imposing Western logics that lack locally driven, participatory forms of development (Chambers 1983; 1997), which are driven by bureaucratic experts and their global, universalising technical knowledge (Escobar 1995; Mosse 2011). The localisation agenda has gained renewed momentum since the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and the consensus agreement titled the Grand Bargain (IASC 2016), which called for a fundamental shift in power away from international NGOs toward local organisations and groups. Here, the concept of the local typically stands in binary opposition to “international,” with renewed attention to the maintenance of systemic structural asymmetries—from salary disparities to decision-making agency, through to racialised

tropes about capacity and trustworthiness—where changes to the status quo are subtly resisted (Al-Abdeh and Patel 2019; James 2022). It is important to state that although the broadcast was subsidised by UK International Development, the IPC, while a non-profit, does not position itself as a “development agency” but rather as a membership-based sports governing body (IPC 2022). They typically raise funds through the commercialisation of broadcast rights and partnerships with private foundations or sponsors rather than through development funding. Yet, the parallels regarding asymmetric power dynamics raised by the localisation agenda remain relevant to these discussions.

Communication for Development and Social Change, Globalisation, and Place

Given these debates, it is not surprising that issues of the global and local have been recurrent themes throughout the literature on communication for development and social change, which straddles the fields of communication studies and development studies. In particular, Robertson’s concept of the “glocal” was referenced by Hemer and Tufte (2005) in their edited volume, *Media and Glocal Change: Rethinking Communication for Development*. Similarly, Appadurai’s discussions highlight that the global is not “merely the accidental site of the fusion or confusion of circulating global elements” (Appadurai 2013, 67), but rather that these are mutually constituted sites, each generated through complex negotiations and tensions. This has influenced the work of Lie (2003) and Hemer and Tufte (2005). Other scholars have drawn on Castells’ discussions of networks to understand place, globalisation, and transnational social movements (Dutta 2015; Escobar 2000).

Lie’s (2003) concept of communication for localisation is particularly useful here. Unlike the discussions of TV localisation above, Lie first emphasises localisation as constituted of “acts” of interpretation, highlighting the agency of people in processes of interpretation. He says that the process of interpretation applies equally to global television content and to campaigns by development agencies, labelling these as “acts of localization” and simultaneously “counteracts to globalization,” where “through interpretation that people empower themselves” (Lie 2003, 96). Building on this, he proposes a concept of “communication for localization,” which emphasises action. Communication for localisation is:

an active concept it refers to supporting the voice of the local (which in some cases can also mean national or even macroregional) or disadvantaged groups (either in a global, macroregional, national, regional, or local arena), in order to counterbalance the global communication flow and to positively favor the right to culture from the inside out. (Lie 2003, 99)

Interpretation, identity construction, voice, and action are core, indivisible aspects of communication in localisation practice.

Another useful framework for considering flows grounded within a place is the communicative ecologies approach (Hearn and Foth 2007; Lennie and Tacchi 2013; Slater 2014; Tacchi et al. 2019). This analytical and conceptual framework supports an understanding of everyday communication practices in holistic and contextualised ways, while avoiding the imposition of Eurocentric notions of “media,” including definitions of what constitutes “media” and categories of use (Hearn and Foth 2007; Slater 2014). For example, Slater (2014) discusses the relevance of “roads,” and more specifically the seasonality of “mud” in the flows of local communication in Sri Lanka. As such, it is useful for thinking about global and local media flows, uses, and meanings in place-based and connected ways. This work has been advanced by Tacchi et al. (2019, 95) who state that communication occurs in an interconnected ecology “of information and communication resources, media, networks, inter-relationships and content.” The metaphor of an “ecology” implies the existence of a complex, interrelated array of processes, practices, and the resources and media used to perform them (Tacchi et al. 2019). Media do not have fixed, invariable properties; instead, meanings emerge in a social context, shaped by social practices and interactions (Slater 2014; Tacchi et al. 2019). Core to the approach is attention to the interrelations between the dimensions of information and content, media and spaces, and social relations and networks.

Communicative ecologies, in combination with Lie’s communication for localisation, offer a framework for examining how the global media phenomenon of the Paralympics was adapted to the Malawian context.

Methodology

This research adopted participatory action research to explore how the debut FTA broadcast of the Paralympics in Malawi could be meaningful, relevant, and valuable. This paper reports on research from a sub-project of a collaboration between researchers at two universities (Loughborough University and the University of Malawi) and the IPC, covering the period from 2020 to 2024. The research encompassed athlete development, studies on broadcast production, content and audiences, and school-based education programmes.

