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Promoting the ideals of integration and diversity. Media coverage of Special Olympics Australia

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Abstract
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Promoting the ideals of integration and diversity

Media coverage of Special Olympics Australia

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ABSTRACT

Australia's media organisations have long had an obsession with the exploits of our sporting 'champions', both on and off the field. This coverage is often said to be a response to the demands of a sports-mad nation. In a society in which sport is often considered a symbol of unity and integration, this paper investigates whether the media (1) contributes to the spirit of diversity by covering sport involving people with intellectual disabilities, and (2) encourages greater awareness of disability issues by writing with authority and understanding, or instead promotes elitism by focusing on so-called 'real sports' that feature able-bodied elite athletes and exclude those categorised as 'non sports' because they feature people with disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

Sport has long held an important place in Australian life (Lawrence & Rowe, 1986; McKay, 1991; Rowe & Lawrence, 1990). In 1999-2000, nearly 55% of Australians aged 18 and over (7.54 million) participated in sporting activities (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2000a, 2000b). Australians are also active watchers of sport, as attendance figures at major sporting events attest. One can also assume—based on the presence of discrete sporting sections in daily newspapers and news bulletins—that Australians enjoy reading about sport. Although, like the declining sports participation rates (ABS, 2000a, 2000b), readership of specialist sporting publications appears to be on the decline (Roy Morgan Research [RMR], 2002a, 2002b). Declining readership has long been a problem for newspapers as well, particularly among younger demographics (Henningham, 1993, p. 59; House of Representa-
tives Select Committee on the Print Media [HRSCPM], 1992; Knightley, 2003). From a sporting perspective, it would seem that the range of sports actually covered by media organisations is somewhat limited, with a small number of sports obtaining the lion’s share of media attention. Significantly, with the exception of cricket, the sports that are popularised by the media do not seem to match the participation preferences of Australians (ABS, 2000b; RMR, 2003).

In Australia, it is not just the able-bodied who participate in sport or recreational activities. A survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in 1998 found that 28% of Australians with a disability had participated in sport or physical recreation during the preceding 12 months (ABS, 1999). While this participation rate is much lower than the national average, it nonetheless confirms that sport is considered to be integral to the lives of people with disabilities. It also confirms the finding of international research that non-active people with disabilities are more susceptible to life-threatening illness and medical conditions than their active counterparts (Blinde & McCallister, 1999; Chawla, 1994; Davis, 1996; Duvdevany, 2002; Graham & Reid, 2000; Henderson, 1999; Kozub & Porretta, 1996; Sutherland, Couch, & Iacono, 2002; Temple, Walkley, & Sturmsiek, 2000; Yuen & Hanson, 2002). According to Temple et al. (2000), people with intellectual disabilities display low levels of cardiovascular fitness and high obesity, due to the sedentary lifestyles they lead. This leaves them vulnerable to preventable morbidity and mortality (Sutherland et al., 2002). However, studies also show that people with disabilities who participate in sport and recreational programs display higher self-esteem and confidence than people with disabilities who do not participate (Super & Block, 1992; Yuen & Hanson, 2002). These programs offer participants the opportunity to socialise and meet other people with similar interests (Blinde & McCallister, 1999). Other studies suggest that, while the benefits of increased participation are readily observable, there are a number of barriers in the way of people with disabilities who want to participate in organised sporting and recreational programs, such as environmental factors (access to facilities) and organisational issues, including the availability of people who can transport participants to and from the activity, administer it, and provide coaching support (Henderson, 1999).

In Australia, a number of organisations have been established to provide sporting opportunities for people with disabilities. One such organisation is Special Olympics Australia (SOA). Its brief is to provide sporting and recreational opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities. SOA was established in 1976 to
provide year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disability by giving them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy, and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills, and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes and the community. [Its goal] is for all persons with intellectual disability to have the chance to become useful and productive citizens who are accepted and respected in their communities. The benefits of participation in Special Olympics for people with intellectual disability include improved physical fitness and motor skills, greater self-confidence, a more positive self-image, friendships, and increased family support. (SOA, 2003)

Part of the worldwide Special Olympics movement that provides recreational and sporting opportunities for one million children and adults with intellectual disabilities in 150 countries, SOA has 39 chapters operating in each of the states and the ACT, providing regular recreational and sporting opportunities for 3,000 athletes (SOA, 2003). Its athletes participate in local, national, and even international competitions.