Action research is “learning in and through action and reflection” with a commitment to improvement and hope (McNiff and Whitehead 2002, 17). Our approach was informed by an ecological and ethnographic perspective on communication, in line with ethnographic action research (Tacchi 2015). This combination enabled a participatory research methodology that generates knowledge through practices of action and reflection, facilitated by meaningful partnerships and supported by immersive engagement in context. In this way, this research involved the elements of practising communication for social change through experimental and creative approaches, coupled with participant observation, interviews, workshops, knowledge exchanges, networking, and other methods of data collection and reciprocity.

At the time of writing, there have been two key action research cycles. In the first cycle (2021), the research project funded the national broadcaster to produce voice-over commentary in the Malawian language of Chichewa, utilised Theatre for Development (TfD) to explore themes of disability stigma and para sport, and conducted mobile screenings of the Paralympic broadcast and video content in three districts of Malawi. In total, these community events engaged around 1,300 people. During these community activities, the researchers undertook participant observation, conducted interviews before and after, and documented the events and dialogues using field notes, photography, and video.

Building on the insights from the first cycle, the second cycle (2022) experimented with what would become the “Making Noise” process and toolkit. We convened a diverse group of individuals and organisations, including many who had participated in the first cycle, to co-create and implement their own “Making Noise Action Plan” to use para sport as a platform for social change. It used the African Union Region 5 Youth Games, hosted by Malawi in 2022, as an anchor. This process involved members of the Malawian National Paralympic Committee (NPC), the Region 5 Games organising committee, representatives from inclusive sport organisations, representatives from Malawian Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) and disability service providers, as well as journalists from local television stations Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) and Mibawa TV, along with the researchers. Research funds were deployed to support actions that took place alongside continuous processes of reflection and discussion. Follow-up workshops collaboratively analysed the resultant news stories and other outcomes, such as responses from government, community members, and commercial stakeholders.

The Paralympics “Made” Malawian

This research advances thinking on communication for localisation by identifying acts of interpretation and localisation in the process of making the Paralympics Malawian, which emerged as the Paralympic content was integrated into, connected with, and adapted to the local communicative ecology. We use the idea of “making” (the making of the “voice-over,” making meaningful spaces, making connections, and dialogue to create meanings) to draw attention to the active nature of localisation. We begin by analysing the interpretation processes involved in local commentary production.

The Making of the “Voice” Over

The most literal site of interpretation occurred through the process of adding commentary in Chichewa, the language spoken by the largest number of people in Malawi, to the Paralympic television highlight packages. As outlined, each participating national broadcaster in SSA received the highlights packages via the internet or satellite from TVMS, with versions in English, French, and Portuguese. In Malawi, the national broadcaster given the broadcast rights was the MBC. The idea of local commentary was originally proposed as a response to the obvious language barriers associated with

engaging audiences beyond the English-speaking urban population and was initially conceived quite simply as a translation and voice-over. However, as the process evolved, it became a more nuanced method of interpretation.

Two MBC reporters were appointed to the commentary team: one sports reporter and one disability reporter. They invested significant time and labour into the interpretation process. The sports reporter described the process involved in reviewing the recordings, researching the sports and athletes, and planning his commentary.

[Once] I have access to [the highlights packages], I go home. I do some reviews on the videos, at least for a couple of hours. And then I come the following day, having reviewed the videos, I call [the disability reporter]; he comes. He didn't have time to listen to the videos, so all he was doing was to just follow what I was saying. So, I would play [the package] on my laptop with my headphones on ... and he would comment on what I'm saying. (MBC interview, March 9, 2022)

The process of interpretation was therefore quite demanding for the commentators, who were unfamiliar with many of the sports themselves. However, the dynamic they created between themselves, along with the improvisation under time pressures, contributed to a lively and very local commentary.