However, SOA officials say that the organisation often struggles when seeking to gain coverage for the work it does (Tanner, Haswell, & Lake, in press). The purpose of this paper is to consider a number of research questions, including the following: (1) is it correct that sporting events involving people with an intellectual disability are ignored by the media? and (2) even if they are covered, do the resultant stories encourage the ideals of integration and diversity? Linked to these is a third question: does print media coverage of such stories tend to reinforce negative stereotypes? That is, how are the stories framed? If the answer to the third question is true, it is despite the existence of clear guidelines that are designed to help journalists to (1) understand the importance of diversity, (2) interview people with a disability, (3) present information involving disability knowledgeably, and (4) be able to distinguish between language that is considered acceptable and that which is considered inappropriate. These guidelines include the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) Code of Conduct, the Australian Press Council (APC) Principles, and a range of publications put out by various disability groups, such as Media Guidelines prepared by the Disability Council of NSW.

The tendency of the media’s coverage of people with disabilities to promote and thus reinforce negative attitudes and stereotypes has been widely documented (Antrim, 1997; Auslander & Gold, 1999; Hardin & Preston, 2001; van Kraayenoord, 2002). In fact, it is often argued that media portrayal of disability issues is inaccurate and demeaning.
(Yoshida, Wasilewski, & Friedman, 1990), although this does vary from medium to medium (Elliott & Byrd, 1982). According to Hardin and Preston (2001), 'stereotypes have generally allowed disabled individuals to be framed as either dangerous or pathetic; disabled people are either tragic cases, constantly bemoaning their fate, or courageous 'supercrips' somehow overcoming their natural condition' (p. 43). Much media coverage of disability issues uses what Seale (2001), in an unrelated study, calls 'struggle language'. This leads to other long-held criticisms of journalists who cover disability issues, which include a lack of sensitivity or ignorance (Antrim, 1997).

To test these assumptions, we focused on the media's coverage of a major sporting event run solely for people with intellectual disabilities, namely, the 7th Special Olympics National Games held in Sydney from September 21-27, 2002. The games attracted 800 competitors from all Australian states and territories and from neighbouring countries. As such, it was the largest sporting event held in Australia in 2002 in terms of total competitors. There were 4,000 spectators at the opening ceremony, 1500 at the sell-out closing ceremony, and an average of 2,000 per day at competitions (Langthorne, 2003).

**MEDIA AND SPORT**

To understand media coverage of disabled sport, it is important to appreciate how journalists and other people in the news chain make decisions regarding the suitability of stories. As McKay (1991) argues, one of the first decisions is to distinguish 'real' sport from 'non'-sport (p. 92). So-called 'real' sports receive coverage, whereas the 'non'-sports struggle to gain column centimetres or air time. Certainly they are not covered as prominently. According to McKay, however, the application of these definitions is not straightforward, with considerable disagreement within the media itself over what constitutes real sport and what is non-sport (p. 92). He argues:

Having decided what is 'real' sport, it has to be decided which types of sports will be covered—amateur or professional; male or female; disabled, youth or master's; regional, national or international; ordinary events or 'spectacles'. Judgments next have to be made on which aspects of the selected sports will be represented. (p. 93)

Decisions regarding the status of particular sports are influenced by a range of economic, cultural, and political factors. Sport is a multi-billion-dollar business and the financial fortunes of many companies, including media organisations, are linked to the success of sporting events and even the activities of individual sports stars. The media tends
to focus on the high-sponsorship sports: soccer, cricket, and, at the time of this article going to press, the 2003 Rugby World Cup being hosted by Australia. But the media does not restrict itself to the sports; it also focuses on the on-field achievements and off-field lives of high-profile individuals. These are generally the highly paid elite sports men and women. At the top of the pyramid—and thus, in the media spotlight—are the small number of sportspeople representing a range of sports whose skills, appearance, or ability to talk to the media set them apart from their peers.