The constitution of the commentary team was also significant in the interpretation and localisation process. The sports reporter is a trained journalist specialising in sports. His is one of the voices most strongly associated with local football commentary, and on match days, his charismatic cadences and catchphrases can be heard from radios and televisions across towns and villages. This background was particularly evident in his commentary on five-a-side football events, a sport played by athletes with visual impairments and a sighted goalkeeper:

We will now be going to that game of 5-a-side. ... This is football. ... Yes, there is a lot of work here. ... Japan and France. ... Boys from these countries. ... There we see Japan has won the ball going forward, and it's a goooalll! Japan went with a lot of strength and the goalkeeper for France could not see the ball. ... And now the Japanese boys are going forward passing nicely. ... Oh, they scored a very good goal. ... Now Japan is leading, feeding the goalkeeper of France a rabbit, where the striker shot it in between the goalkeeper's legs... Japaaaaaan! And the coach is very happy saying, 'This is how it should be; this is how it should be.' ... Now it is a penalty for Japan and it's a gooooooooooalllll! 4-0! 4-0! 4-0! ... The Japanese team has felled the French team like a tree. (Broadcast on August 29, 2021, translated from Chichewa)

As a voice already rooted in the communicative ecology of Malawians, his presence strongly associated the Paralympic coverage with Malawian sports. Audience responses at the mobile screenings indicated how important this association was, with some stating, "The commentators were fun. It was just like I was watching Malawian football" (screening on October 24, 2021, translated). It elevated the Paralympic coverage from something quite distant to something deeply familiar.

The above quote also highlights the use of local idioms in the Paralympic commentary. Alongside felling “the French team like a tree,” there were many other examples dotted throughout, such as “swimming fast like a chambo,” a fish native to Lake Malawi, and “going in for the kill, like chopping off the snake’s head” (broadcast on August 29, 2021, translated). The sports reporter’s commentary also gave lay explanations for some of the lesser-known sports, such as “throwing the heavy stone” (shotput) and “swimming backwards” (backstroke) (broadcast August 29, 2021, translated). The commentary on backstroke also provided another example of layering local understandings of people with particular swimming skills by linking global athletes to the lakeside regions of Malawi:

This person is swimming backwards, nicely. ... This one should be from the lake, the way she swims. ... There at M’baluku in the southern part of Lake Malawi. ... This one must be from Mangochi. ... Ukraine’s Ostachenko in second place, Diaz ... No, no! Zou in first place, Lopez Diaz number two, while Ostapchenko is number three. (Broadcast on August 29, 2021, translated)

These types of references within the commentary to local landmarks, fauna, and experiences were significant as a process of interpretation and localisation.

The second member of the commentary duo was a radio programme producer and presenter of several weekly programmes including *Greetings by Braille* and *Ifenso Ndife* (“Disability is Not Inability”). Drawing on his lived experience as a person with a visual impairment, his contribution to interpreting the Games was to make explicit connections between Paralympic sport and disability rights. In comparison, TVMS’s approach to the commentary, under the direction of the IPC, was to provide a straightforward introduction to the event, including brief information about the impairment and classification, and then to commentate on the sports performances as if they were any other sport (for more, see Pullen et al. 2024). This aligns with the assertion that the “best” way to cover the Paralympics is to focus on the athletic performances and to avoid overemphasis on disability, inspirational/overcoming framings, and patronising language (Page et al. 2022). The Malawian commentary, therefore, provided a significant contrast, punctuated by explicit discussions about disability directed at parents, the government, and people with disabilities. It maintained a consistent narrative that individuals with disabilities possess talents and have the right to opportunities (in the form of inclusion, facilities, and funding) to reach their potential, and they should not be seen as objects of pity. At times, the disability reporter used the platform of the commentary to reinforce his activism on other platforms:

What is pleasing is that many people have learned, and are continuing to learn, that a person with disability is able. Most times when we say, mostly on the radio, that people with disability should be given opportunities, people think that we say it just for the sake of saying it, or just to pamper people with disabilities. Don’t you believe now, having seen this?! (broadcast on August 29, 2021, translated)

Indeed, the strongest theme in his commentary was to compare the context of disability in Malawi with the situations of “our friends in other countries [who] are way ahead.” While he frequently encouraged people with disabilities to lead this change, he also directly called on the government, the private sector, and parents to do more:

Because in Malawi there is no interest in a person with disability. When many people see a person with disability, they see him or her as a failed person who cannot do anything. Today, this is going to be a big lesson to the government and also those responsible for sports that, if given a chance, people with a disability can place a country in development. (Broadcast on September 3, 2021, translated)

This contrasts with some critiques of the Paralympics in the Global North, where discussions of broader disability politics, such as austerity, have been avoided by media managers who are instead keen to maintain a positive spin (Goggin and Hutchins 2017), resulting in a discursive decoupling of the Paralympics and para-athletes from wider disability politics (Purdue and Howe 2012). This commentator combined his activism with light-hearted banter, self-deprecating jokes about being tired from training, and jibes about how easily the para-athletes would outperform his able-bodied co-host. The sports reporter described the disability reporter’s approach as “playing an activist part inside the commentary while at the same time also giving us his analytical humour on how the games were proceeding” (MBC interview, September 3, 2022). In this way, the commentator transformed Paralympic content into a platform for voicing disability politics.

One concern expressed by those involved in producing the Africa-wide broadcasts regarding support for national-level commentary in contexts new to para sport was the risk that commentators might use inappropriate and derogatory language. Terminology is much easier to oversee and control with a centralised broadcast in European languages. Terminology in the disability sector is often a fraught topic. For example, the current IPC guidance and UN recommendations for using person-first language (person/athlete with a disability) are strongly objected to by many in the UK disability community, who argue that identity-first language (disabled person/athlete) is consistent with the social model of disability. This becomes even more complicated in languages other than English. For example, in French, the term *handicap* is widely used and is not considered pejorative (Ville and Ravaud 2007). Disability rights leaders and government agencies in Malawi advocate for person-first language in keeping with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). However, disability terminology remains an ongoing challenge, and deeply offensive terms in Chichewa continue to appear in mainstream and everyday contexts, including media reporting. In our workshops, we found that some journalists lacked knowledge and awareness about preferred terminology in Chichewa. For them, the opportunity to learn respectful disability terminology in their local language from people with lived experience was the most significant takeaway (workshop notes July 21, 2022). Therefore, the fear of a lack of “capacity” to comment appropriately is not without a kernel of truth. However, it is important to recognise that the narrative of a “lack of

capacity” and other stories of local limitations are frequently used tropes in international aid and development, commonly invoked to justify limits to localisation and the maintenance of top-down control (Al-Abdeh and Patel 2019; James 2022). The Malawian experience of localising the Paralympics demonstrated how appropriate language relating to disability in the local language can be ensured by being led by people with disabilities in the production process, without the need to resort to using English or other hegemonic languages for top-down oversight.

The commentary, therefore, becomes an important site of communication for localisation by integrating the content within the local communicative ecology, offering an empowering interpretation of the Paralympics. The commentary does not merely make the content understandable and relatable to people’s daily lives, although this is certainly one of its consequences, it also socially constructs the local (Appadurai 1996) and its disability politics in relation to the global. Furthermore, in keeping with the notion of communication for localisation (Lie 2003), the commentary serves far more than as a simple voice-over; it provides an opportunity for a local voice, drawing on the power of the familiar literal voices of the commentators within the communicative ecology and utilising the platform to amplify disability politics. It made the content sound and feel Malawian.

Making Meaningful Spaces

There is a jarring paradox in this discussion between the emphasis on TV broadcasting and the reality of television access in a context like Malawi. Just 11.6% of Malawian households own a private television, and in rural areas, the ownership rate drops to 5.4% (National Statistical Office 2020). Even this cursory understanding of media access makes it essential to explore how Paralympic content can flow within this communicative ecology.

Early on, the action research included plans to hold mobile screenings and TfD events in rural communities as a way to promote the Paralympics beyond the boundaries of broadcast TV. TfD has a long history in Malawi and neighbouring countries, with origins in the post-independence movement of travelling theatres that used the medium of theatre (often comedy) to engage rural villagers in critical yet veiled social commentary on the dictatorial politics of the time (Magalasi 2012). Theatre remains a significant part of local communicative ecologies, with drama clubs in villages often performing comedy and entertainment at community events, and some NGOs commissioning performances of educational dramas. TfD draws inspiration from thinkers such as Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal and involves working with communities to create and perform original plays by fictionalising lived experiences from the local area (Kamlongera 1987; Magalasi 2012). Meanwhile, mobile screenings have a long history in Malawi. They involve the use of portable equipment and a local space (a school, a church hall, a community centre), gathering local communities and facilitating discussions. Both TfD and the mobile screenings sought to be responsive to local communication and information flows.

The criticisms of this approach, rather predictably, were its inefficiency and limited reach. Tfd and mobile screenings, while both consistent with communication flows in these ecologies and highly impactful (Akambadi et al. 2023), appeared small scale compared with the claimed broadcast footprint. Such activities did not align well with the IPC's strategic, more commercially oriented outlook.