To date, however, it seems that the achievements of athletes with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, have not yet qualified for 'real' sport status. A number of possible explanations can be advanced for this. The first has to do with the fact that such athletes are overwhelmingly amateurs. Their sport is often scheduled to fit in with the commitments of the coaches and administrators who volunteer their time and expertise. This compares with the highly paid full-time coaches who train elite athletes in other disciplines. The second explanation has to do with the belief that sport involving people with disabilities does not qualify as elite and therefore would struggle to capture the attention of readers, viewers, and listeners, compared with other sports involving so-called 'able-bodied' athletes. Linked to this is the view that people with disabilities are not a marketable commodity, either because their performances do not set or threaten recognised world records or because they do not meet the 'body beautiful' ideals we associate with sporting heroes, and which advertising representatives favour in athletes who endorse their products. This attitude appears to be reflected in the small number of on-going major sponsors SOA has managed to attract. At the time of writing, its major sponsors included Metcash/IGA, SAS Institute Australia, Team Otis, Qantas, the Australian Sports Commission, and the Primary Club (SOA, 2003). It also receives considerable on-going support from Rotary, which provides many of the volunteers required to run such a large sporting event (SOA, 2003).

The view that people with disabilities are not marketable is both an interesting and potentially misguided argument, given the number of Australians who have a disability that affects them in their daily lives. According to the ABS (1999a, 1999b), nearly 20% of Australians are categorised as having some form of disability. Nine percent of Australians with a disability have an intellectual impairment (ABS, 2000d). Add to that the family members, friends, carers, and other

Promoting the ideals of integration and diversity

127
people working in the field, and the percentage of people who could be assumed to be interested in stories about disability, including intellectual disability, would increase significantly.

IDENTIFYING THE NEWS VALUES
Commercial and marketing considerations are just two of the factors that influence whether a story is published or broadcast. From a journalistic perspective, there are a number of others that influence whether information is converted into news and distributed to a reading or listening public. These have been identified as 'news values' or 'criteria for newsworthiness'. These include consequence, proximity, conflict, human interest, novelty, and prominence (Conley, 1997; Masterton, 1992). Consequence refers to the number of people who stand to be affected by the story. Proximity refers to the closeness of information to the reader: for example, information about a local person is regarded as having greater news value than the same story involving someone from another town. Conflict is one of the mainstays of journalistic writing. The majority of hard news stories involve 'conflict', as do sporting stories. Human interest refers to the interest we have in other people, particularly individuals who would not normally be considered newsworthy. This criterion can also be applied to coverage of an event. In journalistic terms, novelty refers to the unusual. Prominence refers to an event that is considered newsworthy because of who was involved, rather than what they were involved in.

According to Masterton (1992), there are also three core elements, interest, timeliness, and clarity, that need to be satisfied before information can be published as a story (p. 21). The information must be of interest to a large group of people in the target audience. Given the percentage of people within the community who have an intellectual disability, are related to or associated with people with a disability, or work in this field, it would not be difficult to satisfy this core element. Timeliness refers to the fact that the information must be new, or at least not widely known. This element is also likely to be satisfied, particularly in the case of an organisation that is essentially staffed by volunteers, does not have a large promotional budget, and relies heavily on the media to promote its work. Finally, the information must be understandable to the target group. Given the style of sports reporting generally, including the tendency to write to a low common denominator, it is anticipated that such reporting would be readily understandable to the population at large, particularly if the structure of the story avoids discussions about disabilities and focuses on the sporting dimension.
Given the focus of SOA's activities, it could be argued that stories involving the games would satisfy a number of these news values. The first criterion, consequence, is satisfied by virtue of the large number of people throughout Australia who stand to be affected by the story. Given SOA's structure and focus on grassroots participation, it is likely that interest in the games would extend down to the community level where the pleasure of team selection, the euphoria of success, and perhaps even the disappointment of defeat would be shared, particularly in the smaller communities where the participants are likely to be personally known to many other people.

This suggests that the second criterion, proximity, is also achievable. From a journalistic perspective, it indicates that there is considerable potential for widespread coverage of the games across different levels of media, from the national media, through the state organisations, to small community providers of news.

Conflict is one of the more problematic criteria, from SOA's perspective at least, given that its focus is on participation rather than competition. This is summed up in its motto, 'Let me win, but if I cannot win, let me be successful in the attempt'. Within Special Olympics, the focus is on achieving a personal best (PB), but only within a 15% band. Athletes who break their PB by 15% or more do not receive a medal or placegetter's ribbon. However, in the spirit of Special Olympics, they do not miss out completely, receiving a participant's ribbon. This focus on personal achievement rather than breaking world records allows SOA to run events in which people of different abilities (and even gender or age) compete alongside each other.

From a journalistic perspective, this focus on participation rather than elite performance may be considered a negative. Mainstream media coverage of sporting events focuses on the contest—the physical crunching of bodies, the finessing of shots for goal, the strategies employed to outsmart one's competitors. These are more likely to satisfy the criteria of newsworthiness than the performance of a ten-pin bowler who may struggle to keep their ball out of the gutters, let alone score a strike. Some sports reporters may struggle to find a story lead in such a performance. And yet it can represent a significant personal achievement viewed by the right reporter, it offers grist for a potent story.

There is also considerable potential in the fourth criterion, human interest. As indicated previously, this criterion focuses on people who would not normally be considered newsworthy. Certainly that could be said of the majority of athletes selected to compete at the games. Very few would have been the subject of media attention before, given the

Promoting the ideals of integration and diversity
lives they tend to lead away from their sport. Many are on disability pensions. Some have jobs, but generally they struggle to find full-time paid employment, often working part-time or on a voluntary basis in low-profile jobs. While many lead independent lives, often they don't have the profile that would draw the media to them. And yet, given the coverage mainstream sports reporting devotes to the injuries of athletes, the disabilities of games participants may provide the 'hook' journalists look for in developing a story. However, this can be a double-edged sword from a media perspective, and highlights the need for journalists writing about disability to report responsibly. This would involve treating any 'gee whiz' element cautiously. Journalists seeking to introduce this element into a story about disability would need to be careful not to promote existing negative stereotypes and not to report in a way that could be viewed as patronising or condescending.

The final criterion, prominence, is one that SOA has tapped into to promote the games and even the achievements of individual athletes. While SOA does not have its high-profile equivalents of Olympic gold medallists Cathy Freeman or Ian Thorpe, or even Paralympian Louise Sauvage, its cause has been taken up by the likes of former world number one tennis player Lleyton Hewitt, Australian Test Cricket captain Steve Waugh, and long-distance swimmer Susie Maroney. Hewitt, for example, has accepted the honorary title of Special Olympics Ambassador, a role that takes him to competitions where he mixes with and even hits up with athletes when his schedule permits.

Based on this discussion of the various criteria of newsworthiness, it appears there is considerable potential for an organisation like SOA to gain positive coverage of an event like the 7th National Games. Before analysing the data, however, it is necessary to provide one further element to the framework within which this study is being conducted. Given the Hardin and Preston (2001) comment regarding stereotypes, we have decided to adopt a methodology based on 'framing'. A news frame effectively advises readers how to interpret a story (D'Angelo, 2002; Entman, 1993; Hendrickson & Tankard, 1997; Tuchman, 1978). According to this approach, journalists 'frame' their reports of events through traditional routines, including the application of 'news values' and 'news angles' to events (Hendrickson & Tankard, 1997, p. 1). According to Entman (1993):

Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition,
causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation
for the item described. Typically frames diagnose, evaluate and prescribe.
(p. 52, Entman's italics)

The frames can be the outcome of an interaction between different actors: (1) sources who provide the journalist with information, (2) the journalists and other media professionals in the news chain, and (3) the audiences. According to Entman:

Communicators make conscious or unconscious framing judgments in deciding what to say, guided by frames (often called schemata) that organise their belief system. The text contains frames that are manifested by the presence or absence of certain key words, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments. (p. 52)

Frames work by highlighting some bits of information, thereby making them more noticeable or meaningful (salient) to the audience (Entman, 1993, p. 53). This can be achieved through a number of strategies, including placement or repetition (p. 53). However, frames can also work through the omission of information. ‘Most frames are defined by what they omit as well as include, and the omissions of potential problem definitions, explanations, evaluations and recommendations may be as critical as the inclusions in guiding the audience’ (p. 54).