In the second cycle of the action research, key stakeholders were brought together for a "Making Noise" workshop. Participants undertook a mapping process to identify communication networks and flows, which revealed additional opportunities. For example, one of the participants was from Mibawa TV, a commercial station that started as a satellite television broadcaster but is now increasingly focused on distributing content via Facebook streams. Mibawa TV's Facebook streams receive anywhere from 1,000 to 100,000 views per video, targeting the growing number of Malawians who have access to smartphones and mobile data bundles. Following the Making Noise workshop, more than three hours of para sport television content were produced across both MBC and Mibawa TV. Additionally, other potential networks for distribution were identified in the Making Noise workshop, such as working with OPDs to engage a national network of parents to hold screenings and participate in para sport activities, as well as faith-based groups. Given the social importance and influence of religion on the meanings of disability (Chataika 2013), and the density of these networks across the nation, they could serve as powerful spaces for initiating new conversations about disability.

Distribution should not only be about the pragmatic quest for increasing the efficiency of reach; it is critical to understand how the social meanings of the spaces and platforms of distribution, when embedded in a process of communication for localisation, influence the social meanings of content and enable interpretation and empowerment. When Paralympic content is viewed in a community screening at a school or church hall, featured on a local television station's weekly sports show, expressed by the village drama group, or led by an OPD, these processes of communication contribute to localisation and help make the Paralympics Malawian.

Making Connections

A third, critically important element of the communication for localisation process was our effort to connect para sport communication with the existing disability rights movement in Malawi. This highlights the communicative ecologies framework's emphasis on social resources and goals (Tacchi et al. 2019), and what enables the platform of the Paralympics to be utilised for local aspirations, agendas, and activism.

The importance of connecting para sport communication with the disability sector became clear in the first action research cycle. The mobile screenings and Tfd provoked a reframing of disability among participants, and in some cases, even local action, such as building a ramp to a classroom using local materials (Akambadi et al. 2023). However, the ramp is all but useless when the root issue at stake is access to wheelchairs

and other assistive technologies. Only 4.5% of people who need assistive technology in Malawi have access to it (Eide and Munthali 2018). On visits back to the village a few months after the performances and screenings, we were met with questions about how to support families in extremely distressing and degrading situations, with little access to assistive technology or services. This was a sobering lesson in the dangers of assuming that para sport can have social impact value on its own.

In the second action cycle, the workshop convened a group that included representatives from sports, OPDs, and disability service providers. This was significant, as in Malawi, as in many countries around the world, the NPC was not well connected with the broader disability rights movement. This is not uncommon, sometimes due to clashes regarding the perceived apolitical nature of the Paralympic movement (Goggin and Hutchins 2017; 2021; Purdue and Howe 2012) or as a result of national sports governance structures. In Malawi, connecting to these networks was immensely powerful, as explained by a leader in the Malawi NPC:

Before, ... it wasn't easy for us to meet the likes of MAP [Malawi Against Physical Disability, a rehabilitation and assistive technology provider], PODCAM [Parents of Disabled Children Association of Malawi], or FEDOMA [Federation of Disabled Persons Organisations Malawi]. But I think because of that meeting, we have established a strong rapport amongst our organisations. ... We were looked at as a sporting organisation ... [that] had nothing to do with issues of maybe fighting stigma or some other social issues affecting the citizenry. ... But now it's really different. (Malawi NPC interview, March 3, 2023)

Collaboration around the para sport platform became a means, for example, for MAP, the rehabilitation and assistive technology provider, to reach new clients for assistive technology provision. There were also contributions in terms of representation, where one activist from an OPD, upon hearing that the disability reporter was part of the commentary team, responded with "Oh! Our own" (OPD interview, September 3, 2022). The collaboration is, in effect, a process of "recoupling" the Paralympics with activism. While there are other ways we could have solved the issues that emerged from the first round of action research, such as being better prepared to refer to relevant service providers, we argue that making these connections is, in fact, core to practices of communication for localisation, as it enabled processes of interpreting and framing the Paralympics in relation to local aspirations, agendas, and activism (Tacchi et al. 2019). It connects communication for localisation with action, as well as place-based transnational activism and social movements (Appadurai 2013; Escobar 2000; Lie 2003), becoming a tool for localised communication and activism.

Dialogue to Make Meanings

The final act of localisation of the Paralympics came through the process of dialogue. Dialogue is, of course, fundamental to Freirean informed understandings of

communication for social change; however, here we also want to understand it in Lie's (2003) terms as an act of communication for localisation.

Some aspects of the Paralympic content felt irrelevant, even incongruous, when viewed from the perspective of a rural Malawian village. Unfamiliar sports, high-tech facilities, and the assistive technology shown on screen meant that for some in the mobile screenings audience, the Paralympics seemed like an event only for people in "rich countries" (Akambadi et al. 2023). This was partly addressed through local commentary, as well as through processes of dialogue and interpretation.