For example, sources invariably have particular messages they want the media to convey and will do all they can to ensure that these messages are understood and prioritised by journalists in presenting a particular story. Journalists, who are supposedly guided in their work by the twin tenets of fairness and objectivity, will then process that information and convey it to their readers, listeners, and viewers, using traditional news values as a guide when putting the story together. Finally, the information is absorbed by audience members. However, it is widely acknowledged that the effects of framing can be limited if the frames do not accord with dominant schemata in the receiver's belief system (D’Angelo, 2002; Entman, 1993, p. 54; Scheufele, 1999; Tewkesbury, Jones, Peske, Raymond, & Vig, 2000). According to D’Angelo (2002), 'schemata organise and filter incoming information, and integrate it into existing, or prior, knowledge’ (p. 875). Schemata influence how individuals recognise and respond to information that has been framed in a particular way (D’Angelo, 2002; Scheufele, 1999). ‘In this way, prior knowledge is believed to mediate the power of frames in a decision-making or evaluative way’ (D’Angelo, 2002, p. 875). Although, as
Tewkesbury et al. (2000) argue, the single greatest power of media frames is their ability to provide and activate information, thereby shaping individual frames (p. 804).

As indicated previously, Hardin and Preston (2001) identified a number of potential frames: 'stereotypes have generally allowed disabled individuals to be framed as either dangerous or pathetic; disabled people are either tragic cases, constantly bemoaning their fate, or courageous "supercrips" somehow overcoming their natural condition'. To these can be added a number of other potential frames that could potentially appear in media coverage of sport for people with intellectual disabilities, including:

1) people with disabilities as contributing members of society;
2) people with disabilities as part of society's diverse fabric, whose achievements and contributions should not be defined by what they are, rather than who they are;
3) individuals wanting to be recognised as 'people' first, rather than being defined by their disability.

While some of these may potentially be viewed as subsets of the Hardin and Preston frames, we believe they warrant separate consideration, particularly in light of the guidelines that are available to journalists writing about disability.

THE CASE STUDY
The survey covered a 16-month period, commencing in September 2001, 12 months out from the games, and finishing in January 2003. Articles were sourced through two electronic databases, Factiva and Lexis-Nexis. The search was conducted using a keyword search for the phrase 'Special Olympics'. This search produced almost 200 articles; however, the sample was trimmed down to include only stories that mentioned the national games. In total, 110 articles were published that satisfied our criteria, averaging 241.05 words in length. Photographs were not included in the study as they were not available from the computer databases. A follow-up study will look more closely at the images of disabled sport in newspaper photographs. The articles were independently coded by two researchers. In no cases did the researchers disagree over the interpretation of the frames employed by the media.

The articles identified were published in 58 newspapers. These ranged from large-circulation state dailies to small suburban and community papers that were published just once a week. All states and the ACT were represented in the selection. Forty-one newspapers that covered the games were classified as suburban/community papers, five...
were regional/country papers, seven were metropolitan dailies, with five capital city Sunday papers. Thirty-four newspapers (58.62%) published just one article, twelve (20.68%) published two articles, seven (12.06%) published three articles. Only five newspapers published four or more articles: the **Central Coast Express** (New South Wales) published four articles, the **Hills Shire Times** (New South Wales) published five, the **Kalgoorlie Miner** (Western Australia) published six, and the **Canberra Times** (Australian Capital Territory) published seven. The **Manly Daily**, a Sydney newspaper with a circulation of approximately 90,000, published the most articles: nine (representing 15.51%).