The process of dialogue enabled active interpretation and localisation by the audience, giving them a chance to share their ideas and relate them to the local context. The initial responses were often one of surprise, and one man commented that "I think for all of us this is the first time to see people with disabilities playing sports" (screening, October 28, 2021). During the facilitated discussions after the mobile screenings many of the statements, particularly those made by teachers and village leaders, repeated the basic positive intended messages. For example, one village leader said:

We have seen people with disabilities doing sports, and we have young people with disabilities in the schools around here. What is needed is for us to encourage them so that they can do what anyone else can do. We also have to teach our children not to discriminate against children with disabilities but to encourage them. If we do that, then everyone will benefit and be happy. (Screening, October 28, 2021, translated)

This may appear as mere platitudes, but in contexts where disability is highly stigmatised, there is significant power in having leaders publicly affirm these statements. Some of the other responses related the global Paralympic phenomenon to local issues such as access to education and employment, as well as to complicated phenomena such as keeping children locked in their homes (see Ingstad et al. 2011; Ngubane-Mokiwa 2018), for example, "Let me ask all parents not to keep children with disabilities in houses, so that teachers should help us nurture the talent that these children have" (screening, October 28, 2021, translated).

The way dialogue supports localisation was particularly evident in TfD. The plays, performed by fellow community members who had participated in the TfD workshops, explored themes of exclusion, shame, and abuse, as well as inclusion and achievement. The scenes were recognisable to audiences, provoking reflection and debate. After one performance on the themes of paternal abandonment, a member of the audience said that "This has happened here in our community" (TfD, October 23, 2021, translated). This play sparked heated debates about the morality of divorcing a parent who is abusive toward a child with disabilities and the various options the mother and the community could pursue. Plays about disability sports reflected everyday popular sports, such as football and netball. Interestingly, rather than the surprise and shock commonly seen at the screenings of the Paralympics, TfD audience members spoke about people they knew with disabilities who were excellent at sports. In this way, theatre can serve as a

bridge between elite, unfamiliar Paralympic sports and familiar, everyday inclusive sports.

Dialogue as a process of meaning-making and interpretation is not limited to these community-based events. Similar acts of mediated dialogue can also be seen in the production of local television content. One of the sports reporters involved in the Making Noise workshop subsequently produced a 30-minute studio interview with a sitting volleyball player, offering an extended conversation with someone who has lived experience of disability in a way that is rarely shown in Malawian media.

The space for dialogue to build shared interpretations is, therefore, a critical element of the localisation process. It is not only important for making sense of global content collectively and applying it to local experiences, but also for shifting modes from awareness raising to action and social change.

Conclusion: Making Noise

Ultimately, this paper argues that when social impact efforts using the Paralympics are driven by reach-centred logics—which, for efficiency reasons, necessitate centralised, region-wide production absent of genuine local partnerships—the potential for social change is undermined. The Paralympic narratives stemming from centralised content production structures are unlikely to resonate with and engage audiences, connect with local disability movements and rights agendas, and, ironically, effectively reach audiences in some contexts due to language barriers and communication environments.

The key to a communication for social change strategy requires a proactive approach to fostering localisation. Conceptually, this advances Lie's concept of communication for localisation, combining it with a communicative ecologies approach. This paper has unpacked at least four acts of localisation that were vital for the Paralympics to resonate in Malawi. These acts included creating the “voice-over” with local commentary, employing distribution tactics through the establishment of meaningful spaces, forming connections to the disability movement, and engaging in dialogue to generate understanding. Taking this approach, we argue that global media events, such as the Paralympics, can indeed serve as useful opportunities for social change.

This article argues that localisation can be operationalised efficiently by empowering local people and groups to determine how to make global media content meaningful and impactful in their context. In this way, it aligns with debates on localising development and shifting power from international to local organisations. Localisation was also found to enable the Paralympics to be used for disability advocacy in ways that were not possible in the centralised TVMS packages, demonstrating that the apolitical nature of the Paralympics is not inevitable.

One of the practical outcomes designed to operationalise these findings is the “Making Noise” process and toolkit. Key to the toolkit is a process for creating coalitions between para sport representatives, journalists and the media, OPDs, disability service providers, and communication for social change practitioners. The toolkit makes it possible to consider how processes of localisation can be fostered in locally tailored, yet replicable and scalable ways.

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