The articles were spread over the survey period. Not surprisingly, however, the greatest proportion of stories coincided with the lead-up to and running of the games, with 45 published in September (40.9%) and 12 in October (10.9%). What the table doesn’t reveal, however, is that only nine articles were published during the week of the games, even though all newspapers would have published during this period. If the data is dissected further, a number of other facts emerge: 26 articles were published in the week leading up to the games (September 14–20), and only three articles in the week immediately following the games (September 28–October 04). A further 11 articles were published in the period October 05–October 24. This prompts a number of tentative conclusions. First, that there was little media interest in the games as an event that would warrant daily coverage, or even if that interest did exist, the media organisations did not have the resources to cover the games themselves, perhaps relying on local SOA officials to provide them with results. Despite the enormous resources that were poured into the opening and closing ceremonies to replicate the Olympic Games, and the excellent attendances at each, the games clearly did not warrant ‘spectacle’ status as defined by McKay (1991). Second, the number of articles published in the weeks after the games suggest that media organisations considered the story ‘holdable’. That is, they could run it when space was available. The lack of coverage devoted to the games by the large state-based newspapers, in particular two local mass-circulation dailies the **Sydney Morning Herald** and the **Daily Telegraph**, suggests that the Games had not obtained ‘real sports’ status in the mind of editorial executives at the large state-based newspapers, with the possible exception of the **Canberra Times**. From the perspective of the suburban and community newspapers, the limited coverage during the games is understandable, as they would have had only one or two opportunities to publish stories. The fact that a small number of newspapers, including the **Hills Shire Times**, **Kalgoorlie Miner**, and **Manly Daily**,
published a selection of stories on the games suggests that at an individual level a small number of papers may have accorded it ‘real sport’ status.

To further analyse the ‘real sport’/‘non-sport’ argument, it is important to consider the language employed by journalists in discussing the selection of athletes and their skill levels. This potentially links in to all of Hardin and Preston’s (2001) frames, as well as the additional frames added above. From the outset it was soon evident that the media organisations or individual journalists, or both, did not subscribe to or promote the three frames identified by Hardin and Preston. This is confirmed by the language employed by journalists to describe the achievements of athletes, including ‘outstanding athlete’ (Manly Daily, 2002, January 25, p. 11) and ‘multi talented’ (Canberra Times, 2002, September 18, p. 33).

These statements all support the argument that individual journalists and organisations recognised the status of Special Olympians as athletes. While the stories may not have employed the term ‘elite’ when discussing the achievements of individual participants or teams, the descriptors employed acknowledged that they had achieved high levels within their sport. Significantly, there was no belabouring of the individual’s disability in newspaper reports of their selection in a representative team or even a detailed profile. For example, only eight articles mentioned specific disabilities. Down syndrome was mentioned in five articles, with epilepsy, autism, cerebral palsy, and Williams syndrome mentioned in one article apiece. A small number of articles also mentioned that athletes had a ‘developmental disability’ or a ‘mild intellectual disability’. Certainly there were no attempts to describe how the athletes had ‘climbed mountains’ or ‘overcome other challenges’ either in gaining selection for the team or competing at the games. However, the potential lost dreams of one athlete who became disabled after a childhood accident was touched on in one article (Manly Daily, 2002, September 17).

This apparent willingness on the part of journalists or media organisations to avoid discussing individual disabilities when profiling athletes suggests that the campaign to train journalists through the preparation and distribution of tip sheets and handbooks is working. Against this, however, there were instances in which stories contained language that would be considered inappropriate according to the guidelines identified above. Examples of politically incorrect language tended to employ descriptors such as ‘suffers from’ (Bayside Leader, 2002, November 25; Central Coast Express, 2002, March 6, p. 2). These all contravened the
'people first' philosophy that disability groups are seeking to promote. Individually focused negative comments tended to revolve around the word 'suffers'.

While these comments appeared in only a small proportion of the stories published, they still suggest that more work needs to be done in educating journalists about the use of acceptable language. From a journalistic perspective, this may involve more than placing the individual before the disability as suggested in a number of publications. It would also involve journalists discarding one of their fundamental tenets—'brevity at all costs'. For example, the phrase 'intellectually disabled athlete' contains fewer characters and spaces (31) than the preferred 'athlete with an intellectual disability' (39). It would take a concerted campaign to convince journalists that the change in emphasis between the two versions is justifiable. Perhaps significantly, it is not just the journalists who struggle with the language. A small number of articles quoted or paraphrased SOA officials who made similar transgressions themselves by placing the disability before the athlete.

There was no deception involved in these articles; that is, there were no journalists seeking to paper over the fact that the athletes had disabilities (or were 'elite' athletes). Invariably, the stories contained a brief description of what the Special Olympics was about, or the fact that athletes had intellectual disabilities. But on no occasion was this information presented in a way that gave the impression that the writer intended to undermine or demean the achievements of the athlete being profiled. In fact, as these quotations highlight, many stories gave the impression that the journalist believed the athlete's achievements—be it selection in a representative team, or success in an individual or team event—should be celebrated.

A small number of articles even told how the individual's disability had not stopped them from achieving in other areas. These articles are important in a number of respects, particularly in light of the additional potential frames identified in response to Hardin and Preston. These frames show how people with intellectual disabilities can achieve life goals, be happy, and contribute to the life of their community by working, volunteering, and participating in non-SOA-sponsored activities (Stonnington Leader, 2002, December 11, p. 18; Northern District Times, 2002, October 9).

These stories reinforce the findings of the literature discussed earlier, namely, the importance of sport and recreation for people with intellectual disabilities. Also, the media seemed to pick up and promote the ideals advocated by Special Olympics. A number of articles talked about
how Special Olympics helped ‘empower’ athletes (East Torrens Messenger, 2002, July 24, p. 3; Northern News, 2002, October 17, p. 42). Equally, journalists and media organisations gave considerable coverage to SOA’s fundamental tenet that athletes were not necessarily competing against each other (Whitehorse Leader, 2002, September 4, p. 61; Northern District Times, 2002, October 9).

Given the earlier discussion about news values, and in particular the emphasis journalists place on conflict, be it in sport, politics, or life generally, this aspect of media framing of the SOA games stood to be potentially problematic. Significantly, however, this aspect of the games was not generally covered positively, with journalists and media organisations appearing to support SOA and its approach to competition, including the focus on having a go irrespective of one’s individual skill level. In particular, this was highlighted in the Manly Daily’s (2002, September 25) coverage of the soccer game about which the reporter said:

New Zealand’s unrehearsed victory lap to the best of Rocky Horror’s Time Warp brought the supportive crowd ... to their feet yesterday. Their attempts at the Haka drew an even bigger cheer from both team mates and opponents alike.

The significance of self-achievement is summed up by SOA executive director Rex Langthorne: ‘It’s very challenging but incredibly rewarding. You see people achieve what they’ve never thought possible—to watch the smiles on their faces when you place a medal around their necks’ (Manly Daily, 2002, September 24). This was also confirmed by an unnamed SOA spokesperson who said, ‘While winning is important, realising one’s potential and achieving a personal best amongst peers makes participation in the games a rewarding experience for Special Olympians’ (Hills Shire Times, 2002, September 17).

These themes appeared regularly in stories that mentioned the selection of local athletes in representative teams, and pre-games stories (45 articles), pre-games athlete profiles (24 articles), and post-games profiles and results (14 stories). They were also highlighted in the large number of stories that gave editorial space to SOA’s call for volunteer coaches, drivers, and other assistance (31 articles). There were also stories about the pre-games Law Enforcement Torch Run involving police officers from Tasmania (where the previous games had been held), Victoria, and NSW. These officers and other volunteers carried the ‘flame of hope’ from Tasmania through Victoria to NSW (again replicating the Olympic torch run). While this was on a much smaller scale, it nonetheless attracted significant support from community newspapers in particular,
which used the torch run to promote the games. The stories about the athletes, and the competition, were also important. For example, a number of newspapers personalised their stories by naming athletes and the events they would be competing in, even if they weren't profiled in detail. In one instance, the Lake Macquarie News (2002, October 16) named 18 athletes and then followed up with the names of eight other athletes in a separate story (October 18). The Manly Daily mentioned 11 athletes by name in two articles (2002, September 17, September 28).

One final issue needs to be discussed, and this bears directly on the discussion about placing the athlete above the disability. This has to do with the right of athletes to speak for themselves. This issue was flagged at the beginning of this paper and is covered in the guidelines issued to journalists by disability groups. These documents generally caution journalists against conducting interviews through other people (carers, family, and others), rather than allowing the person with the disability to speak for themselves. In this instance, 20 of the 110 articles (18.18%) included direct quotes from athletes. A further two articles paraphrased the athlete. In 11 stories parents were quoted, with other spokespeople (coaches and other SOA officials) quoted or paraphrased in a further 13 articles.

The willingness of journalists to directly quote or paraphrase athletes is a positive. It reinforces what Special Olympics and other disability groups have been seeking to achieve, namely, to allow people with disabilities to speak on their own behalf. In fact, the article quoting Gabrielle Clark (Manly Daily, 2002, January 25) highlights the success of an SOA program to give athletes public-speaking skills. While not all athletes with disabilities are able to do so, the fact that journalists did give a number the opportunity to speak is an acknowledgement of their own individuality, perhaps even competency. This situation is not very different from the coverage of mainstream sport in which articulate sportspeople tend to be quoted in the media more frequently than their colleagues who are less articulate or confident. Just like the elite stars who receive media training, Special Olympics instituted a program under which a number of its athletes have received training in public speaking and media relations. This program will provide an important bridge between SOA, its athletes, and the wider community. While this was only acknowledged in one article, its success was evident in the confidence a number of athletes revealed when talking to journalists about themselves and the games.
CONCLUSION
This paper set out to test three research questions. As the above discussion reveals, the answers to those questions were delivered fairly emphatically by the survey of media coverage of SOA’s 7th National Games. It is clear that media organisations do respond to and report on sporting events involving people with intellectual disabilities. However, it seems that such events are best suited to the type of coverage provided by suburban and community newspapers, where individual athletes may be known. The almost total absence of coverage devoted to this event by the large NSW dailies suggests that it did not qualify for ‘real sport’ status according to the criteria they employ, even though the Games clearly satisfy the traditional news values generally adopted by journalists when determining the newsworthiness of an event.

While Special Olympics is modelled on the Olympic competition for elite athletes, right down to the torch run (the so-called ‘flame of hope’) and choreographed opening and closing ceremonies, the nature of the competition may militate against ongoing media coverage unless there is a significant and perhaps blatantly obvious ‘hook’ for the journalists. As the above discussion reveals, the difficulty is in convincing news decision-makers that Special Olympics makes compelling reading.

In relation to the second question, it is clear that, while few newspapers did provide ongoing coverage of the games, those that did publish articles appeared to embrace the ideals of integration and diversity. This is highlighted in a number of articles, particularly those that show another side to the athletes, namely, Special Olympians as caring and willing to give of their time, to work on behalf of the community, or to participate in sport that is not specifically organised for or adapted to make it suitable for people with disabilities.

Clearly, newspaper reporting on the 7th National Games helps disprove the argument that media coverage of disabilities tends to reinforce negative stereotypes—to the contrary, in fact. In this case, the individual achievements of athletes were highlighted, not in an elite sense but in a positive way. The disabilities of athletes were generally played down, in line with current guidelines. Generally speaking, coverage followed the ‘people first’ approach to reporting that is favoured by the published guidelines and some disability groups.

As such, this paper shows that, while there is scope for greater coverage of sporting events involving people with intellectual disabilities, the print media’s coverage of the 7th National Games in Sydney revealed
that there is considerable respect for and interest in the achievements of athletes. The task confronting SOA and other similar organisations is to convince the media that this coverage should be continuing.

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Promoting the ideals of integration and diversity


*Australian Journal of Communication* • Vol 30 (3) 2003

140
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Promoting the ideals of integration and diversity